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Visions of Peace Amidst a Human Rights Crisis: War on Drugs in Colombia and the Philippines

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Abstract

Peace is one of most widely used yet highly contested concepts in contemporary politics. What constitutes peace? That broad analytic inquiry motivates this article, which focuses on the contentious discourses of peace within a society besieged by widespread trafficking and use of illegal drugs. Focusing on the illegal drug problem in Colombia and the Philippines, the central puzzle of this paper constitutes two fundamental questions: How do state leaders justify their respective “war on drugs”? How do they construct and discursively articulate ideals of peace in the context of the illegal drug problem? This paper compares the post-9/11 Colombian war on drugs (2002–2010) vis-à-vis the Philippine war on drugs under the Duterte administration (2016–2019), particularly in terms of how their presidential administrations articulate “peace” in the context of resolving the drug problem. The paper examines the varying discourses of peace, investigates how those local discourses relate to global discourses on peace and illegal drugs, and underscores how and under which conditions those peace discourses portray the material distributive conflicts in those societies. The core argument states that the Uribe and Duterte administrations primarily deployed the notion of peace as a justificatory discourse for increased state repression, intensified criminalization of the drug problem, and the reluctance of the state in embracing a public health approach to the proliferation of illegal drugs.

Keywords: peace, human rights, Colombia, Philippines, Alvaro Uribe, Rodrigo Duterte

Introduction

Peace is one of the most widely used yet highly contested concepts in contemporary politics. Some politicians invoke peace as a goal that could be achieved through the intensification of state violence. Leaders of powerful countries invoke peace—together with other supposedly noble objectives such as democracy, stability, security—as a justification for militaristic foreign intervention in a weak country often situated in the global South. In his widely cited work on peace, Johan Galtung (1969, 167) argues that one of the principal ways of defining peace is to characterize it as the absence of violence. Yet, this method of defining a concept through negation is problematic, particularly because it does not fully substantiate the core empirical features of the concept and the situa-

tion whereby peace supposedly exists. Later on, Galtung (1996) introduces the notion of positive peace, which highlights positive societal features such as the existence of social justice and equity. In both definitions, Galtung conceptualizes peace as a structural condition that constitutes several empirical features. Notably, contemporary scholarship on security studies¹ has yet to consider peace

¹ For a comprehensive analytic review on various notions of peace, refer to Richmond (2006): victor's peace, institutional peace, constitutional peace, and civil peace. To a substantial extent those four peace concepts underscore the material-structural conditions of peace, but they do not highlight the dynamics of peace as a discursive tool of justification and political mobilization.

as a discursive tool (rather than as a macro-material condition) that political actors use in advancing concrete policy aims. Hence, what constitutes peace? In a society beset by the proliferation of civilian deaths, crimes, and state violence, how is peace best reimagined and actualized? How does the state leadership frame and discursively advocate their visions of peace amid a society besieged by violence?

That broad analytic inquiry animates this article, whereby I focus on the discourse of peace within a society besieged by widespread trafficking and use of illegal drugs. In recent years, states have primarily relied on violence, coercion, and public shaming of illegal drug users, and in many cases, have facilitated the systematic killings of civilians (Björnhead 2004; Mercille 2011; Morton 2012; Paley 2015). This strategy of relying on state violence also motivated non-state criminal organizations to bolster their firepower, in a bid to maintain their control and profits from the global drug trade. Based on the *International Drug Policy Consortium* (2018, 7), the illicit demand for narcotic drugs at the global level is astounding. Around 275 million people aged 15–64 have used illegal drugs at least once in 2016, a statistic that marks a 31 percent increase since 2009 (*International Drug Policy Consortium* 2018). Globally, the majority of these people preferred cannabis as top choice, followed by opioids and amphetamines. Accordingly, the use of methamphetamines has increased in the global South, especially in North and West Africa and East Asia. The global drug market, particularly between 2009 and 2017, has witnessed the introduction of around 800 new psychoactive substances, while the illegal usage of medically prescribed drugs has skyrocketed in the global North, particularly in North America. While national drug policies vary, several states have framed illegal drug use as a criminal problem rather than as a public health issue. In the last decade, nearly half a million civilians die each year as a result of illegal drugs (*International Drug Policy Consortium* 2018, 8).

Since US President Richard Nixon's war on drugs in 1971, particularly when criminal law enforcement took control of illegal drug regulation, illegal drug use has proliferated, global drug syndicates have expanded, and the number of civilian deaths has increased. In Nixon's war on drugs, the criminalization and public shaming of people who use illegal drugs facilitated mass imprisonment, with global statistics suggesting that one in five detainees were caught, many of whom simply possessed such drugs for personal use (*International Drug Policy Consortium* 2018, 8). Hence, notwithstanding "the increasing investments in enforcement-based supply reduction efforts aimed at disrupting global drug supply, illegal drug prices have generally decreased while drug purity

has generally increased since 1990 . . . thereby suggesting that expanding efforts at controlling the global illegal drug market through law enforcement are failing" (Werb et al. 2013, 1). This sentiment of failure over the criminalization of drug use has been gaining traction in the last few years, as vividly expressed by former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, a global leader in the fight against illegal drugs (2018, 1):

In my experience as head of my country's government and previously a health minister, as a former senior official at the United Nations, and more recently as a member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, I've found debates on drug policy tend to be divisive and passionately ideological. On one point, however, there is a clear and growing consensus: Around the world, the so-called "war on drugs" is failing.

This sense of failure begs the question as to which ideal do current global and national drug policies deviate from. If the societal battle against illegal drugs is construed as a war, how is victory in such a war defined and constructed? If the oppositional concept of violence is peace, then how is peace attained in a society besieged by the use of illegal drugs? In the attempt to curb the drug problem, state leaders and elites invoke politically appealing concepts to mobilize support and resources for intensified state violence against drug syndicates. Perhaps the most widely invoked linguistic tool in the discursive battle against illegal drugs refers to the notion of peace. Rather than focusing solely on the material features of the drug wars, I also focus on the discursive and ideational articulations of the government's visions of peace.

Empirically, I focus on the illegal drug problem in contemporary Colombia and the Philippines, where governments have historically and primarily deployed a militaristic approach. Particularly, the central puzzle of this paper constitutes two fundamental questions concerning the two aforementioned country cases: How do the political elites and state leaders therein justify their respective "war on drugs"? How do they construct and discursively articulate ideals of peace in the context of the illegal drug problem? This paper compares the post-9/11 Colombian war on drugs (2002–2010) vis-à-vis the Philippine war on drugs under the Duterte administration (2016–2019), particularly in terms of how their presidential administrations articulate "peace" in the context of resolving the drug problem.

I maintain that the Uribe and Duterte administrations deployed the notion of peace² as a justificatory discourse

² It is analytically difficult to ascertain whether Uribe and Duterte only pay lip service to peace. The empirical evidence, however, shows that peace became a principal

for increased state repression, intensified criminalization of the drug problem, and the reluctance of the state in considering a public health approach towards the proliferation of narcotics. The Duterte administration conceptualizes peace as a condition where law and order are achieved, or more tangibly, when state power could overcome contestations from many, if not all, forms of political dissent. The Uribe administration, on the other hand, upholds that promoting democracy and human rights is necessary to secure peace, and it maintains that increased state repression effectively thwarts threats to peace. In both cases, peace and other discursive ideals such as the rule of law, order, and security were strategically deployed in a bid to consolidate the authority of the Duterte and Uribe administrations amid highly contentious political resistance from civil society organizations and human rights activists.

