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PROGRAM ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Violence and Autocratization

in the Philippines under Duterte

Sol Iglesias, PhD

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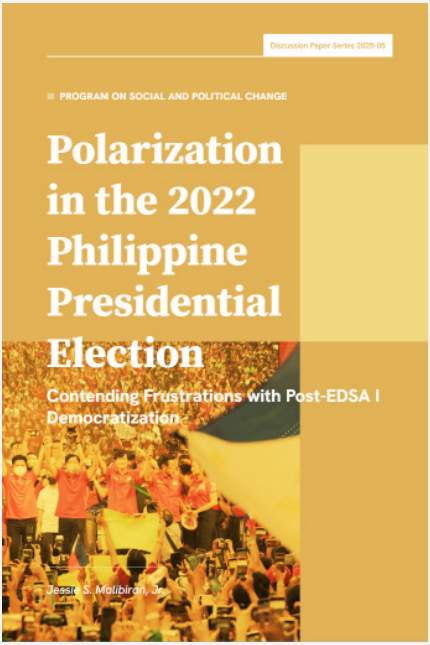

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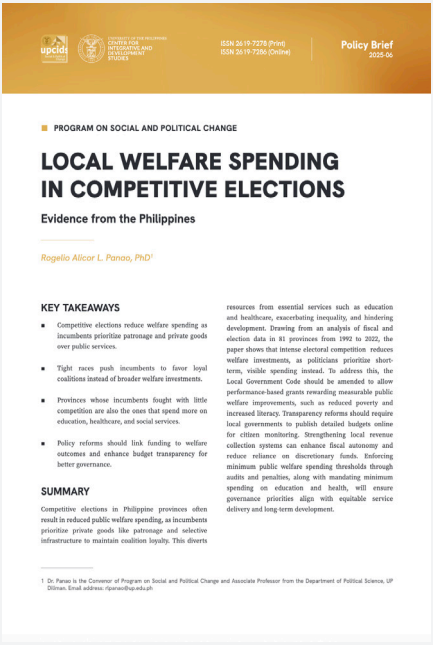

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VIOLENCE AND AUTOCRATIZATION

in the Philippines under Duterte

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte may have committed crimes against humanity in a systematic, wide-spread campaign of mass killing against civilians.
- I argue that this anti-crime campaign of mass violence is integral to the autocratization experienced in the Philippines under Duterte.
- Rather than overt political repression against state opponents, the tactic produces fear but confounds institutional backlash.
- The violence adds a coercive element to concomitant attacks on institutions of horizontal accountability and distorts public opinion.
- The case demonstrates that using a violence indicator signifies an earlier onset and longer duration than recognized backsliding periods, that could have otherwise gone undetected.

INTRODUCTION

Former President Rodrigo R. Duterte may have committed crimes against humanity in a systematic, wide-spread campaign of mass violence. The International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor leading the investigation estimates that between 12,000 to 30,000 individuals have been killed in the government's national anti-crime campaign, typically known as the "war on drugs" (International Criminal Court Pre-Trial Chamber I September 15, 2021). A sharp escalation of repressive violence often accompanies democratic collapse. Yet the relationship between state violence and democratic backsliding is not well understood. How does state violence affect democratic backsliding? I argue that this campaign of mass violence is integral to the democratic backsliding experienced in the Philippines under Duterte.

Ostensibly aimed at crime and corruption, the anti-crime campaign is a type of political violence that we are beginning to see more, and it is distinct from "routine", everyday police violence. Such a tactic may be compatible

with autocratization since it appears to be a governance matter. Executive constraints are typically designed to avert authoritarian rule by outright use of force, but anti-crime measures may not immediately trigger democratic checks and balances. These may not be blatant political repression targeting the opposition, the media, or civil society, yet a violent anti-crime campaign may engender fear while confounding institutional backlash—particularly if it enjoys popular support. Moreover, violence adds a coercive dimension to attacks on institutions of horizontal or vertical accountability. Anti-crime programs exploit moral panic over drugs and other social ills. Then, they lower the bar for addressing a complex issue with a simple solution: elimination of offenders, even if through illegitimate means. This in turn offers both a narrative to win consent and support from key audiences, promoting the populist leader as someone who can deliver concrete results, while producing violence akin to state terror and a political environment conducive for control.

The Philippine case offers insight into estimating the impact of state violence on democratic backsliding without being aimed at or causing immediate democratic collapse. Empirically, the case demonstrates that using a violence indicator signifies an earlier onset and longer duration than recognized autocratization periods. The violence dimension identifies periods of autocratization that would have otherwise gone undetected. This raises the question of whether the existing emphasis on electoral democracy deterioration should be reconsidered, especially under conditions of illiberal rule but in which political competition remains robust.

I compare how democratic backsliding (specifically autocratization) in the Philippines is measured or identified in the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Dataset 2022 Version 12 and the Democratic Erosion Events Dataset (DEED) 2020 Version 4 and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) data on the "war on drugs" with country-wide coverage from 2016 to 2021. I use the data to analyze different approaches for identifying periods of autocratization, depending on the degree to which violence is a factor in the analysis.

