# Solid case against political dynasties | Inquirer Opinion

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The name “Ampatuan” will live on in infamy as the clan behind the grisly Maguindanao massacre in November 2009, that saw 58 individuals, including 32 members of the media, ambushed, shot dead, and hurriedly buried in what has been described as one of the most brutal election-related violence and press killings in history.

A court ruling in 2019 sentenced Andal Ampatuan Sr., Andal Jr., and Zaldy to life imprisonment without parole on 57 counts of murder for the massacre. Andal Sr. died in prison in 2015. While necessary to reveal the full extent of the crime, the horrific details of the killings that emerged during the years-long trial have, however, eclipsed the other crimes of the Ampatuan clan, which held sway over Maguindanao politics for several decades.

But a Sandiganbayan ruling on Monday drew attention to the family’s record of excess and abuses in public office, with former Maguindanao governor Datu Sajid Islam Ampatuan found guilty of graft and malversation over P400 million in public funds. Previous to the anti-graft court’s ruling, Ampatuan had a total of 272 corruption cases over similar anomalies.

Ampatuan faces from eight to 12 years in prison for graft, and reclusion perpetua, or imprisonment for 20 to 40 years, for malversation. The current vice mayor of Shariff Saydona Mustapha was also perpetually disqualified from holding any public office, and ordered to pay a P393-million fine.

## ‘Undreamed-of heights of power’

The case stemmed from Ampatuan’s misuse of funds for the construction and rehabilitation of 22 farm-to-market road projects that were found to be mostly unimplemented, with the money disbursed without public bidding. Aside from exacting full accountability for Ampatuan’s mismanagement of public funds, the ruling provides a case study on how abuses, corruption, and impunity are enabled by political dynasties. With the absence of competing forces, there are simply no checks and balance in governance.

The Ampatuans’ rise to power may be traced to President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. who, in the mid-70s, appointed Andal Sr. as Maganoy (now Shariff Aguak) mayor to help him stamp out the growing Islamic separatist movement. From being Maguindanao officer in charge under President Cory Aquino, Andal Sr. parlayed his post to become governor for three terms. In 2005, his son Zaldy took over as governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao which consisted of five Muslim provinces. But it was in 2001 when Gloria Macapagal Arroyo became president, that the Ampatuans rose to “undreamed-of heights of power,” according to a report by the International Crisis Group. In 2006, Arroyo issued an executive order legalizing the informal private “armies” being kept by families like the Ampatuans, thus abetting the use of might for political control.

## Perks and powers

Aside from maintaining a heavily armed private army of more than 2,000 men, the International Crisis Group said the Ampatuans also controlled the police, the judiciary, and the local election commission. Despite their notoriety after the Maguindanao massacre, at least 15 Ampatuans have managed to win several elections.

It’s a familiar political scenario that happens when a few prominent families monopolize local positions for generations. One senator even brazenly described the practice as a birthright, “pinamana ng aming magulang,” a family legacy they are entitled to.

While the 1987 Constitution provides that “the state shall guarantee equal access to opportunities for public service, and prohibit political dynasties as may be defined by law,” Congress has failed to pass the enabling law over the past 37 years.

A 2019 study by the Ateneo de Manila’s School of Government found that 80 percent of governors, 67 percent of House representatives, and 53 percent of mayors came from political dynasties. Why expect them to craft a law that would cut off their easy access to public office and all the perks and powers it brings?

## Poorest in the country

On top of undermining the country’s criminal system by arrogating on themselves the role of judge, jury, and executioner as seen in the Maguindanao massacre, members of political dynasties exercise almost total control of government resources to enrich themselves instead of using public funds for their constituents. Proof of this is how, despite the astounding wealth of their top officials, a 2023 study found that several provinces in Muslim Mindanao remain among the poorest in the country, with 23.5 percent of their households living below the poverty threshold.

Learning from this, the framers of the Bangsamoro Electoral Code have incorporated anti-dynasty provisions in the document to curb the influence of entrenched political families. Unfortunately for Philippine politics, the norm remains, “with great political power comes generational greed.”

Hopefully, the Ampatuan case has amply illustrated the evils of concentrating power in the hands of a few and with it, summon enough political will among voters in next year’s elections to excise the source.