IPS

ASIA 16.08.2017 | Rikard Jalkebro

Lawless order

The Philippines' ongoing war on drugs will shatter hopes of peace for a generation

When he was elected president of the Philippines in July 2016, President Rodridgo Duterte promised to negotiate peace agreements with the major insurgent groups that have destabilised much of the country for decades.

His government announced it would commence peace talks with the representatives of the National Democratic Front, the umbrella organisation that represents both the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army. Duterte also committed himself to a peace agreement with the Philippines' largest insurgent group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

At the time, these seemed like breakthroughs in the making. But the early optimism has dissolved, and the peace talks have stalled. While the government does seem genuinely willing to negotiate, the president seems to be been prioritising another one of his election campaign promises: eradicating crime and drugs.

This notorious "war on drugs" has been extraordinarily bloody, and criticised by human rights organisations and foreign governments alike. Nonetheless, it is supported by a majority of the population.

The popular narrative of the effects of drugs – in particular, shabu, or methamphetamine – seems to be exaggerated. Shabu use, urban legend says, results in not just theft and robbery, but paedophilia and arson; horror stories abound of addicts slaughtering entire families. The president himself has been quoted likening shabu addicts to "the living walking dead … of no use to society anymore".

This rhetoric normalises a culture of impunity for the police and vigilantes, many of whom resort to extreme violence. Many innocent people have been targeted, both intentionally and unintentionally; journalists, police, politicians and other critics have been threatened, intimidated, fired or arrested for alleged links with drugs. Yet during my

own research, many Filipinos told me they feel safer and that crime seems to have gone down.

The "war on drugs" may seem distinct from longer-running security issues, but it isn't. The crackdown is contributing to a culture of unchecked violence, which is increasingly accepted as a necessary measure. If this normalisation continues, lasting peace will never be achieved.

Getting it wrong

For all its conciliatory talk, the government is still using tough tactics to deal with violent insurgents. So far, they have not paid off.

In May 2017, the military launched an operation to apprehend Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of the Abu Sayyaf Group, a faction of bandits designated as a terrorist organisation. But when the army swooped in, Hapilon was protected by scores of armed men who quickly took strategic positions throughout Marawi City. Instead of capturing Hapilon, the military raid seemed to kick-start the group's unanticipated plan to seize the city.

Duterte was on a state visit to Russia at the time. The operation unravelled, and martial law was declared not just in Marawi, but on the entire island of Mindanao. The government has claimed it had intelligence about the group's plans, but has issued contradictory statements on the rationale behind the siege, citing both jihadism and the drug trade.

Reports state that a few hundred jihadists managed to hold onto several neighbourhoods in defiance of government troops; they held off the military with improvised explosive devices, a sophisticated network of underground tunnels, and snipers placed in strategic locations across the city. This is a remarkable change in tactics for the Philippines' insurgents, and clearly echoes recent urban battles in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

The ongoing Marawi City crisis has scotched the government's ceasefire with the New People's Army. The deal was ultimately breached by both sides; in response, the Communist Party's central command ordered increased operations in other parts of the country.

Generation gap

This decision is partly grounded in history. Communists still harbour

bitter memories of the last period of martial law, imposed by dictator Ferdinand Marcos. True, the post-Marcos 1987 Constitution has more checks and balances in place than its predecessor, but martial law in Mindanao has already been extended to December 31, and may yet be extended to the entire country.

But outside the insurgent movements, many Filipinos see martial law as a necessary means with which to solve various problems in Mindanao. Aside from the insurgency, the region is home to many powerful families and clans with private armies and large weapon caches – something exemplified in the Marawi Crisis, where small groups of "terrorists" enjoy access to remarkably advanced weapons.

The problem is that martial law has hardly been a storming success. The government's airstrikes have caused both civilian casualties and immense material destruction. The armed forces have attempted to secure the area around Marawi City, but it seems likely that Hapilon and the Maute leadership have escaped. Nor has the army managed to prevent new fighters from entering Marawi City; on the contrary, the Maute Group and Abu Sayyaf seem to have no problem recruiting ever more members.

The problem is that martial law has hardly been a storming success

Other groups are having problems, too. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front's leadership has expressed concerns over its lack of control over the younger generation; the disconnect between what the Communist Party leadership says and what the New People's Army is actually doing could mean that the Communists have lost control of their armed affiliate.

The success of any peace process is measured not only by what agreement ultimately gets signed. What will matter is whether it can be implemented, and the extent to which it addresses both the roots and consequences of the conflict. Only then will any further violence be avoided, and permanently. The prospect of any such peace in the Philippines remains slim. To quote Duterte himself, "There will be no peace for a generation."

This article first appeared in The Conversation



Rikard Jalkebro

St. Andrews

Rikard Jalkebro has a PhD in international relations from the University of St Andrews with a focus on peace and conflict studies and terrorism studies in the Philippines. Rikard has done extensive fieldwork on terrorist groups in the Philippines and is interested in the relationship between insurgencies and peace agreements. He is a Teaching Fellow in the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews.