

“Shoot them dead” – Parallels between the “War on Corona” and the “War on Drugs”

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Like other leaders in the world, Duterte not only enforced police and military presence in the public space, but also described his government's measures against the pandemic as warlike. The martial character of the governmental language culminated on April 1st into the public statement that violators of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) would be shot to death by the police and the military. The extent of violence in the official language stood out above that of others so that President Duterte secured himself and his country a place in the news headlines worldwide.

“Why does it seem that personnel manning the checkpoints are fully armed with M-16 rifles instead of functioning thermal guns, personal protective equipment, and disinfection facilities?,” Karapatan Deputy Secretary General Roneo Clamor had already asked two days into the then-called General Community Quarantine (GCQ) in March 2020. From the perspective of a human rights defender what Clamor called the government's militarist solution against COVID-19 had already become obvious - hence the statement that health checkpoints should be of a medical character instead of the observed militarization.

Indeed, war rhetoric in the administrative language in the Philippines is nothing new and therefore predictable. Compared to the use of militarized language in the infamous “war on drugs,” it rather seems to be the notorious way to address any administrative challenge, from political opponents and international diplomacy to internal social and health issues. In terms of militarized language, the administration's actions suit the words: since Duterte took office on June 30, 2016, the “war on drugs” has led to the [death of approximately 27.000 Filipinos](#) to date. Most victims came from urban poor communities and their perpetrators enjoyed impunity. Besides the violence and the killings, no other promise of the “War on Drugs” could be kept. The Duterte administration couldn't sweep the drug problem out of the Philippines within the initially promised six months, and even though the [EU](#) and the [World Bank](#) measured declining poverty rates in the Philippines in the first two years of the Duterte administration, there is current evidence that the “[war on drugs](#)” might at least [undermine the positive effects of the anti-poverty policies](#).

Meanwhile human rights organizations evaluate the legacy of the recent administration far less optimistic than the multilateral entities do: “Duterte and other senior officials have instigated and incited the killings in a campaign that could amount to crimes against humanity,” [Human Rights Watch](#) states. [Amnesty International](#) called the “war on drugs” a “lethal policy” targeting the vulnerable and the poor, as well as human rights activists and critics of the government and leaving families in grief and despair. Duterte is currently investigated by the ICC for “crimes against humanity”.

The so-called “war on drugs” primarily led to more violence against the population, the political opposition, and the civil society. What is the intention behind the use of a militarized language in the context of the pandemic? Could it be a pretext for power expansion? Or is it mere incompetence regarding the management of the COVID-19 crisis?

The administration continues to threaten the population with the announcement of a possible reintroduction of martial law, in cases “[of invasion and rebellion](#).” In this case, “invasion and rebellion” are war-like terms

meant to describe people who would not obey the rules of the lockdown. Human rights defenders stress the point that disobedience to these rules is due to the disastrous circumstances and missing aid in especially poor urban areas. In other words: people break these rules because they need to go out for work, for food or maybe even because they do not know better - but certainly not for “invasion or rebellion.” For this reason, the [Commission of Human Rights Philippines](#) has stressed the importance of lawful quarantine conduct on the ground: “Proper enforcement and public cooperation are indeed expedient. The best way to achieve these is through a humanitarian approach that ensures peace while protecting public health.”

The enforcement of rules through the military and the police is already gravely worsening the human rights situation in the Philippines and comes without a doubt very close to an actual use of martial law. However, proposing the implementation of martial law as a measure against COVID-19 can backfire: The usual war schemes to combat an enemy, like prisons, military facilities, verbal or physical aggression, will not weaken the virus – they will even enhance its spread. A virus will hardly be impressed by more police and military in the streets, while people are suffering from hunger, poverty, and insufficient hygiene facilities. The current administration is used to act in a martial manner. But neither the "war on Corona" nor the "war on drugs" are meant to solve the named problems. Because means weapons, violence and uncertainty. Directing guns against people will neither cure nor prevent them from COVID-19 or drug addiction. War intimidates, it tries to bend people's will and it kills. Instead rather soft skills are necessary to solve the current problems: good governance, transparent communication, informative but critical media information, independent judiciary and well-equipped social and health systems.

With these considerations, the idea of a militarized answer to corona rather seems to be a pretext for further intimidation as well as for arbitrary policies and governmental actions. Martial law will not contain the virus or lower infection rates. It will not stimulate the economy or reduce poverty, nor will solve the problems of drug trafficking and drug addiction. It will not secure regular political processes nor will it contribute to or restore any kind of order. It will solely strengthen the militarization of Philippine politics, which is the origin, and not the solution to the problem. To defend the democracy in the Philippines and to protect human rights in times of Corona, it is – among many other aspects - important not to fall for the use of militarized language and martial action. Neither a virus nor drugs are an actual enemy, they are matter-of-factly health, social and legal problems and should exclusively be addressed like that.

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