

Of Human Lives and Human Rights

Duterte's Authoritarianism and its Impact on Human Rights



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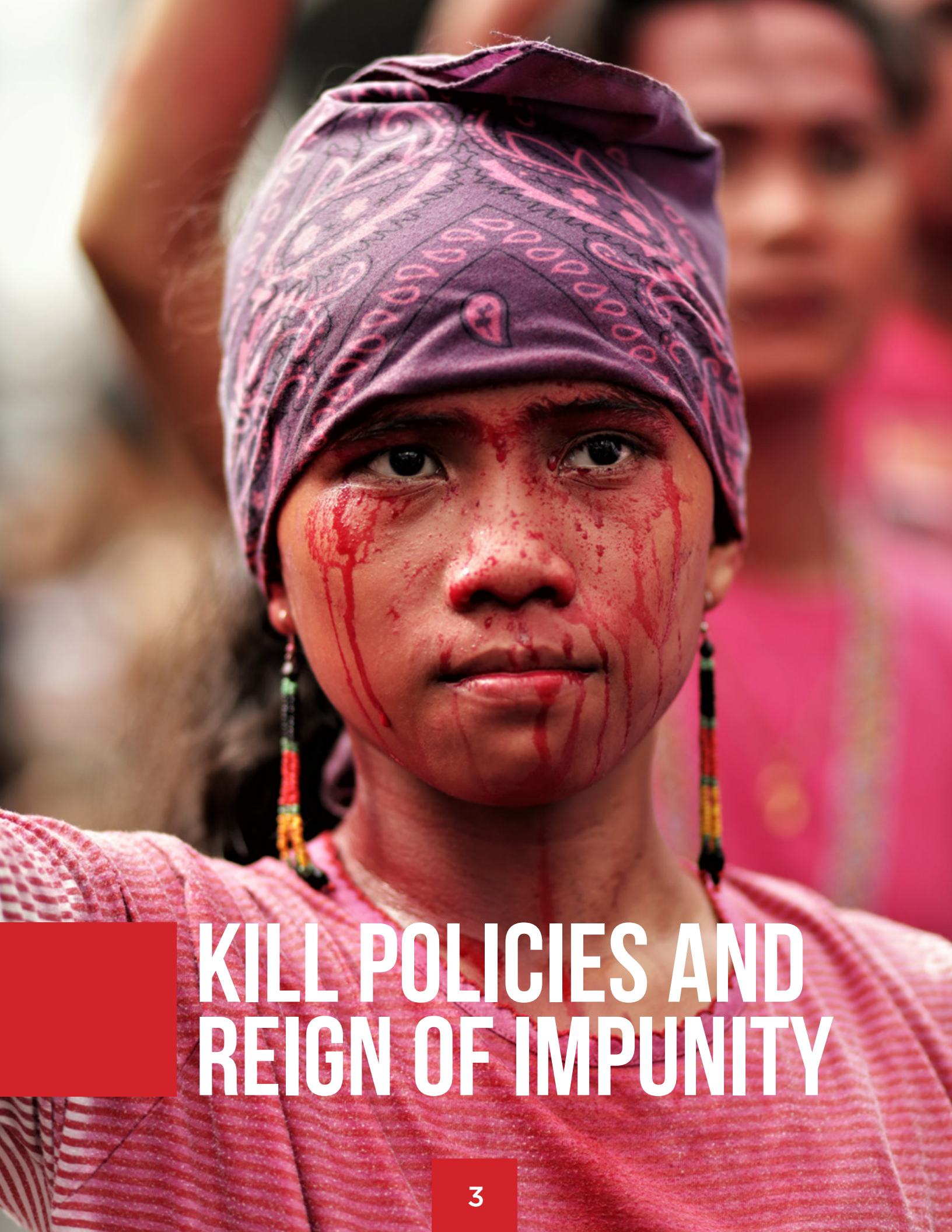
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KILL POLICIES AND REIGN OF IMPUNITY

“Your concern is human rights, mine is human lives.”

-President Rodrigo Duterte

In his third State of the Nation Address (SONA), President Rodrigo Roa Duterte revealed once again his blinkered view of human rights. In justifying his government's bloody campaign against illegal drugs, the president doubled-down on his critique of human rights advocates who speak out against his kill policies. This pithy soundbite, then echoed by his supporters in and outside of government, belies the essential truth: that human rights and human lives cannot be separated from each other. Indeed, the very essence of human life is human rights.

Correspondingly, Duterte's claim of valuing human lives run counter to his systematic instigation of violence against members of the populace who he deems as less than human—alleged drug users and peddlers, petty criminals, human rights advocates and activists. In the second year of his presidency, Duterte remains faithful to his war on the poor and his war against human rights as he pushes for increased militarization in the countryside, the red-tagging of critics and activists, and his centerpiece kill policy—the so-called war on drugs.

