# A hollow cry for peace | Inquirer Opinion

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The Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) sounded the call, and almost two million faithful answered with their feet. In droves and by busloads, the members flocked to the Quirino Grandstand in Manila on Jan. 13 for the “National Rally for Peace,” touted as an apolitical gathering for unity and forgiveness.

It was anything but that.

Like moths drawn to a flame, a good number of politicians were in attendance, unable to resist the promise of benediction and a potential endorsement, months before the midterm elections in May, by one of the country’s most influential Christian sects. Quite naturally, the next day’s headlines trumpeted INC’s “show of force.”

Yet the true message of the rally wasn’t lost on anyone possessed of common sense: Excuse wrongdoing, deflect accountability, and protect the powerful.

At the heart of INC’s “moral call” is Vice President Sara Duterte, who is fielding accusations that she misused funds earmarked for the Office of the Vice President and the Department of Education, which she headed until July last year. But instead of answering the allegations, the Vice President had opted for blanket denials and death threats directed at her adversaries, including the President and his relatives. Three impeachment complaints have now been filed seeking her removal from office, with a fourth in limbo.

## The art of doublespeak

In organizing its grand rally, the INC leadership’s rationale was a masterstroke in the art of doublespeak: It was aimed, the sect leaders said, at expressing their support to President Marcos’ opposition to the impeachment of Duterte, following her acrimonious parting of ways with the administration.

The sect took pains to use the President’s own remarks to further its cause. In December, Mr. Marcos said: “What will happen if somebody files an impeachment? It will tie down the House, it will tie down the Senate. It will just take up all our time and for what? For nothing, for nothing. None of this will help improve a single Filipino life. As far as I’m concerned, it’s a storm in a teacup.”

The INC rally, according to INC spokesperson Edwil Zabala, was “basically in support of what the President himself said.”

Meanwhile, Malacañang had little choice but to play along with the subterfuge. Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin said there was no change in the President’s position not to support moves to oust his former “UniTeam” running mate.

“We view today’s assemblies as part of the national conversation we should be having as a people to bring clarity and consensus on issues that face us all and affect our future,” Bersamin said.

## Flex of political muscle

But the Palace’s official statement betrays the administration’s misguided priorities and lack of direction. After all, it’s not “clarity and consensus” that the public demands to bring closure to the funding irregularities facing the country’s No. 2 official—it’s accountability.

The INC may have marketed its rally as a gathering for national forgiveness, but it’s crystal clear that what it truly seeks is forgiveness for one individual—one who might just be politically useful in three years when another general election ushers in a new administration.

A day after the INC rally, Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla said the mammoth gathering would not influence the government’s investigation against Duterte. “We just have to look at the law as something that equalizes everything between all of us, that’s why we cannot give special favors to people because of standing,” he said, adding: “I’m not concerned about that because it’s their freedom to express themselves and we respect that freedom. We regard that freedom zealously.”

But it’s naive of Remulla to believe that the rally was truly just an exercise of free speech. On the contrary, it was a calculated flex of political muscle, aimed at intimidating lawmakers and deflecting attention from serious allegations of corruption.

## Unchristian and unpatriotic

And while the justice chief’s assurances are welcome, his words alone will not suffice. The justice system must remain impervious to such overt displays of power if it is to retain the people’s trust. As the President’s legal adviser, former Senate president Juan Ponce Enrile, noted, there would be “a very detrimental precedent if we follow the logic implicit in the INC rally,” which is that impeachment is more a matter of political expediency than a constitutional mechanism to remove an erring official.

Therefore, the pursuit of accountability in Duterte’s alleged transgressions must continue unimpeded, whether via the political pathway of impeachment or a judicial one through the courts, or both.

Religious influence has no bearing in this conversation, especially so when its motive is both unchristian and unpatriotic—to shield a public official from scrutiny. Ultimately, INC’s cry for peace rings hollow in the absence of an equivalent call for justice, for one cannot exist without the other.