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Initiatives for International Dialogue

An explosive cocktail
Counter-terrorism, militarisation and authoritarianism in the Philippines

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Executive summary

Violent groups committing terror attacks have existed in the Philippines since the early 1990s, often posing security threats to the state and the population. Today, it seems that President Rodrigo Duterte's administration is taking advantage of their existence to justify a counter-terrorism agenda which is used to legitimise an ongoing brutal crackdown on segments of opposition groups, political movements, civil society, human rights defenders, and Indigenous and minority populations.

Our paper maps how the renewed global drive to counter terrorism, combined with the election of a populist government in the Philippines with autocratic instincts and violent tendencies, has produced an explosive cocktail; one that is having damaging effects on conflict dynamics, civic space and the democratic freedoms of Filipino citizens.

Since the global war on terror was initiated in 2001, counter-terror approaches have fuelled devastating, unending wars in a host of countries, not least in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Syria and across the Sahel. As many as 800,000 people have been directly killed, including at least 335,000 civilians. A further 21 million have been displaced.[1] Despite the mobilisation of enormous political, financial and military resources worldwide, similar patterns of failure have meant that violent groups remain resilient in many contexts, while civilians continue to bear the brunt of the violence.

Even with the well evidenced harms and limited results brought about by counter-terror methods throughout the world, the Philippine government and international partners have embraced counter-terrorism in the Western Pacific. Our paper charts how counter-terrorism has been a core framework influencing security decisions since 2001 under the Macapagal Arroyo administration, and how it worsened significantly following the election of President Duterte in 2016. Through the dramatic militarisation of civilian governance structures, President Duterte has weaponised counter-terrorism to pursue a narrow, securitised political agenda that is having widespread impacts on peace and human rights.

In the Philippines, as elsewhere, international partners and multilaterals touted the preventing or countering violent extremism (P/CVE) agenda as a way to change violent, repressive and ultimately ineffective war on terror approaches into a more principled, comprehensive and effective response. This led to the creation of the Philippine National Action Plan on P/CVE (NAP P/CVE). Ostensibly, it was designed to elicit a new 'whole-of-society' approach to tackling the threat posed by violent groups.

Yet this agenda and action plan did not transform the government's response to violent groups, and instead allowed for further securitisation of development, rights and peace efforts in the country. Our paper details how the NAP P/CVE has created a perception among civil society that United Nations (UN) funds and agencies have prioritised an external policy framework over the needs and demands of communities across the country.

This is not a dynamic unique to the Philippines – it is part of an observable trend around the world.[2] Nonetheless, in the Philippines, it has helped to conceal and maintain the same counterproductive macro-strategy. This is exemplified by the Siege of Marawi in 2017, and recent illiberal, repressive steps which target individuals who are perceived to be sympathetic to political opponents and communist rebel groups.

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By framing security approaches under the global rubric of counter-terrorism and P/CVE, the Duterte government has found a convenient cover to legitimise its pursuit of narrow domestic political priorities. There has been a global roll-out, by international donors and multilateral institutions like the UN, of P/CVE policies, plans and project funding to contexts like the Philippines. This has inadvertently added salience to the Duterte government's drive to target elements of society it deems 'enemies of the state'. This is one of several important impacts of the counter-terrorism and P/CVE agenda in the Philippines. Others include:

- **Reshaping priorities and co-opting civil society** – many civil society organisations (CSOs) have reframed their work to ensure they remain suitable partners for international organisations who – often without understanding the wider implications of doing so – bring P/CVE money and programmes to the Philippines. This has led to the instrumentalisation of women's rights organisations and youth groups – often the 'targets' of such funding – whereby efforts to promote gender equality, women's rights, build peace and prevent conflict are only supported if they are deemed to contribute to P/CVE or counter-terror objectives.

Funding given through this securitised lens moves these organisations and groups away from their vital role in championing community priorities in the context of an increasingly authoritarian governance approach.

- **Aiding a crackdown on opposition and dissent** – the adoption of an overbroad definition of what constitutes 'extremism' and radicalisation is leading to significant harms. The criteria used for assessing 'radicalisation' include an individual's political persuasion, religious belief, or education institutions where they study. Combined with government efforts to label 'terrorists', radicals, religious 'extremists', insurgents, rebels, and separatists as 'enemies of the state', this has led to many counter-terrorism and P/CVE interventions targeting student groups, dissenting movements and certain minority groups.