In different speeches, President Duterte would **urge the police**, and even ordinary citizens, to engage in arrests of suspected criminals and kill them should they resist. He even **guaranteed protection** for police for when they need to kill while doing their duty. The death toll skyrocketed, both from police operations and the sudden increase of vigilante-style killings: **riding-in-tandem kills four people each day** according to numbers released by the Philippine National Police.

Due to the public outrage caused by the death of three minors—**Kian delos Santos, Carl Arnaiz,**

and Reynaldo 'Kulot' de Guzman—and **Korean businessman Jee Ick-Joo** in 2017, the Duterte administration was forced to recalibrate their campaign and create new guidelines for it.

On January 2018, the PNP **released new policies** for the resumption of Oplan Tokhang which include requiring the wearing of body cameras during anti-drug operations, vetting and regular performance reviews of members of drug enforcement units, and having representatives from barangay officials, educational institutions, religious groups, and the media during operations.

Since these changes, the PNP maintains that the number of killings has decreased this year. From a total of a hundred killings each week when the anti-illegal drugs campaign started, the death toll is now down to **an average of 23 deaths per week**.

Despite these government claims, recent reports suggest the opposite. A Philippine Daily Inquirer story in November **reported 11 killings in just ten days** within the Caloocan, Malabon, Navotas, and Valenzuela (CaMaNaVa) area alone.

Also, the fact remains that those killed lost their lives under highly suspect circumstances. Take the case of Allan Rafael, a former Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) and a cancer patient, who **died due to alleged beating by police officers** in August. Police reports say that Allan was detained due to “breach of public peace” and alleged possession of illegal drugs. His brother, however, recalls Allan describing how he was extorted by police then detained, beaten and slapped so he would admit that he used illegal drugs.

Children have not been safe from the killings. President Duterte, in 2016, described children killed in the campaign as “collateral damage.” The truth is that children have become easy targets—in fact, the Children’s Legal Rights and Development Center (CLRDC) asserts that the so-called drug war has shed the lives of **at least 74 children as of December 2017**, and that a number of these children were targeted for killing. Multiple cases also show that children are killed by police officers during **buy bust operations or by unidentified assailants**.

Besides the anti-illegal drugs campaign, the government also employed other strategies to ‘ensure peace and order’ in the country such as the short-lived *Oplan Tambahay* or the Anti-Loitering Campaign, which aimed to apprehend loiterers who are “**potential trouble to the public**.” This led to even more killings and human rights violations.

Throughout the campaign, thousands were arrested and put in overcrowded jails. Mass detention resulted in deaths like that of Genesis Agoncillo, alias Tisoy, who was arrested for being shirtless. While under police custody, Tisoy was **allegedly killed by his cell mates**.

In Mindanao, meanwhile, **Martial Law remains in place**. With Congress granting an extension in 2017 that is set to expire by end of 2018, President Duterte has requested further extension of one more year, citing the need to quell rebellion. In December, Congress **voted overwhelmingly** in support of this extension. Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo was quoted by the Philippine Star as saying that not extending Martial Law in Mindanao “may only frustrate the progress we are witnessing” and that rebellion might spread to other parts of the country. With the new extension, Martial Law in Mindanao shall remain in place until the end of 2019.





Reports have shown, however, that political killings have **worsened under martial rule**. In fact, human rights group KARAPATAN has documented a total of at least 49 victims of extrajudicial killings in Mindanao and an average of at least one unsolved killing per week **since the Martial Law declaration**. These killings usually target indigenous peoples and activists.

President Duterte also recently **issued Memorandum Order No. 32** increasing military presence in the regions of Samar, Negros, and Bicol to suppress what it calls “sporadic” lawless violence in these areas. Critics cite this order as possible prelude to nationwide Martial Law. Partylist Representative Antonio Tinio of ACT Teachers, **believes** that the memo will only “lead to greater repression in the face of growing resistance to the administration’s anti-poor and pro-oligarch policies.”

The Duterte administration this year also continued to engage in reckless red-baiting. Early this year, the government sought to tag 600 individuals as terrorists, one of them being **United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Victoria Tauli-Corpuz**.

This administration’s practice of red-tagging of people whom they presume as ‘threats’ directly presents risks to individuals, organizations, and institutions. **As a Vera Files explainer puts it**, “victims of red-tagging may be subject to: interception and recording of communication, detention without charges, restricted travel and personal liberties, examination of bank records, and seizure and sequestration of assets.”

These government campaigns—*Oplan Tokhang*, *Oplan Tambah*, the declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao and the counterinsurgency program *Oplan Kapayapaan*—all presume to bring peace and order in the country. And yet, mounting evidence reveal that people from urban poor communities and the countryside suffer the lethal repercussions.