In building those key points, this paper is organized as follows. First, the next section reviews the theoretical literature on peace, revisits the current literature on war on drugs in the Philippines and Colombia, and substantiates the arguments that directly link the relationship between “peace” discourses in the context of the drug wars. The next part presents the case study analysis of the Philippine war on drugs under the Duterte administration, which will be followed by the section that analyzes the Colombia’s war on drugs under the Uribe administration. This paper concludes by discussing the comparative findings of the two case studies, by drawing some broad lessons for addressing the illegal drug problem, and by highlighting the implications of the criminalization of the war on drugs on states’ human rights commitments to its citizens.

theme in their public speeches. Before their presidential tenure, both politicians depended upon violence in order to promote stability. As an ex-provincial governor, Uribe strongly supported a national scheme that commissioned civilians in gathering intelligence in support of security services. That program was known as CONVIVIR, which was strongly criticized for its human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch 1998). Similarly, Duterte’s long career as a city mayor witnessed his support for state-sanctioned “death squads” (known as Davao Death Squad) that are known for extrajudicial killings of civilians (mostly poor people and alleged criminals) in Davao City. Kusaka (2017a, 49) describes Duterte’s politics as demonstrative of “the coexistence of compassion and violence under a patriarchal boss who maintains justice outside of the law.”

Theorizing Peace Discourses: Illegal Drugs, Human Rights, and Democracy

How should we reconsider peace in an empirical analysis of the drug war discourses? In this study, I consider peace as a desirable, overtly abstract, and morally appealing “meta-discourse” that refers to a broad set of socio-political conditions upon which particular forms of violence are perceived to have been repressed or undetermined, if not totally eliminated. My notion of peace does not have a comprehensively defined set of empirical indicators decided *a priori* as supposedly indicative of a condition of peace in a given society. Rather, following Clifford Bob’s (2019) conceptualization of rights, I argue that peace is a flexible discursive tool that political actors use to rally and to mobilize support for a particular policy strategy, and in some cases, perhaps a broader revolutionary movement. Similar to loosely defined concepts such as rights, justice, equality, *peace* refers to the aspirational political condition that pertains to the relative absence of violence, in its many forms of manifestation—ranging from those at the level of the individual (physical and psychological) and collective (repression of group-rights). It is likely that no political community persistently desires to endure systemic and pervasive violence. That premise reinforces the idea as to why peace enjoys profound moral resonance as well as perhaps quite universal acceptance across societies and across historical time. While policies and political actions may have varying intended and unintended effects upon a given political community, politicians and other societal actors strategically deploy and invoke peace as a rallying cry to justify a wide panoply of policy actions that they themselves may know as inherently violent or anti-peace by nature. As Rainer Forst (2017, 12) rightly contends, the “question of justification” is a “political and practical question, and thereby lends the aforementioned concepts dialectical resonance: and on the other hand, it starts from the analysis of the real relations of subjugation.” Simply put, justification is crucial in discourse particularly in political communities, whereby power is unevenly distributed, and in such cases, justifications form the non-material basis for varying forms of subjugation and control over particular groups of individuals.

What are political discourses? Discourses refer to a set of propositions, utterances, assertions, and beliefs uttered in the public sphere for the particular purpose of advancing a policy action or a broad belief-system (Regilme 2018b, c). The public sphere refers to the societal space that represents the meeting point of discursive battles between civil society, state, and the market (Habermas 1991; Regilme 2018a). Politicians deploy discourses with

the aim of providing rebuttals and counter-responses to opposing arguments raised by their opponents. In the context of a constitutionally guaranteed liberal democracy, discursive justifications aim to provide reasons and legitimating ideas in support of a particular policy action. Yet, those discursive justifications do not exist independent of the material circumstances that underpin a given political community. Rather, those material circumstances, while they do exist independently despite the absence of a conscious human observer, shape how and under which conditions discursive justifications are formed and by whom. This issue of whose interpretations matter in the public sphere requires an analysis of how material power is distributed amongst various groups of actors who participate in the formation of the public sphere.

Methodologically, I highlight the key substantive discourses that dominated in the political speeches and texts of the officials of the Philippine government (2016–2019) and the Colombian government (2001–2010), with the focus on President Rodrigo Duterte of the former and President Alvaro Uribe³ of the latter. Both countries⁴ are fairly similar in a number of relevant and comparable aspects. As middle-income countries located in the Global South, Colombia and the Philippines have nominally electoral democratic systems with constitutionally guaranteed human rights for its citizens, a relatively liberal democratic political culture, considerable levels of material inequalities, and a long-standing problem on widespread use and trafficking of illegal narcotics. Because of those notable similarities, the comparative analysis effectively highlights how and under which conditions two democratically elected executive

governments have weaponized peace discourses in order to make increased state repression and militarization of a public health problem more appealing to their domestic constituencies.

The empirical analysis herein constitutes a “plausibility probe” (Levy 2008, 8), whereby the two cases of the drug wars illustrate my theoretical propositions on the role of discourse as justificatory tools for increased state repression, using the notion of peace as the core concept. The discursive dynamics and the material circumstances of the state-initiated drug wars in Colombia and the Philippines are well-documented in a wide range of scholarly literature in the social sciences, especially in political science, international relations, and area studies. Because of this wide swath of vetted scholarly literature on the drug wars, I analyze and theorize the dominant discourse patterns as well as various news articles and other open-source speeches and government documents in order to illustrate my broad theoretical arguments. For that reason, the case studies probe the plausibility of such theoretical arguments and contribute to a better understanding of the government’s political logic and discursive justifications for the extremely violent state-led drug wars, which led to the human rights disasters in Colombia and the Philippines. While the case studies do not make an exhaustive discourse analysis of the presidential administrations in those two countries, the comparative study relies on a wide range of empirical sources from Colombia, the Philippines, as well as international sources: primary documents of speeches from official government websites; reports from various national and international news media outlets; and, secondary literature and empirical accounts from local journalists and scholars. Employing data triangulation, I cross-verify particular pieces of empirical information across various sources with nominally different interests (e.g., local versus international; public versus private media agencies) in order to ensure reliability of the comparative analysis.

This article contributes to the relevant literatures on security studies, human rights scholarship, and international relations (IR) in several ways. Notably, it redresses some of the analytic limitations of securitization theory, which has been dominant in the study of domestic state repression and international politics. First, whereas securitization theory usually focuses on the ideational aspects by underscoring the notion of security as a speech-act (Waever 1995), this study highlights *how ideational-legitimization* narratives (such as peace discourses vis-à-vis threat construction) and *material* actions (state and non-state violence) fundamentally constitute security as a sociological condition that is distinctively formed during a given temporal

³ I have chosen the Uribe administration (rather than the current Duque presidency that only started in August 2018) because of its relatively longer duration of service, which provides large range of empirical information on the war on drugs and the human rights abuses during that time.

⁴ Although I compare two cases of “national” war on drugs, my analysis seeks to avoid a “methodological nationalist” bias that has dominated mainstream security studies in two ways: (1) by raising the possibility that a militaristic approach has increasingly become a more common practice, thereby demonstrating a sort of global diffusion of normative attitudes towards illegal drugs, and (2) by highlighting how war on drugs-oriented patterns of discourses, material resources, and concrete political actions can be observed in distinctive political spaces (e.g., Latin America and Southeast Asia). For further theoretical discussion on space and global security, refer to Adamson (2016).

period, geographic space, and actor positionality. While securitization theorists insist that “the way to study securitization is to study discourse” (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998, 25), I show that the construction of security emanates from competition amongst social actors that generate actions both in the *ideational* and *materialist* realms of public contestation. Second, as the Colombian and Philippine cases show, the legitimization and eventual policy implementation of the war on drugs depended both on the public demonization of anyone involved in illegal narcotics *and* the insistence of a “peace” utopia that the governments seek to achieve through militarization. Although “securitization process is inherently negative” as it “bypasses normal democratic procedures and fast-tracks issues into the secretive and undoubtedly hostile realm of security” (Sjöstedt 2017, 14; see also Aradau 2004), the analysis herein shows how legitimization narratives through peace discourses—framed as *positive*, emancipatory utopias by state actors advocating for militarization—often occur in openly contested public spheres and could facilitate the loss of human lives. Third, this paper engages with the emerging literature on the “varieties of peace” program by demonstrating that peace represents a multifaceted and politically contentious process of “becoming rather than an end state” (Jarstad et al. 2019, 2). In other words, peace should be conceived not only as a mere sociological *condition* but as a *process* of contestation of discursive justifications, legitimization narratives, and mobilization of resources in support of distinctive political utopias.

