

Civil Society Under Populist Repression: Political Engagement in the Philippines During and Beyond Rodrigo Duterte's Regime

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Why was the civil society unable to mobilize effectively against democratic backsliding during Rodrigo Duterte's administration in the Philippines (2016-2022)? What are the challenges and opportunities for civil society in the post-Duterte period? Although Philippine civil society has a history of vibrant activism and substantial contributions to democratic policymaking, it was subdued and muted during Duterte's violent populist rule. This article argues that Duterte's autocratic strategies, such as personalized rule, centralization of power, lawfare, and disinformation, not only undermined civil society organizations but also created a precarious environment that discouraged overt opposition. This led to a decline in political participation and a weakening of civil society. To support our arguments, we draw on empirical evidence from personal communication with key figures from CSOs, reportage from these organizations and media, and analyses from relevant scholarly literature. In this study, we refine the Regime Maintenance Theory by showing a type of authoritarian resilience that does not rely mainly on punitive measures or election cheating. Unlike Ferdinand Marcos Sr., or Gloria Arroyo, Duterte did not have to rig elections or limit public space to subvert civil society. Instead, he used a mix of repressive methods and a populist narrative that appealed to many people. This study, hence, demonstrates that legitimacy derived from mass approval can generate coercion even in the absence of punitive repression.

Keywords: Civil Society; Discursive Delegitimization; Duterte; Philippines; Populist Repression



INTRODUCTION

The Political Significance of Civil Society in the Philippines

Civil society encompasses "all social, cultural, religious, and non-profit economic organizations outside government but operating within the framework of law" (Wurfel, 2004, p. 215). Although voluntary and independent of the state, these organizations "seek benefits, policy changes, or accountability from the state". They are "concerned with public rather than private ends" (Silliman & Noble, 1998, p. 13). Within democracies, they are crucial in "containing the power of democratic governments, checking their potential abuses and violations of the law, and subjecting them to public scrutiny" (Diamond, 1994, p. 7). Civil society has played crucial

roles during critical junctures in the Philippines, the oldest democracy in Southeast Asia. Not only have they filled a complementary role to the state (Mojares, 2006), but civil society has also been pivotal in advocating for democratization and good governance in the country (Silliman & Noble, 1998). This was emphatically demonstrated during the regime of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. (1972-1986). Following the assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr., Marcos Sr.'s foremost critic, massive protests backed by civil society actors across the political spectrum ultimately led to Marcos Sr.'s ouster and the restoration of constitutional democracy through the People Power I protests in 1986 (Magadia, 1999). Civil society's commitment to active citizenship continued in the post-dictatorship period, most notably during the People Power II protests in 2001, which toppled Joseph Estrada following corruption allegations (Landé, 2001). The Philippine civil society has also constantly been involved in policy-making processes, such as in the advocacy of devolution in forest governance (Magno, 2001), gender equality and women's rights (Francisco, 2021), opposition to the hard rock mining industry (Holden, 2005), and the enactment of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act in 1997 (Rico, 2007).

This legacy of civil society in the Philippines, characterized by its vibrant activism and significant contributions to democratic policymaking, renders its relatively subdued role under the administration of Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022) more striking. A tough-talking mayor who won the Philippine presidency in 2016, Duterte promoted a contentious yet effective agenda of order-over-law (rather than law-and-order) throughout his campaign, emphasizing the need for punitive policing instead of conventional legal frameworks. Such an agenda resonated with the Filipino people, who felt that the country's legal system was ineffective in addressing social problems (Pepinsky, 2017, p. 122). Duterte, however, implemented his order-over-law agenda at the expense of civil liberties and human rights. Through his violent populism, Duterte instrumentalized the dichotomy between 'good citizens' and 'evil criminals' to justify the systematic purging of supposed lawbreakers (Thompson, 2022). Under his administration, "executive aggrandizement was pushed to the hilt" (Magno, 2021, pp. 89-90), facilitating the country's democratic backsliding. The muted response of civil society to Duterte's actions contrasted sharply with the vigorous civil society engagement in other recent cases of democratic backsliding. For instance, in Bangladesh, civil society played a crucial role in the July 2024 Revolution, which ousted then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina following her regime's abuses of authority (Alam et al., 2025). In Turkey, lawyers working in civil society organizations (CSOs) provided strategic litigation and served as human rights defenders (Oder, 2021). The civil society in Myanmar, where the military junta retook power in 2021 after years of fragile democracy, has been "at the forefront of the anti-coup resistance" (Stokke, 2023, p. 119). In these cases, civil society rose to the occasion and mobilized despite substantial challenges.