Episodes of Philippine democratic erosion in the DEED dataset include Duterte's "war on drugs" as state conducted violence, but as a precursor of democratic erosion rather than an integral feature. The dataset also registered a majority of episodes related to the repression of the opposition, media

repression and other signs of erosion in checks to executive authority and the reduction of electoral competition. With regard to the V-Dem data on the Philippines, based on an index combining liberal democratic and electoral qualities, autocratization occurs at least two years later than a sharp increase in physical violence ratings.

The relative importance of the polyarchic dimensions of democracy vis-à-vis basic civil liberties like arbitrary killing and other personal integrity violations needs to be reconsidered. Duterte's anti-drug crime campaign produced widespread, systematic summary executions of at least 6,200 civilians (according to official police estimates), if not as many as 30,000 individuals (according to the ICC and non-governmental organizations). The weight given to escalations of state violence needs to be further explored as a dimension of autocratization.

The deleterious effects of state violence on democracy can be profound, as the Philippine case demonstrates—particularly on horizontal accountability, press freedom, justice and the rule of law, as well as freedom of expression in a broad sense. This paper offers a perspective on how the impact of state violence on autocratization can be evaluated. The next stage of this research will be to better qualify the gaps in the data and recommend correctives for measuring autocratization comparatively.

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND MEASUREMENT

Democratic backsliding is not new but there is a growing recognition of its prevalence in recent years. In a seminal work, Bermeo (2016) defines democratic backsliding as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy," differentiating this from abrupt processes of democratic collapse like military or executive takeovers. Moreover, she distinguishes executive aggrandizement from such other forms since there is usually no change in leadership and occurs incrementally (Bermeo 2016, 5-10). Other scholars similarly emphasize the distinction between backsliding and collapse. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) use the term "erosion" as the gradual weakening of democracy by elected leaders who undermine the electoral systems that elevated them to power, without a clear collapse into authoritarianism. Autocratic leaders in democratic societies

constrained by relatively free elections instead aim to marginalize rather than eliminate their political opponents. The executive targets the legislature and the judiciary to disrupt horizontal accountability, rejecting democratic norms and tilting the electoral playing field to disadvantage the opposition (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 94–96). Some scholars recognize that similar processes occur in autocracies. Luhrman and Lindberg (2019, 1099) thus suggest the term autocratization as an umbrella concept, encompassing democratic backsliding as the gradual process, democratic collapse as sudden reversal to authoritarianism, and autocratic consolidation as the erosion of democratic qualities in autocracies (Pelke and Croissant 2021; Waldner and Lust 2018, 95).

Autocratization in weak states poses a specific problem for comparative politics, but this is not well understood and the empirical work on this question is fairly recent. The nature and success of backsliding is logically conditioned on the strength of democracy at the start of the autocratization process. Weak democracies at the onset of backsliding would be expected to have an impaired capacity at resisting backsliding, for instance (Laebens and Luhrmann 2021, 913—14). In a study of democratic backsliding in third wave democracies, Wunsch and Blanchard (2022) find that some of these post-colonial and relatively recent democracies can stabilize a range between democracy and autocracy as a function of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal (toward civil society and the media) accountability qualities. However, given that variation, they detect distinct backsliding trajectories over time, including democratic reversals, autocratic stagnation, and partial backsliding. They describe one particular trajectory as democracies "under attack" in which the three dimensions of accountability transition from intermediate quality to weak during backsliding transitions (Wunsch and Blanchard 2022, 11-18). Democratic quality as intermediate is distinguished from consolidated, stable democracy at the outset; the erosion trajectories also thus differ.

Moreover, a widespread premise in the literature is that democracy, generally speaking, pacifies state violence: a finding consistent in comparative studies across space and throughout time (Davenport 2004, 11–18). Democratic backsliding is logically related to a weakening of the constraints around the use of state violence. However, the relationship between violence and autocratization is not commonly explored because there are evidently few cases of egregious state violence under democracy, while state violence tends to fall under the umbrella of a decline in liberal democracy or a denigration

of horizontal constraints. Andersen (2019, 616) argues that there is a need to account for at least two different kinds of democratic backsliding in recent decades, distinguishing between the breakdown of electoral contestation and the erosion of the liberal components of democracies in which the electoral core is not immediately targeted. Similarly, Coppedge (2017) delineates two different sequences or pathways of democratic backsliding: constraining checks-and-balances of horizontal accountability vs. attacks against civil liberties. The Philippine experience better fits the type in which the liberal dimensions of democracy and civil liberties are threatened: egregious violence offers a coercive edge to autocratization without threatening electoral competitiveness directly. Yet the democratic backsliding literature tends to emphasize the former.