Besides, the article illustrates how supposedly neutral and universally appealing meta-discourses such as peace could be used as weapons for regime consolidation and could engender tangible and material consequences such as severe human rights crisis. Regime consolidation requires legitimization narratives, and in the case of Uribe and Duterte, legitimacy was sought through the strategic invocation of state security-oriented notion of peace. By showing how peace is a highly contested rallying discourse, I contribute to the nascent theoretical developments in peace studies (Klem 2018) and human rights scholarship (Bob 2019; Regilme 2019, 2020) that highlight the inherently politicized nature of moral concepts and their concrete distributive consequences to the society that impact the existential survival of its more vulnerable members. In addition, this article is arguably the first in security studies, political science, and human rights literature that investigates the contemporary war on drugs using theoretically oriented systematic comparisons between Colombia and the Philippines.⁵

Hence, my comparative analysis of the drugs wars in the Philippines and Colombia includes the focus on the structural-material circumstances of the drug wars as well as its ideational features. As shown in Figure 1, the comparative summary of the two countries’ drug wars is presented based on several key benchmarks. In terms of the material factors, I analytically describe the broad socio-political context and the purported material basis of the drug war in each country, with a focus on the features of the primary actors deploying state violence, their primary targets, the key features of the human rights crisis that emerged from state violence, and the political logics of the incumbent government. In regard to ideational features, I provide some preliminary insights concerning the Colombian and Philippine governments’ dominant perspectives on peace, human rights, and their over-all stance on unarmed political dissent amidst a perceived crisis of illegal drug use and trafficking. Thus, understanding how and why transformative policy strategies emerge require the intertwining and mutually reinforcing interactions of material and ideational factors, as those processes will be demonstrated by the case studies of the drug wars in Colombia and the Philippines. The overarching argument maintains that the discursive justifications and resource mobilization in support of the drug wars were systematic attempts to consolidate the authority of Duterte and Uribe within and beyond their state’s coercive apparatus, particularly by legitimizing increased state violence through discourses of state security-oriented notion of peace. Following Galtung’s (1969, 1996) emphasis on peace as a set of *material* conditions and recent scholarly studies of how morally appealing concepts are used as *ideational* tools in political contestations (Bob 2019; Klem 2018), I illustrate how government officials deploy peace as a justificatory instrument in order to facilitate the broad acceptance and implementation of particular security policies that have

drugs employ a methodologically-nationalist approach and intra-regional comparative approach rather than a cross-regional comparative outlook. For the Colombian case, see Bagley (1991), Thouni (1995), Tickner (2003), Arnson and Tickner (2010), Holmes et al. (2010), Rosen (2014), Tate (2015) and Regilme (2018c). For the Philippine case, see Thompson (2016), Simangan (2017), and Gallagher et al. (2020) among many others. The Colombian war on drugs, however, has been analyzed using an intra-regional comparison, as shown by the study of Borda (2009). Notably, Walch’s study (2016) is perhaps the only piece that compares the two countries, particularly on the determinants of success of the peace negotiations therein.

⁵ So much of the insightful and rich empirical literature on the contemporary Colombian and Philippine war on

		THE PHILIPPINES	COLOMBIA
Country Characteristics	Region	Maritime Southeast Asia	Andean Region, South America
	Size	300,000 sq. km.	1,138, 910 sq. km.
	Population	105 million (2018)	49 million (2018)
	Form of Government	Presidential Representative Democratic Republic	Presidential Representative Democratic Republic
	Economy	Lower-middle income country	Upper-middle-income country
Material Features of the Drug War	Broader Context of the Drug War	Increasing drug-related crimes amid increasing economic development and inequalities	Long-standing Colombian asymmetric war between the state, crime syndicates and communist guerrillas in a bid to consolidate their control over Colombian territories
	Primary State Actors Deploying Violence	State-sanctioned death squads and police officers of the Philippine National Police	Primarily the Colombian Armed Forces
	Primary Targets of the Drug War	Mostly drug users from low-income communities	Armed communist rebels of FARC who were active in the drug business
	Features of the Human Rights Crisis	Official govt figures: 5,526 deaths of 'drug personalities' (July 2016-June 2019) in contrast to the 27,000 deaths claimed by non-governmental sources; 42,600 out of 142,000 prisoners are drug offenders (yet the national prison system is built for only 20,000 prisoners)	The Uppsala Conflict Data Program recorded 8, 185 people (civilians and armed rebels) during the period 2001-2010 died due to state-based violence
	Political Leadership of the War on Drugs	Rodrigo Duterte (2016-Present)	Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010)
	External Political Support from a Powerful State	China - Duterte administration	United States - Uribe administration
Ideational Features of the Drug War	Perspective on Peace	Rule of Law and State Control as Conditions of Peace	State Violence as a Means to Democracy, Violence as Necessary to Attain Peace
	Perspective on Human Rights	Human Rights as Irrelevant	State Security is Necessary to Preserve Human Rights
	Stance on Unarmed Political Dissent Against the Drug War	Delegitimization by accusing human rights activists and political opposition members as beneficiaries of the illegal drugs industry	Denial of the human rights costs of the drug war and the justification that militarization of the drug war is necessary to maintain democracy and human rights

Figure 1. Comparing the material and ideational logics of the war on drugs in the Philippines and Colombia.

concrete material consequences to human lives. The table above presents the organizing principles upon which the comparative analysis of the drug wars will be conducted. The next section begins with the case study of the Philippine war on drugs under the government of President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-ongoing).

Duterte’s War on Drugs in the Philippines

On the 30th June 2016, Rodrigo Duterte was sworn into office as the 16th President of the Republic of the Philippines. Duterte defeated four other key contenders in the 2016 presidential elections, with 40 percent of the total number of votes with the second (Manuel Roxas) and third placer (Grace Poe) garnering 23 percent and 21 percent, respectively. Those other presidential contenders upheld policies that speak of relative continuity to the strategies of the administration of the President Benigno Aquino (2010–2016), while the Duterte campaign sought

to depart from Aquino’s liberal democratic-oriented policy agenda.

Duterte’s core agenda focused on three key policy priorities. First, he vowed to push for the shift from the current, centralized system of governance to fully federalized system. In this way, provincial governments acquire more power in managing their own affairs in ways that are not possible in the current system (Casiple 2019, 180). While this agenda is unsurprising considering that Duterte was the first provincial politician to be elected directly to the highest elected office in the country, the proposal in support of federalism also marks the weaknesses of the post-1986 electoral democracy system. Specifically, Duterte and his allies criticized how previous electoral administrations since the fall of the Marcos dictatorship failed to deliver the socio-economic benefits of liberalization across the society, thereby characterizing such a democratic system as elitist (Thompson 2016). Second, Duterte’s policy agenda constituted the shift from reliance upon the

United States as a security guarantor toward a much closer bilateral relationship with China. Third, Duterte's centerpiece agenda includes his "war on drugs" that generated the worst state-initiated human rights crisis in the country's modern political history (Simangan 2017).

My empirical analysis of Duterte's war on drugs consists of two key components. The first part constitutes the material features of intensified state repression, while the second part focuses on the ideational justifications for the approach in solving the proliferation of the use of illegal drugs.

What were the material aspects that constitute Duterte's war on drugs? The Philippine war on drugs formally started right after Duterte's start of tenure, and he argued that the use of illegal drugs in the country was increasing in the 2000s, and therefore drastic measures from the government are required. Specifically, in his first State of the Nation Address in 2016, Duterte attempted to bolster his case for a crisis of illegal drugs:

Two years ago, PDEA [Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency] came out with a statement that there are 3 million drug addicts in this country. That was two or three years ago. How do you think – would the number incrementally [sic, grow] if we count now? Give it a liberal addition. Maybe, gawin mo na [make it] [700,000]. So three million seven hundred thousand [3.7 million]. The number is quite staggering and scary.

