

A Case Study of the Effect of Duterte's Policies on the Rise of Terror

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Abstract: President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines has enacted numerous extreme policies targeting drug dealers and users in the Philippines. Since his election there has also been an increase in Islamic terror activity. This paper seeks to explore whether these policies had an impact on the rise in terrorism in the country.

Keywords: Philippines, Drug war, Duterte, Abu Sayyaf

Introduction

Terrorism has been on the rise in the Philippines. The Global Terrorism Index⁶⁰ ranked the Philippines in 2016 at 12th⁶¹, with a 7.089, and in 2018⁶² at 10th, with a score of 7.18. This increase is directly related to the increase in operations of Abu Sayyaf and Islamic State affiliated militant

⁶⁰ The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) is a yearly report that assesses the terror levels of 163 countries, covering 97.7% of the world's population. Each country is scored on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 representing the highest level of impact from terrorism. For more information, visit the Institute for Economics & Peace at <http://economicsandpeace.org/reports/>.

⁶¹ "Global Terrorism Index 2016 – World," Global Terrorism Index 2016, November 2016. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2016>.

⁶² "Global Terrorism Index 2018 – World," Global Terrorism Index 2018, December 2018. Accessed July 30, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2018>.

groups⁶³. In 2016 President Duterte was elected to the Philippine's Presidential Office by popular vote. This began an officially sanctioned literal war on drugs that would erode the social infrastructure and normalize violence, used as a pretense to remove political opponents and drive the price of drugs high enough to incentivize drug groups to fund terrorist groups. This paper seeks to examine whether the current regime's drastic social policies has influenced the increase in terrorist activity.

Conflict Background

The Philippines is home to a vast array of ethnic groups and political ideologies. The country is predominantly Catholic, with approximately 5% of the population identified as Muslim⁶⁴. The Muslim population is mostly concentrated in the southern region in Mindanao island and has spawned multiple different movements demanding independence for the Moor region. In 1971 the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was founded with the purpose of establishing an independent Moor region. Then in 1977 the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was founded as a separate group from the MNLF. The MILF was extremely popular in the region, and in the 1980s gained a considerable amount of territory through popular support. Following the 1980s, both the MNLF and MILF transitioned into moderate political factions and began to negotiate with the government. Former members from both factions became the primary insurgents in the area after being ostracized from the MNLF and MILF, when both parties became more moderate⁶⁵.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 28.

⁶⁴ "The World Factbook: Philippines." Central Intelligence Agency. February 01, 2018. Accessed August 01, 2019. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rp.html>.

⁶⁵ "Guide to the Philippines Conflict." BBC News. BBC, October 8, 2012. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17038024>.

Abu Sayyaf Background

The Abu Sayyaf (ASG) militant group has existed in the Philippines for approximately three decades⁶⁶. The primary motivations for this group are a) the independence in the predominantly Muslim regions of the South Philippines and b) to establish an Islamic Caliphate⁶⁷. After being ostracized from the MNLF for their radical views, ASG was formed. In the 1990s they shared close ties to Al Qaeda, but have since then separated from them⁶⁸. The organization has carried out various operations, from small scale kidnapping and extortion operations to larger coordinated attacks such as the Valentine's Day Bombings in 2005 and the Siege of Marawi⁶⁹. For most of its existence, the group focused heavily on kidnapping operations. In the 1990s alone, they abducted American missionaries, tourists, and school children⁷⁰. More recently, they have aligned themselves with the Islamic State (IS), although there are conflicting reports about the nature of the relationship between Abu Sayyaf and IS. Some reports consider them a local affiliate, while others state that it is purely a symbolic relationship without any exchange of materials and funding⁷¹. Abu Sayyaf is not the only group in the region, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Ansar al-Khalifa, and the Maute Group also operate in Mindanao. Each of them was formed after splitting from either the Moro Islamic Liberation Front or Abu Sayyaf⁷². On March 25th, 2017 Abu Sayaff Group, along with other Islamic State affiliated Muslim militant groups, seized the city of Marawi.

⁶⁶ "MMP: Abu Sayyaf Group", FSI, August 2018. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/abu-sayyaf-group>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² United States Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017*, report, United States Department of State, September 19, 2018, Chapter 1, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2017/>.