It is possible that the issue is one of measurement. A recent debate in comparative democracy studies challenges the primacy of expert-led democracy indexing.[2] Little and Meng (2024, 154–57) criticize expert-coding as a subjective process of regime type measurement, advocating instead for objective indicators such as incumbent party loss and acceptance of electoral outcomes, and other verifiable estimates of *de facto* and *de jure* electoral competitiveness, executive constraints, and press freedom. One substantive implication of their methods is that their empirical evidence does not support claims of global democratic recession using data from expert-coding such as Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), the latter widely accepted as authoritative in particular. However, Knutsen et al. (2024, 164 and 167) defend their methods, arguing that objective measures such as those offered by Little and Meng are unable to integrate new autocratization techniques in democratic backsliding processes as would-be autocrats innovate to occlude their informal, non-institutional efforts that may hollow out formal democracies—among other nuances lost. Meanwhile, Baron et al. (2024, 209) discuss the value of episode-based documentation, which they argue offer more opportunity to document and evaluate events that cause or constitute autocratization including those that threaten but do not fundamentally change democratic institutions. These may be undervalued or

2 Papers presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting were collected to reflect the debate in a special issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics*. Key articles are discussed hereafter.

completely missed in Little and Meng's approach but are more likely to be captured in expert-coded indices.

In the next section, I evaluate how V-Dem, the Democratic Erosion Dataset, as well as Little and Meng track democratic backsliding in the Philippines during the Duterte administration. I show that these measures fail to fully capture the import of the drug war and its relationship to democratic backsliding; and while the erosion events dataset includes it in its Philippine coverage, it is not weighted enough to register as anything more than another erosion precursor that occurred during the period.

MEASURING AUTOCRATIZATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

Diamond (2022, 168–69) regards Philippine democratic collapse as having occurred in 2019 citing attacks on horizontal accountability and the mid-term electoral results as the main cause. Although he mentions the drug war, by 2019 the violence had already declined considerably. Levitsky and Way (2020, 60) identify the Philippines as a competitive authoritarian regime, achieved through polarizing populist strategies, as Duterte "astutely tapped into widespread public disaffection over soaring crime rates and persistent corruption". Wunsch and Blanchard (2022, 18) classify the Philippines as a third wave democracy *under attack*, with intermediate quality institutions of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal accountability eroding to weakness, possessing a persistently weak electoral process over the who post-authoritarian period.

The V-Dem annual reports likewise consider the Philippines an autocratizing regime, falling from the ranks of democracies as an electoral autocracy by 2020 (Alizada et al. 2021, 31). Similarly, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) (2021, 8–9) report on democracy considers the Philippines as a backsliding democracy beginning from a relatively weak democratic position. However, what is unclear is how the chain of causality leads from the mass violence of the "war on drugs", or even its popularity, to a tilting of the electoral playing field, given that the Philippine president is constitutionally limited to a single, six-year term. Casting the Philippines as a non-democracy or authoritarian hybrid does not elucidate if

Duterte has wielded the violence for electoral gain and how. Indeed, Svolik (2019, 21–22) argues that populists exploit political polarization so that voters become willing to trade democracy for the promotion or protection of their partisan interests, facilitating autocratization without impinging on electoral competitiveness itself. Nonetheless, there is a growing consensus that the Philippines is autocratizing, but when the country transitioned out of democracy and exactly why remains to be clarified.

However, I argue that the Philippines began an autocratization process as early as 2016 precisely because of state-sponsored mass violence. The distinction matters because the mass violence was targeted at unarmed civilians i.e. outside the context of a civil war. The violence concomitant with autocratization has been extraordinary. Thompson (2021, 2) reasons that while Duterte's contemporary illiberal populists have sidelined, jailed or even assassinated rivals, only Duterte has instigated systematic, state-led mass murder of unarmed individuals or groups. This case offers insight into how this type of political violence hollows democracy out. As this paper shows, the Philippine government's campaign of mass violence facilitated an executive-led debilitation of democratic institutions. Unlike a military coup d'etat or civil war that aim at the state, the drug war violence can be considered as targeting the norms that constitute democracy, such as the intrinsic value of every human life. In this, a state-sponsored campaign of systematic violence is central to autocratization, rather than incidental.

This section explores the extent to which state violence is integrated into existing measures of democratic backsliding and autocratization. First, I briefly describe how episodes of democratic erosion in the Philippines are captured in the Democratic Erosion Events Dataset (DEED). Second, I use data from the V-Dem dataset and apply its measure of autocratization to the Philippine case, comparing it with V-Dem's own physical violence index. Third, I overlay Philippine data over V-Dem liberal democracy data as a final comparison of autocratization onset.