An investigation by German broadcaster Deutsche Welle emphasized the varying numbers on the death toll in this administration. Their review also **highlighted the “inflating and deflating” numbers** from the government. Until now, no one can truly determine the total number of deaths. But one thing is clear—whether it is one person or tens of thousands of people—killings have been happening and accountability must be exacted.

Indeed, the prosecution of police officers involved in the deaths of **Kian Delos Santos, Carl Arnaiz, and Reynaldo De Guzman** appears to be a nudge towards claiming justice for the victims' families; But justice for Kian is only the beginning; thousands of deaths remain unaccounted for. If the Duterte administration wishes to prove that it is serious about upholding the sanctity of human lives, bringing perpetrators to justice—especially when they are State agents—must be of primary importance.

But the government's **announced withdrawal** from the Rome Statute earlier this year, following the decision of the International Criminal Court to conduct a preliminary examination on the high number of alleged extrajudicial killings in the country, disproves any semblance of government accountability. If anything, this decision reveals the government's unwillingness to be subject to independent international scrutiny, all under a flimsy excuse of protecting sovereignty.



As Rose Trajano, co-convenor of In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity Movement (iDEFEND) **observes**, Duterte has “wasted the final opportunity to prove the merits of his violent campaign against illegal drugs.” His disavowal of the process, Trajano adds, “portray[s] a tyrant who is afraid to stand up to international scrutiny as he knows there is no way to justify the mass killings before international law.”

In his SONA in July, President Duterte promised that his so-called war on drugs will be as “relentless and chilling” as ever. As 2018 ends, it appears he has held true to his word.

His administration's kill policies continue apace and the specter of violence and the reign of impunity looms heavy on the horizon.



THE DEROGATION OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

When he assumed the presidency almost three years ago, President Duterte promised to alleviate poverty and bring inclusive growth in the country.

By 2018, however, these promises remain unfulfilled. Skyrocketing prices of goods due to persistent high inflation, increases in the number of families experiencing involuntary hunger due to worsening poverty, and higher numbers of underemployed and low-earning Filipinos have all become difficult realities. These are just some of the effects of the Duterte administration's willful derogation of the Filipinos' economic, social and cultural rights.



Thirty-seven-year-old store owner Rosie Alegre usually monitors prices of goods by checking the receipts of her inventory for her small sari-sari store in an urban poor community in Tanza, Navotas. But early this year, she was surprised that her weekly budget for her store increased by at least 30% from the usual Php 1,000.00. She believes this to be a direct effect of the high inflation rate brought by the government's implementation of the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion, popularly known as TRAIN 1.

TRAIN 1, passed at the end of 2017, is the government's first tax reform measure intended to fund the administration's centerpiece "Build! Build! Build!" infrastructure project and other social services. Put simply, **income taxes were reduced for a majority of taxpayers** with the tax burden moved to value-added taxes on basic commodities.

Even before its implementation, the law has been criticized as pro-rich and anti-poor. Its first year of implementation proves this critique to be accurate. **IBON Foundation said** that the law has benefited

the "5.5 million of the highest-earning 9.1 million households through reduced taxes; however, the price surges in prime commodities and services due to increasing inflation rate have begun affecting the overwhelming majority of poor Filipinos without any income tax gains."

The country's inflation rate went up to 4.6% in May 2018—the highest rate recorded in the last seven years. Inflation **continued to escalate until October** at a staggering 6.7%. This led to **soaring prices** of oil and fuel, alcohol and tobacco, sugar and sweetened products, food, and transportation services. According to Rosie, for instance, a dozen packs of cigarettes increased from Php 560.00 to Php 780.00, soft drinks prices jumped from Php 11.00 to Php 18.00 each bottle, and rice prices went up from Php 41.00 to Php 48.00 per kilogram. The prices of dressed chicken and pork also increased by Php 20.00 to Php 30.00 per kilogram. As a result, she had to adjust prices accordingly to recover her capital but explaining it to her *suki*, who are also poor, proved difficult.

Furthermore, **TRAIN 1 has also worsened** the impact of volatile oil price movements due to price deregulation. The continuous price increases of oil, has greatly affected the prices of other commodities as it is a widely used resource in the production and transportation of goods. According to fisherfolk alliance PAMALAKAYA, fisherfolks are now spending Php 643.00 for every 12 liters of gasoline, from only Php 516.00 last year. Likewise, peasant group Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) said that farmers are now spending Php 1,500.00 from only Php 600.00 last year for every 600 liters of diesel, which is just enough to prepare and irrigate a hectare of land. KMP foresees that if price surges in fuel continue, it may reach up to Php 3,600.00 by 2020. These numbers do not include price hikes brought by TRAIN in the farmers' and fisherfolks' **food and other family expenses**.

Oil price hikes also led to higher fare rates in the transport sector. Jeepney drivers and operators have successfully petitioned the Land Transportation and Franchise Regulatory Board (LTFRB) to raise their minimum fare rate from Php 8.00 to Php 10.00 (LTFRB recently announced an imminent rollback following oil price reductions in the last quarter of 2018) while bus companies have added at least Php 3.30 to the minimum fare, plus a peso for every succeeding kilometer. These fare hikes did not only add burden to commuters, but had also **undermined jeepney drivers' earnings** by Php 500.00–Php 600.00 a day.

Power rates have also dramatically increased. **Bulatlat reported** that “Meralco has implemented a big TRAIN-triggered rate surge in February, which it imposed on an installment basis – Php 0.75 per kilowatt hour (kwh) in February, Php 0.85/kwh in March, and Php 0.23/kwh in April.”



Aprilyn Responde, a 42-year-old housewife, complains that before TRAIN came to effect, she only paid around Php 200.00 to Php 300.00 for her monthly electricity bills, but in the past few months, she has been paying almost double their usual bill. Aprilyn laments that this was money she could have allocated for her children's daily school expenses.

Consequently, rising prices of basic commodities have pushed more poor families into poverty and hunger. IBON Foundation has estimated that the poorest 60 million Filipinos have lost anywhere between Php 2,500 to Php 6,800 of their incomes in 2018 because of rising prices. Because of this, poor families were forced to reduce their consumption and expenditure on goods and services for their everyday living, especially on food which eventually led to higher hunger incidence. Citing the 2015 *Family and Income Expenditures Survey*, low income groups spend 59.7% of their total income on food while the upper income groups allocate 38.8%. Based on the Third Quarter Social Weather Survey report of pollster Social Weather Stations, *there are more Filipinos who experienced involuntary hunger* this year, basing from the data which says that from 2.2 million families in July, the number rose to 3.1 million families in September 2018.

Hunger brought by the soaring prices of commodities has adverse health impacts, especially on children. In Tanza for instance, diarrhea, fever, and malnutrition cases among children were rampant. According to residents, they would rather eat cheap processed foods along with rice rather than spend hundreds of pesos for more nutritious food like vegetables.

The overall employment picture in 2018 is also worrisome. Despite the increased employment rate *recorded by the Philippine Statistics Authority* with 94.7% in January to 94.9% in October 2018, underemployment rate is still high at 46.6%. These figures are also low compared with the rates two years ago. The number of employed Filipinos fell from 40.954 million in 2016 to 40.659 million in 2018. It should also be noted that most Filipino workers still have low-paying jobs, earning below the standard livable income of Php 25,000 per month, not even enough to support a family with five members. IBON Foundation also reported that the 1.8 million unemployed in the last two years came *mostly from the agricultural sector*, further weakening the country's biggest industry and leaving hundreds of thousands of farmers jobless.





The consequences of soaring inflation is undeniably borne mostly by the poor.

According to IBON Foundation, there are around 15.2 million families who are now in greater poverty, as of April 2018. Worse, inadequate cash transfer mechanisms, such as the *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps), **provide little help**. Anna Lionson, a 4Ps beneficiary, said that it was only a band-aid solution to their real problems. They are only receiving Php 200.00 per month, not even enough to supply their everyday expenses for food.

The Duterte administration's insistence to implement TRAIN 1 only shows the meager quality of the country's socio-economic policies and their insensitivity to the condition of the majority of Filipinos who are poor.

Despite calls to halt TRAIN 1's implementation, the second phase of tax 'reform' measures are already on their way to becoming law. The Tax Reform for Attracting Better and High-Quality Opportunities (TRABAHO) bill, which **has passed the third and final reading** at the House of Representatives, aims to lower corporate income taxes (CIT) down to 20% and modernize incentives given to companies. This is also to complement TRAIN 1's promise to exempt small-scale businesses—those who have annual sales of Php 3 million and below—from paying value added tax (VAT) which is envisioned to **encourage growth and job generation**.

However, Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) Director Dominique Tutay warned of **possible job losses** should the TRABAHO bill get passed. Citing a DOLE study on the bill, Tutay specified that it will mostly affect those who work in technology-driven industries and the services sector. DOLE's fears are also echoed in a study by the Confederation of Wearables Exporters of the Philippines (ConWEP), which estimates that layoffs in the apparel industry could be as high as 40% of the workforce if the TRABAHO bill becomes a law.

As IBON Foundation foresees, taxes that will be generated under this bill will only increase the wealth, income, and property of the rich while collecting indirect taxes from the rest, especially the poor. The research group said that by 2021, there will be a Php 261.3 billion revenue loss accumulated from direct taxes while the country's poorest will have to pay higher consumption taxes and suffer from higher inflation **without gaining any benefits**.

