

## Violence, Human Rights, and Democracy in the Philippines

### INTRODUCTION

Violence, and the explicit call for violence as a means to achieve political ends, were key features of Rodrigo Duterte's campaign for the presidency in 2016. When he won the office with sixteen million votes or a 39 percent plurality, it was considered as a democratic mandate to wage his so-called war on drugs. Win the war on drugs and the cures to other ills of the country will simply fall in place—that was his promise. Duterte asked for three to six months to make his vision a reality. There will be blood, he said.

This special issue of *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* comes off the press with Duterte midway through his six-year term as president. There was hardly any let up to the bloodbath that he called for. The war on drugs became a war against Islamic radicals, became a war against communist partisans, became a war against conspiracies and imagined enemies, became a war that is now ravaging the very institutions that are tasked to wage it.

The articles in this issue are some of the first outputs of the three-year research and advocacy collaboration between the Third World Studies Center (TWSC) of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman and the Department of Conflict and Development Studies (DCDS), Ghent

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\* Jeroen Adam, Joel Ariate Jr., and Elinor May Cruz, members of the steering committee of the research and advocacy project "Violence, Human Rights, and Democracy in the Philippines" also served as the editors for this issue of *Kasarinlan*.

University. The complex issue of violence serves as the focal point of this joint effort. The broader background is the practice of democracy at the grassroots, on how often the mandate and the complicity for violence against a suspect class is drawn at the expense of their supposedly inalienable human rights.

Where a climate of impunity, fear, and intimidation has been introduced, the growing literature on Duterte hints at a fetishism. Against this potential analytical blindspot, our project does not make the argument that the current wave of state-induced violence in the country is pure Duterte invention. The political opportunities that this government has seized or crafted to govern through violence are deeply-rooted in Philippine history—a history that can be described as “the narrative of the interaction of narratives,” whose cleavages play a decisive role in the production of violence (Stewart and Strathern 2002, 7). Thus, it is one of the aims of our research to render visible the contours and continuities in the deployment and experiences of violence across the country through case studies from the urban and rural brutalities of Duterte’s drug war to the imposition of martial law in Mindanao.

Through unfiltered public pronouncements, Duterte unleashed missions of extermination targeting the defenseless and the very poor, creating a disposable class whose deaths are supposed to serve as an object lesson in fear and obedience to the armed agents of the state. Duterte’s agents are supposed to be exercising the state’s monopoly on violence. What he in fact created are killers, in and out of government, that understand power as coming from the barrels of their guns. Our research traces and puts on record a violent time in human rights and democracy in the country. It tells the narratives of violence founded on the struggles against and for these classes of Filipinos.

## **CRAFTING A RESEARCH AGENDA AND FORMING A RESEARCH NETWORK**

The idea for this research and advocacy collaboration began four months after Duterte’s victory. Rosanne Rutten of the University of Amsterdam referred Steven Schoofs, who was then a doctoral research fellow in Ghent University, to TWSC for a possible workshop to share critical reflections on Philippine politics and society, as well as preliminary explorations for collaborative research. What began as a series of online meetings between DCDS representatives Jeroen Adam

and Schoofs and TWSC research staff members Joel Ariate Jr. and Elinor May Cruz turned into the organization and conduct of a small workshop on February 3-4, 2017 in UP Diliman, “Politics, Power, and Social Transformation in the Philippines: Towards a Contemporary Research Agenda.”

The workshop was more of scoping work to explore what the academe, media, and civil society organizations (CSOs) were doing and what can be done to pool them together, albeit with limited resources, toward making an impact on the present political climate. The workshop thus centered on three themes: change and continuities in politics and power in contemporary Philippines, crafting new theoretical and methodological approaches toward a new research agenda, and an engaged scholarship with enhanced impact.

