# The spectacle of selective justice | Inquirer Opinion

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The recent theatrics of Vice President Sara Duterte over a House committee’s contempt orders against her chief of staff, Zuleika Lopez, for evading questions on her office’s dubious use of confidential funds, has provided the public intermittent entertainment in recent days. Duterte’s death threats against President Marcos, First Lady Liza Araneta-Marcos, and House Speaker Martin Romualdez have meanwhile pushed the alarm button among these officials’ security detail, with the National Bureau of Investigation serving the VP a subpoena on Tuesday to explain her unlawful utterances.

Beyond spectacle, however, such popcorn moments also reveal the uncomfortable truth about the country’s justice system, where only the poor and disenfranchised are dealt the full brunt of the law. As in the VP’s case, the rich, powerful, and privileged can get away with defying the mandate of Congress and with public avowals of ordering a hit on the country’s top officials.

Contrast the hand-wringing and generic protestations among investigative agencies over the VP’s brazen threats, with the 2020 warrantless arrest of a 25-year-old teacher from Zambales, for offering in a post on X (formerly Twitter) a P50-million bounty for anyone who could kill then President Duterte. It was apparently meant as a joke—a bad joke, admittedly—but one that easily challenges logic, for how could a mere teacher raise the millions he had offered?

## Perfect tableau

His arrest prompted Alliance of Concerned Teachers party list Rep. France Castro to remark how our laws appear to have a double standard: “When a President makes threats, it’s fine, but ordinary folks get arrested.”

More recently, the court acquitted former senator Leila de Lima of all the drug-related charges filed against her by the previous administration. It took almost seven years—after several changes of judges and the recantation of govt witnesses—for De Lima’s case to be resolved, a far cry from the almost three months spent in detention by Juanito Jose Remulla III, the son of the justice secretary, before charges of illegal drug possession against him were dismissed.

Before her acquittal, De Lima’s police escorts were also shown physically blocking media access to her. Contrast that with the VP requesting a camera during her hospital visit to Lopez, which police chief Brig. Gen. Nicolas Torre III readily granted. Thus was the public treated to a K-drama scene of a hysterically sobbing Lopez clinging to Duterte, the perfect tableau to document their “victimhood.”

## Birthday bash

In 2023, another teacher was arrested for posting a video of the traffic congestion allegedly caused by the VP’s convoy passing through Commonwealth Avenue in Quezon City. While the VP quickly denied being in the alleged convoy, a mere hint of her fallibility by a watchful public was enough, it seems, to grease the squeaky wheels of selective justice.

Those who cite De Lima’s long overdue exoneration as proof of how the country’s justice system is fully functional often forget that equal application of the law is an indispensable part of that system, and one routinely ignored by authorities. Abusive police officers and government actors are the first to flout the law—and obscenely so during the pandemic when recourse to proper authorities was all but impossible under a lockdown.

Remember the 2020 birthday bash of then NCR police chief Maj. Gen. Debold Sinas that showed law enforcers violating the health protocols they were supposed to enforce? Defying the mask mandate and social distancing were clear violations of the Bayanihan Act, but no sanctions were meted out to the police. Meanwhile, the police arrested six volunteers ferrying relief goods to Bulacan without a valid quarantine pass. As of Sept. 6, 2020, a news report said that a total of 100,486 have been arrested for alleged quarantine violations across the country.

## Pork barrel scam

The Supreme Court’s grant of bail in 2015 to former senator Juan Ponce Enrile for his plunder case in the pork barrel scam for “humanitarian reasons,” and former police chief Oscar Albayalde citing “old age and health” as consideration when organizing the possible arrest of former first lady Imelda Marcos are clear manifestations of cockeyed justice as well. While suspects often spend years just waiting for their cases to be heard, Marcos never served a day of her 42- to 77-year sentence for her 2018 conviction on seven counts of graft.

And will somebody please remind the VP that every time she decries the lack of due process in Lopez’s case, people are reminded anew of how its absence has led to thousands of extrajudicial killings during her father’s term?

With a multitude of instances of Lady Justice winking conspiratorially at a privileged few, how the authorities deal with the Dutertes’ criminal acts—she for “masterminding” the possible murder of three officials, and he for calling on the military to intervene in “a fractured governance”—bears close scrutiny. Will the relevant authorities finally step up and prove, once and for all, that no one is above the law?