An ambitious infrastructure plan, funded by anti-poor tax reform measures, cannot possibly address urgent quality of life issues for many poor Filipinos. Living in a relocation site in Tanza, Anna said that she never felt like home. They live in a house made up of substandard materials making them vulnerable to different calamities, further exacerbated by poor drainage and high water and electricity costs.



Hospitals, schools, and green spaces for their children remain inaccessible. Anna bemoans this lack of focus on their immediate needs:

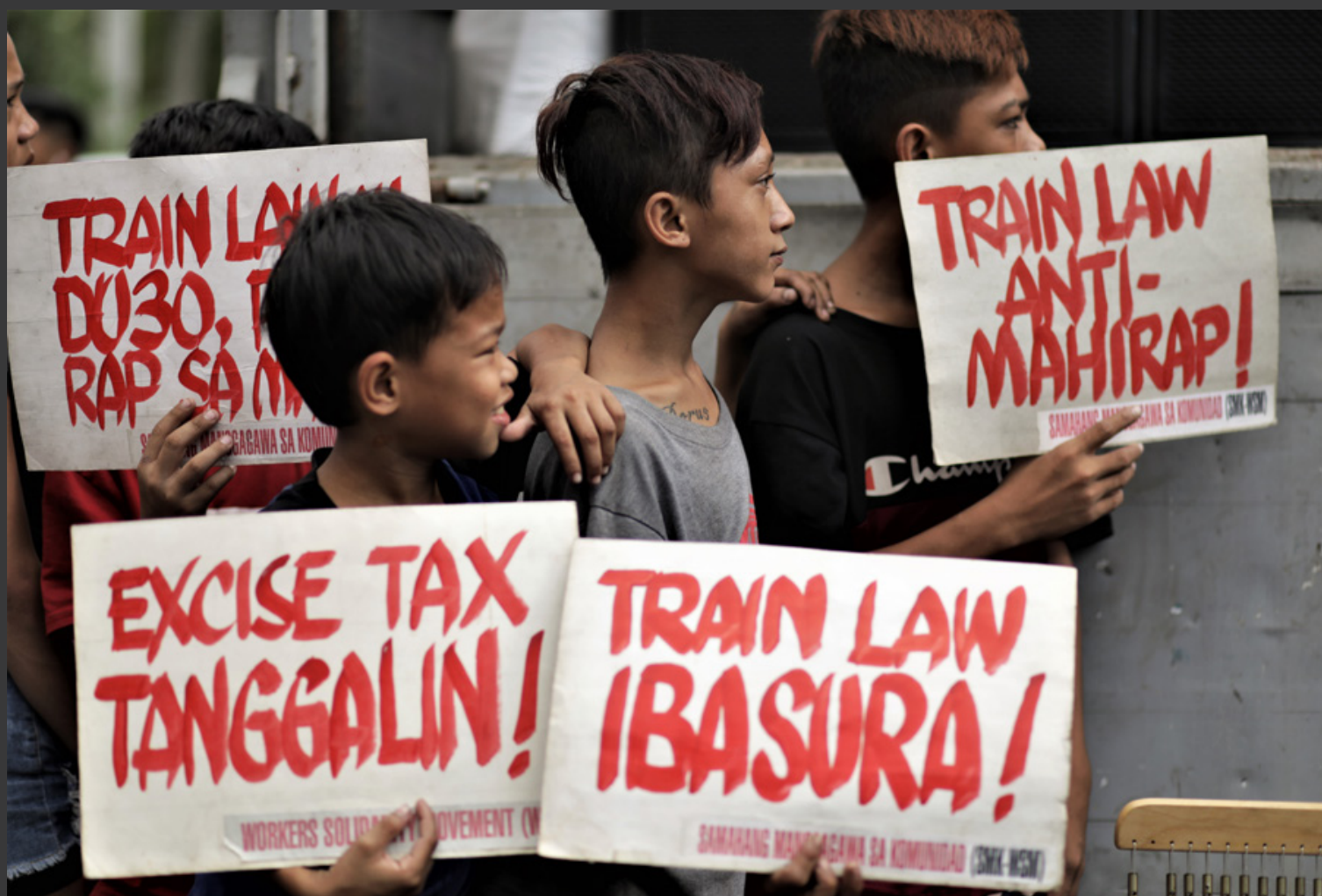
“Kung kinukuha nila sa tao ‘yung pangtustos sa kanilang mga proyekto, syempre dapat ibalik din nila sa tao. Sana i-prioritize nila ang basic social services na obvious naman na kulang na kulang.”

Echoing Anna’s concerns, IBON Foundation said that the TRAIN-funded projects will only benefit capitalists and big businesses in economically established regions such as NCR, Central Luzon, and Southern Tagalog, instead of in the poorer regions such as CAR and ARMM.

