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Targeted Killings: Cultural Legitimacy and the Normalization of Lethal Violence in the Philippines

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Abstract

This paper examines targeted killings in the Philippines as a socially embedded and enduring form of lethal violence. While research generally focuses on specific sectors, actors, or victim groups, such an approach obscures a broader pattern of recurrence across political, criminal, and social spheres.

This paper starts from the observation that targeted killings recur in independent contexts and argues that diverse, context-specific dynamics are underpinned by a shared permissive environment.

Various Surveys show that Filipinos display a high degree of justification for violent acts—ranging from interpersonal to political violence—placing the country among the global frontrunners in this regard. A similar tolerance extends to other illegal acts, such as bribery and tax evasion. This coherence of attitudes indicates a permissive normative environment in which targeted killings are not regarded solely as criminal extremes but as at times legitimate actions.

The findings suggest that a common cultural framework contributes to the persistence of this practice. In the Philippines, significant segments of the population view violence as, at times, an acceptable means of pursuing interests or exercising social control. Although social attitudes do not directly determine individual actions, they lower the moral and psychological barriers to considering or condoning violence.

Reducing targeted killings therefore requires more than apprehending hitmen or prosecuting individual masterminds—it demands addressing the deeper cultural and institutional conditions that make such violence acceptable.

Zusammenfassung

Dieses Working Paper untersucht gezielte Tötungen auf den Philippinen als eine gesellschaftlich verankerte dauerhafte Form tödlicher Gewalt. Während die Forschung generell auf bestimmte Felder, spezifische Akteure oder Opfergruppen fokussiert, verdeckt dieser Ansatz breitere Muster der Wiederkehr über politische, kriminelle und gesellschaftliche Sphären hinweg.

Dieses Papier geht von der Beobachtung aus, dass gezielte Tötungen in voneinander unabhängigen Kontexten vorkommen und argumentiert, dass den unterschiedlichen kontextspezifischen Dynamiken ein gemeinsames permissives Umfeld zugrunde liegt.

Umfragen zeigen, dass Filipinos ein hohes Maß an Rechtfertigung für Gewalthandlungen äußern – von zwischenmenschlicher bis hin zu politischer Gewalt – und damit im globalen Vergleich zu den Spitzenreitern gehören. Eine ähnliche Toleranz zeigt sich auch gegenüber anderen illegalen Handlungen wie Bestechung und Steuerhinterziehung. Diese Kohärenz in

den Einstellungen weist auf ein permissives normatives Umfeld hin, in dem gezielte Tötungen nicht ausschließlich als kriminelle Extreme gelten, sondern als bisweilen legitimes Handeln.

Die Befunde deuten darauf hin, dass ein gemeinsamer kultureller Bezugsrahmen zur Aufrechterhaltung dieser Praxis beiträgt. Gewalt wird in den Philippinen von signifikanten Teilen der Bevölkerung als bisweilen akzeptables Mittel der Interessendurchsetzung oder sozialen Kontrolle betrachtet. Auch wenn gesellschaftliche Einstellungen individuelles Handeln nicht direkt bestimmen, senken sie doch die moralischen und psychologischen Hemmschwellen, Gewalt in Betracht zu billigen oder in Betracht zu ziehen.

Eine Verringerung gezielter Tötungen erfordert mehr, als Auftragsmördern dingfest zu machen oder einzelne Auftraggeber strafrechtlich zu verfolgen – sie verlangt, dass die tiefer liegenden kulturellen und institutionellen Bedingungen, die solche Gewalt akzeptabel machen, direkt angegangen werden.

Content

1. Introduction[1]

Targeted killings—deliberate, premeditated acts of lethal violence directed at specific individuals—are a recurrent feature of social and political life in the Philippines. Public debate and the rare scholarly analysis have, in line with that vast majority of social scientific analyses of violent practices, often framed them through the lens of particular actors or episodes: the police and vigilante groups of President Duterte's "war on drugs," political assassinations, or the elimination of perceived social undesirables. While such perspectives illuminate important parts of the picture, they tend to treat these manifestations in isolation, as if each were driven by causes unique to its domain.

This report takes a different approach. Drawing on documented incidents from across the country, it examines targeted killings as a single category of social practice that cuts across political, economic, and interpersonal settings. Perpetrators and victims include local officials, businesspeople, farmers, transport workers, and family members, as well as criminals or political figures. The recurrence of this practice across otherwise disconnected spheres raises an analytical question: what enables such a specific form of violence to endure in diverse contexts, involving actors with very different immediate motives and resources?

The guiding assumption here is that when a practice appears in multiple domains of social life, its persistence is likely sustained by causes operating at a broader, more general level. This study argues that in the Philippine case, the shared enabling factor is cultural: widely held norms, values, and expectations regarding the acceptability and potential utility of violence. These cultural patterns shape how individuals interpret disputes, assess available options, and weigh the legitimacy of using lethal means. They do not compel action, but lower normative and psychological barriers to considering such options when conflict arises.

Empirically, the analysis combines incident data, occupational and demographic profiles of victims, and findings from the World Values Survey on Filipinos' attitudes toward various forms of violence and other illegal acts among other. It situates these within specific institutional and social settings—such as clan mediation, election-related "peace covenants," which may resolve disputes, however, at the cost of legitimizing disputants' right to employ violence. In doing so, it links everyday social and institutional practices to the wider cultural environment that renders targeted killing thinkable, and sometimes legitimate.

Rather than analyzing these cases in isolation, the report argues that their prevalence reflects a shared set of cultural beliefs about the legitimacy of violence. It suggests that the prevalence of certain values, norms, and attitudes create an environment where lethal force is widely seen as a viable means to achieve personal, political, or collective ends and thus tends to be used as a widely spread social practice.

2. The Cultural Foundations of Support for and Use of Violence

This report contends that diverse forms of violence in any society—planned or spontaneous, directed at various groups—often arise from a shared cultural or subcultural background. This context both enables and limits what people view as justifiable violence.

Yet, political science has generally favored structural explanations over cultural ones, focusing on factors like age and gender, poverty or community disorganization, and soci-

1 Many thanks go to my colleague Christin Stühlen, for her many thought provoking critical remarks on an earlier version of this paper.

etal-level inequality or firearm access. Culture, as an enabling or limiting force, is rarely foregrounded.

Recent work has taken cultural phenomena more seriously, examining, for example, gang codes, police norms, or masculine ideals and their links to violence. However, these are often cast as cultural superstructures of broader structural forces, emerging from and thus expressions of social and economic hierarchies and power asymmetries. Some research shifts the focus, treating (sub-) cultures as independent forces shaping behavior, not just reflections of context.

Most analyses segment violence by perpetrator or victim group, risking the loss of overarching connections. What is often missed is a holistic view—whether varied violent acts might spring from shared cultural patterns that give meaning to violence across society.

For example, both honor cultures and toxic masculinity are distinct but overlapping phenomena and converge in how they justify violence against men and women. "Honor culture" shapes expectations and justifications for a wide range of aggressive behavior (Cohen and Nisbett 1997; Cohen et al. 1996; Clarke 1998; Brown and Osterman 2012; Brown et al. 2018; Souza et al. 2017; Pomerantz et al. 2021). Its norms operate in settings from gangs to the Mafia and clan-based societies, expressed in personal vendettas and group conflicts, up to inter-state war (Barnhart 2017; Lebow 2008; Nawata 2020; Uskul et al. 2022; Masterson 2022).

Cohen and colleagues' experiments show that honor cultures influence cognition, emotion, and physiological responses (Cohen et al. 1996), underlining a statement introducing a classical article on "Southern Violence" in the US: "Southerners […] will be polite until they're angry enough to kill you" (Reed 1971: 429). Historical examples, like the persistence of capital punishment in the American South after lynching's decline, illustrate how cultural attitudes justify and sustain violence (Clarke 1998: 289). Regional differences in corporal punishment in US schools[2] further reflect enduring cultures of violence with serious behavioral repercussions (Gershoff and Font 2016; HRW 2008; Texas Education Code 2013: Sec. 37.011). The current list of states that still allow corporal punishment in public schools is almost identical to those states included in the "American South" in analyses of honor culture, signaling the wide-ranging effect of honor culture on the perceived legitimacy of physical violence, far beyond spheres typically associated with honor-related violence. Such punishment typically targets boys and black pupils (U.S. Department of Education 2023, U.S. Department of Education 2018). In 2017/2018, the four Southern States of Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi and Texas held 75 percent of all reported cases.

Across these examples, the unifying theme is the role of socially derived interpretive frameworks defining acceptable violence, continually reproduced through individual practice. This draws on Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionist perspective: 1) "human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them," 2) those meanings arise from social interaction, and 3) meanings are interpreted by the individual in dealing with the environment (Blumer 1969: 5). Meanings are plural, evolving, and context dependent. Individuals inhabit multiple, sometimes conflicting subcultures. Institutions rely on the meaning-making of members, as seen when informal expectations override formal rules. Shared meanings—schemas, frames, narratives, group identity, implicit biases, and enculturated stereotypes—shape interpretation of and reactions to events or situations,

Before examining empirical cases of targeted killings in the Philippines, this section clar-

2 Corporal punishment is a highly disciplined ritual, administered by the principal or another leading member of the school, but never the teacher. Students have to bend forward and are beaten by with a wooden paddle, that is of solid wood.

ifies culture, shared meanings, and approaches to mapping Filipino attitudes toward violence.

2.1 Defining Culture

Despite extensive literature, clear definitions of "culture" remain scarce. The concept is often treated as "essentially contested."[3]

This report follows Clifford Geertz's (1973) definition: culture is a "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz 1973, 89). Geertz distinguishes culture (interpretive frameworks) from social structure (patterns of interaction), noting tensions between these and individual orientations—each necessary to understand human action (Geertz 1973, 144–145). Importantly, culture is autonomous, not subordinate to structure, though both interact and shape one another.

Geertz's view aligns with psychological approaches. Harry Triandis, for instance, defines culture as "shared elements that provide the standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historic period, and a geographic location. The shared elements are transmitted […] with modifications" (Triandis 1996, 408). Kitayama and Cohen likewise describe culture as a set of symbolic resources—lay theories, icons, scripts, schemas—externalized into practices and institutions. They stress that culture is dynamic, invented and reshaped across generations, with meanings constantly "negotiated, manipulated, and arbitrated […] by all individuals who participate in a cultural community" (Kitayama et al. 2007, 138). This points to a distributive view of culture: embedded within, not above, individuals.