Civil Society Under Duterte

Given its history of active citizenship during critical junctures, one would assume that the Philippine civil society would play a major role in countermobilization efforts against Duterte. After all, civic space for street protests and elections still existed during his rule. As contended by Bermeo (2016), "[w]hen civil society is allowed some space, countermobilization [against democratic backsliding] can occur" (p. 17). But despite its prominent role during previous administrations, the civil society struggled to mobilize effectively against the Duterte regime. This inability can be attributed to interrelated factors: the fragmentation within civil society, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, state suppression through a contentious law, and the perversion of the electoral system and the digital space. Arugay and Baquisal (2023) explored

Duterte's assaults on civil society and the use of repressive mechanisms, examining their impacts on civil society's resilience and coherence. Their study describes the mechanisms of repression – legal harassment, co-optation, and red-tagging – and their consequences for civil society's capacity to resist the Duterte regime. In this study, we dwell on the perspective of civil society actors who were directly targeted in these assaults to explore the overall impact of the regime on civil society participation and its consequences for the quality of Philippine democracy beyond Duterte's term. Our central argument is that Duterte, through his strongman politics, directly and indirectly undermined the political efficacy of CSOs. He pitted these organizations and their advocacies, such as human rights, against his supporters, creating a precarious environment that discouraged opposition and political participation against him and his government. The run-up to and results of the 2022 Philippine general election, however, galvanized and energized the remnants of old stalwarts of civil society. This also resulted in the creation of new CSOs, which are currently championing political participation and electoral reforms in the Philippines.

Discursive Delegitimization

As Southeast Asia's oldest democracy and a country once dubbed as having one of the most vibrant civil societies,¹ the Philippine case is crucial for understanding the phenomenon of democratic backsliding sweeping across many democracies. Examining the dynamics of Duterte's 'violent populist' regime and its impact on civil society can provide valuable lessons for political scholars and CSOs confronting the challenges posed by elected leaders with authoritarian tendencies. Lastly, we believe this study can improve our understanding of civil society, its diversity, and its vulnerabilities. Doing so shall promote a more nuanced (compared to the typical monolithic and homogenous) view of civil society (Backer, 2003, p. 311).

This study contributes to Regime Maintenance Theory (RMT) by highlighting a variant of authoritarian resilience that does not depend primarily on overt legal restrictions or electoral manipulation, as is typically used to maintain authoritarian regimes. It demonstrates that regime maintenance can be achieved through discursive delegitimization and popularity-driven pressure. This perspective refines RMT by showing that legitimacy derived from mass approval can substitute for coercive legal frameworks in sustaining regime stability. Duterte's approach illustrates how civil society can be weakened not by eliminating civil society participation but by undermining its credibility and appeal, particularly when human rights-oriented and democratic messaging fails to resonate broadly. This study is particularly relevant at a time when human rights appeals are declining worldwide, not least in established European democracies (see reports by Amnesty International, 2025, and Human Rights Watch, 2026). We expand RMT by emphasizing the role of narrative and public trust as mechanisms of regime endurance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs and adapts RMT as the framework for examining civil society participation in the Philippines. Summarized, this theory states that authoritarian regimes deploy a variety

¹ As also explained by Thompson (2018), civil society is among the "strategic groups" in the Philippines. Together with the big business, the Catholic Church, and the military, these four groups have played instrumental roles during and after the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. Not only do they possess "large organizations that allow them to mobilize supporters for or against a president", but these strategic groups also wield the capacity to either "buttress or challenge the power of a president" (p. 124).

of strategies to maintain their hold on power, such as repressing or controlling the political engagement of civil society. This is necessary to prevent challenges to their rule or the rise of alternative sources of authority. Other autocratic strategies include manipulating institutions to suppress dissent, undermine the opposition, and ensure compliance. Authoritarian regimes are also likely to co-opt selected CSOs by granting resources, privileges, or other benefits in exchange for loyalty and support. Such regimes, which revolve around charismatic leaders, centralize power in accordance with their interests, preferences, and even whims (Diamond et al., 2016; Geddes et al., 2018).