Rosalie, Aprilyn, and Anna are just three of the millions of poor Filipinos who are suffering from the consequences of these neoliberal policies of the Duterte administration. While neoliberalism has been the bedrock of Philippine economic policy for decades, the Duterte administration's continued adherence to the neoliberal agenda, only further entrenches the oligarch class he so viciously disparaged during his campaign in 2016. As a consequence, inequality gaps continue to widen and poor Filipinos continue to suffer.

The Philippines in 2018 saw another year of unheard calls for social justice. Duterte, now in his third year as president, rules over a society where the urban and rural poor are attacked on many fronts: worsening this willful derogation of the Filipinos' economic, social and cultural rights is a war against the people—killings committed under the false banner of ending the drug, insurgency, and terrorism problems.

It remains to be seen whether President Duterte intends to twist the knife further.





DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND THE SILENCING OF DISSENT

Thirty-two years after the restoration of democracy, the Philippines, under President Duterte, is at the precipice of authoritarianism.

Democratic backsliding, a deterioration of the quality of democracy, has become one of the defining features of President Duterte's rule. While this backsliding develops over years and decades of poor governance and weak democratic institutions, President Duterte's autocratic impulses has placed Philippine democracy at a near-constant state of crisis.

The Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit marked the Philippines as a 'flawed democracy' in its 2017 review. Indicators such as threats to opposition, violence and killings, legislative limitations on assemblies and demonstrations all saw **decreases**. Realities on the ground confirm this assessment, as civic spaces **continue to be threatened in 2018**.

Crucial to the Duterte administration's systematic campaign of delegitimizing opposition and silencing dissent are the attacks on the credibility of critics and human rights advocates. Without any factual basis, **Department of Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano claimed in March** that certain human rights groups have become "unwitting tools" by drug lords for their vicious opposition to the Duterte administration's brutal 'war on drugs.' This baseless and irresponsible claim was repeated by then-presidential spokesperson Harry Roque, who linked human rights groups to drug lords who "fund destabilization efforts against the Government."

This claim was **never substantiated** with evidence but the harm was immediately apparent. As **Human Rights Watch pointed out**, these claims are "shockingly dangerous and shameful," with the HRW Asia Director asking "Are they trying to have death squads target human rights activists?"

The accusation is especially insensitive given that in 2017, 60 human rights defenders were killed according to **a Front Line Defenders report**. Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), meanwhile, documented **at least 28 cases of killings of HRDs** from January to June 2018. With this, the Philippines **has been listed by the United Nations** as one of the countries that instigate threats and killings by tagging HRDs as terrorists.

The year 2018 also saw the further decimation of legitimate opposition. Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, the first female Supreme Court Chief Justice in the Philippines, **had been vocal in her critiques** of some of President Duterte's favored policies and decisions, most notably in the declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao, the burial of former President Ferdinand Marcos at the Libingan ng mga Bayani, and the due process violations and killings resulting from the so-called war on drugs.

In May, and voting 8-6, the Supreme Court en banc **granted the quo warranto petition** to oust the Chief Justice from office, with the decision being "immediately executory without need for further action."

Critics slammed the decision. The International Commission of Jurists, one of the most eminent legal organizations in the world, **described her removal** as "add[ing] to the perception that the government institutions are unable or unwilling to safeguard the rule of law, and will attack the institutions that protect it."

Sereno's ouster was followed in September by the **revocation of the amnesty** for rebellion granted to Senator Antonio Trillanes IV. Days later, Senator Trillanes was **arrested by the PNP** inside the Senate building. Trillanes is the second sitting senator to be arrested on legally questionable grounds, following the 2017 arrest and incarceration of another fierce Duterte critic, Senator Leila de Lima for trumped-up drug charges.

The administration's campaign to incapacitate whom they call "State enemies" have extended to red-tagging students and youth activities. The Armed Forces of the Philippines recently branded 18 colleges and universities as breeding sites of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and are taking part in the alleged ouster plot against Duterte, **dubbed Red October**. The list, supposedly the result of military intelligence work, included Caloocan City College, **which is a school that does not exist**.

Foreign human rights advocates have not been spared. Sister Patricia Fox, who has lived and worked in the Philippines for 27 years for causes of the basic sectors, was **forced to return** to her native Australia after months of concerted efforts by the government to drive her out of the country.

In April, European Socialist Party official Giacomo Filibeck was **barred from entering the country**, following accusations that he is involved in “illegal political activities.” Filibeck, who was supposed to attend an Akbayan Partylist Congress in Cebu, was part of an international solidarity mission in 2017 which criticized the killings brought about by the so-called war on drugs.

Moreover, law professor and human rights advocate Gill Boehringer was held at the Bureau of Immigration in August because he was on the blacklist for **allegedly participating in protests and fact-finding missions** in the country.