The Duterte administration framed the war on drugs as the effective and inevitable response to the widespread use of illegal drugs, especially methamphetamine and cannabis. Notwithstanding "several decades of drug control, the prevalence of drug use, particularly methamphetamine, is on the rise" both in Southeast Asia, and specifically in the Philippines (Lasco 2018, 40). While drug addiction is a serious problem in the Philippines, victims of this social menace struggle amidst the inadequate public health and rehabilitation facilities. Duterte contends that the illegal drug situation in the Philippines pose apocalyptic threats to the society and destructive effects to individuals, and the only way to combat such an imminent disaster to the Philippine society is through his administration's state violence-focused approach that vigorously implements extrajudicial killings of all suspected criminals and drug users (Barrera 2017, 350). Rather than treating the drug problem as a public health issue, the Duterte administration mobilized the state's coercive apparatus in violently killing and harassing individuals allegedly involved in illegal drugs. As Columbia-based professor Sheila Coronel (2019, 19) rightly maintains, "the level of illegal drug use in the Philippines is lower

than that in the United States or Thailand, but Duterte's warnings about the drug scourge have fueled the public's anxieties about safety." Moreover, Duterte (2016a, 40) even made irrelevant and morally despicable remarks in an attempt to bolster his case for increased state violence against illegal drugs:

Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now there is three million, there's three million drug addicts. There are. I'd be happy to slaughter them. At least if Germany had Hitler, the Philippines would have you know, my victims, I would like to be all criminals to finish the problem of my country and save the next generation from perdition.

How did the Duterte administration justify extrajudicial killings of illegal drug users and traffickers? First, Duterte made the case that illegal drugs facilitate the breakdown of political order through the involvement of politicians, military and police agents, and ordinary civilians. He argued that various crimes, acts of social deviance, and other socio-economic problems such as poverty can be traced to widespread illegal drug use. In Duterte's world-view, illegal drugs represent the foundational cause of long-standing societal problems such as poverty, political corruption, and economic uncertainty (Regilme 2016). In his first public speech right after assuming the presidency in June 2016, Duterte (2016b, 12) argued that "the problems that bedevil our country today which need to be addressed with urgency are corruption, both in the high and low echelons in government, criminality in the streets and the rampant sale of illegal drugs in all strata of Philippine society and the breakdown of law and order." In response to the urgency of the drug problem, Duterte (2016b, 5–6) invoked state violence as the only solution: "these sons of whores are destroying our children. I warn you, don't go into that, even if you're a policeman, because I will really kill you. . . If you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself as getting their parents to do it would be too painful." During the presidential campaigns, Duterte, who was then the Mayor of Davao City, unashamedly argued (ABS-CBN News 2015, 3–4 and 11).

Are you telling me that these criminals have human rights to kill and human rights to continue their criminal activities? What about the human rights of the innocent victims and their orphans? A leader must be a terror to the few who are evil in order to protect the lives and well-being of the many who are good," We're the ninth safest city... How do you think I did it? How did I reach that title among the world's safest cities? Kill them all [criminals].

By framing users of illegal drugs as the most dangerous existential threat to the Philippine political order, Duterte underscored the Philippine state's failures in solving socio-economic problems including material inequality and political corruption. This simplistic framing of the country's entrenched problems as all linked to illegal drugs gained some traction amongst Duterte's support base, while Duterte continued to demonize his predecessor, former President Benigno Aquino (2010–2016) of the Liberal Party, whose presidency facilitated increased economic growth amidst increasing crime rates, and other opposition politicians and critics,⁶ who advocate for a non-violent approach to criminality and illegal drugs.

Duterte and his allies contend that Davao City emerged as one of the "safest" cities in the country because of the effectiveness of extrajudicial killings, and that claim "was the bedrock of his presidential campaign. . .that emphasizes order above law which is particularly attractive to voters who are tired of the ineffectiveness of legal institutions in addressing crime and disorder" (Simangan 2017, 5). Indeed, the Duterte administration employed state agents in implementing state violence in order to eliminate violently all suspected drug addicts, users, and traffickers in ways that were not formally sanctioned by law.

By framing illegal drugs users as the quintessential culprits of many national problems such as poverty and corruption, the Duterte administration sought to bolster his legitimacy before and during his presidential term. As Wataru Kusaka (2017b, 216) compellingly argue, there are three key issues that played a crucial role in Philippine electoral politics: poverty, morality, and ability. Accordingly, success in presidential politics emanates from careful instrumentalization of *antagonism* between "good" and "bad" groups as well as *moralization* in the public sphere. Attempting to provide moral justification for

his anti-poor politics, Duterte blamed illegal drug users (mostly from the lower economic class) as the cause of all political and economic problems, while high-profile traffickers with links to politicians are spared from state violence. Based on Amnesty International's investigation on the profiles of the victims, the war on drugs created a war against very poor people, as suggested by the wife of a killed victim based in Metro Manila who attested that (Wells 2017, 12):

Those who are rich are jailed and turned into witnesses. How come the poor are being killed? In our neighborhood...they usually kill those of us who have families – people who sell to have a little money. If people had other opportunities, they wouldn't [sell drugs].

Yet, Duterte's claim about the purported improvement in public security came at the cost of thousands of civilians killed by state-sponsored agents during the war on drugs. As shown in figure 2, the number of civilian deaths resulting from state violence dramatically increased in 2017, a year after the Duterte administration launched its increased state repression against suspected drug addicts and traffickers. Before Duterte's war on drugs, the administration of President Benigno Aquino III focused on good governance, human rights, and economic reforms, which likely contributed to the decrease in the number of victims from state-based violence (Aquino III and Bradley 2010; Regilme 2015: 155–193; Regilme and Untalan 2016).

The Duterte administration's drug war constitutes various discursive mechanisms of justification (Johnson and Fernquest 2018, 363). First, the rhetoric and policy discourses of Duterte and his administration officials encourage the killings of all those involved in narcotic drugs. Duterte devalued the life of alleged criminals by arguing that "there's a whale of a difference between killing an innocent person and killing a criminal. . .they ought not to be mixed up" (Ranada 2017, 20–21) and justified that the casualties of the drug wars were criminals who ought to die. Second, police officers implement fictional buy-bust operations, whereby the target suspects would be accused of violent resistance and are eventually killed. Third, police agents and suspected state-sponsored assassins systematically yet covertly look for all targets and kill them in ways that demonstrate acts of governmental terrorism. In fact, the distinction between a buy-bust killing and a regular extra-judicial killing is unclear, considering that "if the victim did not have a gun, one can be given to him after he is killed—and it frequently is" (Johnson and Fernquest 2018, 363).

⁶ For example, Duterte's allies alleged that Senator Leila de Lima, who remains to be the most prominent critic of Duterte's human rights abuses, as directly linked to illegal drug trafficking. Since 2017, De Lima remains in prison on the basis of drug trafficking charges amidst the very slow processing of court trials, while many local and international human rights organizations consider her as a "prisoner of conscience." In January 2020, the US federal government, through the initiatives of the US Congress, has mandated the State Department to impose sanctions and travel bans to individuals and government officials who are directly involved in the political imprisonment of De Lima. This US initiative was part of the US Global Magnitsky Act (Buan 2020).