Table 1. Episodes of Democratic Erosion, Philippines

EPISODE TYPE	CODER RATING
Duterte administration (2016-2019)	
Repression of opposition	3
Media repression	3
Reduction in judicial independence	3
State conducted violence or abuse	1
Extremist/populist parties	3
Revision of the constitution/ Suspension of the rules/ constitution	3
Manipulation of civil service/ Weakened civil service/ integrity institutions	3
Electoral fraud	3
Systemic reduction in election freedom/fairness	3
Electoral violence	3
Precursor - Horizontal corruption	3
Media bias	3
Aquino III administration (2010-2016)	
Nonstate violence	3
Arroyo administration (2001-2010)	
Horizontal corruption	3
Electoral fraud	3
Media repression	3
Curtailed civil liberties	3
Electoral violence	3
State conducted violence or abuse	3

■ **Source:** Democratic Erosion Events Dataset (DEED); a coder rating of "3" indicates moderate erosion of democratic institutions while a rating of "1" indicates that there are precursors to democratic backsliding but erosion of democratic institutions has not yet taken place

DEED identifies unique events related to democratic erosion across 101 countries from 2000 to 2020 (Gottlieb et al. 2020). DEED offers a menu of specific incidents that are subjectively assessed as democratic erosion (or episodes of resistance, for that matter, which are also included in the dataset), including democracies based on the V-Dem liberal democracy index if a country received a lower score in year *t* than in *year t-1*, implying that the incidents are contributing factors or potential causes of the observed erosion. What Table 1 above shows us is that a majority of identified democratic erosion incidents occurred under the Duterte presidency, with a number of democratic erosion events also having occurred under the Gloria Macapagal Arroyo government. The term of Benigno Aquino III produced only one erosion event, according to this dataset.

The DEED dataset included Duterte's "war on drugs" as state conducted violence, but as a single event of democratic erosion. This does not reflect the unprecedented scale of the violence and its emergence as the dominant form of political violence in the first two years of the Duterte administration. Meanwhile, the dataset registered many episodes related to the repression of the opposition, media repression and other signs of erosion in checks to executive authority and the reduction of electoral competition. DEED is not effective at telling us is how these different events relate or compare, and how much erosion or autocratization has occurred. Nonetheless, the identification of autocratizing episodes is valuable.

Still, while most events of state violence linked to autocratization in democracies were against political opponents or to crack down on dissent, a few cases identified in the DEED database were similar to the "war on drugs" in the Philippines (Gottlieb et al. 2020). For example, in 2019 in Brazil, police and military forces killed an estimated 1,249 people in favelas in the capital Rio de Janeiro over an eight-month period. The violence stemmed from the government's hardline approach to bring down crime rates, particularly to prevent drug dealing. In Guatemala in 2006, the president was accused of involvement in extrajudicial executions of prisoners in 2006 when he served as the head of the prison service. In Thailand, the government's anti-drug crime campaign resulted in more than 2,500 killings by the police in 2003. Unlike the rest of the democratic erosion events, the targets were neither protesters, opposition nor ethno-religious minorities but alleged criminals or prisoners.

Moreover, except for Guatemala, each of these cases resulted in hundreds or even thousands of deaths over a short period of time. While the number of cases is small, the magnitude of the violence suggests the need for further concern and investigation.

Figure 1. Autocratization Estimates: Liberal Democracy Index vs Physical Violence Index

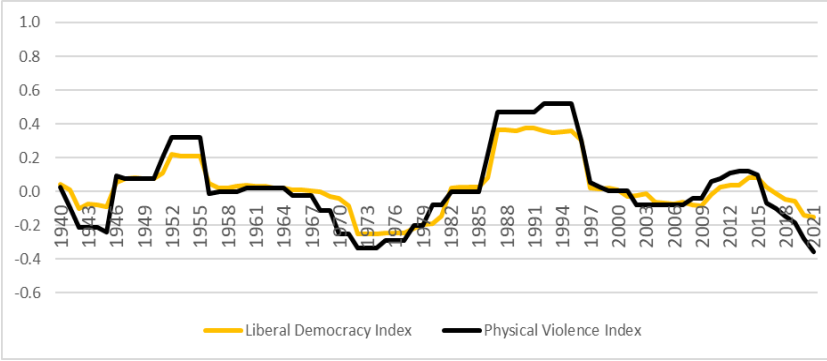


Table 2. Autocratization Estimates: Liberal Democracy vs Physical Violence Index, 2000 to 2021

YEAR	LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX	PHYSICAL VIOLENCE INDEX
2000	0.01	0.01
2001	-0.03	0.01
2002	-0.03	-0.08
2003	-0.02	-0.08
2004	-0.07	-0.08
2005	-0.07	-0.08
2006	-0.07	-0.08
2007	-0.07	-0.08
2008	-0.08	-0.04
2009	-0.09	-0.04
2010	-0.02	0.06

YEAR	LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX	PHYSICAL VIOLENCE INDEX
2011	0.02	0.07
2012	0.04	0.11
2013	0.04	0.12
2014	0.08	0.12
2015	0.08	0.10
2016	0.03	-0.07
2017	-0.01	-0.10
2018	-0.05	-0.15
2019	-0.06	-0.18
2020	-0.14	-0.28
2021	-0.15	-0.36

■ Shaded years denote autocratization periods. Absolute value of difference of index score for year *t* and year *t-10* greater than 0.05.