What these people and groups all have in common is the courage to monitor and speak up against rampant killings and human rights violations occurring under Duterte’s rule. In each and every instance, they were confronted with intimidation and harassment. What is clear as well is that similar attempts will be quelled, further cementing the hold of a culture of fear and silence that envelops critics and civic actors.

Meanwhile, the government is also ramping up its State surveillance efforts, bolstered by the **2016 purchase of sophisticated surveillance equipment** from the United Kingdom. While State surveillance does not have a clear definition under the Philippine Constitution, it can be understood as watching and monitoring the activities and information of one citizen, a group, or the whole population in secret. Though there is no clear information on the extent of surveillance the country is capable of doing, it will undeniably violate the rights to privacy of the Filipinos under the Bill of Rights of the Constitution.





In addition, the passage of Republic Act 11055 or the National ID System—which calls on Filipinos of legal age to register their personal information in a database called the Philippine Identification System (PhilSys)—further **strengthens State surveillance capacities**. While the proponents may argue that the law would simplify government and private transactions, there is no guarantee that the personal information of Filipinos would not be used against them. Those who wish to speak out against government may also be targeted through their own information, with the National ID and the data it contains becoming tools for State-sponsored harassment and profiling.

There is also House Bill 7111 or the Foreign Electronic Surveillance Act filed in March by staunch Duterte ally Rodolfo Fariñas. The bill allows the government to electronically monitor any foreign entity in the country without the issuance of a court order or warrant. Part of the proposal would allow the State to conduct surveillance on “any target” **in cases of emergency**.

Critics argue that the purpose of this proposed law is to prohibit foreign advocates who support Filipinos’ campaign for the full realization of their

human rights. In a statement, **In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity Movement (iDEFEND)** described the proposed bill’s purpose as a “slippery slope” and compared it to Marcos-era practices that “witch-hunt groups and people in order to quell any opposition to authoritarian rule.”

Philippine media is also at a crisis point. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) called the Philippines “**Asia’s deadliest country for media**” after four journalists were killed during Duterte’s second year as president. Shortly after winning the 2016 election, **Duterte said**, “Just because you’re a journalist you are not exempted from assassination, if you’re a son of a bitch. Freedom of expression cannot help you if you have done something wrong.”

In January, the Securities and Exchange Commission **revoked the license to operate** of social news site Rappler, in what is widely seen as a transparent form of retribution against Rappler’s extensive coverage of the human rights violations occurring under the so-called war on drugs. President Duterte also repeatedly threatens to **block the renewal** of franchise of the biggest television network in the country ABS-CBN.

Meanwhile, Rappler Chief Executive Maria Ressa was indicted with five charges of tax evasion in November. The move is recognized by the Committee to Protect Journalists as “politicized persecution” and “a clear and present threat to press freedom.”

In July, a radio broadcaster was gunned down by unidentified assailants in Albay. Aside from the killings, there have been 85 recorded cases of threats and attacks against working journalists, including libel cases, online harassment, death threats, and intimidation.

These incidents portray a wider crackdown on press freedom in the country—which, it has to be said, has always been in a precarious state given the dozens of unsolved journalist killings. The Duterte administration’s campaign to delegitimize the media’s function as a watchdog and replace them with barely concealed propaganda infringes not only the right of the press to report but also the right of the people to information.



A culture of fear has also enveloped rural and urban poor communities.

Human rights groups have reported that it has become more difficult to engage people in human rights discussions out of fear of being tagged as dissidents and State enemies. Residents from urban poor communities of Quezon City and Caloocan have called their communities “unsafe” because of the so-called war on drugs, which has killed their neighbors. Indeed, PhilRights continues to receive reports of many residents fleeing their homes to escape the risk of being targeted for killing.



The picture that emerges is that of a society on the brink of reckoning. As the foundations of democracy—strong institutions, free expression, robust legitimate opposition, the safe practice of journalism, and a culture of transparency—crumble under the weight of the Duterte administration’s autocracy, Filipinos once again must respond to the call of reclaiming their hard-won democracy.



DUTERTE'S DE-FACTO AUTHORITARIANISM

President Duterte's brand of forceful braggadocio naturally lends itself to dramatic pronouncements, so when he **proclaimed** in February that "I am really a dictator," it seemed like one more self-aggrandizing remark in what was by then already a tiresome litany of similar statements.

And yet this admission, while seemingly off-the-cuff, was in many ways also a revealing look into how Duterte views his style of leadership. Speaking in Malacañang before former communist rebels whom he invited for dinner, the president insists that a dictatorial style of leadership is a must, otherwise "nothing will happen in this nation."

With 2018 marking his second year as president, this bit of self-mythology continues to inform his policy directions. As human rights advocates tirelessly point out, Duterte's rule has enabled a significant escalation of human rights violations and a corresponding rejection of State accountability for these violations—to a degree not seen since the country's two-decades-long martial rule ended in 1986.