This theory has primarily been applied to authoritarian regimes, such as those in the “Big Five” China, Iran, Russia, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia (Diamond et al., 2016), and dictatorships (Geddes et al., 2018). In this study, we tested whether this theory is also applicable to analyzing the Duterte regime, which Levitsky and Way (2020) identify as a “competitive authoritarian” regime. This form of regime features the existence of democratic institutions alongside abuses of power by incumbents, leading to “electoral competition that is real but unfair” (Levitsky & Way, 2020, p. 51). Rather than manipulation and co-optation, Duterte leveraged public discontent over persistent corruption and criminality to justify his autocratic practices and tilt the political landscape to his advantage (Levitsky & Way, 2020, p. 60). His regime weaponized laws, sponsored disinformation, and mobilized the police to target alleged lawbreakers and those deemed critical of Duterte, including members of the media, political opposition, and civil society (Arugay & Baquisal, 2023; Bagalawis et al., 2024; Ong & Tapsell, 2022; Thompson & Agojo, 2025).

While the regimes of Marcos Sr., Arroyo, and Duterte all repressed civil society, the methods they used to maintain their rule and the ways civil society responded to them differ significantly (Thompson & Agojo, 2025). To maintain their regimes, Marcos Sr. (1965-1986) and Arroyo (2001-2010) had to engage in election fraud and constrain the civic space. Despite these measures, civil society pushed back primarily through sustained, sizable protests. In contrast, Duterte neither had to manipulate elections nor legally restrict civic space. His illiberal agenda’s popularity was sufficient not only for him to be elected as president in a generally free, fair, and competitive election in 2016, but also for his allies² and “continuity candidates”³ to win in the 2019 and 2022 elections. Moreover, the civil society-led pushback against Duterte failed to gain significant momentum (Lorch, 2021; Thompson & Agojo, 2025). This is surprising, considering that the civic space during Duterte’s term did not deteriorate to the extent seen during Marcos Sr.’s authoritarian regime (see Figure 1).

² In 2019, Duterte’s allies secured victory in the senatorial elections, while all of the opposition candidates lost.

³ The tandem of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (son and namesake of the late dictator) and Sara Duterte-Carpio (then-Mayor of Davao City and daughter of President Duterte) won as President and Vice President in the 2022 elections. They did so by effectively positioning themselves as Duterte’s “continuity candidates” or candidates who will continue his policies (Arguelles, 2022, p. 223).

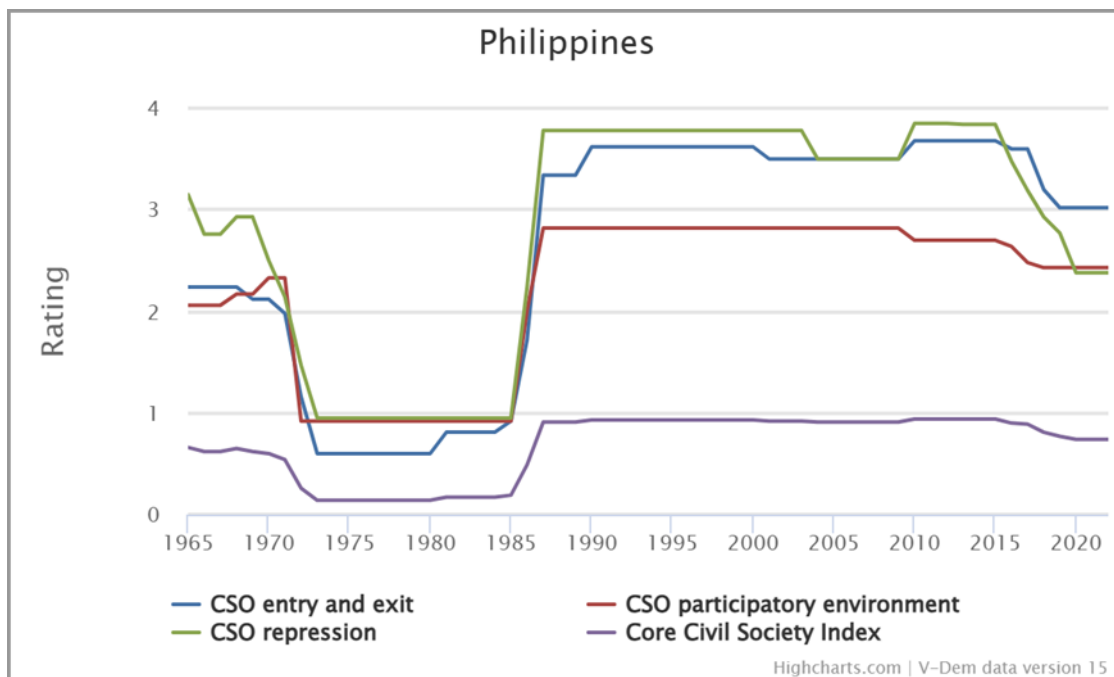


Table 1. State of civil society in the Philippines (1965-2022).⁴ Graph generated by the authors through the Varieties of Democracy.

