

# **On the frontline of Duterte's 'war on drugs' - Philippine society, history, culture and the present political regime**

Sunday 1 October 2017, by [BOYLE Peter](#), [CARLOS Ellecer "Budit"](#) (Date first published: 22 September 2017).

**In its first year in operation, Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte's 'war on drugs' has cost more than 13,000 lives and left the country mired in a human rights crisis.**

**One of the organisations at the forefront of opposing Duterte's war is In Defence of Human Rights and Dignity Movement, iDefend, a coalition of more than 50 human right and grassroots organisations.**

**Peter Boyle spoke to iDefend spokesperson Ellecer "Budit" Carlos about the situation.**

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**Peter Boyle - iDefend says that the Philippines is facing a "human rights crisis". Please describe what you mean by this?**

Ellecer "Budit" Carlos - The Filipino people are now being brutalised and dehumanised by a multi-fold human rights crisis, a human rights catastrophe under President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs".

This is the administration's defining cornerstone program, which has led to the killings of thousands of the most vulnerable, beaten down and impoverished Filipinos; routine mass roundups and arbitrary arrests in the poorest communities; the extreme over-congestion of places of deprivation of liberty (over 90% of those in jail are drug suspects leading to the worsening of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in these places); the rise of certain police excesses and abuses of power like maintaining secret places of detention and arrests for ransom; and a steep rise in cases of the two other gravest forms of human rights violations, torture and enforced disappearance (the vast majority of victims now are drug suspects).

These conditions, the establishment of a de-facto social cleansing program, were constructed by Duterte and other public officials through sustained public pronouncements predisposing the police and non-state actors to become more violent.

Duterte's public kill rhetoric and encouragement of the police to be quick on the trigger, even offering them bounties and protection from litigation has amounted to the arbitrary derogation of the right to due process and the right to life. It is a situation whereby the police routinely violate their own rules of procedure, the rule of law and circumvent due process and settle justice on the streets. It's the "chipping away" of the Philippine criminal justice system.

If this institutionalized impunity and permission structure for mass murder persists, we the threat of

throwing out the window all the human rights education and sensitisation work human rights groups and the Philippine Commission on Human Rights have undertaken for decades, transforming even the most law abiding and decent law enforcers into butchers.

This human rights catastrophe has made human life very very cheap and has severely compromised human dignity, desensitised Filipinos and dehumanised everyone in Philippines society.

**Despite all this, Duterte seems to continue to enjoy significant public support in the Philippines. How do you account for this?**

Duterte took advantage of a very disoriented and frustrated public. His popularity was a product of Filipinos' collective despair and disenchantment with the failure of the liberal democratic regimes over the past 30 years.

These elite dominated regimes after the EDSA Revolution in 1986 – the popular peaceful uprising at the end of the Marcos dictatorship, sadly hijacked by the Philippine oligarchy – up to the last presidency before Duterte, were unwilling to fulfil the promise of radical social reforms, the equitable redistribution of the nation's wealth and the democratisation of essential services and opportunities, all requisites so that Filipinos could get out of poverty and obtain decent living conditions.

Another major factor contributing to his popular support, and for his drug war in particular, is the fact that the most impacted by crime and drug pervasiveness in Philippine society are the poorest of the poor.

When poor people experience a crime and they report to the Philippine National Police, police officers in many if not most cases will do nothing. The wheels of justice, due to bureaucratic inertia and corruption, grind slow or not at all for the poor, especially for the poor who do not have the means to do under-the-table transactions. In many cases, the police will even try to exploit and abuse impoverished complainants.

The poor also do not have the means to live in gated communities or pay for private security. This is why so many Filipinos have lost faith in the Philippine criminal justice system which in essence provides checks and balances, transparency and the right to prove ones innocence in court. Unfortunately there is that severe disconnect between policy and what really happens on the ground.

That is why, not only Duterte and police officers want to do away with the other pillars and procedures under the criminal justice system, regular Filipinos have also come to subscribe to the alternative justice dispensation system this violent president is offering.

Duterte is able to operate on top of a strong support base because he relies on the oppressive and exploitative setup's survival being dependent on keeping the vast majority poor and uninformed. The majority of Filipinos have been deprived of information and knowledge channels for developing and acquiring a broader world view and thus the capacity for deeper critical thinking and analysis.

Widespread abject poverty and the deprivation of the right to education, and access to information, coupled with despair, make the poorest of the poor vulnerable to becoming exploited and manipulated. The lack of a broader world view, even among the middle class deprives them of the ability to see all the social-ills from a structural perspective.