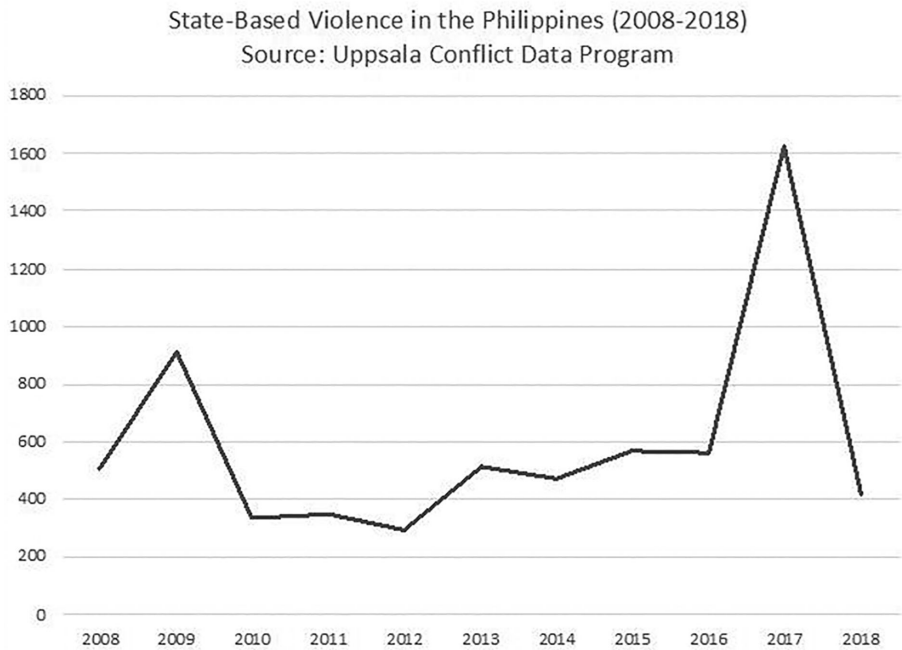


Figure 2. State-based violence in the Philippines (2008–2018). [Pettersson et al. \(2019\)](#).

The war on drugs deliberately targeted any suspected drug users and traffickers, without any proper court-sanctioned vetting and arrest warrants ([Reyes 2019](#), 111–112). In Duterte’s war on drugs, state agents employ two key tactics. First, they systematically identify suspected drug dealers, users, and alleged criminals and disclosing their names in the media. Second, state agents passionately justify the killing of those suspects as inevitable, while publicly embarrassing the suspects’ families and friends through the placement of placards on the dead targets that indicate that they deserve death for their involvement in drugs. Such tactics depend also on showcasing the purported effectiveness of state violence in fostering order and peace in the society, where, as Duterte maintains, human rights and democratic governance allegedly failed ([Reyes 2019](#), 111).

Who were the victims of the drug wars in the Philippines? The large majority of the victims were financially impoverished individuals living in slums. In a study conducted by two Philippine universities and the Stabile Center at Columbia University, 40 percent of the killings were conducted in the slums of Metro Manila (between May 2016 and September 2017), and the dead civilians were “typically tricycle drivers, construction workers, vendors, farmers, jeepney barkers, garbage collectors, or were unemployed” ([Coronel, Kalaw-Tirol, and Pimentel 2019](#),

3). The official statistics from the Philippine National Police confirm that around 5,000 individuals were killed nationwide by state agents between 2016 until 2018 ([Ball et al. 2019](#), 3). On June 2019, the Philippine police contradicted its own earlier pronouncements and asserted that 6,600 individual lives were killed by state agents in their anti-drug operations ([Maitem 2019](#), 2). In addition, approximately 30,000 victims were killed using the “riding-in-tandem” tactic, which involves purportedly state-sanctioned two masked or hooded assassins riding in a motorcycle and widely suspected as state-sponsored agents ([Maitem 2019](#), 3).

What was the political logic that underpinned the state violence-oriented approach to addressing illegal drugs? The most likely general explanation for the emergence of a state-initiated human rights crisis in the context of the war on drugs pertains to Rodrigo Duterte’s attempt to bolster his political authority in two ways ([ABS-CBN News 2015](#); [Coronel 2019](#)). First, Duterte relies on the political support from those who believe that the problem of law and order in the country could only be fully resolved through the full reliance on state violence and disregard for democratic procedures and human rights commitments. Second, by reinforcing the coercive capacities of the military and the policy through the war on drugs, Duterte undermines the likelihood

of a potential coup. Notably, forty-six retired high-ranking military and police officers were given ministerial posts (positions as Cabinet Secretaries) and other influential positions in various government agencies and government-owned corporations (Gita 2019), thereby suggesting the administration's attempt to quell the potential of coup against Duterte's leadership. Duterte even vowed to hire more retired military officials into his administration for the remaining three years of his presidential term. Notably, the majority of these retired military and police officials came from Duterte's political bailiwick in southern Philippines. Moreover, the support of the upper- and middle-classes is crucial to the survival of the Duterte regime, particularly when such influential class groups could potentially consolidate their resources and influence in toppling an incumbent presidential administration. As the majority of the war on drugs' victims came from extremely poor background, the Duterte regime wins the support of the elite and middle class by providing them a (albeit false) sense of security and safety (David et al. 2018; Go and De Ungria 2019). Dismissive of the legitimacy of non-violent approaches, the war on drugs also aims to address poverty by killing poor people in a way that bolsters wealthy elites' support for Duterte. Specifically, the police and state agents primarily implemented their killing operations in the financially poor slums of Metro Manila and other underdeveloped rural areas in the provinces, thereby targeting poor Filipinos (Barrera 2017; Coronel, Kalaw-Tirol, and Pimentel 2019).

While the war on drugs constitutes Duterte's strategy for regime consolidation, what exactly were the political discourses and justifications that sought to justify such a violent strategy? In justifying the war on drugs, how did the Duterte administration and its allies construct notions of peace and human rights? The Duterte administration's discourses instrumentally claims that peace depends on the rule of law and the effective provision of basic security. Duterte claims that the war on drugs could generate peace, which is crucial for sustainable socioeconomic development. In his 2017 State of the Nation Address (SONA), Duterte (2017, 11) claimed that the "economy surges only when there is peace and order prevailing in places where investors can pour [in] their capital and expertise" and referred to his successes in the localized war on drugs in Davao City during his time as its City Mayor. In the same speech, he also maintained that the "fight against illegal drugs will continue because that is the root cause of so much evil and so much suffering [applause] that weakens the social fabric and deters foreign investments from pouring in. . . the fight will be unrelenting as it will be unrelenting" (Duterte 2017, 12). In his 2019 SONA speech, Duterte (2019, 47) main-

tains that: "developmental gains will not be felt by our people in the countryside if we cannot maintain law and order. . . "Yang peace and security, wala "yan. [peace and security are nothing]. . . we need to enforce the law." (Duterte 2019). Yet, the inconsistency and ambivalence of Duterte's policy views are well-known. In the same SONA speech, Duterte (2019, 65) claimed that he "will do [address the dispute] in the peaceful way, mindful of the fact that it is our national pride and territorial integrity that are at stake." The remarkable difference between Duterte's policy approach on illegal drugs problem and the South China Sea dispute suggests inconsistency on the use of state violence. Walden Bello (2017, 83) argues that the core objective was "not to win the war on drugs," but "to promote a broader authoritarian agenda by establishing a climate of intimidation and fear that will make the destruction of democratic political institutions. . . and their remaking in an authoritarian direction a 'walk in the park'". Thus, the logic of the war on drugs also rests on Duterte's need for regime consolidation and his broader coalition of allies.

The foregoing analysis shows two strands of ideas concerning the Duterte administration's views on peace. On substantive content, peace refers to the scenario where the Philippine state exercises full control of marginalized groups, particularly the materially poor citizens, in a way that protects the interest of capital and wealth of the elites. In this way, peace refers to state security, which includes the consolidation of power of the ruling presidential administration and wealthy elite allies. Peace, in this view, does not include the freedom of the poor people from state violence, as they remain key targets of the war on drugs without any recourse to procedural justice and rehabilitative facilities, particularly for those suffering from narcotic drug addiction. In advancing such an elitist view of peace, the Duterte administration employs several tactics. First, it reorients the state apparatus as an instrument of violence not in the service of the state's human rights commitments to its citizens; rather, state violence exclusively reinforces the interest of incumbent presidential regime's consolidation of authority, while bolstering the interests of its ruling wealthy elites. Second, the state's discourses aim to dehumanize poor people, who were characterized as worthy of being killed in the interest of state security.