Select participants from the academe, the media, and CSOs were invited to present on the subthemes of: 1) political power and organizing for politics, 2) resources for politics and bases of power, 3) transitions in political leadership, 4) political domains in everyday life, and 5) concentrations or dissipations of political power. Invited foreign and local scholars gave their respective takes on the epistemology of the field of Philippine Studies and politics (what could be the novel contributions of the above presentations to the field?), new methodological approaches (how to ensure that these novel contributions are carried out with theoretical and methodological rigor?), and ethics and positionality (for whom is the contemporary research agenda?).

The workshop threshed out the following preliminary key questions in contemporary Philippine politics and society toward crafting a research agenda in making sense of the present: 1) who are “we” when we begin to query why the old “lenses” and “tools” are no longer working, e.g., when human rights scholarship and practice fail to promote social transformation in the country?, 2) who are the new “subjects” of Philippine politics and how can we map the current political ecology?, and 3) what methodologies can be devised to capture the manifold contexts against the increasing normalization of real and symbolic violence in the country?

The collaboration between TWSC and DCDS paved the way for two intersecting projects as part of the South Initiative program funded by VLIR-UOS (Flemish Interuniversity Council–University Development Cooperation). The two projects were decidedly toward the conduct of research from different perspectives and localities not

limited to the academe nor Metro Manila, which will be made available and accessible to a public that has become highly polarized due to disinformation and propaganda. Our research must first and foremost be grounded and multidisciplinary.

The first project was “Violence, Human Rights, and Democracy in the Philippines: Strengthening the Quality and Impact of Academic Research” (2018–2019), which sought to create a research network that will be equipped to produce evidence-based research to reinforce public debates about the risks and consequences of authoritarian rule in the Philippines. The second was “Violence, Human Rights and Democracy in the Philippines: Publishing and Disseminating an Open Access Book” (2019–2020), which sought to collate the various research outputs of the first project into an open-access peer-reviewed book publication, accompanied by a dissemination strategy targeting diverse stakeholders. In both projects, former TWSC director Ricardo Jose served as local promoter and DCDS associate professor Jeroen Adam as Flemish promoter. University of Antwerp professor Gert van Hecken served as co-promoter and Belgian human rights organization 11.11.11 as one of our research network partners. A steering committee, with Jeroen Adam, Joel Ariate Jr., Elinor May Cruz, and Steven Schoofs as members, was formed to conduct and coordinate the research and advocacy project.

In the last two years, TWSC and DCDS organized several workshops that resulted in the creation, capacity-building, and maintenance of the research network, which was officially set up in 2018. The first workshop (January 11, 2018) served as a “casting call.” Potential case study researchers were invited to present their research plans, discussants gave their input based on their grounded knowledge, and mentors abstracted the realities presented by the case study researchers into an articulate framework of study. Three key components make up the research network: 1) TWSC and DCDS representatives composed the steering committee; 2) established scholars, veteran journalists, and CSO representatives composed the advisory committee; and 3) academics, CSO members, journalists, and independent researchers were the case study researchers. At that time, the case studies were situated in the following localities, where the researchers were either based in or have extensive knowledge and experience of, or both: the Cordillera, North Caloocan, Bulacan, Iloilo City, Davao City (one case study on history and politics, another on the local media), Surigao del Sur, and Marawi.

By June 2018, the research network was duly formed. The second workshop (June 18, 2018) saw concrete research plans for the case studies, as well as candid discussions on their feasibility and how these case studies will cohere for the planned book publication. It was also around this time that the steering committee realized that aside from the case studies, the development of a database on drug-related deaths was needed. While we acknowledge that this initiative was not new—there were already several existing ones, such as the Drug Archive produced by a research consortium from the academe; Inquirer.net’s “Kill List;” ABS-CBN’s “Death Toll;” the government-backed “RealNumbersPH;” among others—and can easily be mired and weaponized in the politics of counting the dead under the Duterte administration, we envisioned the database to be primarily a *pedagogical tool* instead. What this means is the template for the database, as well as all other supporting documents, will be made available online for free via the project website, where counting the casualties of Duterte’s war on drugs can serve as an exercise in reflexivity for the different state universities and colleges and CSOs across the country that have their own “numbers” to narrate.

