



APPENDIX 5.3

LETTER OF FR. JOAQUIN G. BERNAS, SJ ON THE BARANGAY BRIGADE OR BARANGAY KAWAL, 22 MAY 1979

No document has thus far been found to corroborate this account of a cult-like rite wherein fealty is sworn to Ferdinand Marcos. However, knowing that there were eventually Marcos cults (allegedly organized by the military, see “Editors’ Introduction” in this volume) and the centrality of the barangay to Marcos’s political machinery, it is not far-fetched that the reported rituals, or versions thereof, did take place.

Source

Sanidad, Arno V. 1979. “Facade Democracy.” *Philippine Law Journal* 53:313-44. <http://plj.upd.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/plj/PLJ%20volume%2054/J%20Volume%2054%20Third%20Quarter/PLJ%20Volume%2054%20third%20quarter%2003-%20Arno%20V.%20Sanidad%20-%20Facade%20Democracy%20p.%20313-344.pdf>.

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BARANGAY BRIGADE
 TRAINING MANUAL
 — April 3-7, 1979

[The May 25, 1979 issue of ICHTHYS carried a letter by Fr. Joaquin G. Bernas; SJ on the Barangay Brigade or Barangay Kawal. We are publishing here a copy of the Barangay Brigade Training Manual which demonstrates that the fears expressed in Fr. Bernas' letter are well based. For those of our readers who may not have seen this letter, we are republishing it here with the Manual. It would be good to consider the points for reflection raised in this letter after reading the Manual.]

*Association of Major Religious Superiors of Men in the Philippines
 Manila*

May 22, 1979

TO: The Members of the Catholic Bishops Conference
 of the Philippines

The Major Religious Superiors of Men
 in the Philippines

The Major Religious Superiors of Women
 in the Philippines

Enclosed is a report on a recent development which might be affecting your territorial jurisdiction. Because of the significance of these reported developments, I have taken the liberty to send the report to you with the request for verification by your priests or religious or lay leaders and lay leaders and with the request for comment. I do this both in order to alert you about the human rights implications of the report and to solicit your guidance.

(Sgd.) JOAQUIN G. BERNAS, SJ
 Chairman
 Executive Board

* ICHTHYS, Vol. II No. 29, July 27, 1979.

Since March of this year, reports from many parts of the Philippines, in connection with training seminars for the Barangay Brigades of the martial law regime, and specifically for the "Barangay Kawal" programme, have given many citizens cause for grave apprehension that there is probably a nationwide pattern of preparation for totalitarian rule, based on a personality cult of certain high officials of the martial law regime. These reports are from Nueva Ecija, Zambales, Pampanga, Laguna, Batangas, Iloilo City, Antique, Misamis Oriental, Iligan City and Zamboanga. The events they recount follow the same general pattern.

This pattern begins with an invitation to a four to five-day training seminar for Barangay Brigade leaders. Participation are recruited with varying degrees of pressure, often not too subtle, often accompanied by veiled threats in case of refusal.

During the seminar itself, nothing remarkable generally happens until the closing night. Before that there are the expected lectures and discussions, on nationalism, discipline, community involvement government programmes and the like, albeit strongly favoring the viewpoint of the New Society.

On the last night, however, the seminar takes on a new twist, an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. As the night deepens, the participants are blindfolded and led by circuitous and confusing routes for about 15 minutes, to another place of assembly. When their blindfolds are removed, they usually find themselves in a hall in which the only light comes from torches which flank a full-length picture of President Ferdinand E. Marcos. This picture is invariably of heroic, more than life-sized proportions, and is sometimes also accompanied by a picture of Mrs. Imelda Romualdez-Marcos, and sometimes also by that of the mayor of the locality. Often some flags or banners flank the picture or pictures. In the foreground there is a red-covered book of one of Mr. Marcos' writings, upon a decorated stand, together with some oath forms for signature. A human skull often completes the setting.

After a brief exhortation, touching on the greatness and benefits of the New Society and its exalted leader, a presiding officer then begins to inform the participants that they are being inducted into the Barangay Kawal. They are then told that as Barangay Kawal they will be sworn to defend with their lives and their total commitment, the "Supremo" and "Primer Ministro" of the New Society, Ferdinand E. Marcos. The participants are then enjoined to strict secrecy regarding the dramatic events of that night.

Then follows a formal call for those who do not wish to take the oaths, to say. (All those reluctant to take the oaths were afraid to say so, in the occasions covered by our reports.) And so the oaths are administered — one of total commitment to the Supremo, and one to strict secrecy. Many participants at this point take the oath under duress, being afraid of the consequences of refusing, and being still in a state of disorientation from the suddenness of these developments.

The participants are then requested to affix their signatures to the oath forms or to the red-covered book of Mr. Marcos' writings, ostensibly so that they could be summoned to fulfill the obligations of the oath they have taken, whenever necessary. In some instances they are told to sign their names in their own blood, and many do so. Toward the end of the ceremony, the participants take part in burning an effigy of the Old Society and its evils.

In all these reported seminars, local government officials, especially those at the Barangay level, were prominent in organizing and recruiting for the seminars. In a significant number of seminars reported, local Iglesia ni Kristo ministers and/or leaders were active in recruiting and staffing the seminars, and in exhorting and inducting the members of the Barangay Kawal.

It is improbable that these seminars are merely spontaneous local phenomena. The reports are too widespread and similar, indicating a deliberate government-sponsored or government-supported pattern or policy, probably nationwide in scope.

The terms of the oaths in these seminars far transcend the oaths to defend the Constitution and democratic rights and freedoms, and to tell the truth, to which we are used in a democratic political system. Instead, the oaths in these Barangay Kawal seminars and the setting in which they are held, convey the strong impression of a personality cult demanding absolute loyalty — a totalitarian propensity contrary to the spirit of the 1935 Constitution.

The active role of elements of a religious denomination in these seminars bears close watching. Does this indicate massive support by that denomination for the martial law regime? On what terms?

More significantly, we ask ourselves, do these reports indicate the beginnings of an attempt to set up a totalitarian regime, based on a personality cult of Mr. Marcos and his associates, with the complicity of a religious sect, and backed up by the Barangay Kawal acting as a paramilitary force, in conjunction with the regular Armed Forces?

If the defense and promotion of human rights is already so risky and difficult under the present authoritarian government, how much more will it be under a totalitarian government, with all the forces of coercion and surveillance at its command?

In addition, is there here an attempt to establish a government-sponsored religion?

As Christians committed by the Gospel to the defense and promotion of human rights, ought we not to be more watchful, and take a strong stand now against any move towards deepening authoritarianism and especially towards totalitarianism?

Finally, and most importantly, what concretely do we do about these developments?