This inability to make sense of the permanent crisis in the Philippines and not knowing how to take action has led to many to put their hopes on a strongman. The left, with the tools to conscientise

people, does not have the strength in numbers to do so.

Many Filipinos and those outside the Philippines have expressed wonder and disbelief with regard to the popular support of Duterte's drug war, in spite of the horrors of the nationwide massive killing spree he had set into motion. His popularity seems unshaken and unchallenged after thousands have been executed in the streets.

This acquiescence, passive consent or even active consent among Filipinos (and I must mention here that this is by no means the majority of Filipinos) has its historical roots, it is a sad by-product of oppression under the hands of our colonisers and reinforced and sustained by the Philippine ruling class.

This is the other notable factor for Duterte's popular support – a characteristic of Filipino culture we now must recognise and confront head-on.

While I must proceed with caution and trepidation, this must be said. It is the common lack of concern about our collective welfare, the insufficient compassion for other Filipinos we do not know, those who do not have an emotional attachment to us. We are a family and village oriented people, but beyond this, we lack the sense of community and in a greater sense, genuine nationalism.

In fact, we are quite a divided people, regionalistic to a fault, overriding sometimes our better judgement and eroding even our core values. That is why, many of us are easily trapped into developing a false sense of patriotism, thereby even becoming supportive of killings.

Spanish colonialism and US imperialism has stunted the development of our common healthy sense of unity and compromised the core values of some Filipinos. Duterte effectively exploited this social characteristic common among Filipinos.

This Duterte juncture has shown how the long time structure of oppression in the Philippines accounts for the misplaced mind-sets and broken moral compasses among Filipinos. Duterte's propaganda machinery predisposing many Filipinos to look the other way.

On top of all the primary factors contributing to his popularity I had mentioned, Duterte's innermost circle, composed of former people from the left, understood very well how to apply mass organising and mobilisation methods.

Duterte has at the very grassroots, organisers and propagandists who are establishing mass base structures with government funds such as the Kilusang Pagbabago (Movement for Change). This will serve as his fascist machinery on the ground.

He is also making full use of government media and information agencies, appointing apologists and popular celebrities, most being rabid lackeys. Duterte's innermost circle also undertook painstaking spadework years before the 2016 elections, popularising him at the grassroots and securing support from a section of the elite, particularly in Mindanao. Understanding that social media plays an important role in shaping minds and opinions of Filipinos.

Months before the elections, call centre type outfits with well-paid and fulltime employees were setup to do nothing else but to prop up Duterte's image and to monitor and counter criticisms. They also deployed propagandists all over the world immediately after Duterte assumed office. These propagandists, who are provided government resources, have managed to organize DDS (Diehard Duterte Supporters) groups in various countries. iDEFEND has had many close encounters with them during our international information and solidarity tours.

These DDS groups appear to be the beginnings of an extremist nationalist network and are very efficient in bullying and lynch-mob tactics online and offline. They extend this home-grown methodology to silence criticism and dissent to places with high concentrations of Filipinos.

Those who run this entire propaganda superstructure (with public relations experts at the helm) have mastered the art of shaping opinions and mind-sets through repetitive distorted patriotic slogans, incitement to violence and hate ,spreading lies, half-truths and fake news. This enables Duterte and his cohorts to control the national narrative.

In spite of Duterte propaganda, we should take comfort in the fact that there has been a massive mind-set shift among the urban poor communities which have been most impacted by the drug war. But these are the “unseen, unheard and neglected” folk which do not have a social voice much less on social media.

We are also quite sure that the majority of Filipinos are just silent, many of whom are afraid, and the unorganised who try to speak out are subject to bullying and lynch mob behaviour by a few neighbours, friends and even family members, who have fallen into the Dutertism trap. I think it is safe to say that the erosion of his popularity is well underway.

**Some Duterte supporters say that he is being unfairly blamed for abuses that are being committed by a corrupted police force. What is your response to this?**

Clearly, extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances and torture were prevalent before Duterte’s presidency. The liberal democratic regimes were unable and unwilling to address these by effectively policing and holding to account their ranks.

The culture of violence in the policing and military sectors, stemming from the Marcos dictatorship during which human rights violations were encouraged, continued. The range of regimes actually benefitted from impunity or what former UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston referred to as “a very powerful undercurrent of lawlessness”.

Nonetheless, we saw a clear and indisputable sharp rise in cases of extra-judicial killings of a particular section of Philippine society – drug suspects coming from the most impoverished communities – when Duterte began his presidency. The police actually started ramping up their operations weeks before Duterte formally assumed office after the election results showed clearly that he would become president.