We are pleased to note that the project website <https://dahas.upd.edu.ph> will be publicly accessible by February 5, 2020. We believe the database is pioneering in its historical and comparative attempt to cover the administrations of Benigno Simeon C. Aquino III and Duterte.

The third workshop (November 5–6, 2018), aside from discussing updates to the case studies, saw the presentation of the steering committee’s preliminary attempts in the creation of this database.

By the second year, the fourth workshop (February 6–8, 2019) saw the additions of Abra and Cebu case studies, resulting in a total of eleven case studies, including the database. The workshop also marked the research network’s transition from research to advocacy, as other members of the media and CSOs were invited, hoping to benefit from their experiences as the steering committee started to craft a dissemination strategy. Inviting members of the media and CSOs as potential advocacy partners during instead of after the conduct of the research has been completed was the network’s way of forging a bottom-up partnership and generating buy-in in disseminating the outcome of the research.

Our experience, however, based on two workshops (February 6–8 and August 13–14, 2019) showed how the current political climate

has made it rather difficult for different sectors to come to terms and reflect on each other's works. It was evident that everyone was working on something, and for the moment, on their own. We remain optimistic however that as the two projects come to a close, efforts parallel to what the research network is trying to accomplish can, at some point, meet and converge toward fostering public debates that will countervail the reigning impunity in the country. The fifth and sixth workshops (May 17 and August 13-14, 2019) were meant to wrap up the majority of the case studies, with the exception of Abra and Cebu and the replacement of the Cordillera with Payatas in Quezon City as a case study site.

Our research rationale aimed at the production of empirically informed analyses of the state of violence under the Duterte administration, in particular, and the Philippines, in general. This rationale was motivated by research principles that give careful emphasis on grounded knowledge, different local realities, multidisciplinary, historical complexity, and inclusiveness in knowledge production and dissemination. Finally, research parameters were drawn from the key concepts of violence, the state, and democracy, serving as orientation points for the case studies.

## STORIES FROM SELECT LOCALITIES AND ON COUNTING THE DEAD

This special issue of *Kasarinlan* contains the first cohort of the case studies for the project. These five articles describe the local realities of real and rhetorical violence deployed and experienced under the Duterte administration from: 1) the spate of killings in North Caloocan, the so-called ground zero of *tokhang*; 2) the continuing violent militarization within an indigenous community in Surigao del Sur; 3) the Islamist upsurge in Lanao del Sur that led to the destruction of Marawi City; 4) the patronage politics that weaves through the media landscape in Davao City and its import on the media reportage on Duterte's drug war; to 5) the development of a database on drug-related killings in the country. Among the five, excerpts of the three articles that focus on the localities of North Caloocan (Palatino 2020), Surigao del Sur (Gatmaytan 2019), and Lanao del Sur (Yabes 2019a; 2019b) have already been released online through different media outlets. This is the first time that the papers on the Davao City media and the development of the drug-related deaths database will be made public.

Raymond “Mong” Palatino wrote “Tokhang in Caloocan: Weaponizing Local Governance, Social Disarticulation, and Community Resistance” to probe the violent consequences of tokhang in the communities of North Caloocan. Known for high-profile killings, such as the deaths of grade-eleven student Kian Loyd delos Santos and South Korean businessman Jee Ick Joo, North Caloocan makes for a curious case with its local government unit’s (LGU) full support and active promotion of tokhang. Mong details how the LGU’s efforts turned it into a role model for other LGUs: from allocating bigger budget for its Anti-Drug Abuse Council to prohibiting city councilors from providing assistance to the victims’ families or even visiting the wakes of the victims. Mong also described the social and political consequences of tokhang embodied in the concept of “social disarticulation”—an experience not dissimilar to what slum communities experience during government-organized forced evictions:

The impact of tokhang could be similar to the demolition of communities but its methods are more brutal and sinister while shrouded in extralegal secrecy and affects a wider segment of the local population. It intensifies state intrusion into the lives of the poor, overkill police deployment is legitimized, and the community’s state of underdevelopment is entirely blamed on the drug problem. It also undermines solidarity among neighbors by instigating citizen surveillance which makes it more difficult to promote unity in challenging the reign of oppressive local authorities. Community solidarity is shattered by tokhang where everybody is seen as a suspect or snitch in a supposedly drug-affected barangay.