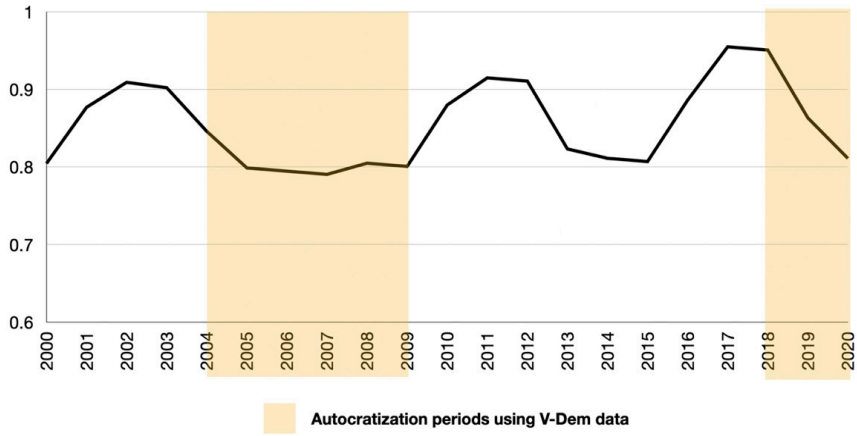
Source: V-Dem Dataset version 12

V-Dem annual reports consider autocratization as a significant decline on the Liberal Democracy Index (LIBDEM) in democracies, as democratic regression, or autocracies, as autocratic regression. Conversely, democratization is a significant increase in a country's LIBDEM. The index measures the extent to which constitutionally protected civil liberties, rule of law, horizontal accountability and constraints on executive power are achieved, also taking the level of electoral democracy into account, on a scale from low to high (0-1) (Coppedge 2022, 44). Unlike DEED, the V-Dem report captures change over a ten-year period (the LIBDEM difference at year *t* from *year t-10*), seeking to integrate both gradual and sudden changes, on the condition that the absolute value of the LIBDEM change is greater than 0.05 (Luhrmann et al. 2020, 11). Figure 1 compares the autocratization and democratization patterns of LIBDEM scores for the Philippines with the corresponding V-Dem Physical Violence index (CLPHY). The CLPHY is an average of two indicators: freedom from torture (CLTORT) and freedom from political killings (CLKILL), with a range from 0 to 1. Political killings are those considered to be perpetrated by

the state or its agents (e.g. police, security forces, prison officials, paramilitary groups) without due process of law, for the purpose of eliminating political opponents. Similarly, torture here refers to a purposeful infliction of extreme mental or physical pain to extract information or intimidate incarcerated victims, particularly at the hands of state officials and other state agents (Coppedge 2022, 176).

The data presented here are the differences between scores for LIBDEM at year *t* and at *year t-10*, the V-Dem measure for autocratization and democratization, as well as for CLPHY for comparison. While the patterns resemble one another, as observable in Figure 1, Table 2 shows that substantial increases of violence are detected considerably earlier than autocratization episodes: in 2002 rather than 2004, under the Arroyo government; and in 2016, rather than 2018 (or 2020, as V-Dem reports in its 2021 findings). One way of looking at sudden increases in state violence is that they are precursors or early warning signs of autocratization, as can be inferred from the V-Dem data or as the DEED typology has explicitly done. Yet the weight given to such escalations of state violence needs to be further explored and considered as a dimension of autocratization.

Figure 2. Democratic Backsliding in the Philippines: Little and Meng's Index vs. V-Dem



Little and Meng (2024)'s index of objective rather than expert-coded measures of democratic backsliding uses indicators of electoral outcomes (incumbent performance and turnover) as well as executive constraints and

media freedom. Examining the Little and Meng (2024) index scores on the Philippines however, they capture backsliding under the Arroyo government similar to V-Dem's LIBDEM index (see data in Figure 2) but show that the first two years of the Duterte government—the height of the anti-drug crime violence—saw democratic improvement rather than decline. The problem is that Little and Meng continue to measure backsliding mainly in terms of democracy's electoral dimensions.

Boese points out that in the V-Dem definition of democracy, for instance, the electoral dimension is considered the core element without which no country can be considered democratic. Boese (2019, 95–127) furthermore lauds V-dem's explicit theoretical basis for aggregation (compared to other democracy datasets Freedom House and Polity), accepting the premise without recognizing that this could cause measurement errors under some conditions. For instance, state violence may be more salient for autocratization processes in weak democracies or in competitive authoritarian regimes in which electoral institutions remain largely intact.

Drawing from Little and Meng's insight that objective measures could enhance or even offer different findings with respect to democratic backsliding, countable and recorded data on violence incidence are verifiable, unlike subjective ratings. Methodologically, however, I expand upon erosion events identified in the work of Baron et al. (2024), but I treat the drug war as a precursor *and* explanatory factor for backsliding, which is a stronger claim than their work would imply. The following two sections elaborate on this reasoning.

DUTERTE'S "WAR ON DRUGS"

In the post-war, independent Philippines, Duterte's "war on drugs" campaign is unprecedented in the scale and scope of its killings—surpassing even the Marcos dictatorship, under which around 2,427 extrajudicial killings from 1975 to 1985 (Kessler 1989, 137). Although neither by a military takeover nor constitutional dissolution, the Philippines has also experienced a distinctive decline of democratic institutions since 2016 when Duterte assumed the presidency.