Uribe's War on Drugs: Plan Colombia

Located in the Andean region in South America, Colombia is one of the continent's enduring electoral democracies. Its population includes approximately 49 million people, as of the year 2018, and almost four times larger than the Philippines in terms of land area. While the

Philippines is classified as a lower middle-income country, Colombia is much wealthier with a GDP per capita twice as large as the Philippines. For several decades, Colombian people have suffered amidst the enduring asymmetric war between the state, crime syndicates, and communist guerrillas in a bid to consolidate their control over various parts of the Colombian territory. In deploying state violence against the armed communist rebels (FARC), the Colombian government employs state agents of the Colombian Armed Forces in order to kill and to eliminate non-state terror groups, including the armed communist rebels.

During the tenure of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe (2002–2010), around 8,185 civilians and armed rebels were killed due to state-based violence (Pettersson et al. 2019; Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2019). Considering the wide magnitude of state violence employed in Uribe's war on drugs, Colombia received immense foreign military aid and strong political support from the US government. That foreign support and the Uribe-led government's violence-focused policy strategy were crucial in the implementation of Colombia's war on drugs.

Historically, Colombians have been suffering from "high levels of organized violence," but it was in the 1990s that a low-intensity conflict became more serious to the extent that scholars and policy analysts characterized the period as illustrative of a civil war (Gray 2008, 63). In 2002, Alvaro Uribe started his presidency and faced three key threats: "an 18,000-strong drug-financed insurgent group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, FARC); a 12,000-body paramilitary umbrella group, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), also financed by drug money; and a dwindling leftist insurgency, the National Liberation Army (ELN)" (Sweig 2002, 2). Hence, the Uribe administration "inherited an appalling security situation: an intractable internal conflict, a civilian population threatened by illegal armed groups, and the continued collaboration of the military and police with paramilitaries who commit human rights abuses" (Mason 2003, 392). Whereas Duterte's drug war targeted drug users as they were the purported cause of the country's political and economic problems, the Uribe government intensified counterinsurgency operations against armed rebel groups for their alleged involvement in illegal drugs and for challenging the Colombian state's territorial sovereignty. Consequently, such state actions "significantly reduced the number of FARC combatants, and guerrillas were forced to retreat toward the border of the country" (Civico 2016, 11). Faced by the overall popularity of *mano dura* or tough-on-crime stance in Latin American politics (Pereira and Ungar

2004; Wolf 2017), Alvaro Uribe generally maintained very high favorability ratings during his 8-year term (around 60–70 percent on average) (Viera 2010). That high favorability rating dramatically dropped, as one national survey conducted in 2019 revealed that 69 percent of the total number of respondents expressed an unfavorable image of Uribe (Redaccion W Radio 2019). Although he was "elected in a landslide by an electorate frustrated with the failures of peace talks" (Civico 2016, 11), Uribe's fall from grace emerged after his administration's human rights abuses and coercive methods to bring down political opponents gained traction in the public sphere (Orozco 2019).

What were the material aspects of Colombia's war on drugs? With the support from the US government, the Uribe administration launched the local "war on drugs," which refers to increased state repression of all forms of non-state violence, such as crime syndicates and armed communist rebels. This US-funded war on drugs is widely known as Plan Colombia.⁷ From the Uribe administration's perspective, such non-state armed rebel groups and illegal drug syndicates have been involved in the use and proliferation of illegal narcotics as a way to finance their repressive activities so as to consolidate their control over Colombian territories.

Figure 3 illustrates the estimated number of civilian deaths resulting from the following types of armed encounters: (1) state-based violence, where state actors killed civilians; (2) non-state violence, where none of the parties is a state actor; (3) one-sided violence, where the attacks on civilians emerged amidst violence involving state and non-state actors. Despite the methodological limitations of data on state violence, the graph below suggests a pattern of increase in civilian deaths during the peak of the war on drugs, starting in 2002 until 2006. That pattern of violence demonstrates that the militaristic approach to the proliferation of illegal drugs exacerbated the severity of political conflict between the state and armed rebels, while also pervasively killing civilians in the process. As such, the revamped *Plan Patriota* (widely known as the second phase of Plan Colombia) facilitated the increase to 415,000 armed forces members in 2007 from mere 279,000 in 2000 (Rosen 2014, 56).

⁷ For a comprehensive analysis of Plan Colombia, refer to Rosen (2014). Plan Colombia consists of the *Plan Patriota*, which was the defense plan by the Uribe-led government that also enjoyed the support of the US government. The *Plan Patriota* consists of the Democratic Security and Defense Policy doctrines, which sought to gain control of the territories occupied by armed rebel groups such as the FARC and the ELN.

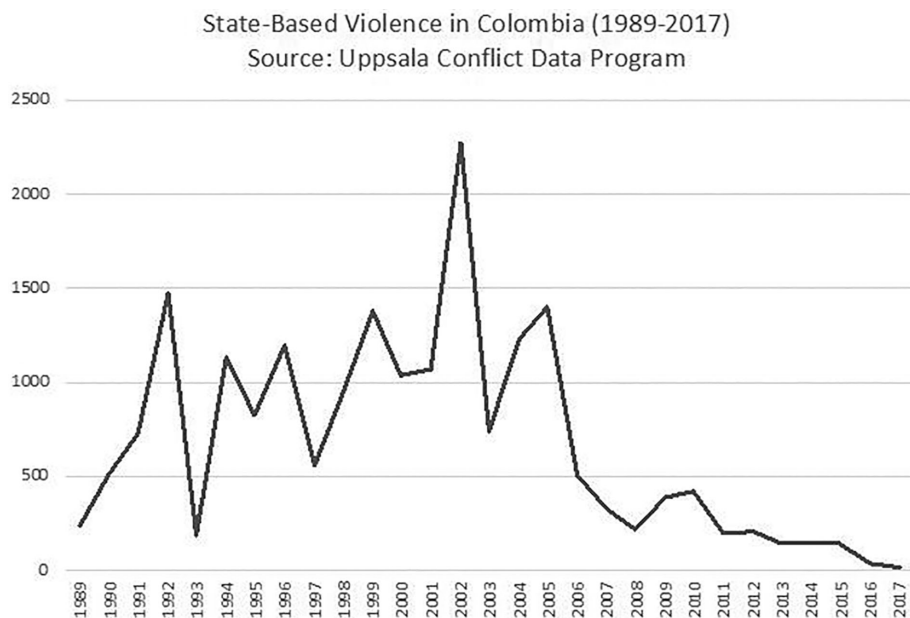


Figure 3. State-based violence in Colombia (1989–2017). [Pettersson et al. \(2019\)](#).

Uribe's war on drugs received almost 8 billion USD worth of military and counterterror assistance from the US government over the course of a decade ([Bagley 2013](#), 103). Around 80 percent of the US funds allocated for Plan Colombia were allocated for counternarcotics and counterterrorism, while a mere 20 percent was allocated for institutional development and non-militaristic policy areas such as judicial reforms, refugee assistance, human rights, and democracy promotion ([Frechette 2007](#), 23). That budget strategy demonstrates "the greatest level of counterdrug cooperation ever achieved between the United States and Colombia" ([Frechette 2007](#), 16), and in exchange, the Uribe administration made his country as the only South American ally in the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq. For the Bush administration, the core objective was to curb the flow of illegal drugs into the United States and to stimulate peace, economic development, as well as Andean regional security ([Veillette 2005](#), 1).