Omar Lizardo (2017, 2023) extends this by arguing that culture consists of "cognitive routines and structures within people […; that are cultural] when the same relation between routines and structures can be found within more than one person" (Lizardo 2023, 291). In a similar way Saucier (2025: 6) argues:

> "Culture is located in individuals, thus distributed out across a population – in the set of norms, beliefs, and values acquired by each of many individuals. One might label this 'culture-in-the-person' as personality – or as mindset, culture being the aggregate of such individual-level formations."

Such localization implies that culture is unevenly distributed: individuals vary in how deeply they internalize meanings, how they interpret cultural "requirements," and the salience such meanings hold. Cultural groups, in this view, are linked not by a single defining property but by networks of similarities that connect members in unique ways. Individuals participate in multiple, partly overlapping cultures and internalize them to different degrees. As a result, cultural groups are inherently heterogeneous and marked by significant within-group variation. Because each person participates in multiple cultures linked to different group memberships, culture is, as Saucier (2025) notes, inherently multicultural. Responses to situations thus depend on which cultural frame is activated. Cultural conformity further varies with a culture's looseness or tightness (Gelfand 2025)—its tolerance for deviance—which interacts with non-cultural personality traits such as social desirability and impression management. Even with these caveats, culture generally provides shared role expectations, attitudes, and to some extent behavioral choices.

Where anthropology often emphasizes the collective dimension of culture (with the excep-

3 Some rather critical reflections on efforts to define the term "culture" are provided by Jahoda 2012.

tion of psychological anthropology), this report follows psychology in stressing the link between shared elements and their use by individuals in perceiving, evaluating, and acting.

The paper's central assumption is straightforward: the widespread use of targeted killings in the Philippines—across arenas, actors, and victims—is rendered more likely, by cultural predispositions toward violence in social interaction. Unlike research on honor cultures or toxic masculinity, this analysis does not claim to identify a distinct cultural type from Philippine attitudes toward violence. Instead, it seeks to link observed behavioral patterns (targeted killings) with cultural backgrounds expressed in survey data on attitudes, which translate into a practice that sets the Philippines apart from its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Given the focus on targeted killings across arenas and groups, the relevant level of analysis is Philippine society as a whole. While gang, elite, or police cultures offer specific contexts, the high prevalence of targeted killings across all of them points to a broader cultural foundation. One may argue that subcultures condition actual use of violence, but the simultaneity of high levels across arenas suggests that "arena-specific" cultures alone cannot explain the phenomenon. Survey data, though limited, help approximate relevant cultural meanings at this macro-level.

2.2 Approaching Violence-Related Clusters of Culture through Shared Attitudes

This section then understands culture as shared but individually internalized and used—consciously or not—to make sense of the world. Meanings assigned to violence form part of the cultural repertoire individuals draw on and are expressed in specific attitudes, which serve as rough proxies for identifying cultural patterns. Attitudes are to a significant extent expressions of culture as understood above: the individual internalization of cultural elements shared with others.

Following Fazio (2007), attitudes are understood as "evaluative knowledge," associations between an object and a summary judgment, varying in strength and accessibility. Crucially many are "socially communicated appraisals" (Fazio et al. 2024: 80) linking individuals to their environment (e.g. like-minded individuals). They have affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. Two key factors influencing their behavioral relevance are arousal and valence—how emotionally charged and positively or negatively oriented they are. Thus, while socially shared, they vary individually in strength and placement. Activated automatically by external stimuli, they shape perception and are fairly good predictors to behavior, particularly when reinforced by "tight" group norms or cultural meanings (Albarracín et al. 2018; Ajzen 2012; Briñol et al. 2019; Terry et al. 2000; Smith and Louis 2009).

Attitudes towards violence need not correspond to individual behavior but reflect cultural understandings of the (de-)legitimation of violence, especially among bystanders from the same cultural group. Here it is argued that shared attitudes may be likened to an environment enabling the use of violence across settings. Nai et al. (2025: 2) put this differently: "while supporting violence is not the same as committing it, the latter can hardly exist without the former."

Psychological research also supports the relevance of violence-specific attitudes to violent behavior (Blankenship et al. 2019; Seddig and Davidov 2018; Nunes et al. 2022), often linked to authoritarian personality traits or social dominance orientations. Actual endorsement of violence varies by individual traits, habituation, and peer norms, depending on the individual's degree of enculturation (Blankenship et al. 2019).

Data on Filipino attitudes remain limited but include Deinla et al. (2025), World Values Survey, Asian Barometer, SWS, Pulse Asia, Publicus Asia, and local surveys in Duterte's

hometown. Despite their limits, these data allow for a basic mapping of violence-related dimensions in Filipino respondents "personal culture."

The next sections map targeted killings in different Philippine contexts and examine public attitudes toward the justifiability of violence and other illegal behavior. The final empirical section illustrates how enculturated means meant to inhibit various forms of violence have the unintended consequence of legitimizing this violence in the first place and how language contributes to the trivialization of the violence problem.

3. Targeted killings in the Philippines in and beyond the war on drugs

3.1 Police Use of Deadly Force During the War on Drugs – and Beyond

The Philippine war on drugs under President Duterte (2016–2022) drew the most national and international attention regarding fatal targeted violence. Duterte framed illegal drugs as a national security threat requiring decisive action, including the killing of suspects, implemented immediately after he took office under national police chief Ronald Dela Rosa.

Official directives emphasized due process and human rights, stating that "house-to-house visitations must be done in a manner that shall not violate the rights of the subjects" (NPC 2016: 5). Oversight committees were charged with ensuring adherence to procedures (NPC 2016: 8, 11, 17), and process charts prioritized lawful arrest (NPC 2016: 19). Nonetheless, many operations ended in suspects' deaths, allegedly killed while resisting arrest. By the end of Duterte's presidency more than 6,000 suspects have been killed in police operations, with several thousand more killed vigilante-style.

This outcome aligned with Duterte's pre-election rhetoric, including threats to dump criminals in Manila Bay and disregard for human rights: "Forget the laws on human rights. If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as mayor. You drug pushers, hold-up men and do-nothings, you better go out. Because I'd kill you" (Reuters 2016). After taking office in mid-2016, he compared himself to Hitler, willing to kill "three million drug addicts" (BBC 2016). Police internalized this message, viewing themselves as eliminating "bad souls," on or off duty (The Guardian 2016).

A detailed analysis of one high-fatality province reveals that not only vigilante-style killings but also many police-perpetrated killings during anti-drug operations were targeted killings. Claims of self-defense often masked their one-sided and premeditated nature (Kreuzer 2025).

Though extraordinary in scale, this wave of police killings was not entirely without precedent. In the years before Duterte, police killed 200–300 suspects annually, usually outside of drug-related contexts. While some deaths were likely due to genuine self-defense, earlier incidents also bore hallmarks of targeted killings—multiple dead suspects, no police casualties, and no survivors—indicating excessive or intentional lethal force.[4]

4 From January 2007 to June 2016, the author's dataset recorded 2,278 suspects killed in officer-involved shootings (OIS), but only 160 wounded—a ratio of 14:1, far above international norms, which typically expect more wounded than killed. This suggests that many OIS were in fact targeted killings. After Duterte, killings fell below pre-2016 levels, but the imbalance persisted: 10:1 in 2022, 16:1 in 2023, 7:1 in 2024, and 2:1 by mid-2025. This does not imply that most armed confrontations were staged. At least 129 police officers were killed and 190 wounded in the documented shootouts (excluding ambush cases; discussed below).

Post-Duterte, police use of deadly force dropped dramatically to slightly below pre-Duterte levels. Post Duterte, police use of deadly force saw a dramatic reduction to levels somewhat lower as during the pre-Duterte years. Still, largely unbalanced but slowly shifting in the right direction, remained the ratio between killed and wounded (2022: 10:1; 2023: 16:1; 2024: 7:1; 2025 to June 2:1).

3.2 The Targeted Killings of Mainstream Politicians

Unlike the social cleansing of criminals, targeted killings of politicians strike at the political order. Between 2007–2024, at least 1,935 elected politicians were assassinated: 720 pre-Duterte (2007–mid-2016, 76/year), 1,012 under Duterte (169/year), 234 post-Duterte (93/year). About 5% were killed by communist rebels; most remain unsolved (author's dataset). Fatalities peak during elections, mostly executive officeholders, especially barangay captains and mayors.

Of 1,935 victims, 664 were barangay captains (i.e. village heads or city ward leaders). Given approximately 42,000 barangays this equals approximately a rate of 88 killings per 100,000 positions annually. Mayors saw 52 killings, or 3.7/year, a rate of 225 per 100,000 given 1,642 posts. Non-elected officials like secretaries and treasurers are also targeted, but such cases are less well documented.

While assassinations are widespread, they are clearly more prevalent in several rural hotspots, including Maguindanao (Mindanao), Abra and Ilocos (Northern Luzon), as well as Samar and Leyte (Samar, Leyte). Some cities in the National Capital region also feature prominently: Caloocan, Manila, and Malabon, as well as several Luzon provinces, Nueva Ecija, Bulacan, and Pampanga, to mention only a few.

Local rivalries are often persistent, with some individuals surviving multiple attempts. Of 34 politicians targeted more than once, 10 survived a second attempt, 2 a third, of whom 1 was killed on the fourth.

Table 1: Politicians with multiple attempts on their lives

	Total	Survived	died
2nd attempt	34	10	24
3rd attempt	2	2	0
4th attempt	1		1

Source: author's dataset

In some cases, victims later were later charged as perpetrators. Rynalbert Insular, mayor of South Upi, survived three assassination attempts but was arrested in 2025 for ordering the 2024 killing of his vice mayor, Ronald Benito. Similarly, Ryan Luna survived two attempts and was later charged with involvement in two murders, one the wife of a prominent local politician and competitor in 2007 and the other a barangay chair in 2022. Other politicians charged in the past years include one mayor charged for the death of a party-list representative to Congress and his police escort, a member of congress charged as his firearm was used in the murder of a barangay councilor, a former barangay chair, charged with the murder of a barangay councilor and a mayor charged with the murder of a couple more than ten years ago. A more typical outcome is either impunity or the arrest of the guns- for-hire upon which the police would declare the case solved.

Despite its historical continuity and regular occurrence, it receives little public or official attention unless high-profile figures are involved, as in 2023, when the provincial governor of Negros Oriental was killed along with nine bystanders and one member of his competitor's family charged.