While 2016 and 2017 were marked by shock and awe tactics—systematic State-endorsed violence that left tens of thousands dead, and many more incarcerated due to a brutal campaign against illegal drugs—the year 2018 presents a fuller picture of President Duterte's autocratic playbook.

From his presidential campaign onwards, President Duterte and his allies have successfully demonized human rights concepts, eroding and marginalizing a hard-won and burgeoning human rights culture in the country. And in centering his presidential agenda on a repeat of his bloody anti-illegal drugs campaign as Davao City mayor, he introduced a wave of violence at a scale that shocked the entire world.

By 2018, however, desensitization to this violence has taken root. This year saw the Duterte administration unleashing a torrent of State actions that in effect pave the way for full-blown authoritarian rule.

A culture of fear and silence has wrapped itself around urban poor communities and the countryside. Critics like Senator Leila de Lima, Senator Antonio Trillanes IV, Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, and Vice President Leni Robredo were systematically targeted and shoved out of the way. Human rights defenders are harassed, threatened, and in some cases killed. Freedom of the press is curtailed by vicious attacks on media workers' legitimacy and safety. State surveillance is escalating. A form of constitutional change with markedly reduced human rights guarantees is being pushed along with a shift towards federalism.



That all this happened in the Philippines, long known as one of Asia's most vibrant, if flawed, democracies still beggars belief. That all this happened while the president continued to enjoy high popularity ratings would force reflection on just how much or how little Filipinos place faith on democratic values.

Perhaps one way to understand these present realities is to examine President Duterte's **effective use of political emotion**. A populist through and through, the president portrays himself as a man of action, somebody willing to get his hands dirty in order to fix the country's many problems.

By preying on the public's frustrations and insecurity given the country's oligarchic politics and rampant socio-economic inequality, President Duterte is able to position himself as a compelling alternative to elite rule.

By dehumanizing people who use drugs under a blanket *adik* tag and blaming them for violent crimes, he is able to convince people that bringing peace and order to communities require bypassing established law enforcement procedures and due process. By portraying critics and activists as enemies of the State who are out to destabilize and prevent the country from progressing, he is able to decimate legitimate opposition. What these actions all have in common is violence, both implied and carried out. These actions are also all unified under a discourse of development that relies on President Duterte's Davao City-tested ideas on peace and order.






Even *DuterteNomics*, the administration's centerpiece socio-economic plan, reveals a security-focused approach to socio-economic development. **Said Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea:**

[*DuterteNomics*] started out with a simple yet pragmatic economic strategy: Rid the streets our country [sic] of criminals, free our people from the menace of drug abuse, bring lasting peace to our southern islands, and neutralize extremist and terrorist groups.

By arguing for security as the primary impetus for economic development, the Duterte administration's economic agenda is inextricably linked to the ongoing bloody campaign against illegal drugs which has caused tens of thousands of deaths and **immeasurable psychosocial and socio-economic suffering to the families left behind.**



Enabling the president's authoritarian crusade is the subservience of the leadership in both the legislative and the judicial branches. The principle of checks and balances, held as a noble standard by any democracy, is essentially dismantled given that President Duterte's political alliances in the House of Representatives and to a slightly lesser degree in the Senate, have led to a legislative agenda that is overwhelmingly pro-administration. The ouster of Chief Justice Sereno from the Supreme Court this year, following a questionable quo warranto process, has erased any semblance of independence of what has long been among the most highly trusted institutions in government. The deafening silence of local government officials to any of these developments also reveal the powerful hold of the president's political machinery across many parts of the country.

Writing for the think-tank The Institute for Leadership, Empowerment, and Democracy (iLEAD), sociologist Czarina Medina-Guce, argues that the Philippines is now at a "political plateau" having "reached the limits of [...] democracy."

Of course, the weakening of our democratic institutions did not happen overnight. Various social and economic forces have operated over decades to pave the way for an illiberal, fascistic leader such as President Duterte to emerge and earn legitimate power through elections. Medina-Guce cites the elite capture of political and economic power, the failure to incentivize the valuing of democratic principles and values, and the rarity of asserting accountability as key factors for the deterioration of democratic values.

Opposing this slide to authoritarianism is therefore an urgent task. Human rights defenders, while hampered by security risks that are all too real, have taken the mantle of defending democracy and human rights ideals. This involves going back to basics and reclaiming the narrative of human rights as being the standard by which leadership and governance ought to be performed. Collaboration with like-minded sectors such as the Church, the youth, and a vast network of peoples' organizations are needed now more than ever.

As 2018 draws to a close, President Duterte's desire to undermine a democracy that put him in power is all too clear. The question that remains is how much further the Duterte administration is able to bend Philippine democracy before it breaks.

**LET US
HOPE
WE NEVER
FIND OUT.**

