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# Duterte Unbound

Vicente L. Rafael

In the Philippines, the deaths from President Rodrigo Duterte's bloody war on drugs keep mounting. In seven months, there have been over 7,000. Most of these have been in the poorest communities among those labeled by the police as "drug personalities," that is, suspected dealers and users—Duterte makes no distinction between the two. The killings, carried out by the police in league with vigilantes unfold like clockwork, from around ten in the evening to five the next morning. Success is measured by the body count, and with Duterte in the habit of exposing local officials implicated in the drug trade while threatening to declare Martial Law, there is no end in sight to the nightly executions.

What is perhaps most troubling is that amid these extra-judicial killings, Duterte remains wildly popular—as much as 86 percent of the country approves of his rule. While his crude talk, frequent threats, and wild stories about killing alleged criminals are staples of his late-night press conferences and public speeches, no organized forces have yet emerged to challenge him. Dissent has been diffuse and largely unorganized in the face of the president's popularity.

Among those living in poor communities who are most directly affected by the murders, anecdotal evidence from journalists covering the killings suggests that anger is growing among the families of the victims. But they are as yet unable to translate their grief into organized resistance. With no movement, religious or political, to back families up, the daily killings only intensify their sense of vulnerability.

The middle class, historically the source of ideas and leaders for political movements, remains divided. The minority who oppose Duterte are out-raged. They pontificate, they rant, or they offer carefully crafted critiques, but these have yet to graduate into broader strategies or tactics for sustained resistance. Even the demonstrations opposing the burial of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the National Heroes' Cemetery late last year, as impressive and sudden as they appeared, were largely spontaneous and leaderless. Participation came mainly from students of elite schools with



President Rodrigo Duterte arrives in Davao City for a visit, September 30, 2016. Photo by Karl Norman Alonzo/PPD, courtesy Presidential Communications Operations Office.

little or no connection to the masses or any large-scale program for social reform.

The students have since become quiet and it is difficult to tell if their opposition to the Marcoses will spill over into a more concerted opposition to the extrajudicial killings. Instead, the students, along with a section of the middle class, feel largely disconnected by their own privilege; their neighborhoods have been insulated from the killings (so far) even though they sympathize with the victims. Driven to moral outrage, they nonetheless find their political expression repeatedly blocked and deferred. With the military and the police very much in support of Duterte, the prospect for another “People Power” uprising such as 1986 could not be more distant today.

As for the Catholic Church, their moral critique of Duterte, for all sorts of complicated reasons, has barely made a dent. While the bishops were initially hesitant to criticize the president, they have of late begun to be more vocal from the pulpit. Meanwhile, those clergy and nuns in the rank and file must contend with the persistent popularity of a president whose provincial “authenticity” and proletarian pretensions continue to resonate with the majority of their parishioners. Nonetheless, the Church remains a bulwark of dissent and on the eve of the thirty-first anniversary of the People, Power uprising, it marshaled thousands of people to march in protest of the killings.

What of the left? The Maoist Communist Party (CPP) and their allies in the National Democratic Front (NDF) had earlier struck a Faustian bargain with Duterte, agreeing to swallow their criticisms in exchange for cabinet positions and the promise of a peace process that will allow their older leaders a quiet retirement. There were muted criticisms of both the Marcos burial and Duterte's drug wars, but these remained subsumed by larger praise for his anti-American stance and hopes that the president would be serious about implementing social and economic reforms. However, with the recent collapse of the peace talks and Duterte's vow to re-arrest the political prisoners he had ordered released, the CPP-NPA-NDF (whose cadres have never respected the cease-fire) may have to return to their traditionally antagonistic relationship with the state (even as the leadership continues to hope for a resumption of negotiations).

The other left party, Akbayan, whose members had broken from the CPP, began as a promising experiment in left-wing legal participation, winning a few positions in the Congress by way of forging coalitions with the Liberal Party. But their members in Congress have always been in the minority and have been further marginalized by the president's party and its deep antipathy toward the prior regime.

And as far as the Liberal Party or "yellows" are concerned—the party of the previous president, Benigno "Noy" Aquino and his mother, the former president Cory Aquino—the less said the better. They have been neutralized by the president's allies. The exception, of course, is Senator Leila De Lima. But her stinging attacks on the president's human rights abuses have been countered with spurious and baseless charges of abetting the drug trade while she was Secretary of Justice, and slut-shaming her about her relationship with her former bodyguards. Meanwhile, Vice President Leni Robredo, who has been critical of the killings, lately has been all too quiet after being relieved by the president from her cabinet position in Housing. She still faces a court challenge to her electoral victory from the son of the dictator, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr.

Meanwhile, Duterte's supporters, both poor and middle class, continue to talk about the killings as a boon, freeing them from the daily harassment of drug dealers and addicts. What matters to them is the story they are told: that the drug crisis is real and poses an existential threat to the nation, and therefore extreme measures are required to fight it. Spokesmen from high places and trolls from beyond the borders of civil society do their best to promote this narrative—a fitting fairy tale for consolidating a state of authoritarian populism. Business tycoons, for their part, are only too happy to see government restrictions eased and to be left alone to make money. Ironically, Duterte's candid admission that he once abused the powerful opioid fentanyl (and may still be doing so) suggests that his war on drugs is in some ways a battle against that part of himself that he cannot control.

Critics of Duterte, including those on social media and the blogosphere

who refer to themselves as “TSM,” or “The Silent Majority” are at a loss as to what kind of counter-narrative to tell. There is no shortage of astute analysis. But none of it has as yet challenged the dominant tale of an existential crisis, for which apparently only Duterte can deliver the most immediate and bloody solution.

Last January news broke of the kidnapping of a Korean businessman, Jee Ick-joo, from his home in a suburb outside Manila by a group of police. They sought a hefty ransom from Jee’s wife even as they murdered him in the police station, had his body cremated, and flushed his ashes down the toilet. The outcry from the media and from the South Korean government pushed the president to suspend police operations against drug dealers and users while investigations were ongoing. The police involved were punished, in a manner of speaking, by being made to clean the water lilies clogging a section of the Pasig River outside of the Palace. The drug war, as of this writing, remains suspended. Unsurprisingly, the number of killings has dramatically plunged from eight to ten a night in Metro Manila to two or three, now carried out mostly by vigilantes hired by the police.

An international scandal that put police corruption (rather than human rights violations) on full display has brought Duterte’s reign of terror to a temporary halt. How much longer it will hold, and if this pause will give critics a chance to organize and mount more robust dissent, is yet to be seen.

### **Postscript**

As of press time, the war on drugs has resumed, though the police chief claims that all rogue police officers have been taken off the operation. So the killings continue, and once again corpses have begun to show up in Manila’s poorer districts, while Duterte harps on about the necessity of ridding the country of drugs. Meanwhile, Congress has just passed a bill restoring the death penalty, even as Human Rights Watch issued a scathing report on Duterte’s drug war. The Palace, as expected, simply set it aside and claimed that it was yet another case of foreign intervention into national affairs.

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