The Colombian Armed Forces was one of the largest institutional beneficiaries of the US-funded war on drugs, which aimed to bolster state capacities in repressing criminal drug syndicates to eliminate their supposedly illegal control of some territories. In addition, Uribe's war on drugs constituted the "the creation of a network of a million informants throughout the country, as well as part-time 'peasant soldiers'", who supported the Colombian military in its counterterror operations against

armed rebel groups including drug syndicates ([Aviles 2006](#), 405). Indeed, Uribe's US-funded war on drugs aimed for the "consolidation into power of a neoliberal state within Colombia, the role of transnational lobbying by US and Colombian policy-makers, as well as the influence of transnational corporations," while also generating pervasive killings of civilians ([Aviles 2008](#), 410). Thus, the role of the United States in Colombia's human rights crisis is undeniable, and as Tom Long (2015, 213) notes, "later investigations have unearthed links between Uribe's administration and allies in Congress with paramilitary groups." Consequently, a lot of financially impoverished Colombians died because of abusive state actions through the drug war. For instance, the "false positives" scandal in 2008 revealed that the Colombian army systematically recruited poor people from the slums and rural areas, promised them some payment or job, then murdered them, and presented their bodies in rebel uniforms. The Colombian armed forces, thereafter, presented those killed as evidence of the state's victory in the war on drugs, as they expected financial incentives for every dead rebel ([Eskauriatza 2017](#); [Fellowship of Reconciliation and Colombia-Europe-U.S. Human Rights Observatory 2014](#)).

With the subsequent shift of US foreign and domestic policies towards an overarching counterterror strategy, the Colombian government's fight against illegal drugs transformed from a narrow counternarcotics strategy to

a full-blown militaristic approach in counterterrorism (Regilme 2018c; Rosen 2014). For Uribe, Plan Colombia aimed to bolster the state's repressive capabilities in ways that could severely debilitate, if not totally eradicate, drug traffickers and armed rebels. By launching a revamped military campaign against drug syndicates and armed rebel groups, the Colombian government aimed to eliminate "the war-making capacity of narco-traffickers, criminals, and terrorist groups and thereby reduces the level of violence, which enhances the prospects for peace" (Hindustan Times 2005, 33). Hence, the Uribe administration employed a militaristic approach to the problem of illegal drug proliferation, whereby the government argues that "strengthening its coercive powers is an essential step toward recuperating central government control and the rule of law" (Mason 2003, 401–402). This militaristic approach to illegal drugs constituted the dramatic increase in the manpower of the armed forces, the creation of mobile brigades, extension of the years of obligatory military service, acquisition of new military equipment, capacity-building in counterterrorism, and substantial reforms in the intelligence services (Mason 2003, 397).

Considering the severity of the illegal drug problem in Colombia amidst the global terror crisis due to the 9/11 attacks in the United States, "by 2002 many Colombians considered insecurity the country's greatest problem," which motivated the Uribe government to make "insecurity as its principal project" and to legitimize its highly violent war on drugs through the discursive banner of "democratic security" (Denissen 2010, 331–332). Especially during its early years, Uribe's war on drugs had overwhelming support due to its perceived security gains in cities such as Medellín, which is known for its security problems generated by illegal drugs (Arsenault 2014). As the war on drugs generated some sense of public security due to reduced drug production, Uribe in 2011 maintained that "Colombia is winning," because cocaine production has been reduced from the usual average of 1000 tons per year to only 180 in 2010—a trend that suggests that "Colombia is in a very good part of decline" (Wilkinson 2011, 4).

What were the ideational features of Colombia's war on drugs under the Uribe administration? How was peace to be achieved from the perspective of the Uribe administration? For Uribe, intensified state violence is necessary to gain control of disputed territories that are dominated by non-state armed rebel groups, including illegal drug syndicates. Accordingly, state violence is necessary to attain peace and to maintain the political order that makes human rights possible. Amidst the growing human rights costs of his militaristic approach to the illegal drugs prob-

lem, Uribe attempted to justify militarization as necessary in maintaining democracy and human rights. In short, if peace means the absence of non-state violence and the preservation of the state's territorial integrity, then peace requires the total monopoly of the state's control over its claimed territories. As outlined in Uribe's Democratic Security policy, which was the landmark policy document describing the rationale for the war on drugs, the Colombian government disclosed their vision of peace. Hence, peace constitutes three key elements: (1) the reacquisition of national territory from armed non-state rebels; (2) establishment of permanent state presence in those disputed territories in order to maintain law and order as well as to promote economic development; and (3) the negotiation with the three illegal armed rebel groups to end their rebellion against the Colombian state (Teicher 2005). As a discursive banner that sought to legitimize the war on drugs, democratic security constituted several strategies: "aggressively confront the guerrillas and increase the presence of the army and the police throughout the national territory by significantly increasing military spending" (Uprimny 2011). Suggesting the close cooperation between non-state terrorism as a threat to democracy, which was a problem that requires militaristic policy solutions, the Bush administration supported Uribe's war on drugs for a variety of converging interests (Bush 2002, 13):

In Colombia, we recognize the link between terrorist and extremist groups that challenge the security of the state and drug trafficking activities that help finance the operations of such groups. We are working to help Colombia defend its democratic institutions and defeat illegal armed groups of both the left and right by extending effective sovereignty over the entire national territory and provide basic security to the Colombian people.

Uribe also defined peace in terms of negation, particularly by describing a situation where peace does not exist: "Poverty and misery are induced because of terrorist activity. . . . Because of violence people do not invest, and in the absence of investment, it is impossible to create employment, it is impossible to affiliate people to social security, it is impossible to collect taxes, it is impossible to pay public debts, it is impossible to expand social investment. . . ." (Teicher 2005, 6; see also Mason 2003, 392). In justifying the war on drugs, Uribe maintained the exceptional nature of non-state violence and the overwhelming detrimental consequences of illegal drugs—the reason for the intensified state violence through the war on drugs: "The world must understand that this conflict requires unconventional, imaginative, and transparent

solutions. The agents of violence are funded by an international criminal business—drugs. . . If we do not drive out drugs, drugs will destroy our freedoms and our ecology, and the hope of living in peace will be no more than an illusion.” (Uribe 2002, 15). In addition, Uribe maintained that peace is the negation of terrorism, and combatting terror threats requires the full and unconditional support of the domestic public, rather than political dissent, especially from human rights activists (Office of the President of Colombia—Ministry of Defence 2003, 5–6):

The antithesis of democratic politics is terrorism. The terrorist uses violence to impose his will on others, at the expense of the lives of thousands of civilians. There can only be one response to terrorism: its defeat. Those who continue to engage in such criminal conduct will feel all the weight of the law. We Colombians will not give in to this threat. We will defeat it with the support of all citizens. The key concept here is solidarity. Solidarity between citizens and solidarity with the security forces. This principle, a pillar of our constitution, is essential for peaceful coexistence, for the successful integration of Colombian society. The massive show of support of the population in cooperating with the authorities has made clear the determination of Colombians to put an end to terrorism.

Uribe’s war on drugs espouses a notion of peace that can only be achieved through state violence in order to protect the state from any terrorist attacks. During the presidential electoral campaigns in 2002, Uribe was the lone candidate who advocated for a militaristic approach to the drug problem, while his rivals such as Ingrid Betancourt (*Verde Oxígeno*), Noemi Sanin (*Si Colombia*), Luis Garzon (*Polo Democrático*), Horacio Serpa (*Partido Liberal*) supported political negotiations as the primary tool for achieving peace (Echavarría 2010, 103). In 2005, when asked about a non-militaristic approach that focuses on reconciliation with armed rebels, Uribe maintained that he “understand[s] the concern raised by offering alternative sentences for grave crimes, but in a context of 30,000 terrorists, it must be understood that a definitive peace is the best justice for a nation in which several generations have never lived a single day without the occurrence of a terrorist act” (Posnanski 2005, 719). For Uribe, peace would only emerge if the armed non-state rebels will be fully disarmed and surrendered to the Colombian state, and that objective could only be achieved through the effective deployment of violence. This strong commitment to state violence demonstrates the Uribe administration’s refusal “to build a political and social agenda that would allow the structural prob-

lems that constitute the root causes of conflict to be dealt with in depth” (Llorente 2009, 10).