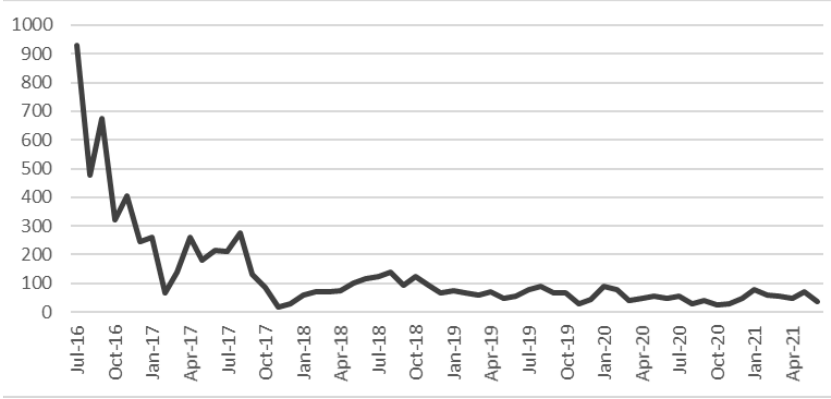
Until Duterte's incumbency, state violence was higher during Arroyo's term than that of any other post-Marcos leader (Karapatan 2012). The United Nations, NGOs and independent investigations attribute the sharp rise in extrajudicial killings in 2005 to 2006 under the Arroyo administration to the military Operation Bantay Laya against the communist insurgency (Karapatan 2011, 16; Parreño 2011, 13-14; Sales 2009).

Duterte had campaigned for the presidency drew on his tough-on-crime reputation built over almost three decades as Davao City mayor, where he was linked to the vigilante group "Davao Death Squad". The Coalition Against Summary Executions (CASE) (2015), a Davao City-based civil society group, attributes an estimated 1,424 fatalities between 1998 and 2015 to the death squad. Locally, Duterte's violent tactics were evidently part of a winning formula for elections: Duterte was mayor for the better part of two decades, after all.

Furthermore, Duterte was adept at maintaining support from national leaders and leveraging Davao City as a "vote bank" that could deliver electoral support to allies. In July 2002, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo appointed Duterte as her "anti-crime czar", heading a national taskforce on kidnapping and illegal drugs (Burgonio and Pazzibugan 2002). Duterte was also a long-time chair of the Davao Regional Peace and Order Council (RPOC), which offered him a platform to influence security priorities beyond his city borders (Esquire Philippines 2016). President Arroyo's support ostensibly shielded Duterte from calls for accountability from the growing violence. According to CASE, death squad killings nearly doubled from an estimated 56 incidents in 2002 to 92 in 2003. Until Duterte's presidency, state violence was higher during Arroyo's term than any other administration in the post-dictatorship period (Karapatan 2012). Arroyo's championing of Duterte's brutal tactics was part of a larger democratic backsliding at this time.

As president, Duterte directed the Philippine National Police to implement Project Double Barrel, a nation-wide campaign targeting drug-related crimes. The program involved various activities, such as intelligence gathering to identify drug users and dealers at the barangay level and beyond, random drug testing, house-to-house visits, and police operations like entrapment ("buy-bust" operations), community sweeps, and raids.

Figure 3. "War on Drugs" Monthly Fatalities, July 2016 to June 2021



■ Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED)

The Philippine government puts the count at 6,201, a figure treated as the official death toll of the drug war (Kishi and Buenaventura 2021). According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (2022), at least 7,740 fatalities resulted from the national "war on drugs". This is closer to lower-bound official estimate due to the unavailability of detailed information from police authorities and other official sources. The ICC Prosecutor considers a death toll of 12,000 to 30,000 deaths credible (International Criminal Court Pre-Trial Chamber I September 15, 2021).

As Figure 3 illustrates, the violence concentrates around the first year of the Duterte administration, tapering off throughout the succeeding years. About a third of the deaths occur in the first three months, based on ACLED data.[3] During this time, some estimate that there was as many as a thousand victims each month (Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism 2017).[4] Apart from the escalation of violence, killings occurred in urban rather than in rural areas in a remarkable reversal of past patterns of political violence in the country

3 Author's calculations

4 See graph "Killed during Police Operations vs Deaths under Investigation" in (Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism 2017)

(Bourdreau 2009). Over a third of the violence reported in the ACLED dataset occurred in the capital, Metro Manila.[5]

Apart from the heightened scale of the violence, the nature of violent anti-crime campaigns need to be qualified as different from both normal state policing functions as well as "routine" police brutality. The "war on drugs" violence in the Philippines lacked rationalization beyond the president's rhetoric. For instance, Duterte elided the fact that drug crime, nationally, had been on the wane for years and kept exaggerating drug crime incidence. He would double the estimate from the Dangerous Drugs Board of 1.8 million users in 2015, of whom roughly half were addicted, claiming there were 3.7 million drug addicts in the Philippines. Yet Duterte's baseless drug crime statistics drove policy, arbitrary figures putting pressure on police and government officials (Baldwin and Marshall 2016). Even so, authorities acknowledged that the drug war did not reduce the drug trade nor restrain drug crime (Allard and Lema 2020). Like the Davao Death Squad, the national "war on drugs" benefited from attitudes that justified the violence to cleanse society from its unwanted elements (Breuil et al. 2009). Furthermore, the anti-crime frame distances the violence from electoral politics as well as from political repression of the opposition (Thompson 2021, 4). Overt repression could have more easily sparked resistance.