Rodrigo Duterte

Duterte has enacted numerous radical policies which have had sweeping effects across the nation. Duterte's 2016 campaign platform was based on nationalism, and a staunch zero tolerance policy to crime and corruption⁷³. Prior to becoming President, Duterte was the Mayor of the city of Davao, where he enacted many of the same tactics of extrajudicial killings and harsh punishments⁷⁴. One of the most noteworthy actions he has taken since becoming president, is the call for lethal direct action against drug dealers and users⁷⁵. Shortly after the election, he called for the extrajudicial killing of any drug users in one of his inaugural speeches, stating, "If you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself as getting their parents to do it would be too painful"⁷⁶. Following this extreme political rhetoric, there have been a large amount of extrajudicial killings. As of the 30th September 2018, the Philippines Drug Enforcement Agency reported approximately 5,000 extrajudicial killings while in police custody, while the Philippine National police listed 15,000 deaths as "homicides under investigation" relating to the war on drugs⁷⁷. Additionally, Duterte has ordered that the military show no mercy for any opposition militants. In a brazen and profanity laced speech, Duterte, addressing the terrorists, said that "I will eat your liver if you want me to. Give me salt and vinegar and I will

⁷³ "Analysis: Understanding the Duterte Vision for the Philippines," Philstar.com, June 30, 2016,, accessed August 02, 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/06/30/1598167/analysis-understanding-duterte-vision-philippines>.

⁷⁴ Kate Lamb, "Thousands Dead: The Philippine President, the Death Squad Allegations and a Brutal Drugs War," The Guardian, April 02, 2017, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/02/philippines-president-duterte-drugs-war-death-squads>.

⁷⁵ "Go Ahead and Kill Drug Addicts': Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte Issues Fresh Call for Vigilante Violence," South China Morning Post, July 20, 2018,, accessed August 02, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/1984193/go-ahead-and-kill-drug-addicts-philippine-president-rodrigo>.

⁷⁶ "Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte urges people to kill drug addicts", The Guardian, July 1, 2016, accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/01/philippines-president-rodrigo-duterte-urges-people-to-kill-drug-addicts>.

⁷⁷ "World Report 2019: Rights Trends in Philippines," Human Rights Watch, January 22, 2019, accessed August 02, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/philippines>.

eat it in front of you”⁷⁸. Besides targeting drug dealers, drug users and terrorists, Duterte has also targeted his political opposition. There are multiple instances where politicians critical of him and his policies have been arrested on charges which they claim are fabricated. Multiple Senators, and most recently the Vice President, who have vocalized their criticism of Duterte, have been arrested⁷⁹. After a Senator sought to open an inquiry about the extrajudicial killings, for example, Duterte’s response was, “I will have to destroy her in public”⁸⁰. The international community has also taken notice of these arrests, with the European Parliament and United Nations both officially adopting resolutions stating that the arrests are politically motivated⁸¹.

Changes in Society

The extreme number of killings has led to pervasive changes in society. The director for Amnesty International’s South Asia Branch, Nicholas Bequelin said, “Fear has now spread deep into the social fabric of society”⁸². This quote is representative of the general atmosphere where extrajudicial killings are normalized, even to the extent that there is now recognized slang amongst the population for various techniques. A New York Times photojournalist, Daniel Berehauk, who was in the Philippines in 2016, documented the murders taking place under the war on drugs. He reported:

⁷⁸ “Duterte Says He Will Eat Islamist Militants behind Beheadings,” South China Morning Post, July 20, 2018,, accessed August 02, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2101529/i-will-eat-your-liver-i-will-eat-it-front-you-philippines>.

⁷⁹ Jason Gutierrez, “Philippine Vice President, a Duterte Foe, Is Charged in Plot Against Him,” The New York Times, July 19, 2019, accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/19/world/asia/duterte-philippines-leni-robredo.html>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ European Union, European Parliament, *Philippines, the Case of Senator Leila M. De Lima*, by European Parliament, March 16, 2017,3, accessed August 2, 2019, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0088_EN.pdf?redirect.

⁸² Rhodina Villanueva, “Execution Rampant in Drug War; UN Probe Needed – AI,” Philstar.com, July 08, 2019, accessed August 02, 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/07/09/1933248/execution-rampant-drug-war-un-probe-needed-ai>.

Not far from where Tigas was killed, I found Michael Araja, shown in the first photo below, dead in front of a “sari sari,” what locals call the kiosks that sell basics in the slums. Neighbors told me that Mr. Araja, 29, had gone out to buy cigarettes and a drink for his wife, only to be shot dead by two men on a motorcycle, a tactic common enough to have earned its own nickname: riding in tandem⁸³.

The Question of a Failed State

Although the Philippines is not considered a failed state, by some classifications, its normalization of violence suggests that it is. The classifications of a failed state vary among scholars⁸⁴. While the specific definitions are contested, there are two common overall concepts across multiple definitions; the idea that the state no longer has a monopoly on violence or its escalation⁸⁵. Both criteria for a failed state have been present in the Philippines after Duterte's call for civilian violence against drug dealers and users. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described weak and failing states as global pathways that facilitate the movement of criminals and terrorists⁸⁶. While the situation is not as dire as other failed states (e.g. Somalia) since the government still exists, the encouragement of civilian led violence has allowed an insurgency to foster and grow in the same way as a failed state does.