In essence, the distinctiveness of Duterte's regime-maintenance strategy lay in its ability to suppress civil society's political participation without relying solely on overt legal restrictions, electoral manipulation, or punitive measures. He consolidated his regime through a combination of repressive techniques and the promotion of a violent populist narrative that resonated widely with the public, as evidenced by his consistently high trust and approval ratings. These granted his actions a semblance of legitimacy, allowed his allies to dominate elections, and put pressure on civil society groups that questioned and challenged his regime, while simultaneously delegitimizing their actions and limiting their effectiveness. This dynamic was reinforced by the limited appeal of human rights-oriented messaging from civil society actors, further enabling the Duterte regime to neutralize dissent without imposing blatant restrictions on dissent.

To include CSO perspectives on Duterte's strategies of delegitimization, we employed a qualitative research design. This included an integrative review of scholarly articles, official documents, and reports from local and international institutions to assess the extent of civil

⁴ Figure 1 covers the state of civil society in the Philippines from 1965 (when Marcos Sr. was elected president) to 2022 (when Duterte concluded his six-year term as president). The data are based on four indices from the Varieties of Democracy: 1. CSO entry exit (measures the extent to which the government achieve to control over entry and exit by CSOs into public life); 2. CSO repression (measures the extent to which the government attempt to repress CSOs); 3. CSO participatory environment (measures the involvement of people in CSOs); and 4. core civil society index (measures the robustness of civil society). It is important to note that there was a steep decline across all indices in 1972, the year when Marcos Sr. declared martial law. Improvements were observed in 1986 following the restoration of democracy through the People Power revolt. However, another major decline occurred in 2016, when Duterte was elected president. This decline, while significant, was not as steep as that experienced in 1972.

society engagement during the Duterte regime. To complement our review, we conducted semi-structured interviews with six CSO leaders. They were selected for their extensive roles in civil society engagement, specifically in social activism, legal advocacy, and ecclesiastical initiatives. Some of them consented to being identified in this paper, while others chose to remain anonymous. To validate our data, we relied on cross-referencing data from various sources, allowing us to develop a nuanced understanding of a sensitive topic (especially during Duterte's violent populist regime). By integrating perspectives from a diverse range of sources, we sought to reinforce the reliability of our thematic findings (Carter et al., 2014). This paper is part of a comprehensive study that centers on policing and violence during Duterte's so-called war on drugs, which was granted ethics approval at the author's institutional affiliation.

In the next section, we discuss the state of civil society under the Duterte regime, focusing on the impact of his regime's persecution of dissenting voices, centralization of power, and extension of political dominance through the party-list system and the digital space vis-à-vis civil society's political participation. This will be followed by an overview of the perils and prospects for civil society under Duterte's successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The study will conclude with notes on the possibilities for a civil society resurgence in the Philippines.

PHILIPPINES' CIVIL SOCIETY DURING DUTERTE'S ADMINISTRATION

Red-Tagging and the Persecution of Dissenting Voices

Compared to other countries in Southeast Asia, civil society in the Philippines still had some space to operate during the Duterte presidency (2016-2022). This is reflected in the Varieties of Democracy's core civil society index, where the Philippines scored higher ratings than neighboring states (see Figure 2).

