

The Origins of Duterte's 'War on Drugs' in the Philippines

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Abstract

President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs" campaign has killed an estimated 30,000 people, an unprecedented level of violence amid a long history of conflict and murderous elections in the Philippines. My research explains political violence in the country from 2001 until Duterte's election in 2016, the period in which this particular form of "anti-crime" violence emerged. Why does political violence persist in a democracy? Explaining the Philippine case as a failure of democratic consolidation is not enough. The key is to understand how a weak state governs: specific patterns of political violence are contingent upon central-local dynamics. Overall, I find that the state remains the biggest producer of sustained political violence—mainly related to counterinsurgency. Without a monopoly over the legitimate (and illegitimate) use of force, the state seeks to regulate violence in society. Locally led, particularistic violence over elections tends to be low in intensity unless it is quasi-statist and centrally supported—such as the "anti-crime", Davao City death squad killings linked to Duterte himself. The Philippines remains a weak state, but it has a relatively "strong" capacity for violence oriented toward primacy, not monopoly.

Sol Iglesias is a Visiting Affiliate at the Southeast Asian Studies department of the National University of Singapore (NUS). She has a Ph.D. in Southeast Asian Studies and a M.A. in Political Science from NUS as well as a M.A. in International Affairs from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and a B.A. in Public Administration from the University of the Philippines. She was a Southeast Asia Research Group (SEAREG) Fellow in 2017. Sol is currently writing a book, *The Dynamics of Political Violence in the Philippines*, on the central-local interactions that produced violence in the democratic interregnum between the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship and authoritarianism under Duterte.



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