3.3 The Targeted Killings of Lawyers, Prosecutors and Judges

While assassinations of lawyers, prosecutors, and judges have occurred regularly in the Philippines, they were relatively rare until Duterte's presidency. During the final Arroyo years (2007–2010), 14 killings were recorded. Under President Aquino (2010–2016), 23 were killed. In contrast, the Duterte years (2016–2022) saw at least 65 killings, including 13 public prosecutors—an unusually high number compared to other periods. Given the limited number of prosecutors in the Philippines (likely fewer than 3,000 including assistants; see Republic Act No. 10071), this equates to a rate of approximately 66 killings per 100,000 positions, or about two per year—an alarming rate by any standard. Under Marcos Jr. (as of mid-2025), only three killings have been reported.

3.4 The Targeted Killings of Police Officers

Police officers rarely die in on-duty operations outside anti-insurgency operations (though such cases have slightly increased in recent years), but they are frequent assassination targets. Based on the author's dataset, at least 36 police officers were assassinated during the final Arroyo years. The number rose to 71 under Aquino, spiked to 141 under Duterte, and dropped again to 40 under Marcos Jr. by June 2025. In addition, a significant number of officers were wounded in assassination attempts but survived.

Table 2: Police officers assassinated on and off-duty

	Killed	wounded	Killed per year	Wounded per year
Arroyo (2007–6/2010)	36	24	10.3	6.9
Aquino (7/2010–/2016)	71	48	11,8	8
Duterte (7/2016–6/2022)	142	105	23,7	17,5
Marcos (7/2022–6/2025)	40	23	13,3	7,7

Source: author's dataset

Most attacks involved drive-by shootings. Almost all victims of targeted killing attempts were non-commissioned officers. Geographically, killings occur nationwide, disproportionately in the Muslim Regions of the BARMM. However, during the Duterte war on drugs Cebu figured prominently, when at least 15 officers were killed, mostly in 2018, some rumored to be involved in drug crime, which suggests that they may either have been killed by colleagues in the course of "internal cleansing" or by criminal groups defending their trade. As these (as almost all other) cases remain unsolved, competing claims remain speculative.

A different pattern appears in rural provinces such as Cagayan, Masbate, Sorsogon, Negros Oriental, Northern Samar, and Bukidnon, where many ambushes are linked to communist New People's Army (NPA) rebels. They often begin with IED explosions followed by gunfire and usually target police as a group, not specific individuals. Victims are generally not special forces or on combat missions but selected for their institutional affiliation and easy approachability. Fairly often, NPA commands provoke local requests for police support due to a crime (murder, robbery, etc.), only to then attack the responding police. These incidents are typically claimed by local NPA commands.

3.5 Targeted Killings of Civilians by the NPA

NPA commands also kill civilians, justified as execution of "revolutionary people's court" sentences. Victims are accused of being government informants or of committing crimes "against the people," including land-grabbing, robbery, drug dealing and harassment, but also rape, or murder. They include officials, watchmen, farmers, or workers and others, who generally are labeled as "landlord goons" or "counterrevolutionaries."

The legitimizing discourse varies by context. Some killings are framed as retribution for slain comrades (especially in cases involving alleged informants), others as a form of alternative justice against "lawless elements." The NPA describes these acts as evidence of „revolutionary justice for the good of all" (Ang Bayan Ngayon 2024). Often, both rationales are combined—for example, victims may be labeled both criminals and government collaborators, enhancing the legitimacy of the act (Estrella 2022).

The author recorded 50 killings under Aquino, 125 under Duterte, and 84 during the first three years of Marcos Jr. While in earlier years, such killings were widespread across many Philippine regions, the more recent periods show a geographic concentration in a few provinces, reflecting the NPA's territorial decline.

The epicenter of current targeted killings by the NPA are the two Negros provinces in the Central Visayas. Negros Occidental alone accounted for 30 killings under Duterte and 45 under Marcos. Negros Oriental followed with 31 and 15 killings, respectively. Thus, these two provinces accounted for almost 50 percent of all NPA perpetrated targeted killings under Duterte and for more than 70 percent under Marcos. Other provinces with high numbers include Masbate and Sorsogon in Southern Luzon (Bicol Region).

3.6 The Targeted Killings of Civilians by State or State-Linked Actors

The Philippines stands out globally for the killing of social activists. Of 2,106 land and environmental defenders killed in 64 countries from 2012 to 2023, according to Global Witness, 298 were in the Philippines—surpassed only by Brazil and Colombia. Most killings occurred from July 2016 to 2020 (167 total), averaging 37 per year. Over half are attributed to government forces, including the military and police.

Data from Karapatan offer a broader view from a somewhat different perspective, as they include not only activists but also members of local organizations and ordinary civilians. Their data group together victims from active NPA members to leaders of local people's organizations to simple farmers, with the latter making up most victims. Karapatan focuses on killings by state security forces, often in what it claims were "fake military encounters" (Karapatan 2025: 19.) Documenting extrajudicial killings since 2001, Karapatan reports 127 civilian deaths per year under Arroyo, 55 under Aquino, 74 under Duterte and 79 under Marcos (to the end of 2024). Most killings occur in regions with active NPA presence. Whether using Global Witness' lower numbers or Karapatan's higher ones, targeted killings of social activists in the broadest sense remain fewer than those of mainstream politicians.

Recent years show concentration in certain regions. Under Marcos Jr., 70% of documented extrajudicial killings occurred in Bicol and Negros Island Region, home to less than 10% of the population. This supports Karapatan's claim that killings are tied to counterinsurgency, rising where the NPA is active. Karapatan's data of extralegal executions somehow linked to state actors mirror those on civilians killed by the NPA—both concentrated in Negros and Bicol—suggesting civilians in these areas are often trapped between insurgents and government forces.

The discrepancy between Global Witness and Karapatan reflects differences in focus:

Global Witness tracks activist victims; Karapatan tracks civilians killed by state forces. Both show a spike under Duterte and a decline under Marcos, with killings under Marcos largely limited to two regions (Negros and BICOL) according to the Karapatan data and including several regions in Mindanao according to Global Witness.

3.7 The Targeted Killings of Journalists

The targeting of journalists in the Philippines, has remained largely stable since 2007. Excluding the 2009 Ampatuan massacre (where at least 30 journalists were killed),)[5] fatalities have been steady with a recent clear-cut downturn under Marcos. Throughout the past 15 years until the Marcos administration on average 7 journalists were killed per year, with the number dropping to less than two during the past three years to June 2025.

Table 3: Journalists killed in the Philippines

	Arroyo (2007–6/2010)	Aquino (7/2010–6/2016)	Duterte (7/2016–6/2022)	Marcos (7/2022–6/2025
killed	24	42	35	5
Killed per year	7	7	6	1,7

Mindanao is overrepresented in journalist killings, even excluding the 2009 massacre. Most victims were radio journalists, especially blocktimers at local stations, making up more than half of all deaths and around two-thirds when the massacre is excluded. Many others worked for local print-/online media. They often criticized local elite corruption in politics and business. These killings appear driven by local dynamics, with local powers willing to kill to protect political or business interests.

3.8 Targeted Killings in Various Contexts

Numerous cases illustrate that targeted killings are not limited to politics or activism. In July 2025 alone, victims of targeted killins included a 44-year-old woman in Caloocan, a 35-year-old oil depot administrator, a job order employee in Negros Oriental, a 17-year-old student in Calamba, a businessman in Laguna, two barangay chairs in Samar and Nueva Ecija, a farmer in Samar, a 23-year-old woman in Antipolo, and a former paralegal in General Santos. Many killings involved “riding-in-tandem” assailants on motorcycles, though the phenomenon extends beyond drive-by shootings (GMA News Online 2025a; Estacio 2025; Brigadanews 2025; Kami 2025a; Philippine Star 2025; Manila Bulletin 2025a; Galang 2025; Leyte Samar Daily Express 2025; Canlas 2025; Inquirer.net 2025).

From online news reporting, the author compiled a dataset of targeted killings from July 2024 to June 2025, defined as deliberate, premeditated killings by individuals without clear personal ties to the victim. In the Philippines, these killings are almost always carried out by firearms.

Killings by police, ambushes on law enforcers, and politician assassinations were excluded. The aim is to show how widespread targeted killings are beyond political arenas. News reports coded show 579 killed and 100 injured in the year studied. Bystanders were some-

5 The journalists were not the intended targets. They were accompanying relatives of a Maguindanao gubernatorial candidate whose convoy was ambushed by forces of his opponent on its way to filing of the candidate’s certificate of candidacy. The attack ultimately killed all 57 convoy members and several others who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time (PCIJ 2009; see also Regional Trial Court 2019).

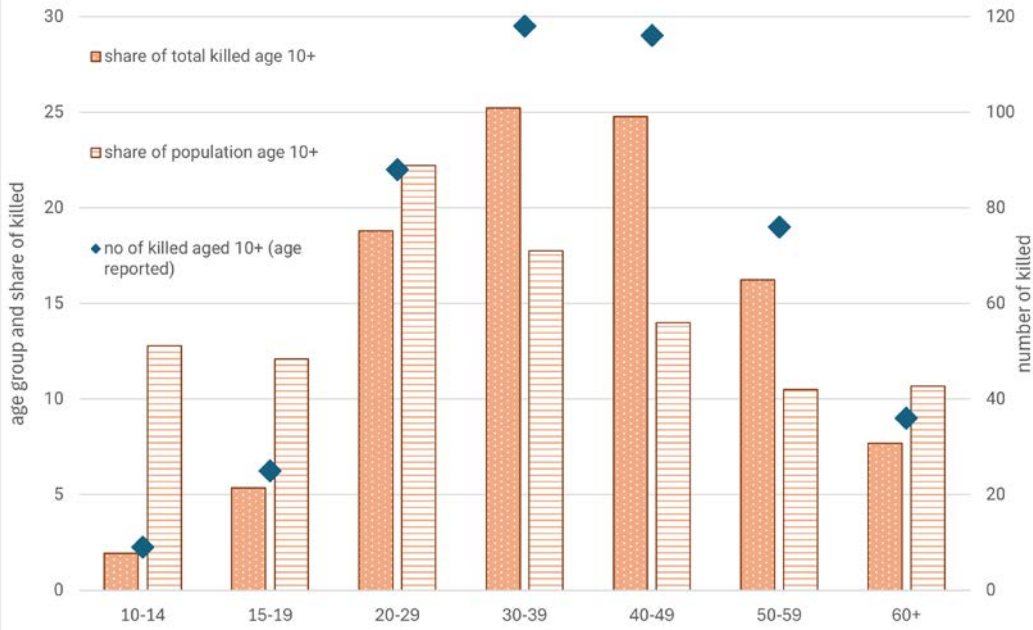
times harmed. About 22% of victims were female. At least 192 attacks involved motorcycles, though the actual number is likely much higher, as means of getaway were often not reported. The youngest victim was a five-year-old girl, apparently killed to send a message to her police officer father.