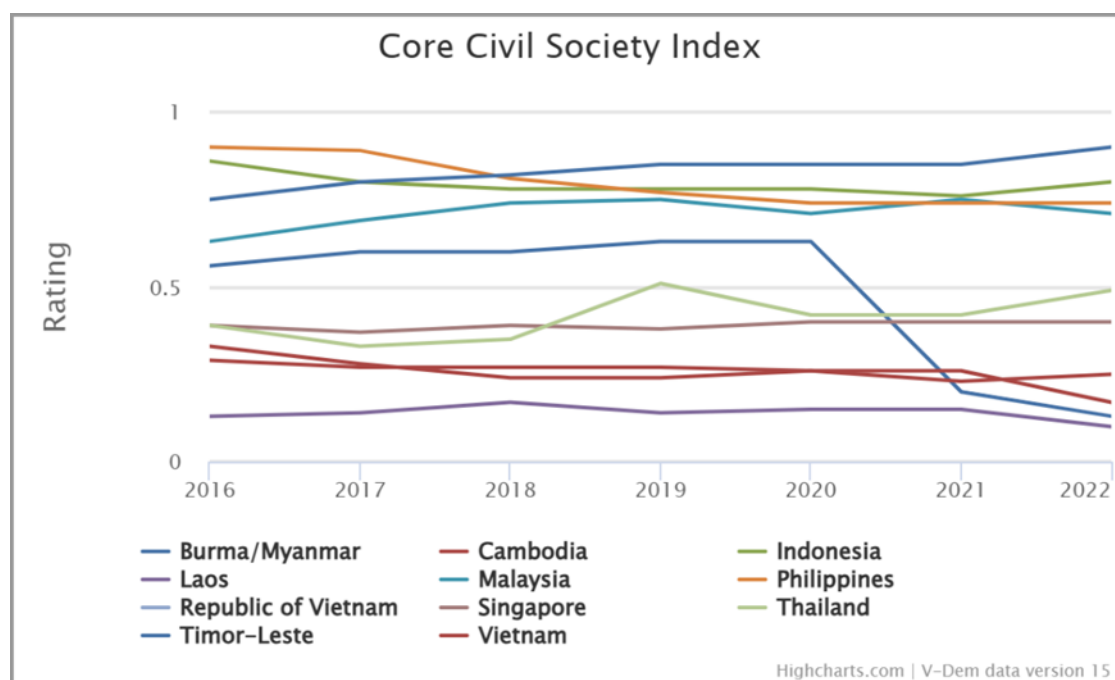


Figure 2. Core civil society index. Graph generated by the authors through the Varieties of Democracy.

Nevertheless, the availability of such space did not necessarily translate to a safe environment for civil society. Red-tagging, or the blacklisting of individuals and groups as underground rebels without evidence, was frequently highlighted as a significant issue in civil society participation in the Philippines. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNCHR, 2020, p. 10) underscored red-tagging as a “persistent and powerful threat to civil society” that has resulted in the harassment and, in some cases, deaths of those maliciously tagged as communists or terrorists. In a separate analysis by the CIVICUS Monitor (2022) of the threats facing civil society worldwide, the Philippines, along with seven other countries in the Asia-Pacific region,⁵ was categorized as repressed. It also noted that activists in the Philippines are stifled by red-tagging acts.⁶

CSO leaders lamented the constriction of civic space during the Duterte years, asserting that voicing dissent can easily put someone in danger. In an interview, a communications officer from a CSO advocating accountability and governance reforms expressed concerns about the dangers of criticizing Duterte. She stated that when someone disapproves of Duterte, “you can get trolled, you can get tagged as *dilawan*,⁷ you will be red-tagged, people will say you are a supporter of the New People’s Army ... or worst, you can get killed” (personal communication, 7 July 2023).

According to Cristina Palabay of Karapatan, the “arbitrary labeling of people” hindered their human rights advocacy, particularly in rural areas (personal communication, 27 June 2023). Hence, despite its availability, the civic space under Duterte was an area in which civil society figures should enter at one’s own risk. Such precarity impaired civil society’s capacities to mobilize its resources and attract public support during critical junctures in Duterte’s term, as discussed in the succeeding sections.

Duterte’s Personalized Rule and Civil Society Fragmentation

Duterte’s persona and his presidency are largely associated with his disproportionate so-called war on drugs. Duterte’s ‘war’, however, was not a unique juncture in Philippine history. Previous presidents have also securitized the country’s drug problem for their political interests (Lasco & Yu, 2023; McCoy, 2009). For instance, Fidel Ramos pushed for the reinstatement of capital punishment during his presidency,⁸ arguing its necessity to address the drug menace (United Press International, 1994). Gloria Macapagal Arroyo expressed a strong stance against illegal drugs, so much so that she identified it as the country’s foremost ‘public enemy’ and a threat to national security (Arroyo, 2001). What made Duterte’s war on drugs distinct from prior campaigns was the intensity of his anti-drug rhetoric and the accompanying on-the-

⁵ These are Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, India, Pakistan, Singapore, and Thailand.

⁶ Specifically mentioned in the report were the cases of community doctor Maria Natividad Castro and environmental activist Vertudez Macapanpan.