Uribe’s notion of peace primarily pertains to state security, rather than human security that emphasizes sense of safety and well-being of individuals within its claimed territory (Nieto 2007, 117). By employing a militaristic approach to the problem of illegal drugs, the Uribe administration failed to “recognize that Colombian democracy is also under siege from poverty, inequality, and social exclusion” and not only from the threats posed by armed non-state rebellion (Nieto 2007, 117). Colombian President Uribe argued that the abandonment of a peaceful resolution with armed non-state rebel groups could be justified only when Colombians accept that a militaristic approach is the only option left (Echavarría 2010, 92):

Internally, we have achieved that the whole country, each and every one of the Colombians, commits itself to peace. Before it was thought that this was a problem only of the Government with the guerrillas. Today we are aware that it is a war that has been declared violent to society and that we are all those who have to work to stop it. . . we Colombians have to be united, today more than ever, and we have to be ready to collaborate with the authorities and to report any suspicious behavior.

Uribe mobilized political support for his militaristic agenda by distinguishing supporters of peace as those in favor of his approach versus those who oppose his policies. That was especially the case when the Colombian government tried to justify its landmark Democracy Security Policy in June 2003 (Echavarría 2010, 93):

Forget the internal divisions and small conflicts and close ranks against violence. We are not going to let terrorism divide us in any way. On the contrary: We will demonstrate civil courage, reject the violent and defend our country! So we are already doing all Colombians, as it happened tonight when we all demonstrated, in a peaceful but forceful way, against the violence of the intolerant.

Yet, Uribe’s militaristic approach generated the proliferation of state-initiated human rights abuses, all the while invoking democratic security as a legitimization doctrine for a highly repressive and violent policy approach (Regilme 2018c, 356–358). Responding to his critics, during the years 2003 and 2004, Uribe accused human rights activists as “terrorists against democracy,” thereby attempting to undermine their credibility (Brysk 2009, 18–19; Minear 2006, 32). As such, Uribe shamed and named human rights activists as cowards and

collaborators of armed non-state rebel groups (Haugaard et al. 2008, 9):

Every time a security policy to defeat terrorism appears in Colombia, when the terrorists begin to feel weak, they immediately send their spokespeople to talk about human rights...These human-rights traffickers must take off their masks, appear with their political ideas and drop this cowardice of hiding them behind human rights.

In the Colombia case, the Uribe administration instrumentalized the notion of peace as the supposed end goal of intensified state violence and the resulting human rights crisis. The Colombian government also used politically resonant concepts such as “democratic security” in selling a militaristic war on drugs as a panacea for the illegal drug problem.

Conclusions

The foregoing analysis provides a critical and comparative assessment of the political logics and discursive justifications of the war on drugs in the Philippines and Colombia. Both case studies demonstrate that peace was constructed from the perspective of state security, whereby state violence is deployed to eliminate all forms of non-state armed rebellion, and in some cases, peaceful political dissent, including human rights activists and government critics.

Accordingly, peace requires the state’s monopoly of violence over all of its claimed territories, and the unwanted presence of armed non-state rebels, drug syndicates, and illegal drug users undermines the legitimacy of the state. Achieving peace, as the Philippine and Colombian discourses on wars on drugs indicate, needs the reinforcement of the state’s coercive capacities in eliminating all forms of non-state armed rebellion and dissidence. With its full reliance on increased state coercion to combat illegal drug use and trafficking, the Colombian and Philippine governments publicly aspired for “negative peace,” which underscores the relative absence of non-state violence. That strategy, however, did not seriously address the structural socio-economic conditions that facilitated illegal drug trafficking and use, thereby discarding the importance of achieving “positive peace.” Rather than addressing the state’s systemic failures to rectify material injustices and to uphold the dignity of individuals from marginalized groups, the Duterte and Uribe presidencies resorted to a violent and simplistic policy strategy of absolutizing their war on drugs as the only pathway to peace. Indeed, people from economically impoverished background

constitute a substantial, if not the majority, of all the civilian deaths recorded in the Philippines and Colombia (Wood 2009; BBC 2015; Eskauriatza 2017; David et al. 2018; Coronel, Kalaw-Tirol, and Pimentel 2019).

Indeed, the Colombian and Philippine case studies demonstrate the importance of two out of the four key strands of liberal peace, as described by Richmond (2006): (1) victor’s peace, which underscores military victory and the supposed stability of peace through domination of the winning party in a war, and (2) constitutional peace, which highlights the stability of the political order through the rule of law. Thus, both the Uribe and Duterte administrations relied on military victory through widespread extrajudicial killings of civilians purportedly linked to illegal drugs as the supposed effective way of reinforcing state security, at the expense of human security. By publicly castigating and dehumanizing civilians allegedly involved in illegal drugs, both administrations rendered those civilians as state enemies, who pose existential threat to the political order and rule of law. In the Colombian and Philippine drug wars, the governments offered a grim diagnosis of the problem of illegal drugs, asserted the exceptional nature of the threat, upheld that intensified state violence was the only effective policy solution, and quelled human rights activists and critics.

Notwithstanding the notable similarities in the Philippine and Colombian discourses on peace, the two case studies differ on several notable areas. Uribe justified that peace, human rights, and democracy were the end goals of state violence, whereas Duterte demonstrated a more ambivalent attitude towards human rights and instrumentalized the discourse of the “rule of law” and peace as justificatory objectives for the widespread state killings of civilians. In the Philippine case, the Duterte administration instrumentalized the illegal drugs problem as a diversionary cover for the highly entrenched socio-economic causes of crime, illegal drug use, and other forms of social deviance. In doing so, Duterte ordered the intensification of state violence as prelude for the consolidation of his power, destruction of democratic checks and balances, and personal enrichment of personal friends and allies. In the Colombian case, however, the Uribe administration signaled a much stronger discursive commitment to the promotion of liberal democracy in ways that were remarkably different from Duterte’s revulsion at peaceful political dissent. In addition, the role of great powers in domestic violence in the Global South should not be underestimated. In Colombia, the Bush-led US government provided political and financial support in ways that expanded the coercive operations of the military and police. In the Philippines, the Chinese government vowed to defend Duterte’s war on drugs in the United Nations,

while the Duterte administration has undermined decades-old strong bilateral ties of Manila with Washington.⁸

The analysis herein has several scholarly and policy implications and contributions. In terms of theory, I show that political actors use the term of peace as a discursive tool that seeks to legitimize their policy actions. For further research, a more systematic investigation of how state leaders and non-state actors construct peace in the public sphere, particularly in terms of their substantive similarities and differences. In policy terms, the comparative study of Colombia and the Philippines suggests that militaristic approaches to the proliferation of illegal drugs facilitates several unwanted consequences, such as engendering a human rights crisis, curtailment of institutional checks against potential abuses of the chief government executive, and the unnecessary empowerment of the state's coercive apparatus without morally conscientious and democratic civilian control. As shown by the case of Portugal, state investments on public health infrastructures, education, and other instruments that improve socio-economic mobility amongst the poor people are likely to undermine use of addictive narcotics without sacrificing human rights (Domoslawski 2011). For that reason, former Colombian President Cesar Gaviria (1990–1994), in an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, warned Duterte about the failures of the war: “but extrajudicial killings and vigilantism are the wrong ways to go. . . the fight against drugs has to be balanced so that it does not infringe on the rights and well-being of citizens” (Gaviria 2017, 9). Indeed, peace represents the society's existential search for utopia—a condition where its institutions consistently respect the dignity and inherent value of every natural human person within its territory. Notwithstanding its variations across the globe, the war on drugs has shown that its supporters failed to realize that the state's quintessential responsibility constitutes, at the very least, respect for the physical integrity of natural persons rather than the self-serving quests of its leaders for consolidating their authority for power's sake.

⁸ During his time as city mayor, Duterte closely cooperated with President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–2010) and her US-supported war on terror in the Philippines. Davao became a “laboratory for a counterinsurgency strategy involving arming civilians, many of them recruited from the city's criminal underworld, and setting them loose in poor communities where the insurgents still enjoyed strong support” (Coronel 2016, 13). See also Regilme (2015, 135–139) for the links between Duterte, Arroyo, and the US counterterror operations in the Philippines.

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