Age data for 468 victims for whom age is provided show that, unlike in the Americas—where youth dominate homicide statistics (Perkins 1997, Sanhueza et al. 2023, UNODC 2023, UNODC no year)—Philippine targeted killings disproportionately affect adults aged 30–59 (see Figure 1 below), resembling Europe's pattern (UNODC 2023: 57–58). The prevalence of older victims suggests these killings are neither driven by gang-violence that typically targets younger males, nor demographic structure, that would suggest a much more pronounced share for younger victims (15–29), due to the large share of young people in the population.

Occupation data for 341 killed and 39 wounded victims show farmers and businesspersons most common, followed by local government employees and transport workers. Only less than 30 were labeled as criminals or ex-convicts, and very few as jobless or marginalized, Motives were reported in 193 killings and 29 woundings: possible criminal involvement in 83, land disputes in 17, revenge in 59, and debts in 12. In Mindanao, some cases related to family feuds or links to security forces. Throughout the Philippines police often cite "personal grudge."

Given that the victims are, for the most part, ordinary citizens—neither elites nor known criminals— and that assumptions on motives vary widely, the evidence undermines not only theories emphasizing social cleansing but also competing claims of pervasive inter-gang violence. A preliminary conclusion is that the available data suggest targeted killing as a social practice embedded across social strata.

Figure 1: Victims of Targeted Killings by Age Group and in Relation to their Share in the Population



Sources: own dataset, Philippines Statistics Authority 2024.

Most incidents involved more than one gunman (244 cases vs. 207 with a single assailant). Motorcycles were reported in 195 cases, 59 by lone gunmen and 130 by multiple assailants. These figures exclude roadside ambushes, which, although concentrated in Muslim Mindanao, also occur elsewhere.

3.9 Targeted killings as a multifaceted phenomenon

Targeted killings in the Philippines are diverse in form and scale. Methods range from the rare use of explosives and roadside ambushes to, more commonly, close-range shootings and motorcycle-based drive-by attacks (sometimes by cars). These latter dominate, except in killings carried out by the police or the communist NPA. Between 2011 and 2013, the Philippine National Police (PNP) recorded 9,518 such incidents. Of these, 4,088 were classified as "pure shooting incidents", resulting in 2,751 civilian deaths, 1,593 injuries, and 385 unharmed survivors (PNP n.d.). These were not tied to robbery or theft but were standalone killings – a pattern that persisted or worsened during the war on drugs. PNP data cited by Rappler record 5,342 motorcycle-riding murders in 2016–2017. While the annual figure dropped to 701 in 2020, about 80% of cases remained unsolved (Talabong 2021).

Perpetrators are varied, though most appear to be professional contract killers. In the first half of 2025 alone, the PNP reported arresting 50 members of 14 gun-for-hire groups in Central Visayas, with 10 others killed in police operations (RPN News 2025; Bustamante 2025b). Some groups functioned as outsourcing units for rival drug gangs, as in Cebu (Bustamante 2025a; Ares 2025). Further arrests between July 2024 and June 2025 included six suspects in Caloocan (Dec 2024) (Lopez 2024), thirteen in Cavite (March 2025) (Caliwan 2025a), three in Pampanga (Jan–Feb 2025) (Reyes 2025; Caliwan 2025b), one in Laguna (GMA News Online 2025b), one in Aklan (Anaten 2024), and one in Leyte (Manila Bulletin 2025b). Though evidence is still anecdotal, the pattern is clear: contract killing is a viable business, accessible to anyone.

While most incidents involve one or two gunmen targeting a single victim, larger combat-style teams are sometimes deployed. A prominent case was the 2023 assassination of Negros Oriental governor Roel Degamo, when 12 heavily armed assailants, many ex-soldiers, stormed his residence during a relief distribution, killing him and nine others. Similar large-scale attacks also strike outside politics: in 2024, one assault killed four farmers, while another left four members of a family dead and three wounded.

These attacks span regions and sectors of Philippine society. Victims include politicians, lawyers, journalists, activists, police officers, gang members, and ordinary citizens. While some cases—particularly those targeting political figures—reflect struggles for power and authority, many killings lack political motives. More or less professional killers carry out a significant share of the killings, yet little is known about the masterminds, largely due to pervasive impunity. The occurrence of targeted killings across diverse social contexts nevertheless suggests that the backgrounds of these masterminds are equally varied.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that targeted killing is not an aberration but a systemic feature of Philippine society. Duterte's "war on drugs" amplified one variant—police-led executions—but this was only a subset of a broader practice: using lethal force to resolve disputes, eliminate rivals, and maintain control. Though rare from the perspective of any individual citizen, their impact is profound. Targeted killings serve as signals—shaping calculations of potential masterminds and spreading fear among possible victims.

The following chapters examine whether prevailing public attitudes toward violence contribute to their persistence across otherwise distinct contexts. While each form of violence has its own dynamics, the central question remains: does the prevalence of targeted kill-

ings across domains reflect a cultural permissiveness toward violence as a means of asserting power and settling conflict?

4. The cultural background of targeted killings as an enabling environment

> "If I become president, I advise you people to put up several funeral parlor businesses because I am against illegal drugs… I might kill someone because of it" (Duterte quoted in Santos 2015). "Diyan mo makita, tataba iyong isda sa Manila Bay. Diyan ko kayo itapon" [There you'll see—the fish in Manila Bay will grow fat. I'll throw you there] (Duterte quoted in GMA News Online 2015). "I am a dictator? Yes it is true. If you don't like it then don't vote for me" (Duterte quoted in Calleja 2016).

These and similar remarks were made by Rodrigo Duterte before his 2016 presidential victory, where he won 39% of the vote against his closest rival's 23%. Voters knew what to expect. Duterte had long been linked to the Davao Death Squad, allegedly responsible for over 1,000 extrajudicial killings during his tenure as Davao City mayor. To Filipinos it was obvious that he was not merely a populist courting a punitive electorate but a seasoned enforcer of an anti-crime agenda, with a record of sanctioning targeted killings.

Audience reactions to Duterte's rhetoric—whether public or official—often included applause and laughter. In December 2016, with already more than 2,000 police killings and many more by unidentified assailants, Duterte stated to a laughing and applauding audience:

> I'm a fiscal (prosecutor), I can read the mind of a criminal. I was a prosecutor for ten years. I could read your mind, if it's a criminal mind. So, when I became mayor, I went straight to the point. 'Get out of Davao. Don't destroy our children, because if you deprive us of the youth for the next generation, I will kill you. […] But with drugs, I'm really strict. I don't need to tell you how strict I am. But I really said, never, never, never. I will really kill you, to be honest. So [laughter and applause] (Duterte 2016; parts translated from Filipino).

The most important aspect of these examples is not a president openly advocating the killing of criminal suspects, but the laughing and applauding public, of whom 39 percent voted for this president with a similar additional rate later supporting him and his war on drugs during his presidency, resulting in overall 80 percent approval ratings.

4.1 Violence Justification in Crime Control

Six months into Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s presidency, Imelda Deinla et al. (2025) conducted a study to understand why a significant share of Filipinos supported mass violence and how such measures gained legitimacy. They explored the "punitive Filipino," analyzing attitudes beyond Duterte's drug war and uncovering widespread support for harsh crime control.

Deinla et al. identified five attitudinal clusters, with even the least punitive showing 48% support for the drug war. Over two-thirds favored lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 13, and a similar share supported restoring the death penalty. A striking 85% agreed harsher punishment reduces crime, and 72% still approved of the war on drugs retrospectively.

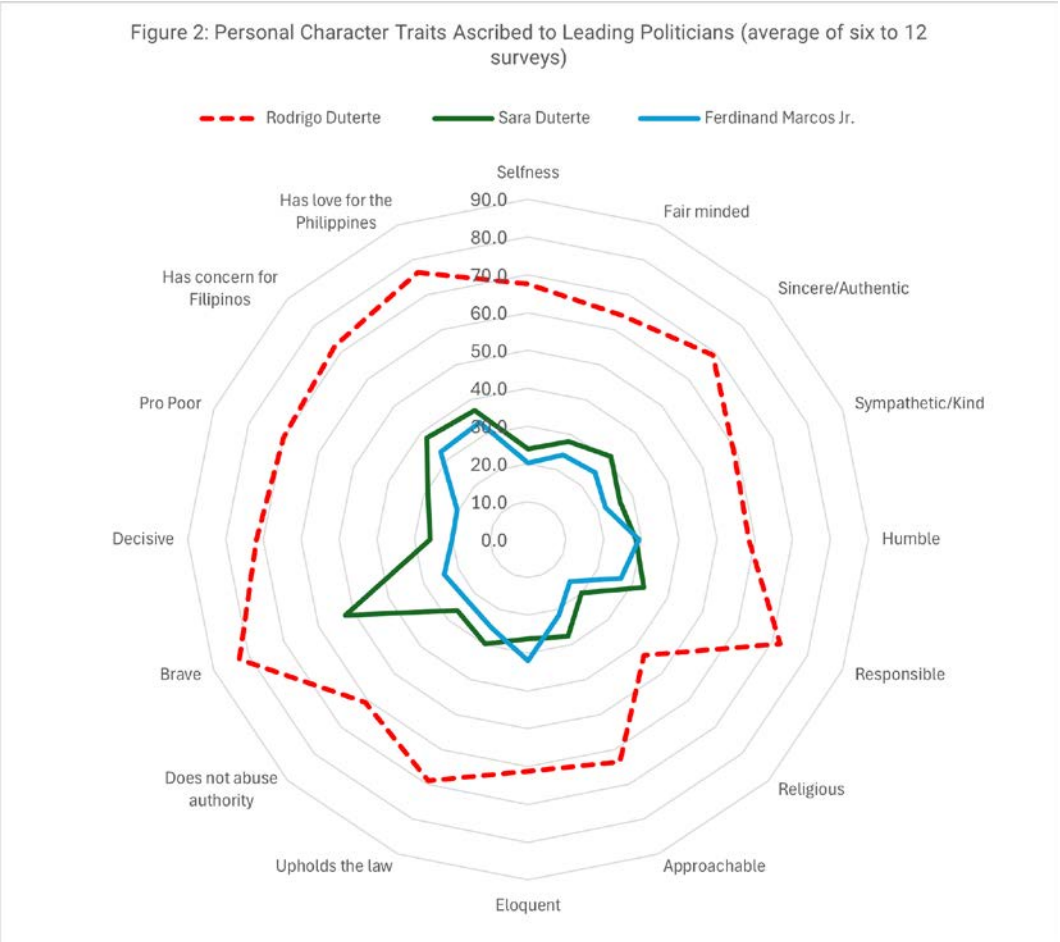
Support extended beyond legality. Forty-three percent agreed violence was necessary to solve social issues like drugs. Forty percent approved, fully or partly, of police torture to gain information, while only 18% strongly disapproved. Thirty percent supported "social

cleansing"— clearly defined as "killing people that some people consider undesirable." Disapproval was below 40%, with a quarter neutral (Deinla et al. 2025 supplemental material).

