

[OPINION]

# Philippines: President Rodrigo Duterte targets - “First they came for the pushers and addicts. Now, the Leftists”

Saturday 27 March 2021, by [QUIMPO Nathan Gilbert](#) (Date first published: 26 March 2021).

**The apparently extrajudicial slaughter of nine Leftist activists two weeks ago, coming soon after President Rodrigo Duterte ordered military and police forces to “kill” and “finish off” communist forces, brings to mind the remarkable and historic confession made by Lutheran pastor Martin Niemoller shortly after World War II. Indicting the cowardice of members of the German intelligentsia and clergy, including himself, in the face of Adolf Hitler’s and the Nazis’ brutal atrocities and genocide, Niemoller admitted: “We preferred to keep silent.” He expressed great remorse for his inaction.**

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*‘Have I preferred to keep silent? Have I spoken out – and spoken out enough?’*

Niemoller’s confession has been turned into poetic form by various groups commemorating the Holocaust of World War II. A variant of the poem, “First They Came,” begins as follows:

*First they came for the communists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a communist.*

The subsequent parts of the poem proceed with “[t]hen they came for...,” enumerating the other victims of Hitler’s mass incarcerations, torture, and murder: socialists, the “incurable” sick, trade unionists, and Jews. The poem ends with:

*Then they came for me  
And there was no one left  
To speak out for me.*

## **Reflecting on Niemoller's confession**

Duterte has often been likened to other ultra-right, populist authoritarian leaders such as Donald Trump (US), Viktor Orban (Hungary), Narendra Modi (India), and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil). All of them have engaged in some form of nationalist demagoguery, and they have used their skills in enthralling crowds and stirring up passions to gain power. While in power, they have resorted to repressive measures, tried to weaken or silence the opposition, and also particularly targeted scapegoats (migrants and refugees, Muslims, drug users, etc.) for verbal attacks or much more.

Adolf Hitler may be the ultimate model of a populist, demagogic dictator, and some of today's populist autocrats and would-be autocrats may have taken a leaf or two from his book. But they all pale in comparison to Hitler, as none of them could ever come close to the scale of the abuses and atrocities – the war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide – that the totalitarian Nazi leader perpetrated.

Niemoller's confession relating to the horrors and silences of the Nazi era, however, provides troubled minds as well as critical voices in the Philippines an opportunity to reflect on what has been happening to the country since Duterte came to power. What Niemoller wrote about has parallels, in varying degrees, in many countries where autocrats and would-be autocrats have systematically attacked, rounded up, or sought to eliminate, group by group, all those opposed to, or critical of, their rule, along with scapegoats blamed for the countries' woes.

After reading Niemoller, many Filipinos who are troubled by Duterte's attacks could ponder on the response – or the lack of response – to these onslaughts. Have I preferred to keep silent? Have I spoken out – and spoken out enough? (The main focus of Niemoller's piece, an admission of guilt, was, after all: "And I did not speak out.") The effect on conscience-stricken Filipinos could well be coming out of the silence or making oneself heard more.

One could reflect on Niemoller, however, from other angles, other perspectives too. Apart from contemplating on "And I did not speak out," one could inquire into "First/Then they came for..." One could examine more closely the circumstances of the attacks, the enforcers ("they"), the targets (whom "they came for"), and the results or outcomes of these attacks. An examination of these would reveal that the moral delineations are not always simple and clear-cut, and it could give some insights into the reach as well as the limits of Duterte's power.

An important point to bear in mind is that when Niemoller talked of "they" (the enforcers of Hitler's onslaughts), he was referring to the entire state machinery of Germany. After being appointed Germany's Chancellor in January 1931, Hitler very quickly attained and consolidated absolute power. Within two months, Hitler gained control over the executive and legislative branches of government, thanks to a law granting his cabinet the power to enact laws. By July, the Nazi Party was the only legal political party in Germany. The Reichstag turned into a rubber-stamp chamber. While continuing as head of government, Hitler assumed the Führership (head of state) in 1934, and became commander-in-chief of the armed forces. To ensure full control of the military, he forced the top generals to resign and he took personal command of it in 1938.

## **Targets and enforcers: Drug dealers and users, DDS, and PNP**

Populist authoritarian leaders often resort to scapegoating as a demagogic technique, blaming a particular segment of society for the country's economic and social problems. Hitler used the Jews, for whom he had a particular hatred, as his prime scapegoats, and he targeted them for

extermination. Calling the drug menace “a social monster,” Duterte has scapegoated drug dealers and drug addicts, and has vowed to “kill them all” in his “war on drugs.” Strangely enough, Duterte himself has linked the targets of his scapegoating and Hitler’s, saying “Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now there [are] three million drug addicts.... I’d be happy to slaughter them.” (Note: Six million Jews, not three million, were killed in the Holocaust.)