Moreover, Mong did not leave out the responses of the communities in North Caloocan to tokhang. He also wrote how what seemed to be the final straw for the communities was the Phase 8 massacre in Bagong Silang, which involved the deaths of minors. Through the help of people’s organizations, protests and collective actions were organized in the area. Funeral marches transformed into protests, and key intersections became protest centers. In spite of what happened in North Caloocan, Mong ends with hope. Based on the experiences of the communities that he documented in North Caloocan, Mong writes that “there is another way to deal with tokhang other than to stay silent or survive its brutality. That it is possible to fight back.”

Augusto “Gus” Gatmaytan wrote “The Manobo Community of Han-ayan: Enduring Continuities and Changes in Militarization” as an attempt to describe a “phenomenology of militarization” based on the

experiences of the Han-ayan community during martial law in Mindanao. Han-ayan houses a Manobo community caught in a gridlock with mining interests in the area and the presence of the New People's Army (NPA). Gus's piece is a "partial history" of the place based on a set of violent incidents that held great significance for the community residing in it. Dating as far back as 2005, the Manobos recounted being assembled by the Philippine military to witness the torture and detention of several of their members accused of supporting the NPA and the brutal killings of their leaders by paramilitary groups, which perpetuated a cycle of displacement in the lives of the Manobos. Gus described how they trusted change was coming when a Mindanaoan came into power, only to be subjected to escalating violence yet again. On his administration's counterinsurgency efforts, Duterte threatened to bomb the Manobo community's tribal schools and the community's first experience of a drone overflight saw yet another evacuation:

One Manobo woman declared that "the symbol of martial law here is [the military's] deployment of drones" (*ang hulagway sa martial law diri kining paglalupad nila og drone*). This statement captures what, for the Manobo, is the most salient characteristic of life under Duterte's martial law: it is not just the continuing, virtually constant threat or reality of militarization, which, after all, is not peculiar to the Duterte administration. Rather, it is the community's perception that they—Manobo residents of civilian communities—are actively being targeted by the state's counterinsurgency forces and programs. Because each appearance of the [drone] is, from bitter experience, linked to subsequent military ground operations, the drone is not merely an eye employed in surveillance, but is also a virtual gun sight used to aim the violence of militarization at Manobo villages.

Gus also described how the continuous but markedly insidious form of violence under Duterte manifested in the social, political, and economic isolation of the Manobo community: they were being cut off from government services, there were food blockades where there were checkpoints, and they were being cut off from their network of support. Given the mining industry's influential role in the area—where "opposition to mining can and has been seen as opposition to the state itself"—and the intricate yet not inseparable history of the community with the NPA—where "[t]he Manobo, like other indigenous groups in Mindanao, have a tradition of political autonomy and self-governance . . . which long predates the coming of the NPA"—Gus hopes his piece based on the tales of the Manobo, narrated by the Manobo themselves,



can help in initiating with the state what is arguably a long and complex dialogue.

Criselda “Cris” Yabes wrote “Factors and Forces that Led to the Marawi Debacle.” In this paper, Cris reconstructs the conflation of events, leading up to a five-month siege of the city of Marawi that started in May 2017 by an ISIS-inspired rebel outfit, under the leadership of Omarkhayam and Abdullah Maute. Despite monitoring by military intelligence and some targeted campaigns against this so-called Maute group in and around the town of Butig, young men were ideologically formed, mobilized, and trained under the charismatic leadership of these brothers and other leaders such as long-time Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon. In the end, the invasion of Marawi proved to be a surprise and a remarkable challenge to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) as the Maute group managed to stand their ground for five months against the AFP. Crucially, these events provoked the promulgation of martial law on the whole island of Mindanao, despite the intense fighting being confined to specific quarters within the town of Marawi. Mindanao has remained under martial law ever since. At the same time, Duterte’s groundless and callous claim that Maranaos are rich enough to rebuild their own city, will, according to Cris: “. . . likely fail to address the Muslims’ future in nation building, as previous administrations lacked foresight and cutting-edge policies.”