Deinla argues that these results suggest Duterte's popularity was rooted in a broader punitive culture valuing violence as a solution to crime. This observation is echoed in earlier surveys such as the 2005 Asian Barometer, where 70% of Filipinos agreed strongly (44%) or somewhat (26%) with bypassing due process to punish "cruel criminals" (Asian Barometer, n.d., Q 75).

These older data suggesting support for vigilante killings are corroborated by surveys in Duterte's home city of Davao, the only city with representative surveys on public perceptions of crime control. These asked not only about the war on drugs but also about the so-called Davao Death Squad, perceived as responsible for more than 1,000 targeted killings during Duterte's mayorship (late 1980s–2016). Two surveys in 2016 and 2017 asked what respondents thought of the Death Squad: 30% said it helped solve crime, another 10% saw it as just retribution. Only a quarter voiced normative opposition, while 14% dismissed reports as exaggerations, signaling denial or deliberate ignorance. Asked whether they favored the alleged extrajudicial killings, 36% agreed, 30% disagreed, and a third refused to answer. Similarly, 95% were either very or somewhat satisfied with anti-drug efforts, with 87% explicitly "in favor of the manner of solving" the problem (Ateneo de Davao University, various surveys).

Figure 2: Personal Character Traits Ascribed to Leading Politicians (average of six to 12 surveys)



Source: Publicus Asia, various surveys; https://www.publicusasia.com/pahayag.

Pointing in the same direction of support for the use of violence as a means for social control is the fact that Rodrigo Duterte has been the national leader viewed most positively by the public (see figure 2 above). Since late 2020, Publicus Asia has included questions on core personality traits attributed to leading politicians, ranging from personal characteristics (humble, sympathetic, approachable, decisive) to political ones (love for the Philippines, upholding the law, not abusing authority). While it is unsurprising that a strongman like Duterte is seen as decisive and brave, he is also perceived as exemplary with respect to traits such as sincerity, kindness, humility, and responsibility. To many Rodrigo Duterte, has been an almost ideal personification of the Philippine leadership ideal, despite the violent excesses in the war on drugs instigated by him. Crucially more than 60 percent perceive him as upholding the law and not abusing authority.

Given four years of the war on drugs that preceded the first survey, this exceptionally positive assessment can only be explained by a broad alignment between public perceptions of appropriate leadership and Rodrigo Duterte's persona and an implicit support or at least toleration of the law enforcement violence that was a hallmark of his presidency.

All data indicate that large parts of the population justify not only harsh policing that may overstep the rule of law, but also outright vigilante action, including the killing of suspects. However, the question is whether such support signals a punitive attitude with a focus on harsher retributive punishment, a belief that focuses on the enhancement of societal security from crime, or, as argued below, is one expression of a specific stance towards the use of physical violence not only for crime control but for the assertion of one's own interests in general.

Put differently, it is argued that the limitation of Deinla et al's the survey to law enforcement related questions establishes the probable frame of public/popular punitivism, whereas a wider frame that includes attitudes on violence in other contexts might show that attitudes and beliefs on law enforcement and punishment provide only a partial picture of a wider propensity to positively evaluate harsh or violent means.

4.2 Violence-Justification beyond Crime Control

This section broadens the focus from punitive attitudes toward crime control to wider social and political contexts, drawing on data from the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS asks about the justifiability of intimate partner violence, interpersonal aggression, and political violence. Respondents rate each act on a scale from 1 ("never justifiable") to 10 ("always justifiable"). Low scores indicate violence is rarely acceptable, mid-range responses (e.g., 4 and 5) suggest ambivalence, and high scores reflect broad or general approval.

One caveat is that the survey wording refers broadly to the "justifiability of violence," in two cases explicitly mentioning "beating" (child, wife). Filipinos may interpret undefined "violence" primarily as physical—though not necessarily lethal—violence. This is especially plausible for "violence against people in general." By contrast, questions on political violence are likely to evoke images of targeted killings or election-related attacks, which often involve firearms and feature prominently in Philippine media. The same applies, even more strongly, to the "justifiability of terrorism."

Cross-national comparisons (63–91 countries, depending on the question) reveal two striking patterns: (1) strong internal consistency in Filipino responses, and (2) exceptionally high levels of violence justification across all categories, with the Philippines consistently among the top-ranking countries.

Table 4: Filipino and international respondents' choices on the justifiability of violence in different contexts[6]

		Social, interpersonal violence (child, wife, people in general)		Political violence (terrorism, political violence in general)	
		international sample	Philippines	international sample	Philippines
Value 1 never to value 10 always	**1**	57.4	38.9	70.85	30.5
	1–3	79.8	57.4	83.85	48.4
	5	6.4	11.8	4.1	16.9
	6–10	8.8	25.2	5.15	26
	10	2.1	9.3	1.2	6.75

Source: World Values Survey; for more detail see the appendix

Although all these forms of violence are illegal in the Philippines, substantial minorities consider them fully justifiable. Most notably, about a quarter of respondents rated wife-beating, child-beating, violence against others, political violence, and even terrorism as often justifiable (scores 6–10).[7]

Another indicator of the broad acceptance of violence—and of corruption—as legitimate means of pursuing political or personal interests is the repeated election of politicians formally charged with major crimes, ranging from targeted killings and mutiny to large-scale graft.

Several prominent cases illustrate this dynamic at both the national and local level. At the local level Iligan City mayor Celso Regencia, charged in 2015 with the attempted murder of a congressman—a case that left several of the latter's bodyguards wounded—was re-elected as mayor and later won a seat in Congress. Edgardo Cobangbang Jr., mayor of Cabugao in Ilocos Sur, was repeatedly reelected despite being accused of masterminding two murders. Although the case remains unresolved, he currently serves as vice mayor under his son. In Samar, Joseph Grey, a municipal mayor suspected of involvement in the drug trade and formally charged in 2006 with two murders, was also accused in a petition to the Department of the Interior and Local Government of ordering at least 20 killings carried out by his "goons" (Rutor 2006). He nevertheless secured reelection in 2007, reclaimed the mayorship in 2016 after two terms served by his wife. In Nueva Ecija, Cuyapo mayor Amado Corpuz was charged with murder in 2008 yet reelected in both 2010 and 2013. His case was reopened in 2018 on order of the Supreme Court (Abogado 2018).

At the national level, politicians with serious allegations have enjoyed lasting electoral success. Gregorio Honasan and Antonio Trillanes, military officers who led military mutinies in the late 1980s and early 2000s respectively, were both elected and reelected as senators.

6 While this table shows results from the 7th wave of the World Values Survey (Philippines, 2019), similar patterns appear in earlier waves. These results do not reflect the war on drugs.

7 While support for violence in the Philippines was exceptionally high by international standards across all categories, it was not evenly distributed among respondents. Support for violence (ratings of 6–10 on the justifiability scale) was stratified by sex, with women showing slightly higher support across all five dimensions (+3 percent). More pronounced were differences by self-reported income and social class: respondents from high-income or upper-class households consistently expressed greater acceptance of all forms of violence, averaging 6.2 percent higher than the next group—those identifying as working class. Urban respondents also showed greater tolerance, with support levels 5.7 percent higher than those in rural areas.

Despite this clear multidimensional stratification, the overall finding holds: by international comparison, tolerance or support for various uses of violence is exceptionally high across all Philippine subgroups. For more detailed figures and comparisons to the broader World Values Survey sample, see the appendix.

Honasan's rebellion claimed dozens of lives, including civilians, while Trillanes spearheaded the uprisings of 2003 and 2007. Trillanes even led his first election campaign in 2007 from his detention cell and served the first years of his first term as senator from the prison cell before being granted amnesty in 2010. In the 2007 elections Honasan and Trillanes garnered about 11 million votes.

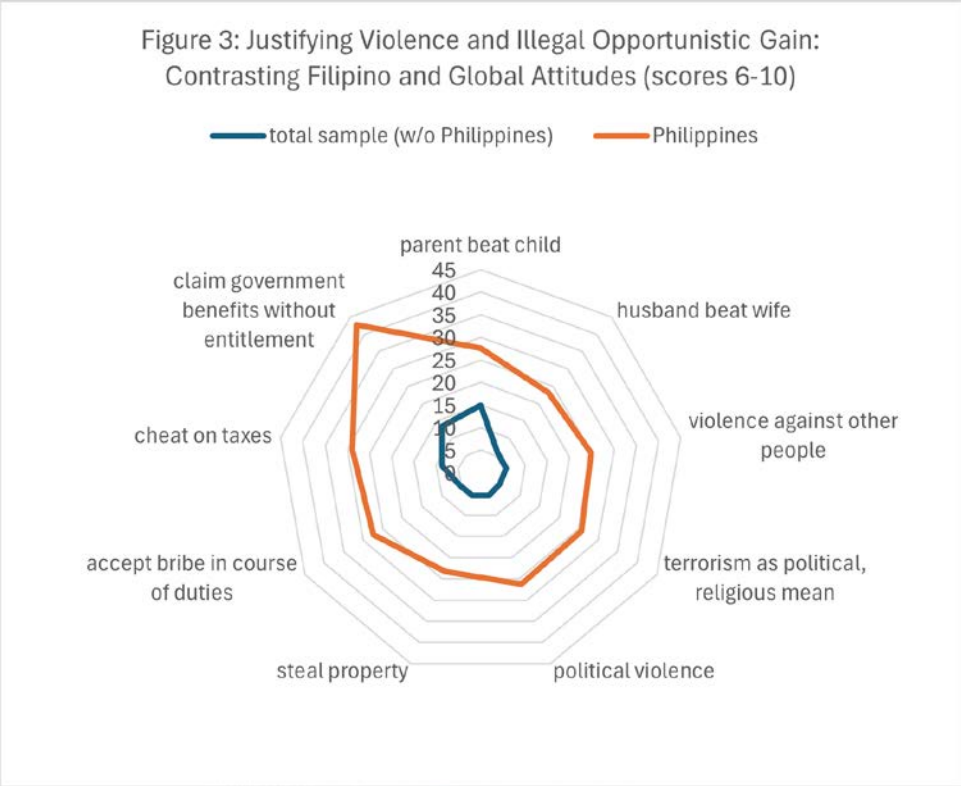
Former police general Panfilo Lacson, implicated in the alleged rubout of a criminal gang in the 1990s, fled the country with a false passport after being charged with the murder of a publicist and his driver. Already a senator at the time, he later returned and went on to win reelection in 2016 and again in 2025. Ronald dela Rosa, the national police chief during the bloodiest phase of the drug war, was elected senator in 2019 with 19 million votes and reelected in 2025 with 20 million.