Narco-terrorism

While drug use goes against Islam, multiple hardline Islamic terror groups have forgone the strict interpretation of this rule in order to further their

⁸³ Berehulak, Daniel. “‘They Are Slaughtering Us Like Animals.’” The New York Times. The New York Times, December 7, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/07/world/asia/rodri-go-duterte-philippines-drugs-killings.html>.

⁸⁴ Turkan Firinci Orman, “An Analysis of the Notion of a —Failed State,” *Ternational Journal of Social Science Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 2016): 1, accessed August 1, 2019, doi: 10.11114/ijsss.v4i1.1199.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Anna Simons and David Tucker, “The Misleading Problem of Failed States: A ‘socio-geography’ of Terrorism in the Post-9/11 Era,” *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2007):, doi: 10.1080/01436590601153887.

own interests⁸⁷, both financially and to supplement their fighters⁸⁸. In an interview with the World Bulletin, Colonel Rodrigo Gregorio of Joint Task Sulu stated that the military had been in contact with Abu Sayyaf members who have been killed while possessing drug paraphernalia and behaving in a manner consistent with drug users⁸⁹. Drug dealing groups in the area have supported Islamic militant groups to destabilize the region in order to facilitate the drug trade⁹⁰. The harsh prohibition has also created unique economic situations for drug traffickers, allowing them to raise prices and increase their profits⁹¹. According to the Philippines Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), the street price of cocaine has gone from P3,600 (USD 72) in 2015, to over P5,000 (USD 100) in 2017⁹². This price increase has further incentivized the drug groups to fund Islamic terror in order to destabilize the region further.

Polarization

Another contributing factor in the rise of extreme militants is the lack of protection for political moderates. In the Philippines, the protection for moderate political parties has not only been removed but replaced with active persecution. As previously mentioned, many of Duterte's political opponents have been targeted with trumped up charges against them

⁸⁷ "At Al Shabaab's Mercy: Woman Narrates Gang Rapes, Drug Abuse at Camps," The Star, November 23, 2017, 1, accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2017-11-23-at-al-shabaabs-mercy-woman-narrates-gang-rapes-drug-abuse-at-camps/>.

⁸⁸ "Coalition Partners Seize, Destroy ISIS Drug Cache in Southern Syria," U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, June 18, 2018,, accessed July 30, 2019, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1552582/coalition-partners-seize-destroy-isis-drug-cache-in-southern-syria/>.

⁸⁹ World Bulletin, "Philippines: Abu Sayyaf Uses Drugs for Recruits, Funds," World Bulletin, September 29, 2016, 1, accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.worldbulletin.net/asia-pacific/philippines-abu-sayyaf-uses-drugs-for-recruits-funds-h177927.html>.

⁹⁰ Amy Chew, "Drug Trade in Southern Philippines Still Bankrolling Pro-Islamic State Militants: Analyst," CNA, August 01, 2018, accessed August 02, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/drug-trade-marawi-mindanao-philippines-islamic-state-maute-10574894>.

⁹¹ Natasha Gutierrez, "How Duterte's Drug War Has Affected Rich Users," Rappler, April 27, 2017,, accessed August 02, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/167838-war-on-drugs-philippines-ecstasy-cocaine>.

⁹² Ibid.

which they claim are planted or fabricated in order to silence them⁹³. The removal of moderates and opposition forces in a country leads to an unstable political situation which further fosters terrorists ability to operate due to the internal strife that is created⁹⁴. A 2005 report examining the factors in the rise of terrorism in a country stated, "Perhaps the surest link between state failure and terrorism, however, is to be found where governments cannot or will not protect political moderates"⁹⁵. By removing any moderate factions, a positive feedback loop is established where extremism only spawns more extremism.

Extraneous Factors

While the current regime's social policies have exacerbated Abu Sayyaf and the Islamic State's control on the region, there have been other extraneous factors not caused by the current administration that has facilitated their rise. The Philippines archipelago creates an extreme porous border that is expensive and complex to patrol. The region already was unable to adequately patrol the area before Abu Sayyaf and the Islamic State became significant players in the region, as evidenced in the rise of piracy and human trafficking that was endemic in the region far before Duterte took power⁹⁶. This problem is further complicated by the Philippine's neighbors to the south. Indonesia and Malaysia have long had problems with Islamic terror, and due to the porous borders, these problems led to an influx of foreign fighters to the Philippines. While foreign fighters were denied entry into the Philippines at airports, others were able to use

⁹³ Jason Gutierrez, "Philippine Vice President, a Duterte Foe, Is Charged in Plot Against Him," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2019,, accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/19/world/asia/duterte-philippines-leni-robredo.html>.