Unlike in Nazi Germany, where the political opposition – the communists and the socialists – were the first ones targeted, in Duterte’s Philippines, the scapegoats – the drug users – were the first target.

Duterte’s nationwide “war on drugs” had a prequel. Before he became president, Duterte, as mayor of Davao City, waged a deadly anti-narcotics campaign in the city that resulted in hundreds of extrajudicial killings. The main enforcer of this campaign was the Davao Death Squad (DDS), a vigilante group whose handlers were policemen, ex-policemen, and barangay leaders.

For the nationwide “war on drugs,” the Philippine National Police (PNP) became the key enforcer, relying mainly on off-duty cops or hired guns on the police payroll to take care of the extrajudicial killings. Duterte picked no less than Ronald “Bato” Dela Rosa, the former police chief of Davao City (now a senator), to head the PNP. Duterte has time and again enjoined the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to take part in the “war on drugs,” but the military’s role in it has remained minimal. This indicates a certain degree of resistance within the military establishment.

Taken from different angles, the results of the “war on drugs” can be said to be mixed. At least 27,000 drug suspects have already been killed [1], yet Duterte himself still sees drug dealers and drug users everywhere, and the drug war will just continue until the end of his term. As a populist stratagem, however, the “war on drugs” has been a great success. In a Pulse Asia survey conducted last September, Duterte scored very high in performance and trust ratings (91% of Filipinos), prompting political analyst Richard Heydarian to name him with some irony “the world’s most popular leader.” [2] A recent study by political scientists Paul D. Kenny and Ronald Holmes found that “support for the campaign against illegal drugs in a broad sense is strongly correlated with populist attitudes in general and with the attribution of charismatic leadership traits to Duterte.”

While Duterte now enjoys soaring popularity ratings, thanks in large measure to his “war on drugs,” he could still be held accountable for the extrajudicial killings in this anti-narcotics campaign. He could face trial, conviction, and imprisonment for “crimes against humanity” at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands. In a preliminary report released last December, the ICC declared that it had found “reasonable basis” to believe that crimes against humanity were committed under the Duterte government’s “war on drugs.” [3] Duterte’s decision to withdraw the Philippines from the ICC in March 2018 does not protect him from ICC prosecution.

### **Then they came for the Islamist terrorists**

As a group, the next major target of Duterte has been the Islamist terrorists, particularly those affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) such as Abu Sayyaf and the Maute group. In May 2017, a botched military operation to capture the top ISIS/Abu Sayyaf leader in Mindanao triggered a five-month long battle in the city of Marawi, Lanao del Sur. Duterte immediately imposed martial law and suspended the writ of habeas corpus in the whole of Mindanao. Through the combined efforts of the AFP and PNP (the main enforcers of the counter-terrorist drive), the ISIS forces in Marawi were finally crushed. Over 1,000 people were killed in the Battle of Marawi, mostly Islamist militants. Marawi itself was devastated.

ISIS had gained a foothold in Mindanao by taking advantage of the long unresolved armed conflict between government forces and the Moro separatist movement. Previous administrations had signed peace agreements with Moro groups but the pacts had all failed to bring lasting peace to Mindanao. A peace agreement signed by the B. Aquino government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2014 could not be implemented because of the lack of enabling legislation.

There was hardly any opposition to intensified operations against ISIS, but Duterte's opponents and critics grew very much concerned that he could use the ISIS threat as an excuse for seizing absolute power. Duterte himself fanned such fears when he declared early on during the Marawi crisis that martial law could be extended across the Philippines [4]. Meanwhile, human rights groups dreaded a spike in rights abuses in Mindanao.

The ISIS threat provided Duterte with the first major opportunity to take on full dictatorial powers. He was afforded much time to plan this out had he wanted to. With the strong backing of Congress, he extended martial law and the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus in Mindanao three times – up until the end of 2019. But unlike President Ferdinand Marcos nearly a half-century before him, Duterte did not make good on his threat of a nationwide martial law.

The outcome of the government's all-out campaign against Islamist terrorists is far from definitive. Although government forces did vanquish ISIS in Marawi in 2017, other ISIS-affiliated groups continue to operate or have popped up in several provinces of Mindanao [5]. Time and again since the 1990s, an Islamist terrorist group or faction has emerged as a major scourge to replace one that has fallen or declined.