Former president Joseph Estrada, convicted of plunder in September 2007 but pardoned just weeks later, went on to win the Manila mayoralty in 2013, serving until 2019. His son, charged alongside him in 2001 and implicated in a corruption scandal in 2013, nevertheless secured Senate seats in 2004, 2010, and 2022. Likewise, Juan Ponce Enrile, accused in 2013 of receiving over 100 million pesos in kickbacks, though failing in his 2019 reelection bid, was appointed Chief Presidential Legal Counsel in 2022. Imelda Marcos provides another example: despite facing multiple national and international graft cases after the fall of her husband's dictatorship, she returned from exile to hold elected office—first as representative of Leyte's first district, and later, from 2010 to 2019, as representative of Ilocos Norte's second district.

Although most of these cases were eventually dismissed, stalled, or forgotten, many of these politicians were reelected while still facing active charges—or, in Estrada's case, even after a conviction. This underscores the limited weight that suspicion or proof of serious crime carries in voter decision-making.

The patterns outlined above suggest that tolerance of violence is embedded in a broader cultural framework that legitimizes lawbreaking across multiple domains. This may help explain the persistence of practices such as targeted killings in the Philippines. The point is not that Philippine culture is inherently violent, but that certain cultural dispositions—internalized and reproduced through everyday attitudes—normalize the resort to violence, extending far beyond crime control into social and political life.

Moreover, the enduring popularity of politicians linked to corruption, such as Estrada and Imelda Marcos, indicates that the disregard for legal norms is not confined to violence alone. World Values Survey data support this interpretation: around 30 percent of Filipinos consider opportunistic illegal acts—such as tax evasion, claiming unearned benefits, bribery, or theft—justifiable in many circumstances (scores 6–10), compared to only 8 percent internationally (see figure 3 below; further details in the appendix).



Source: World Values Survey, Wave 7 (https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/)

When benchmarked against other extreme cases, the Philippines ranks first in support for all above mentioned forms of opportunistic illegalities, as well as all categories of violence justification, except corporal punishment of children (rank 11).

Table 5: Philippine attitudes on violence and other forms of useful illegality compared to other extreme cases

		Philippines rank for scores 6-10	total sample (countries)
Violence related attitudes	man beat wife	1	64
	parent beat child	11	66
	violence against other people	1	66
	political violence	1	92
	terrorism	1	66
Other forms of useful illegality	steal property	1	66
	cheat on taxes	1	92
	claim government benefits not entitled	1	92
	accept bribe in course of duties	1	92

Overall, the evidence indicates that attitudes toward violence and illegality in the Philippines form a consistent pattern, indicating that support for violence and illegality in the Philippines is embedded in a wider cultural framework, that also provides mechanisms

dealing with the ensuing violence. The following chapter turns to such practices—ranging from blood feuds to pre-election peace covenants and linguistic framing—to show how cultural framings sustain, regulate, and normalize violence in social and political life.

5. Violent Practices and their Cultural Framing

The Philippines is a modern democracy governed by the rule of law. Thus, culture-based legitimacy for violent action and "opportunistic illegality" requires double-speak: formal rules cannot be denied, but the operation of informal norms is tacitly accepted.

Two practices illustrate this dynamic: (1) feuding in minority regions—resolved outside the legal system, though state representatives may participate; and (2) pre-election peace covenants or integrity pledges—ritualized agreements intended to curb election violence.

Both practices, while designed to control violence, assume that the violence to be controlled aligns explicitly or implicitly with prevailing cultural norms. Violence is not primarily viewed as a violation of enforceable state law but as a culturally sanctioned tool in need of control. Mechanisms to contain it are celebrated even though they reflect a normative order at odds with formal law, as in both the voluntary decision of the violent offender to abstain from using violence lies at the heart of the process of violence management.

The violence linked to feuds and election-related disputes is not identical to targeted killings, but the latter account for much of the bloodshed in both contexts. Integrity pledges address only a small slice of this continuum of political violence, which regularly claims politicians' and other actors' lives. Thus, while not reducible to targeted killings, both practices place them at the core of a culturally framed understanding of violence and its management.

A further sketch will examine some examples of linguistic reframing and euphemistic normalization of violent practices such as targeted killings.

5.1 Feuding and its Resolution

> Three MILF members were killed and three injured in an ambush […] Police are investigating if the incident was linked to a clan war (rido) or a group conflict. […] Investigators recovered more than 100 bullet shells from different types of firearms at the scene" (Kami 2025b).

Feuding (*rido)* remains widespread in Muslim regions of the southern Philippines and other minority communities. Feuds pit families or kin groups against each other over political office, land, economic interests underlined by and perceived through the frame of honor. They are "recurring hostilities […] characterized by a series of retaliatory acts of violence carried out to avenge a perceived affront and injustice" (Torres III 2014, 4). Annual deaths in Muslim areas between 2011 and 2020 ranged from 500 to over 2,000 (Climate Conflict Action, no year). Pure clan feuds, without strong ties to the shadow economy or politics, caused more than 900 casualties between 2011 and 2023, with numbers rising.

Although many conflicts have material roots, participants interpret them through the cultural lens of feuding and honor, which resist judicial resolution. Instead, settlements are reached outside the courts, typically via mediation and "blood money," often brokered by respected figures with the participation of politicians or representatives of the army. This blurs the boundary between state and non-state authority, producing hybrid systems of conflict resolution (Adam and Verbrugge 2014), which some actors have tried to institutionalize (Bangsamoro Transition Authority 2022).

In such cases, the state refrains from applying the law: killings and property destruction go unpunished, perpetrators retain leadership roles, and the feuding system persists. Settlements confirm cultural patterns that define identity and norms. With built-in obligations of revenge, feuds remain valid frameworks for social action—even for those who reject them, but still risk becoming targets. The persistence of feuds reflects the centrality of family and clan as ascriptive social units. Retaliation is not seen as usurping the state's monopoly of violence but as a culturally required act to uphold honor (Torres III 2014).

While blood feuds are often viewed as cultural specifics of Muslim or minority groups, the underlying logic—family-based competition and sovereignty in violence—extends into mainstream politics.

One example is the (non-violent) feud between former president Duterte's family and current president Ferdinand Marcos. Duterte's daughter, Marcos' running-mate as vice president, declared publicly after a family falling out with the president:

> Don't worry about my security because I've talked with somebody. I said 'if I'm killed, you'll kill BBM [President Marcos], Liza Araneta [the president's wife] and Martin Romualdez [lower house speaker and cousin to the president]. No joke, no joke […]. I've given my order, 'If I die, don't stop until you've killed them" (quoted in: CBS News 2024).

A similar mindset appeared in 2013, when a municipal mayor in Negros Occidental was accused of ordering the attempted murder of a rival. Her defense was not moral outrage but cold calculation: there was no need to kill since her rival would lose, but "Maybe if she were 'winnable'" (quoted in Cortes 2013).

Conflicts between political families fuel high levels of killings in the northern province of Abra, where 56 politicians and candidates were killed between 2007 and 2025 in a population under 250,000. Feuds among the Bersamin, Bernos, and Valera families dominate local politics. In 2024 alone, three barangay captains, a municipal administrator, a counselor, and a vice mayor were targeted (on Abra see: Kreuzer 2022: 26–27). Notable cases include the 2006 assassination of Congressman Luis Bersamin and the failed 2018 attack on another congressman. Comparable numbers appear in Samar and Masbate (58 officials each killed between 2007–2025), Negros Occidental (62), Negros Oriental (48), Caloocan (23), Manila (41), Cavite (38), and Batangas (70). These cases confirm a continuing feuding logic in which family remains central to social, political, and economic life (for an excellent recent study on the role of political dynasties see: Acuña, Alejandro and Leung 2025). While honor may no longer be prominent in these disputes, their core feature still is family competition for local power—sometimes by any means necessary (Deinla et al. 2022; Deinla et al. 2023).

Such family feuds, even violent ones, are often resolved not by law but through *areglo*—amicable settlements, typically involving power-sharing. In many cases, family competition has been managed through intermarriage or cooperation agreements, allowing for swapping or sharing of leadership posts.[8]

8 One of the most dramatic—and ultimately failed—attempts at power-sharing was the 2006 partition of Maguindanao province, intended to ease the political rivalry between the Ampatuan and Mangudadatu families. The Supreme Court declared this partition unconstitutional in 2008, triggering a direct clash between the families for the governorship. During this conflict, the Ampatuan clan massacred over 50 civilians, targeting mostly female relatives of their opponent who had come to file a family member's certificate of candidacy for governor.

Another similar agreement was the 2004 "covenant of unity" between families vying for positions in Abra, signed by the candidates and over 20 municipal mayors. They jointly decided not only on positions in the 2004

In recent decades, a new ritual tradition has emerged to preempt such violence at least during the election period: the Peace Covenant.

