

The Generals' Gambit: The Military and Democratic Erosion in Duterte's Philippines

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From its bloody war on drugs to its fight against terrorism and the lingering communist insurgency, the Duterte administration has exhibited a steadfast resolve to address the Philippines' security challenges. One striking observation is its [heavy dependence](#) on the armed forces to accomplish its security goals, albeit at great cost to the nation's democracy. Unseen since the martial law era, this military role expansion now includes leading the COVID-19 [response](#). The country is said to have the longest militarized pandemic lockdown in the world.

Favoring military officers for their apparent efficiency and obedience, by 2017, Duterte has the greatest [number](#) of retired generals in any presidential cabinet in the post-dictatorship period. Although former military officials usually lead defense and security institutions (such as the Department of National Defense) in practice, the Duterte administration distinguishes itself by also appointing them to head department portfolios dealing with the environment and social welfare; even the office in charge of the peace process.

There is little doubt that this intimate relationship between the military and their commander-in-chief comes when both are very popular with the Filipino public, despite criticisms from the country's stalwarts of liberal democracy, such as the opposition, media, and civil society.

The imbalance in Philippine civil-military relations is another indicator of the country's democracy's ongoing erosion that got worse since Duterte's rise to power. This status has been observed domestically and validated by worsening external perceptions. Just recently, a London-based [think tank](#) classified it as a “flawed democracy.” Simultaneously, a US government intelligence [report](#) has identified Duterte himself as a threat to democracy in Southeast Asia.

The country's state of civil-military relations exposes a dangerous resurgence of the military's undue influence in Southeast Asia's politics. This has been seen in Thailand, [Indonesia](#), and recently, in Myanmar's military coup.

Given the steady pace of Philippine democracy's erosion, there can still be a lot that could happen with the remaining 15 months of the Duterte administration. Its ironclad alliance with a military bent on achieving its first total victory against a historical enemy: the world's longest Maoist-inspired communist insurgency, is worth watching. Regardless of the outcome, the military's gambit might have far-reaching negative consequences to the state and society which it has sworn to protect and defend.

Facelift: The military's improved reputation in Philippine society

At present, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is enjoying a much more improved reputation since re-democratization in 1986. While some may attribute this to Duterte's exaltation and constant praise of the institution, a major factor has been its reformist and modernizing stance in the past decade. Since 2010 the Philippine government has embarked on a security sector reform (SSR) to improve the military's effectiveness and accountability. SSR is a major principle stated in the country's National Security Policy since the Benigno Aquino III Administration. This push for professionalism and democratic accountability by the country's civilian leadership coupled with the military's voluntary cooperation has increased public trust and confidence in the military. A December 2019 [poll](#) (below) revealed that the AFP enjoyed its highest trust ratings since public opinion polling began. An astounding 79% of Filipinos trust the military.



Net trust ratings of the Philippine military, 1993-2019 by Social Weather Stations (All rights reserved)

The steady improvement of the military's image among Filipinos was a by-product of its openness to embrace reform and substantive professionalism. Among others, this included setting up human rights offices across the military establishment, the adoption of a transformation roadmap with the guidance of reputable members of the civilian bureaucracy, academe, media, and civil society, and cooperating with politicians to deal with peace and development challenges at the local level.

Due to the challenges of territorial defense and the country's stake in the South China Sea disputes, the last decade saw the military repositioning itself to be more externally oriented through the concept of a credible "Self-Reliant Defense Posture." As an addition to the military's doctrine, this principle aims to fully modernize the AFP and make it a professional armed force focused on the republic's external defense and security.

Soulmates: Duterte's relations with the military

No president in the country's post-martial law history has favored the military than Duterte. It is not coincidental that once the firebrand leader decided to put his unconditional trust and confidence with the armed forces, things negatively affected Philippine democracy. As more and more members of the military (active or retired) fused themselves with the administration, the more it became more difficult to balance civil-military relations democratically.

This has added to the stress that the Duterte administration has exerted over Philippine

democracy. Never has there been a time in the country where the president has control over all branches of government given the administration's "super-majority" in the legislature. Majority of the magistrates in the nation's Supreme Court are also Duterte appointees. His consolidation of power has attracted the military to embark on a partnership that defies a model of civil-military relations where democratic principles and norms, primarily civilian oversight and accountability, have taken a back seat.

Some ex-generals in top cabinet posts even replaced left-leaning officials [endorsed](#) by the country's communist movement, a complete reversal of the more accommodating stance of the populist leader at the beginning of his presidency. Some see the value of putting retired generals in political positions - they are more efficient, strategic, quicker to respond, and were socialized to obey their commander-in-chief. Anyone familiar with Philippine governance knows that delay, paralysis, and bureaucratic politics are the policy process's maladies. As former military officials, now considered civilians given their retirement from active service, many see their experience as an asset to Duterte's government.



President Duterte in Military Outfit visiting Marawi City (Credit: [Ace Morandante for Presidential Communications Operations Office](#)/ licence: Public Domain)

However, the "civilianization" of the generals is at best only in form. Despite all efforts to portray themselves as civilians, soldiers retain that scholars of civil-military relations call "the military mind." Decades of socialization and practice formed a mental map with a different perspective on political affairs - one that is far less simple, limited, and categorical. This is also shaped by the country's specific historical experience where the military has intervened in domestic politics and decided the legitimacy of civilian governments.

Generals also do not lose their networks and connections within the military world. As observed, every one of them brought other military officials (often fellow retirees who were their subordinates) in every government institution they lead. This multiplier effect not only leads to groupthink in decision-making but also exacts a toll on the development of civilian expertise in the government's already weakened bureaucracy.