Duterte consciously primed conditions for the implementation of his cornerstone program, the “war on drugs”, by sending clear and sustained public messages which promoted hate, misperceptions about drug dependents and predisposed the Philippine National Police, non-state armed groups and ordinary citizens to become violent. He “opened Pandora’s box” so to speak and established a permission structure for mass murder.

Protection of the police from litigation, a police reward system and forced quotas and results for police officials reinforce law enforcement violence and circumvention of due process under this “kill society’s undesired” program.

Duterte and his apologists in and out of government claim that the vigilante killings, roughly two-thirds of the thousands of deaths in the drug war, are not by the state but perpetrated by drug syndicates, rogue police officers and unknown gunmen, to silence those who could squeal. Duterte also claims that he was surprised to find out how corrupt the Philippine National Police (PNP) was and that he was suddenly confronted by this problem when he became president.

In the first place, he was a mayor of Davao, the third largest city in the Philippines for 20 years and before that, he served as a public prosecutor for many years. He already took advantage of the abusive policing culture when he ran the Davao Death Squad when he was mayor and the dysfunctional criminal justice system when he was prosecutor.

He understood very well that the PNP was a state institution predisposed to the worse violations and that most active senior police officers were trained during the Marcos dictatorship. He understood that there was a PNP monstrosity waiting to be unleashed, only being kept in check by human rights organisations, constitutional safeguards implemented by the Commission on Human Rights Philippines and the Ombudspersons office and good officials in government and the Philippine National Police genuinely seeking reforms in the law enforcement sector.

Duterte knew better and opted to consciously pursue an alternative, Davao-forged, justice dispensation system instead of pursuing the much needed radical reforms in the inoperable and anti-poor criminal justice system. He expressly circumvented and did away with the checks and balances and transparency the criminal justice system could in essence could provide.

He and other high officials of the land are responsible for state perpetrated, sponsored and sanctioned killings: perpetrated because law enforcement officials are forced to undertake executions, sponsored because of a de facto policy encouraging the killings through a reward system for police and vigilantes, and sanctioned because they have refused to undertake any action to stop the vigilante killings and even actively obstructed any independent action for this to happen.

They should therefore be held to account for the commission of extra-judicial killings, the omission of the obligation of public officials to protect claim holders (ordinary citizens) from extra-judicial killings, because of the absence of affirmative action and even actively hindering efforts to stop the vigilante killings, and the overall arbitrary derogation of the rights to life and due process when they established the permission structure for the police and non-state entities to massively execute people.

### **How has the case of the police killing of Kian affected the people's attitudes to Duterte?**

I must say that we feared mass desensitisation and media reporting fatigue due to the sheer number of daily killings and that the situation has become normal for Filipinos.

The recent spate of police executions of minors including the case of Kian Delos Santos created a public outpour of anger and showed that there remains a mass fervour opposed to the extra-judicial killings.

The killings of the minors also coincided with the further rise in the numbers of daily executions.

We believe that these have sped up the mind-set shift and the broadening of the circles of outrage and disapproval among Filipinos. As a result, we saw the mass mobilisations made up of organic and organised forces made up of loose coalitions.

It is important to note that in order to sustain these mobilisations and translate them into organised political action, the human rights movement and progressives must be able to soon provide a political centre with the ability to effectively guide systematically and strategically the many forces and sites of courage and resistance toward a common solid unity and direction and perhaps structured militancy should conditions be ripe again for this.

What we are up against is the well-oiled and financed Duterte propaganda machinery, through the state institutions, agencies and resources, online, offline, locally and globally. Duterte has deployed

propagandists at all social levels and locations in and out of the country. His people operating this propaganda and criticism silencing superstructure are engaged in sustaining and building a “Father-Duterte” image by spreading fake news, lies and half-truths and monitor and counter dissent and criticism through organised bullying and inducing a lynch-mob mentality among Filipinos.

The extra-judicial killings and the handiwork of this propaganda machinery has put in place a climate of fear in Philippines society. While Walden Bello defines the acquiescence of Filipinos as active and passive consensus, we suspect that besides those active in expressing outrage and disapproval on the killings, there are many more who are passively outraged and silently disapprove of the killings and growing state repression.

We know that the majority of Filipinos have their moral compasses intact but are either scared, have no idea how to take action or have no avenues to join the mass protests.