5.2 Pre-Empting Election Violence

The widely practiced ritual of the Peace Covenant or Integrity Pledge implicitly acknowledges an individual right to employ violence. Like blood-feud mediation, these covenants are highly ritualized, involving most, if not all, candidates of a municipality, city, or province, often in the presence of priests, government officials, and senior police.[9] At their core is the public signing of a pledge not to use force, threats, or bribery to influence elections, typically in a standardized form:

> "I will not employ any form of violence, force or threat that may impair, impede or unduly influence the free exercise of the people's right to suffrage. […] I will not offer or give bribes or gifts to corrupt the integrity of our democratic process" (Bacoor City Government 2025; Pasig City Government 2025).

Ritual elements may include religious oaths, such as swearing on the Quran in Lanao del Sur (PIA 2025), which reinforce tradition and cultural legitimacy.

While positively received in the Philippines as an explicit call to non-violence, the voluntary and time-bound character of the pledge suggests that compliance depends on the self-restraint of those capable of ordering violence. In effect, it signals that at least some politicians perceive a discretionary right to employ force if deemed necessary (Kreuzer 2021).

5.3 The Contract Killer as "Painkiller:" A Short Reflection on the Use of Words

A former mayor and congressman lamented in a 2022 interview with the author:

> "the sad part about this country is, it's so easy to find painkillers. It's so accessible. […] You just can pay someone to kill someone. […] Here it's so easy to find painkillers" (interview November 11, 2022, anonymized).

By referring to assassins as "painkillers," this senior politician equates murder with medication, typically used to cure illness. Its use in a formal interview underscores both the normalization of the phenomenon and a conceptual shift away from terms focused on killing a specific victim (e.g., *gun for hire, hitman*).

The metaphor of the assassin as a painkiller operates as a linguistic reframing that aligns killing within a therapeutic logic of symptom removal. It positions the mastermind as a sufferer and the victim as the source of discomfort. The assassin becomes an agent of relief, comparable to a drug that eliminates pain, rather than an actor who takes a life. Murder is thus cast as alleviating suffering rather than causing harm. The term painkiller trivializes what occurs, making it appear benevolent while signaling moral disengagement and normalization.

Thus, the choice of the word painkiller functions 1) as a euphemistic reframing that neutralizes moral constraints, 2) a normalization of the exceptional by embedding it into an

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elections but also on mutual support for future elections. When one of the politicians reneged on his promise, he was assassinated (Paredes 2011).

9 While such practices are rare internationally, the Philippines is not the only country where voluntary ritual pledges aimed at setting norms and creating reputational costs are used. In India parties and candidates have regularly claimed allegiance to a "model code of conduct" for the past decades. For one version of the text see: Delhi Chief Electoral Officer no date, Model Code of Conduct, https://www.ceodelhi.gov.in/WriteReadData/Compendium/compendiumV3.pdf. Other cases are Bangladesh, Nigeria, Ghana, Guatemala and Mexico, some of which include pledges explicitly renunciating violence.

everyday language, and 3) an informal legitimization of illegality by presenting it as pain relief.

A similar radical euphemism is salvaging, widely used for extrajudicial killings in the context of "social cleansing"—the targeted murder of socially marginalized persons, mostly suspected criminals, drug dealers, and users. The standard meaning of salvage is to save, rescue, or recover something valuable from destruction or loss. In Philippine usage, however, it denotes the opposite: the destruction of life framed as its rescue. The metaphor used suggest an understanding that views killing as a benign act that redeems the victim from evil. Like social cleansing, the term salvage conceals and legitimates targeted killings.

Linguistic reframing also shapes how election violence is remembered. Each Philippine election cycle leaves behind a trail of dead politicians, staffers, supporters, bystanders, and officials. Yet official summaries routinely conclude that polls were "generally peaceful." Statistically, this seems defensible: fatalities have remained below 100 in recent decades, sometimes below 50. Against the backdrop of thousands of candidates and millions of voters, the deaths appear marginal—unless considered through an international lens or expanded to include political killings between election periods. But neither comparison nor expansion occurs, as official lists only cover incidents during the formal election period that meet a "validated" criterion—an unlikely bar in a context of widespread impunity.

This reframing has a long history. The 2007 barangay elections were hailed as "generally peaceful" despite 99 officially recorded incidents that left 55 dead and 45 injured (PNP 2007). Just months earlier, national polls had likewise been praised, after 177 deaths and 214 injuries were revised down to 75 and 129, enabling officials to claim success (GMA News 2007). In 2013, Interior Secretary Mar Roxas described the elections as peaceful (DILG 2013), though police recorded 75 killed, 74 wounded, and 90 shootings (DIDM 2013). In 2016, the same ministry called the polls "orderly and credible" (DILG 2016).

More recently, counting rules shifted to include only "validated" incidents, sharply lowering official tallies. The 2019 midterms, for instance, were credited with a 55% drop in violent incidents. In 2022, election day itself (!) was declared generally peaceful despite "two explosions, two shootings, one grenade throwing, two ambushes, two armed clashes between political rivals, one indiscriminate firing, one indiscriminate firing with ballot snatching, one ballot snatching, and three strafing" (Sadongdong 2022). In 2025, police reported either 46 or 97 such cases, depending on the source, with about 20 killed and 31 wounded over six months (PNP 2025a; Rita 2025), yet still described the polls as "the most organized and peaceful in the country's history" (PNP 2025b).

This routine description of elections as "generally peaceful" constitutes an institutionalized euphemism. Through definitional gatekeeping and ritualized official language, lethal political violence is reframed from structural pathology into a marginal disturbance that leaves the legitimacy of the electoral process ostensibly intact.

This discursive strategy mirrors the mechanisms embedded in the painkiller and salvaging idioms. All three rely on euphemistic relabeling—whether medical, purificatory, or bureaucratic—that attenuates the moral gravity of killing. They also enact functional re-encoding: assassins as painkillers recast killing as therapeutic relief; salvaging reframes murder as moral purification; and the official verdict of generally peaceful reinterprets aggregated violence as statistical noise rather than systemic failure.

5.4 Practices Preempting, resolving or reframing targeted killings as Confirmation of their Cultural Legitimacy

The sketches of feuding mediation and peace covenants show that the cultural backdrop to societal and political uses of violence is visible not only in popular attitudes but also in the practices regulating it.

Feuding continues to provide a culturally legitimate framework for violent retaliation, as resolution through mediation and compensation reinforces the perception that the authority to punish and forgive lies primarily within the clan, not the state, rendering state law irrelevant. Peace Covenants, while ostensibly preventive, draw on similar normative underpinnings: by framing electoral non-violence as a voluntary, time-bound pledge sanctified through ritual rather than as a non-negotiable legal duty. Thereby they implicitly acknowledge the discretionary right of political actors to employ violence, positioning them above the law.

The reflections on language use in framing murder illustrate parallel strategies of euphemistic re-labeling. By trivializing or reinterpreting killings, they normalize and conceal violence, thereby normalizing violence.

Taken together, these findings highlight a deeper structural condition: violence is not simply a breakdown of order or a byproduct of weak institutions, but is embedded in culturally specific repertoires—feuding, peace covenants, and linguistic reframing—that normalize and justify its occurrence, regulate its use, and ritualize its suspension.

6. Conclusion

The patterns documented in this paper show that targeted killing in the Philippines is not confined to authoritarian periods or to specific actors such as state agents, rebels, or criminal groups. Rather, it is a socially embedded practice that cuts across occupational, regional, and class boundaries, arising from personal, commercial, or political disputes.

When a distinctive form of violence recurs across otherwise separate spheres of social life, it is unlikely to be sustained by isolated, context-specific causes. Instead, such consistency points to a shared enabling condition. In this case, the common denominator is cultural: a set of widely held norms and expectations about when violence is acceptable.

This cultural framework creates a permissive environment, lowering barriers to considering lethal violence as a viable option. Culture does not compel action, but it operates alongside material and situational factors, providing shared meanings and scripts that render targeted killing a plausible solution across disparate settings.

Survey data reinforce this interpretation. Public attitudes in the Philippines show substantial endorsement of interpersonal, social, and political violence, along with readiness to condone other "useful" illegalities. For a significant minority, violence is not seen solely as a breach of law but as a discretionary tool for protecting interests, asserting authority, or avenging slights. While most people never act on such views, the fact that many justify them ensures that targeted killing remains part of the cultural repertoire of conceivable actions in a wide range of disputes.

These orientations are reinforced by institutional practices that manage but rarely delegitimize violence. Informal settlements, clan mediation involving "blood money," and ritualized pre-election "peace covenants" may temporarily resolve disputes but leave intact the underlying informal legitimacy of violent action. Official portrayals of violent election periods as "generally peaceful" further normalize killings, treating them as exceptional disturbanc-

es in an otherwise orderly state. Such practices highlight the discretionary sovereignty of actors to employ or refrain from violence, thereby entrenching its social acceptability.

Not dealt with in this report is institutional failure in the form of impunity. Only a small percentage of murders in the Philippines result in final convictions of the perpetrators, and the masterminds behind such killings are almost never held accountable. Between 2016 and 2020, the average number of convictions for homicide stood at fewer than 1,400 annually (Department of Justice n.d.), compared to 6,000–10,000 murders recorded per year during these and earlier years, a conviction rate below 20 percent. Thus, risks for professional killers are low and for masterminds nearly non-existent. Even in a culture that tolerates violence, a significant shift from impunity to consistent conviction—particularly of masterminds—could alter the cost-benefit calculations that currently sustain the practice.

In sum, the persistence of targeted killings in the Philippines rests on the intersection of three elements: a culturally rooted acceptance of lethal violence under certain conditions; structural opportunities such as the ready availability of hired killers; and institutional responses that normalize rather than challenge such acts. These dynamics are reinforced by pervasive impunity, which makes targeted killing a largely risk-free means of enforcing one's interests. Addressing this form of violence therefore requires engagement with both the institutional and cultural frameworks that render it thinkable and too often consequence-free.