It becomes problematic when civilian leaders like to invite and encourage the military's direct involvement in the formulation and implementation of security policies. Sources from inside the Duterte administration have observed that there is a lack of diverse perspectives in peace and security policy circles and a complete absence of contentious debate (which is critical to arriving at a satisfactory policy outcome) because military officers are trained to focus on immediate responses to perceived crises and are not used to prolonged deliberation. In a very complicated policy area such as peace and security, a government whose most dominant voice comes from the military might settle for quick fixes and lack a holistic appreciation of complex issues.

This is seen in the country's pandemic response so far. The militarized nature of the policies imposed by Duterte's government has failed to appreciate the critical public health and human security dimensions of the pandemic. Its heavy-handed and punitive approach are often not grounded on complex science and empirical evidence that should guide public policy.

Now or never: The military's anti-communist purge

As Duterte assumed the military's *padrino* (godfather) role, the guard rails normally maintained by the civilian government over the republic's guardians started to corrode. The military's top-brass, both active and retired, began to shift their attention to its historical enemy – the communist movement. An executive decree signed by the president in 2018 seeks to “end local communist armed conflict” by the end of Duterte’s term in 2022. This unconditional order aligned with the military’s enduring interest to score a final victory against their communist nemesis since it knows that future presidents might not share the same conviction.

Euphemistically called a “whole of nation” approach, this heavily-funded counter-insurgency strategy seeks to mobilize all relevant stakeholders within the government and even society through collaborative efforts. However, a closer look at its implementation reveals that this approach is dictated by elements of the military establishment. The approach has been distorted to one wherein all of society must go behind the military’s leadership. The Duterte administration’s inability to impose democratic civilian control has put the military in the driver seat of this anti-communist drive. With both retired and active generals at the helm of implementing this, the military is determined to put a violent rather than negotiated end to perhaps the longest running Maoist-inspired communist insurgency in the world.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the military went full-throttle in its McCarthy-like campaign against an insurgency that they believe has penetrated all sectors of society. Though historically seen as rebels with a cause, the communist movement is now labeled as a terrorist group, a term the government used to reserve for jihadists and other religious extremists. Amid a crippling pandemic, the government also passed a new draconian anti-terrorist law that further legally empowered the state to designate terrorists, conduct surveillance, freeze assets, and detain those they believe are terrorists in a process that jeopardized constitutionally-guaranteed rights.

The latest move of the military is to target academic institutions, notably the country’s national university: the University of the Philippines (UP), due to its allegation that it has become a hub for communist recruitment. UP has played a key role in the anti-Marcos struggle but also has produced leaders in all fields and professions in the country, the defense department has unilaterally abrogated a three-decades-old agreement on the conduct of military operations in the eight campuses of UP. This was seen as a brash move with little regard for the mutual respect and good faith built between the academic community and the military.

Despite [the strong condemnation](#) from Filipino academic institutions, there is no sign that the Department of National Defense will reinstate its accord with UP. While both parties to the revoked agreement [have initiated talks](#), the military has entered university campuses and continued to engage in blatant “[red-tagging](#)” of members of the UP community. It is highly improbable that a new accord that will respect or enhance the academic freedom of educational institutions will be forged under the Duterte administration. In the end, the military has little regard to casting a wide net on whom they consider to be enemies of the state, even if it includes the institution whose mandate has been to produce many of the nation’s best and brightest.

Academic freedom has become the latest casualty in this “scorched earth” campaign to rid the country of communism – an ideology not banned by the 1987 Constitution – but one that the Duterte government has successfully linked with lawless violence and crime. In doing so, it has not exercised caution in labelling dissidents and critics as communists themselves or

as their sympathizers. This has a chilling effect on the nation's academic institutions' ability to critically think, study, and analyze important matters, which inevitably includes how the Duterte administration is governing a country it promised to serve and protect.

Scorched earth: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*[1]

Without regard for Philippine democracy's long-term welfare, the Duterte administration has embraced the armed as a political partner despite the constitutional principle of civilian supremacy over the military. This relationship has blurred the critical boundaries between civilian authority and the military establishment. Duterte has given the military everything it wants in terms of perks, resources, and political patronage. Without limited civilian control, he has allowed the military to lead, without civilian supervision, peace and security policy. Finally, the populist president has tolerated a military to generally act with impunity as it wages its wars against its people, rather than defending the state against its enemies abroad.

What will it profit the military if it defeats its enemies but forfeits the country's soul in exchange?

The military has reciprocated Duterte's favor by defending the authoritarian leader's rhetoric and policies. With very few exceptions, members of the armed forces have rallied around the administration, even if its policies in the long-run can undermine military professionalism and modernization. This can also harm the credibility it presently enjoys. There must be ways to communicate to military officers – both active and retired – that their credibility and the military's integrity are at stake when security forces are involved in politics. A politicized military can never be a professional military.

The Duterte administration has raised public expectations that it will deliver positive changes for the country by the end of its term. By fusing itself with Duterte, his administration's failure to fulfill its promises and expectations might lead to damaging repercussions for the military's institutional reputation.

The costs of the generals' gambit might prove to be too high for the country. A democracy is in further danger when the military's interests are threatened. To know how they could react once Duterte relinquishes power to an opposition leader in 2022, one can just look at what the Myanmar military did a few weeks ago.

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Notes

[1] A Latin phrase found in the work of the Roman poet Juvenal from his Satires. It is literally translated as "Who will guard the guardians?".

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