Karol Ilagan, Agatha Fabricante, and Christine Fabro’s “Mirroring Duterte” is a case study on media politics in Duterte’s Davao City. The authors zoomed in on Davao City’s longest running newspaper, the *Mindanao Daily Mirror*, for its coverage on Duterte’s drug war before he became president, and situated their case study in the local history of the community press and its ties with Duterte. The authors examined 256 *Mirror* articles during three key periods: Duterte’s first government post (1986), the beginnings of the Davao Death Squad (1998), and the Commission on Human Rights inquiry into the extrajudicial killings in Davao City (2009). The authors also validated their findings from the *Mirror* with interviews with Davao-based journalists and media experts. The authors showed that the *Mirror* has focused largely on national and local government’s anti-drug pronouncements, programs, and activities; while the victims and their kin were given the least coverage, and if given any, were treated in the articles as propaganda by the opposition. The authors also pointed to the pervasive use of mostly single sources, which as a result, saw articles written following the

conventional manner of reporting, i.e., mere enumerations to the questions “who-what-when-where-why.” Related to this finding is the emphasis on numbers rather than the stories behind the numbers when it came to the drug deaths, referred to by the authors as “a hallmark of the media coverage of the drug war in Davao City.” The authors contextualized the *Mirror’s* coverage of the war on drugs based on the following insights gathered from the interviews: 1) there is “general acceptance” of Duterte’s style of governance in the local media, with some even personally subscribing to it having seen Davao at its worst; 2) economic pressures have brought about conditions of patronage and corruption in the local media landscape in Davao; and 3) in contrast to Duterte’s experience with the national media when he became president, his relations with the local media were that of “a very personal relation.” Finally, the authors gave an important point for reflexivity among media personnel:

The media experience with covering Duterte and his hardline stance on crime also allows for some introspection, to examine the contours and cracks in the profession . . . the local media’s failure to cast a critical eye on Duterte’s drug war when it started was compounded by other institutions also failing to investigate and hold actors to account. It wasn’t until the CHR investigation when national newspapers started to really look into the killings happening in Davao. For the most part, the national media too were looking at it as a purely local event, that it had no national implication or that it does not relate to human rights. While it is important to be critical of government actions, it is also important to be critical of how journalism in communities and in Metro Manila is being done even if the old longstanding issues of reporting remain, i.e., low pay, lack of support for quality reporting, and the appropriation of journalism by partisan ideological or political interests.

Dianna Limpin and Ruth Siringan wrote “Developing a Method for Recording Drug-Related Killings” in the backdrop of competing and confusing figures in the drug war’s rising death toll. Where disparate efforts have been launched to monitor and record these deaths, with some verging on propaganda and thus further obscuring the path to justice for the victims and their kin, the article is a decisive attempt to render transparent the project’s development of a systematic method to document the killings, as well as share preliminary findings spanning the last two years of the Benigno S. Aquino III administration to the first two and a half years of the Duterte administration. Inherent

to sharing in detail the methodology is the promotion of its use where the conduct of counting the dead is one step toward promoting accountability. This is the overall aim for the database, where in the politics of counting the dead, accuracy and veracity in numbers are subject to manipulation and deception. Key insights drawn from the development of the database provide answers to the following: What do we know about the victims? What do we know about the killings? How are the killings related to illegal drugs? When and where did these killings happen?

### A LEGACY OF VIOLENCE

The five articles were written from the different positionalities that each of the case study researchers are “situated” in. They tell stories not confined within Metro Manila nor the jargon of the academic. Compare these accounts then with what the Duterte administration has been frantically putting together in its effort to control the narrative of the supposed Duterte Legacy, “an account of change and accomplishment, as told by the people, for the people” (Duterte Legacy 2019). The articles in this issue counter this state propaganda by highlighting that the supposed “change” comes with a more insidious form of violence committed in the name of order and development. A context often lost in what seems to be an unwavering broad popular support for the government’s culling of those perceived to be undesirables, including legitimate opposition figures.