Raffle (2021) describes the national "war on drugs" in the Philippines under Duterte and its analog in Thailand under former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra as state vigilantism. He observes that state vigilantism can entail intense periods of violence resulting in several thousands of victims may be killed over a short span of time, enabled in a political climate that dehumanizes targets by accentuating their risk to society. The state orchestrates these killings, while simultaneously denying responsibility by presenting the violence as the result of legitimate encounters with authorities, vigilantism, or criminal gang conflicts (Raffle 2021, 3). Arbitrary and contradictory, this violent power of the state produces a regime of impunity that is routinized in the disenfranchised category of people (Duschinski 2010).

5 Author's calculations

The national anti-crime campaign resembles state terror in totalitarian regimes, but it may not produce the same effect. In a weak democracy such as the Philippines, the evidence is strong that the anti-crime campaign was immensely popular. Kenny and Holmes (2020) find support for a penal populism thesis, specifically finding that populist attitudes explain support for the "war on drugs" and the killing of suspected drug criminals. But the authors do not find that their measure of fear of becoming a drug war victim (for themselves or their family) as a significant factor for drug war approval (Kenny and Holmes 2020). Ducanes, Rood, and Tigno (2023) find Duterte's popularity to be plausibly supported by strong support in Mindanao, satisfaction in his administration's overall policy performance and governance, as well as certain character traits as the president's diligence and decisiveness.

CONSTRAINING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

State terror in the form of the "war on drugs" has direct effects on liberal dimensions of democracy, particularly on horizontal accountability and vertical accountability, including public opinion. Incidents recounted here are in the DEED dataset on democratic erosion, but I expand on the relationship between violence and these constraints.

Horizontal accountability

The government detained the president's harshest critic over charges that she abused her previous position as Justice secretary, paid off by drug criminals in a protection racket. Senator Leila de Lima had led a inquiry into the "war on drugs" that also produced potentially damning testimony implicating the president in murders by the Davao Death Squad, linked to him when he was mayor of Davao City. After her removal, the investigation was quickly concluded and the president cleared of wrongdoing. Although the Supreme Court dismissed two of the three cases filed against her, de Lima has served over four years of a six-year senate term in detention. It is worth noting that de Lima had been the Chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights that had investigated him as mayor of Davao City in 2008. After the 2022 election, under the present government of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., witnesses subsequently recanted their testimony against de Lima, alleging that they were coerced by state officials including the Secretary of Justice at the time (Buan 2021). She

has recently been released from detention and awaits the resolution of a third and final case against her.

Duterte's allies ousted Supreme Court Chief Justice, Maria Lourdes Sereno, rendering the high court a deficient check against the executive. The president had targeted hundreds of judges in an unsubstantiated list of drug crime offenders. Sereno had led a strenuous objection to this attack on the judiciary. As a result of the timing of retirements among Supreme Court justices, Duterte was in an unusual position to appoint a majority of high court judges early in his tenure as president. More importantly, the court has been "cooperative" with the executive on salient cases: his appointees consistently and reliably vote in the administration's favor (Ibarra 2020).

Duterte also pressured three prominent media outlets which had covered the "war on drugs" extensively and critically, using both political and economic levers. The Philippine Daily Inquirer was forced to sell under the Duterte administration's accusations ranging from swindling to tax evasion (Rappler.com 2017). The buyer was a prominent campaign contributor and a close ally of Duterte (Corrales, 2016). The Securities and Exchange Commission revoked the license to operate of online media platform Rappler, while Nobel Peace Prize co-recipient Maria Ressa, its founder, was subjected to a number of court cases, and Rappler reporters were barred from certain types of political coverage (Adel 2018). Duterte's allies in Congress denied ABS-CBN, the country's biggest media conglomerate, the renewal of its franchise. The news station was forced to shut its broadcast down on free television and radio on May 5, 2020. Coronel (2018) points out that the Duterte administration and its supporters online had "(let) loose an army of trolls, bloggers on the state's payroll, propagandists and paid hacks who ensure the strongman' attacks against the press are amplified in newspaper columns and on the airwaves, on social media and fake news sites."