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Table 6: Justifiability of various violent and non-violent crimes

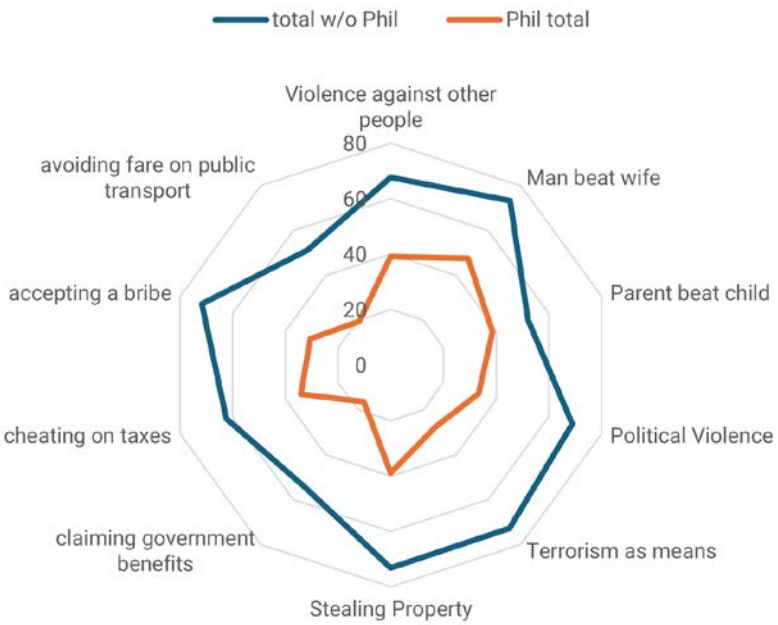
		WVS sample	Philippines												
		total w/o Phil	Phil total	crosstab: sex		crosstab: income (subjective)			crosstab: social class (subjective)					crosstab: Urban Rural	
				male	female	low	medium	high	Upper	Upper middle	Lower middle	Working	Lower	Urban	Rural
Violence against other people	values 1	67,7	39,2	41,7	36,7	43	38,5	25,6	22,1	36,1	41,8	35,9	41,2	34,2	44,3
	values 6-1	5,7	24,9	21,8	**28**	22,9	24,3	**39,6**	**42,3**	24,3	21,9	30,1	25	**29,5**	20,1
Man beat wife	values 1	73,2	47,6	48,5	46,8	52,1	45,7	41,7	40,2	46,4	48,9	46,2	47,9	42,5	52,8
	values 6-1	5,8	23,2	22,4	**24**	21,9	23,5	**28,3**	**40,6**	24	19,5	28,9	23,5	**26,2**	20,2
Parent beat child	values 1	52,2	38,7	41,5	35,8	41,9	37,4	33	33,1	37,5	39	37,7	40,1	32,6	44,8
	values 6-1	15	27,6	26,6	**28,8**	26,2	27,6	**36,1**	**36,4**	26,7	25,8	34,2	26,4	**31,1**	24,2
Political violence	values 1	69	33,4	35,6	31,2	39,5	30	32	37	29,9	36,3	27,9	33,8	27,3	39,6
	values 6-1	5,5	26,2	24,3	**28**	24,1	26,7	**32,5**	**36,7**	23,7	23,3	35,4	25,7	**28,6**	23,6
Terrorism as means	values 1	72,7	27,6	32,4	22,8	34,6	24,3	20,1	24,1	25,7	27	28	29,9	21,6	33,6
	values 6-1	4,9	25,8	23,6	**28,1**	26,2	25,4	**29**	**37,3**	26,7	24,7	27,1	25,2	**29,2**	22,3
Stealing property	values 1	73,1	38,8	40,7	36,8	42,2	37,2	34,1	40,2	38,1	40,3	33,6	39,4	33,2	44,4
	values 6-1	5,4	23,2	22,4	**24,1**	24,3	21	**36,4**	**41,5**	22,6	21,5	27,3	21,7	**26,2**	20,1
Claiming government benefits	values 1	53,8	16,4	17,2	15,7	17,5	15,6	17,9	31,1	14,4	15	15,4	18,8	8,7	24,3
	values 6-1	14,4	42,8	**43,9**	41,8	**46,9**	40,6	40,3	36	43,8	42,1	**48**	40,7	**47,2**	38,2
Cheating on taxes	values 1	62,3	34,2	35,9	32,4	40,1	31,8	23,2	20,8	34,4	34,3	31,1	37,1	28,5	39,8
	values 6-1	8,7	28,9	27,8	**30**	27	28,5	**43,7**	**52,9**	21,4	29,1	37,6	25,3	**30,8**	26,9
Accepting a bribe	values 1	71,7	30,6	33,2	28	33,8	29,8	20,6	28,2	28,2	31,6	26,7	33,1	25,5	35,7
	values 6-1	5,4	27,5	**28,8**	26,2	29,2	25,6	**34,8**	**38,9**	28	27	30,2	25,2	**29**	26,1
Avoiding fare on public transport	values 1	51,1	19,4	20,8	18,1	20,9	19	15,9	18,3	15,6	19,9	16,6	23,2	16	22,9
	values 6-1	14,3	36,7	36,6	**36,7**	38,1	35,1	**42,3**	**59,2**	35,1	33,9	43,2	35,7	**39,6**	33,5

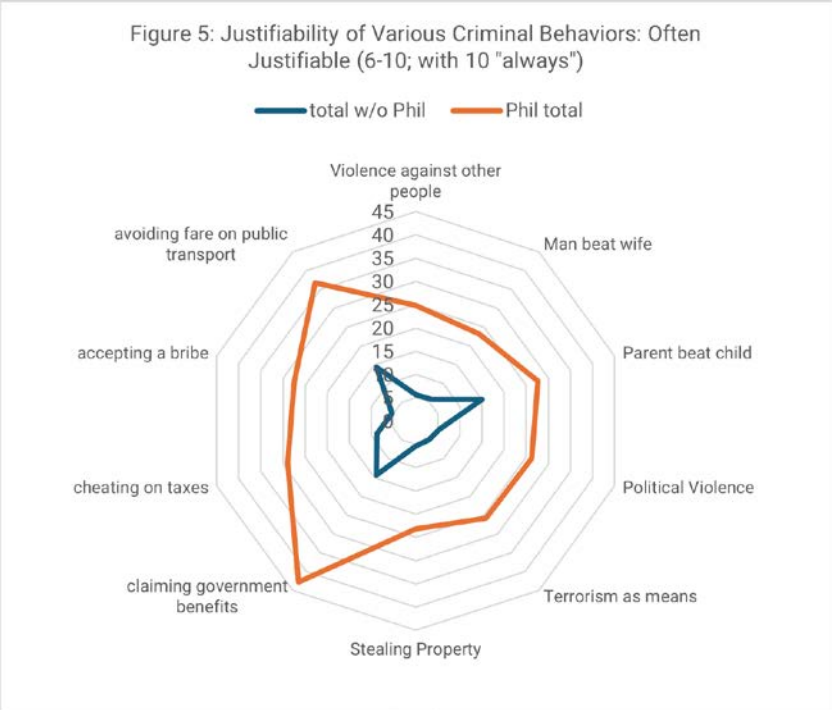
The table on the previous page presents an assessment of how various factors influence perceptions that justify violence across different contexts, alongside an evaluation of the perceived acceptability of different forms of opportunistic illegality. The Philippine case is examined in comparison with all other countries included in the 7th wave of the World Values Survey (data available at https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/).

Cross-tabulation of the Philippine data by societal subgroups—based on sex, income, social class, and urban or rural environment—reveals systematic patterns in the justification of illegal acts. Certain groups show consistently higher levels of perceived justifiability. These include women (minor effect, but particularly consistent regarding attitudes justifying violence), self-perceived high-income respondents (strong effect), self-perceived members of the upper social class (strong effect), and respondents living in urban areas (strong effect). Despite these stratifications, the overall assessment indicates that extremely high levels of perceived justifiability are present across all groups when compared to the international sample.

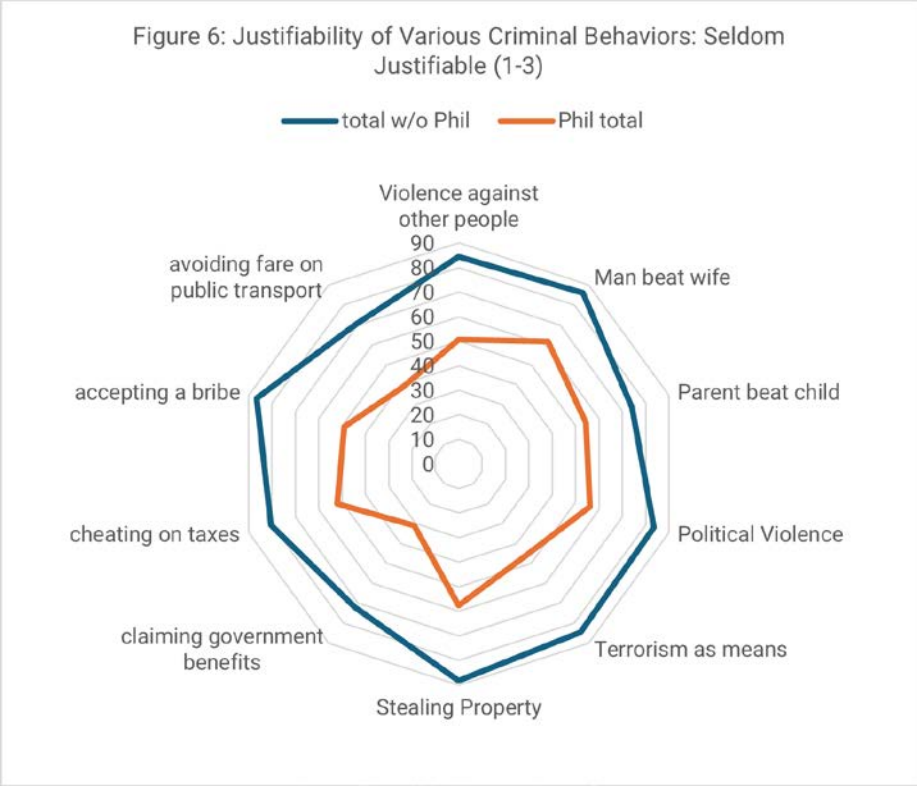
The comparison between the Philippines and the full international sample (see tables below) highlights a substantial divergence. This is evident both in the low proportion of respondents signaling principled rejection of criminal behavior (value 1) and in the relatively high acceptance of various forms of criminal behavior (values 6–10).

Figure 4: Justifiability of Various Criminal Behaviors: Never Justifiable (1)





Even allowing for the possibility that, in some scenarios, a principled stance may seem implausible—for example, in cases involving violence against others or political violence, where self-defense or resistance to a dictatorial regime might be considered justifiable—the observed differences remain striking. In the international sample excluding the Philippines, over 80 percent of respondents selected values 1–3, indicating that violence and other illegal behaviors were perceived as justifiable only in limited circumstances. In contrast, in the Philippines, only 50 percent of respondents chose these lower values.



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