One very positive development in Mindanao is that the Marawi crisis finally convinced the Duterte government to give the peace process with the Moro separatists top priority. Following Congress's passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law in 2018, a new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has been established. The prospects for lasting peace and an end to the scourge of Islamist terrorism depend a lot on the success of the new autonomous region.

## **PART II: The limits of Duterte's power**

*'With a little over a year left in his term, the wanna-be-Hitler is unlikely to attempt becoming an out-and-out dictator'*

In the "Then they came for" part of the Duterte onslaughts prior to the current crackdown on communists, the targets have been mainly opposition politicians and critical journalists, and the main method employed to try to get rid of them has not been physical elimination, but throwing them in jail through false or trumped-up charges. In this part, "they" only managed to "come for" several targets, and thus far, among the latter, only one is behind bars: Senator Leila Delima.

It can be argued that Duterte does not really need to put opponents and critics in jail since he can resort to other means for getting rid of them. Through populist mobilization [6] and the usual patronage and vote-buying, the ruling coalition shut out the opposition in the 2019 senatorial elections and, aided in part by the age-old tradition of turncoatism, easily won an overwhelming majority in the House of Representatives.

To remove the independent-minded chief justice, Maria Lourdes Sereno, from the Supreme Court, Duterte left it to the justices of the court to do the job for him. To weaken and try to discredit the opposition leader, Vice-President Leni Robredo, he has hurled false accusations against her and denounced her in vituperative and misogynistic language.

Apart from controlling the executive branch of government, Duterte would seem to be holding sway too over the legislative and judicial branches of government, judging by the great number of legislators belonging to the ruling coalition and of Supreme Court justices he has appointed. (Eleven of the 15 Supreme Court justices are Duterte appointees [7], and he may be able to pick a few more before the end of his term.)

Despite Duterte's apparent control over the three branches of government, he has not been able to crack down fully on opponents and critics. He may have succeeded in shutting down the country's biggest broadcasting network, ABS-CBN, but the media remains as vibrant as ever and publishes or airs dissenting views as before. Local human rights organizations have continued to expose extrajudicial killings and other atrocities, and they have worked closely with international human rights networks. Amid the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, various social movements have waged protest campaigns online and on the streets.

The limits of Duterte's silencing power can be seen in his many frustrated attempts (thus far) to have intrepid journalist Maria Ressa and former Senator Antonio Trillanes IV locked up in prison despite a barrage of court cases and arrest warrants. Both have been subjected to several years of intense and highly orchestrated harassment. In Ressa's case, reports the [Washington Post](#), "offline prosecution" has been combined with "online persecution," a torrent of extremely vicious social media attacks.

Duterte may have the numbers in the country's top executive, legislative, and judicial bodies, but he still does not have full control of the state machinery. Pro-Duterte judges and prosecutors - the main enforcers ("they") of Duterte's efforts to imprison and silence opposition leaders and critical journalists - have not been able to foil the workings of the country's judicial system and other democratic institutions, no matter the severe batterings that these have undergone over the last few years.

One state institution that remains a bulwark of independence from presidential control is the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), which has continued monitoring human rights violations despite much harassment [8]. Duterte has long threatened to dismantle the CHR, a constitutional body that is Southeast Asia's oldest national human rights institution. He has abjectly failed.

### **The anti-communist drive: A pet project of the military**

With Duterte's express orders to "kill" and "finish off" communists, the next phase of the "Then they came for" onslaughts is likely to be of the bloody kind again, not just the incarceration type. The avowed targets are members of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and guerrillas of the New People's Army (NPA), but included in the actual targets are Leftist activists whom the government deems to be accomplices of the communists. The main enforcer of the anti-communist drive is the AFP, supported by the PNP.

Since the Marcos era, the CPP-NPA has perennially been the target of counter-insurgency campaigns and operations of the military. During the early years of the Duterte administration, however, there was a decline in armed hostilities, as Duterte pursued peace negotiations with the communist rebels and even included some Leftist personages in his Cabinet.

Although Duterte and the military have worked closely together in the war against the ISIS terrorists, the relations between them have been far from steady-going. With strong US-Philippine military ties dating back to independence, the military establishment was not too happy with Duterte's pivot to China. Moreover, the generals were also very doubtful that something positive

would come out of Duterte's peace overtures to the CPP-NPA. Duterte wooed them with hefty increases in the military budget and appointments of retired generals to key government positions, but the strains remained.