Public opinion

Surveys of political performance in the Philippines indicate that President Duterte enjoyed the greatest scale of approval compared to any of his predecessors in the post-Marcos period (Ducanes, Rood, and Tigno 2021). Thompson (2021) argues that violent populism went unchallenged in the Philippines in part due to a lack of a popular alternative from the left and

the failure of earlier "proletarian" populists to remain in power. Despite the serious criticism and legal challenges it has provoked, President Duterte's "war on drugs" is seen to be a major contributor to Duterte's popularity. Surveys also show that while wealthier economic groups tend to voice more approval and stress the greater importance of "fighting criminality", Duterte and the violent campaign enjoyed support across socio-economic class. Curato (2016, 101–02) sees this as an expression of "penal populism", a style of politics that amplifies public fears of crime and desires for a punitive approach to justice. Her ethnographic work in Leyte province adds that Duterte's supporters are motivated not only by fear but also the hope and democratic agency that Duterte also inspires.

However, I caution that the unnatural buoyancy of Duterte's apparent popularity still needs to be viewed with skepticism. For instance, Curato's ethnographic work was not conducted in an area heavily affected by Duterte's campaign of mass violence. Warburg and Jensen, on the contrary, offer ethnographic evidence of the pervasiveness of fear among vulnerable urban poor communities in Metro Manila and that this fear is utilized to control them. Furthermore, they add that the production of "watch lists" at the barangay level, with names of suspected drug pushers and addicts, works as a means of surveilling the community (Warburg and Jensen 2018, 408–11). Kenny and Holmes (2020, 198), meanwhile, rely on conventional direct survey data. They find that populist attitudes explain public support for Duterte's anti-crime campaign, approval for his government's penal policies, and support for violent extra-judicial killings in the course of the campaign. However, they do not rule out the possibility of social desirability bias, a systematic over-reporting of socially accepted behaviors and attitudes as well as under-reporting of unwanted ones among survey respondents over sensitive questions that elicit negative feelings, such as shame or embarrassment, or consequences, like the possibility of sanctions (Krumpal 2013).

Kasuya and Miwa (2023), using indirect survey methods, indeed uncover an inflation of Duterte's popularity by about 39 percentage points due to respondents' social conformity behavior. This mechanism is akin to what Canares et al. (2021) describe as herd behavior in conventional surveys: they found that respondents tend to link their opinions on the president to their individual perception of their community's opinion—i.e. "their" herd's perception and satisfaction with the president. Kasuya and Miwa (2023) find

that Duterte's popularity as president was inflated by social desirability bias (SDB). Still, the finding that Duterte's public approval rating had been inflated by SDB somewhat explains the unusual pattern of high satisfaction during his "lame duck" period, particularly within the final two years of his term. Kasuya and Miwa (2023) reject a "fear thesis" in explaining sensitivity bias over Duterte's popularity but found that social conformity pressure and poverty were significant factors for SDB. Moreover, they found a remarkably high level of SDB among respondents from Mindanao (72.5 percentage points), where Duterte had been a longtime mayor in Davao City.

Thus while President Duterte's popularity had appeared genuine, the mixed empirical support for a penal populism thesis needs to be considered. Although Duterte's "war on drugs" and populist rhetoric resonate with collective sentiments of fear and hope, evidence points to an inflated public approval, driven by conformity pressures and socio-economic vulnerabilities rather than genuine, unmediated support. Evidence of social desirability bias raise critical questions about the reliability of conventional popularity measures. While the notion of penal populism remains persuasive for many scholars, autocratization may affect public opinion and—more broadly—free expression.

CONCLUSION

How does state violence affect democratic backsliding? This paper demonstrates that a sharp increase in state violence in the Philippines was integral to autocratization in the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte. Empirically, the prevalence of state violence indicates that a substantive change in liberal democratic qualities occurred as much as two years to four years before autocratization, based on a widely used measure that uses a combined liberal and electoral democracy index, with a stronger emphasis on indicators of the latter. Violence event and fatalities data signify a single dimension of the extent to which civil liberties are enjoyed in a regime, yet at the same time it is a more objectively verifiable indicator than subjective ratings typically used in democracy and autocracy indices. The Philippine case underscores the salience of state violence levels to assessing democratic backsliding under certain conditions—in weak democracies or competitive authoritarian regimes, for instance.

This paper also demonstrates that, unlike state terror, state-sponsored violence—ostensibly against crime—is compatible with democratic backsliding because it is not overtly aimed at dissent and can go technically undetected. Without directly targeting electoral competitiveness, state violence against "exceptional" enemies like criminals, through illegitimate means, constrains accountability. Moreover, state vigilantism can escalate quickly without immediately triggering institutional constraints or effective political opposition. The deleterious effects of state violence on democracy can be nonetheless profound, as the Philippine case demonstrates, on horizontal accountability and free expression. This paper explores how the impact of state violence on democratic backsliding can be evaluated.

Future research is needed to better qualify the gaps in the data and recommend correctives for measuring backsliding in the liberal dimensions of weak democracies or hybrid regimes. State violence needs to be differentiated in its state terror, campaign form, from routine police violence. Is state violence a component of autocratization? Or, as I suggest here in the case of the anti-crime campaign, does it facilitate democratic backsliding, having an impact as an independent variable rather than an indicator of democratic decline? This research has sought to explain discrepancies in measuring the "timing" of democratic backsliding, in order to better explore its nature.

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