- **Securitising communities while failing to provide security** – national and subnational CSOs leading peacebuilding, development and good governance efforts are experiencing increased pressure to connect their efforts to the wider counter-terrorism and P/CVE agenda. In a country with a long history of internal violent conflict, the push to treat political insurgencies as "terrorism" is closing the space for many developmental and peacebuilding-based responses. Authorities are securitising engagement with many communities in the country, tackling perceived threats through hard security narratives, policies, interventions and partnerships. This is not providing security, but instead driving and enabling rising levels of conflict and repression.

- **Dividing society and discriminating against minorities** – members of minority communities in the Philippines, such as Indigenous people, Moros or Muslims, often find themselves in the crosshairs of conflict and at the receiving end of harassment from both violent groups and security forces alike. Security forces are targeting individuals from these groups under the state's counter-terrorism strategy, as well as subjecting them to surveillance and policing programmes packaged as P/CVE. The tendency of P/CVE to view and portray aggrieved communities as 'vulnerable' and therefore a source of threat is further ostracising already marginalised sectors and breeding mistrust.

In the final section, our paper analyses the impact of the new Anti-Terrorism Act of June 2020. There is a clear indication that the Philippine government's current approach runs contrary to international standards and obligations to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering 'terrorism'. Recent events have shown that any form of expression that articulates a view or political affiliation contrary to the official state position, or addresses human rights violations can now

constitute a form of 'terrorist' activity or a broad 'threat to national security'.

Continuing on this trajectory will have disastrous impacts on communities across the country for years to come. We therefore recommend a significant change in approach by security and development partners in the Philippines, multilateral institutions and international NGOs, and national CSOs. We highlight seven overarching lessons that the Philippines case offers those working on counter-terrorism and C/PVE at the national and international levels:

National level

1. **People must come before external policy frameworks** – all entities working on peace and security need to commit to broadening and deepening the engagement with Philippine society, especially with those most affected by violent groups, repression and state violence. This cannot be optional: it should be central and primary to any strategies, efforts and programmes to build peace and prevent violence.

2. **Human rights norms are central to avoiding downstream harms** – 20 years of evidence from around the world shows that until there is a conscious effort to recalibrate counter-terrorism measures and P/CVE programming to ensure that human rights norms are upheld as a central goal, violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms will continue. In the Philippines, all P/CVE and counter-terrorism programming and policies should include a conflict sensitivity assessment and a gender analysis in the design, implementation and evaluation phases. Programming should focus on upholding international human rights standards rather than undermining them. Where this cannot be guaranteed, projects should be suspended until the human rights situation is addressed.

3. **Impartiality is not neutrality** – implementing organisations in the Philippines are right to try and maintain impartiality. This is a requirement for UN agencies present in the Philippines. But impartiality

is not the same as neutrality. Those working to build peace and prevent violence cannot be neutral about an agenda that is causing significant human rights harms, exacerbating conflict and derailing peace processes. If programming is contributing – directly or indirectly – to the closing of civic space, to criminalising opposition or to spying on minorities, then implementing organisations should refuse to cooperate with authorities, and where possible push back or make efforts to address this conduct.

4. **It is not too late to reverse securitisation and militarisation** – many human rights organisations, activists, peacebuilders, community organisers and IP in the Philippines continue to work for democracy and human-centred security responses. To reverse securitisation and militarisation in the coming years, UN agencies, international NGOs and national CSOs should invest in projects and programmes that promote human security and reassert democratic norms, and opt out of supporting securitised efforts.

Global level

5. **Counter-terrorism is being instrumentalised by authoritarians** – states and multilateral bodies that are committed to protecting human rights, civic freedoms and pushing back on authoritarianism need to develop a policy response that confronts authoritarian states' abuse of the counter-terrorism agenda.

6. **P/CVE cooperation cannot be considered neutral** – international partners need to be honest about the extent to which the Philippine government and its institutions are weaponising this agenda. They should avoid treating P/CVE programming as an apolitical agenda that is disconnected from militarised structures and approaches.

7. **Peace processes and human rights norms cannot be treated as acceptable collateral damage** – given the obvious harms inflicted in the Philippines, a fresh approach should be considered which prioritises peacebuilding approaches and tools, human rights work, support to local civil society groups and human rights defenders.

Notes

1 Watson Institute, International & Public Affairs, 'Costs of War' (https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary)

2 Ní Aoláin F (2020), 'Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on the human rights challenge of states of emergency in the context of countering terrorism, A/HRC/43/46', 21 February (https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/43/46)