Best exemplified by the word and practice of *tokhang*, this violence has a definite indigenous strain, the one that puts primacy in a leader’s capacity to decide who should die as the ultimate and legitimating expression of said leader’s power, just like the *datus* (chieftains) of old. And in the case of *tokhang*, there are further considerations on how the power to kill is wielded. Should it be done within the purview of the state or outside of it? Through a police operation or a rub out? Should it be done by a posse of Davao cops or by masked assassins riding-in-tandem? *Tokhang* then points to what one can reasonably assume to be numerous cases of potentially unlawful deaths that should have been the subject of inquiries.

How violence has been deployed and experienced in the five case studies, both real and symbolic, point to its “layered quality” (Stewart and Strathern 2002, 1), and we hope this special issue helps in peeling off the initial layers. A perceptive reader will notice that up to this point we have not given, nor arrived at, a definition of violence. At this point,

we do not feel compelled to do so. We hope these pieces and the other case studies can enable us to do so at some point; in the end, we hope to map out how violence is inflicted, lived, accepted, and challenged under the Duterte administration. This, we hope, will serve as the initial bearings on the study of violence in the Philippines. Coincidentally, during the launch of the Duterte Legacy campaign, Martin Andanan, presidential communications operations office secretary, gave this speech:

Amidst all these, the President emphasized the deeper, more serious crises before us—the evil that he has seen face to face, the evil that surrounds us, and the evil that is within us. He pledged to change all that, at the expense of his life, in the war he declared against illegal drugs, corruption, and criminality. On [sic] the third year of his administration, his battle-cry continues to confront these evils with great intensity, and no other leader has yet approximated his conquests. This is his legacy unfolding. (quoted in Gita-Carlos 2020)

For the research network, this can only mean there is no end yet in sight to the violence. Daniel Ross (2004, 7), in his book *Violent Democracy*, wrote about the inherently disruptive nature of politics and democracy to be “a constant possibility . . . [and] a kind of promise.” However, we argue that those who will insist on reclaiming the democratic space must first reckon with the unclaimed corpses half-embalmed, half-rotting in some godforsaken funeral home. As part of our research and advocacy, we hope that our project, besides articulating realities on the ground, can direct our attention to possibilities of justice and restitution. While eight consecutive Social Weather Station (SWS) surveys from 2016 to 2019 show the “strong rejection” of the “*nanlaban*” ([violently] fought back) police narrative, the latest SWS survey also shows that Filipinos remain ambivalent about the drug war in view of its perceived impact on illegal drug use in the country (Mangahas 2020).

Duterte’s drug war, as argued in a 2017 petition filed with the Supreme Court by human rights lawyers groups, is unconstitutional. It is also founded on the police parlance of “neutralization,” that is, “to kill” (Buan 2019; PNP 2016). We can say that each fallen body is an indelible mark of where democracy in this country has contracted. We hope our research enables us to rethink the political culture in the country addicted to instant fixes (e.g., three to six months), as well as the convenient moral dichotomy of good versus evil (e.g., “Dilawan” versus Duterte Diehard Supporters, or DDS). That we learn from this government, from this tragic episode in the life of the nation, that killing people is never a solution to the perceived

ills of the body politic. That we can still change minds, now drawn by example by the current government, that the best way to handle the opposition is to shame and dehumanize them, then bludgeon them with the law to the point of submission. Democracy by excision will inevitably lead to self-mutilation. The clamor of the many to get rid of the few eventually becomes a series of purges until, finally, the murderous elite that hides in populist sentiment is exposed. This elite is often represented by the wilting figure of a demagogue. For it is always the moral quandary of any state that defines its being as an opposition to its conjured enemy that once the enemy is gone, it must keep on making one or else its reason for wielding violence in behalf of the people simply collapses. The whole country becomes a site of harm. This we must undo. ❁

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