⁹⁴ Anna Simons and David Tucker, "The Misleading Problem of Failed States: A 'socio-geography' of Terrorism in the Post-9/11 Era," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2007):, doi: 10.1080/01436590601153887.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁹⁶ Leopoldo V. Laroya, "Piracy in Southeast Asia: Examining the Present and Revisiting the Problems of Definition, Prevention, Response and Prosecution" (PhD diss., World Maritime University, 2000), 2000, 25, accessed August 2, 2019, https://commons.wmu.se/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1262&context=all_dissertations.

smuggling routes to enter the region and take up arms⁹⁷. Shortly after the battle, it was reported that at least 32 of the militant casualties were foreign fighters, with the number expected to rise as identities were further established. There are approximately 100 foreign fighters believed to be in the Mindanao region. Foreign fighters, unlike the marginalized local populations recruited, were encouraged to travel to the Philippines and join the militant groups there following the fall of the Islamic State in the Middle East⁹⁸. Duterte also cannot be blamed for the existing culture of explosives used for dynamite fishing in the Philippines that allowed militant groups to have plentiful access to bombmaking materials which further facilitate their operations⁹⁹.

Alternative Actions

The lingering issue of Islamic terror in the Philippines could have been somewhat alleviated had these violent policies not been enacted. As previously stated, the choices to declare an all-out war on drug dealers was part of Duterte's 2016 campaign. Had these drastic measures not been taken, possibly the Islamic violence could have been reduced. Of course, independently the war on drugs has been a humanitarian nightmare, but the terror that arose from this is a compounding problem that further complicates the issue. In the future, groups could take less drastic action, avoiding thousands of deaths in the streets and ensuring that punishment is carried out through official channels.

While keeping violence and other extreme actions limited to state actors does provide a certain degree of stability, it is insufficient. It has been

⁹⁷ "Malaysia and Indonesia Foreign Fighter Transit Routes to Philippines Identified." The Defense Post. November 27, 2018. Accessed August 02, 2019. <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/11/20/malaysia-indonesia-philippines-foreign-fighters-transit-routes/>.

⁹⁸ Rappler.com. "ISIS to Followers in SE Asia: 'Go to the Philippines'." Rappler. Accessed August 02, 2019. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/137573-isis-fight-southeast-asia-philippines>.

⁹⁹ Luke M Gerdes, Kristine Ringler, and Barbara Autin. 2014. "Assessing the Abu Sayyaf Group's Strategic and Learning Capacities." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37 (3): 267–93. doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2014.872021.

shown that in regimes with higher amounts state sanctioned violence, there is a higher incidence of anti-state violence during an insurgency¹⁰⁰. This suggests that any type of violent solution will only make an insurgency worse.

Strategic Importance of the Philippines

Any death from terrorism is unacceptable, but the regional stability of the Philippines is important for numerous reasons. China's expansion into the South China Sea challenges the other claimants to the area. The Philippines claim 9 of the islands¹⁰¹, as well as allowing United States military assets to establish a base in the Northern Philippines¹⁰². This strategic positioning, as well as cooperation between the United States' and the Philippine's militaries, is a critical relationship in matching Chinese expansion in the area. Should extremist action continue and escalate, this would threaten the stability of the area by drawing important resources towards stabilizing internal threats.

Conclusion

The degradation of social order and the rule of law, removal of moderates, and changes in the drug economies have all accumulated to exacerbate the Islamic terror issue in the Philippines. Islamic terror likely would have been an inevitable issue, but the drastic attempts at quelling the drug issue have considerably exacerbated the problem. With the human

¹⁰⁰ Valarie T. Bryant, *The Effect of State Killing of Civilians on Anti-State Violence: A Case Study of Syria*, report, 2014, 29, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://esoc.princeton.edu/files/effect-state-killing-civilians-anti-state-violence-case-study-syria>.

¹⁰¹ Manny Mogato, "[ANALYSIS] Despite Duterte Rhetoric, US Military Gains Forward Base in PH," Rappler, January 31, 2019, 1, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/222309-analysis-us-military-gains-forward-base-philippines-duterte-rhetoric>.

¹⁰² Rand Corporation, *Maritime Issues in the East and South China Seas: Summary of a Conference Held January 12–13, 2016*, report, Rand Corporation, January 13, 2016, 12, accessed July 31, 2019, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF300/CF358/RAND_CF358.pdf.

cost of the conflict already numbering in the thousands, it is difficult to justify this brazen assault on human rights when it is also exacerbating terrorism in the area.

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