**Recently we saw the extraordinary image of Australia’s chief spy posing for a fist sign photo with Duterte and we now have an offer from the Australian government of further air force support and possibly special forces intervention in the Philippines. Duterte tries to present himself as standing up to imperialism. Is this true?**

The Australian Secret Intelligence Service Director General Nick Warner’s meeting with Duterte and the public photograph showing them “fist-bumping” – Duterte’s signature pose and the symbol of Dutertismo – is a verification of the reality that geo-political and economic interests supersede any effort for human rights protection.

This is true regarding the US and Philippine relations as well, as revealed by the statements of US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. He said during his congressional confirmation that “the US and Philippines have a long standing friendship, and while human rights are important, we should not put them in front of economic and strategic interests”.

The actions and statements of Werner and Tillerson are a reaffirmation of the US and the Coalition of the Willing’s interests and authority in our part of the world.

Duterte has received financial aid from the US and Australia while both countries now have managed to get on his good side. So realpolitik for US and Australia is about preventing the Philippines from sliding into China’s orbit. The US and Australia will surely exploit all developments in the Philippines that will justify the boosting or increase of their presence in the Philippines and ensuring that the Philippines falls further into the anti-terrorist “rabbit hole”.

The participation of Australia in the Mindanao conflict further amplifies the Maute siege and further co-opts the Philippines into the war on terror and graveyard policy of the Coalition of the Willing, putting our people at greater risk. Inversely, their double-dealing with Duterte make the US and Australia administrations complicit with the war on drugs, the rise of authoritarianism and conflict in the southern part of the Philippines.

While the Duterte administration claims to have an independent foreign policy, this is all cosmetic. In fact, Duterte chose to “pocket” Philippine territorial rights in the West Philippine Sea legally won against China through the UNCLOS arbitration court in The Hague just so that he could have a free hand in conspiring with the Chinese social-imperialists and for their monies.

Duterte has borrowed more from China in one year than his predecessor did in his 6-year term. This huge amount will bury Filipinos further into the debt trap. It is the people’s taxes which pay for these debts in the long haul, translating into capital starvation and the compromise of the most basic

services.

Duterte also attracted Chinese mining and construction firms and secured huge deals with them, which of course will worsen development aggression and benefit only a particular section of the Philippine elite and Chinese multi-and transnationals. China has also offered a sizable aid and defence package to the Philippines.

Duterte last year announced he is severing ties with the US, both militarily and economically. He has made strong public pronouncements against the US to project himself as anti-imperialist and socialist. But this is all part of the act and Duterte's "double speak" and the Presidential Communications Group, the Defence Secretary and the Philippine military has always done damage control and counterbalanced his pronouncements, revealing the real score and maintaining that the Philippines continues to have good relations with the US.

For senior military officers, they have made it clear that there is little interoperability with China and US still has much more to offer, with Philippine military officers still training in the US and the US and Philippine militaries engaged in sustained joint-exercises in Mindanao. All uneven US and Philippine military accords and defence agreements remain well intact and in effect. Duterte has not taken any concrete steps toward sovereignty from the US.

Duterte, while continuing with desperate efforts to project himself as different from his predecessors, has done nothing to compromise the interests of the Philippine elite nor the geo-political hegemony of the US and its well-entrenched influence in the Philippines. Duterte continues to maintain the old neo-liberal policies which favoured the elite democratic rulers and the exploitative transnational corporations which have shops in the Philippines backed by their home-front western power governments.

While Duterte has revealed his true colours as another lackey of the capitalist-imperialist west, just like all the presidents before him, he has also made the Philippines vulnerable to the incursions of a rising imperialist that is China.

### **What are the dangers that could flow from the breakdown of peace talks between the Philippines govt and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF)?**

When the peace talks between the CPP-NPA-NDF totally break down, there will be at least a handful of consequences.

First, an all-out war with the left will be disastrous at many levels aside from the cost of human lives among combatants of such a conflict. On top of drug dependents, petty drug peddlers and terrorists now tagged as targets, Duterte will start training the state machinery's violence on the left and all activists and people working toward change in the Philippines, including those who represent the struggles of the basic sectors and human rights and environmental defenders.

If Duterte was able to justify the declaration of martial law in the entire island of Mindanao with a population of 24 million people on the basis of the siege by the Maute clan, a small bandit group, with the CPP-NDFP-NPA being a huge organisation, having a structure across the Philippines, he will have all the more reason to declare martial law nationwide.

When the peace talk prospects end for good and Duterte sees no use in pretending to be socialist, he will surely allow and even seek stronger foreign intervention and like Marcos, shall surely receive US support for as long as he will serve its hegemonic interest.

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\* <http://links.org.au/philippines-frontline-duterte-drugs-war-idefend>