The breakdown of the peace talks with the communist rebels paved the way for a more hardline approach. In June 2020, amid the COVID-19 lockdown, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Anti-Terrorism Bill, a sweeping piece of legislation that permits warrantless arrests and allows security forces to hold individuals for weeks without charge. Three weeks later, Duterte, piqued by the CPP-NPA's rejection of his peace terms, signed the bill into law. The Anti-Terrorism Act, however, was not really the initiative of Duterte or Congress. As reported by Rappler, it was a pet project and brainchild of military and police generals [9].

This indicates a curious shift in power dynamics. Instead of Duterte exercising power over the military, it was the military exercising power over him. And instead of the generals being simply the enforcer of the anti-communist, anti-Leftist onslaught, they were also the architect of it. In a sense, Duterte, of "kill them all" fame, has been turned into their mouthpiece and cheerleader.

The limits of Duterte's power have been further shown up by the snowballing opposition to the Anti-Terror Law. Immediately after the law's signing, lawyers' groups and a congressman challenged the constitutionality of the law for infringing on civil liberties. In recent months, the anti-communist drive has become a public relations fiasco. When officials of the National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) engaged in a "red-tagging" spree, labeling and accusing various organizations and individuals of being communists or communist supporters, it caused an uproar and drew widespread excoriation. Among those "red-tagged" were lawyers, writers, and other prominent personages, including two retired Supreme Court justices.

NTF-ELCAC accusations that some prominent universities in Metro Manila were being used as communist recruitment sites were roundly denounced by the academic communities of the universities tagged. Claiming that the University of the Philippines (UP) had become a communist hotbed, the Department of National Defense unilaterally terminated a longstanding agreement with UP prohibiting the military and police from entering without permission. Despite COVID, mass protests erupted on campus.

In the ongoing hearings in the Supreme Court on the Anti-Terrorism Act, the total number of petitions filed by various organizations against the controversial law has grown to a whopping 37, and a formidable line-up of lawyers has presented the petitioners' oral arguments. Again, Duterte is being forced to contend with the workings of the country's judicial system and other democratic institutions.

Whether or not the Anti-Terrorism Act is declared unconstitutional, Duterte and the military will just continue with their anti-communist drive. Extrajudicial killings of CPP-NPA forces and of Leftist activists have started to rise. Red-tagging is broadening even further the range of targets of this drive and could lead to another horrendous extrajudicial carnage.

### **Is time running out for Duterte?**

There will likely be no let-up in Duterte's onslaughts against his chosen targets until the end of his term. In going after political opponents, critical journalists, and Leftist activists, the workings of democratic institutions may pose hurdles. But Duterte will not stop for as long as he stays in power.

Meanwhile, the anti-narcotics and anti-communist campaigns appear to have significantly

contributed to the spike in killings in two groups: lawyers and local government officials. The number of lawyers slain during the Duterte administration has reached 61 [10], local executives (mayors and vice-mayors), 25 [11]. At least some of the lawyers killed were attorneys of drug or communist suspects. Other lawyers and the local executives killed were being linked to drugs.

With a little over a year left in his term, the wanna-be-Hitler is unlikely to attempt becoming an out-and-out dictator. The COVID-19 pandemic presented Duterte with a second major opportunity to take on full dictatorial powers, but he realized he did not have all the wherewithal to do so. It would have been very difficult for him to shut down Congress (as Marcos did in 1972) or turn it into a rubber-stamp legislature. Moreover, with his pro-China stance, he would not have gotten the backing of a pro-US military establishment. Congress did grant Duterte certain “special powers,” but not “emergency powers,” to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. It struck down certain “dangerous” provisions in an early draft of the bill that would have given him powers for budgetary reallocations and takeover of private businesses.

To continue with his initiatives and build on his legacy, Duterte has been grooming his daughter Sara, the mayor of Davao City, who is somewhat of the authoritarian bent too, to succeed him as president. If Sara wins in the 2022 presidential election, he may yet realize his dream of an autocracy – of a dynastic kind. Thanks to Duterte’s grooming, Sara has been topping the early surveys of possible presidential contenders.

There is a more urgent reason for Sara to win the presidential election. Political scientist Mark Thompson notes [12]: “Outgoing Philippine presidents have had a poor track record in securing the election of their favored candidates.” If an “unfriendly” candidate wins in 2022, he or she could well help deliver Duterte to the ICC to face prosecution for crimes against humanity. The precedent for a former Philippine president spending time in prison has already been set by Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Certainly, the slaughterous wanna-be-dictator would not want the “First they came” saga to end in such a way that the enforcers (“they”) are no longer his henchmen but representatives of the ICC. He would dread that the poem would end this way:

Then they came for Duterte. And they brought him to The Hague.

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**P.S.**

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<https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-first-they-came-for-pushers-addicts-now-left-ists>  
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## Footnotes

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