⁷ The *dilawan* is a label used to describe a supporter of the yellow political brand, which, in the Philippine context, refers to the Aquino political clan and/or the Liberal Party. During the Duterte administration, the *dilawan* label was often used in a pejorative manner to dismiss those perceived as members of the political opposition.

⁸ Capital punishment was practiced in the Philippines from the post-war period until 1986. Following the toppling of the Marcos Sr. regime in 1986, the newly created 1987 Constitution of the Philippines disallowed such a penalty unless Congress provides for it due to compelling reasons involving heinous crimes.

ground violence, reinforced by his personalized rule that helped legitimize those measures. Back in the 2016 presidential campaign, he portrayed the Philippines as degenerating into a narco-state and being run by drug lords and narco-politicians. Such a narrative served to legitimize his call for a war-like approach to anti-drug enforcement.⁹ Duterte vowed to eliminate criminality and illegal drugs within three to six months should he win the presidency. Under-scoring this pledge during his final campaign rally, he warned: “All of you who are into drugs ... I will really kill you. I have no patience” (Campbell, 2016). Such rhetoric enabled Duterte to cultivate an image as a tough-talking, everyman leader, projecting himself as a paternal figure (*Tatay Digong*) keen to combat the threats posed by ‘others’ (mainly alleged drug offenders and other petty criminals). He adeptly framed his willingness to sanction a war in the pursuit of the greater good (Thompson et al., 2024). Consequently, his personalized rule, characterized by violent rhetoric against criminalized others, resonated with a public that was weary of insecurity (Teehankee & Thompson, 2016). Upon taking office, the Duterte administration launched the war on drugs, resulting in tens of thousands of casualties.¹⁰

Duterte’s personalized rule was substantially stronger compared to the civil society, which was fragmented throughout his rule. As a result, despite the severity of human rights violations amid the drug war, the civil society failed to muster any sustained, large-scale protests. This includes CSOs that are traditionally identified with the Philippine Left, which historically assumed significant roles in leading the civil society in massive protests (especially during the Marcos Sr. and Arroyo regimes). On the one hand, the groups affiliated with the national democrats (NDs) within the Left had a history of a successful working relationship with Duterte when he was Mayor of Davao City, specifically in implementing social programs. This collaboration occurred despite Duterte’s support for and sanctioning of extrajudicial killings in the city (Casino, 2016; Lamchek & Sanchez, 2021; Palatino, 2017). Hence, when Duterte became president, the NDs were “jubilant over their political windfall of having elected an anti-imperialist, supposedly left-wing president” (Claudio & Abinales, 2017, p. 98).¹¹ This was further empha-

⁹ Duterte exaggerated the country’s drug problem for his political agenda. Thus far, concrete data suggesting that the country is descending into a narco-state does not exist. As written by Quimpo (2017, p. 150), there is no data that proves that the influence of drug lords in the Philippines has “become virulent or widespread at the regional or national level”.

¹⁰ A total of 6,252 killings at the hands of the police and vigilantes were officially reported by the Philippine government. However, significantly higher estimates were provided by independent institutions. In December 2018, the Commission on Human Rights estimated that the death toll may be as high as 27,000, while the International Criminal Court provided an estimate of around 12,000 to 30,000 killings during the first three years of the Duterte presidency (Caliwan, 2022; International Criminal Court, 2021; Maru, 2018).

¹¹ The National Democrats, operating under a more centralized leadership, consider the armed struggle as “the main and decisive form for the revolutionary transformation of a ‘semi-feudal, semi-colonial’ Philippine society” (Abinales, 1986, p. 39). Such a perspective is different from groups affiliated with the Social Democrats, which, despite their diversity, decided to pursue approaches beyond armed warfare (Santos, 2005).

sized when Duterte offered the NDs to nominate their preferred secretaries of four state agencies (“Duterte to Left”, 2016).¹² Duterte also welcomed the possibility of Jose Maria Sison,¹³ founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines (who had been in self-exile since the late 1980s), to return to the Philippines (Claudio & Abinales, 2017). These made the NDs reluctant to criticize Duterte during his early presidency, notwithstanding the mounting drug war casualties. However, in February 2017, Duterte and NDs accused each other of violating the cease-fire agreement that had been established in July 2016. This agreement was intended to foster peace talks between the Philippine government and the communist rebels and address the longstanding armed conflict in the country (Santos, 2017). The Commission on Appointments also rejected cabinet members nominated by the NDs, and Duterte officially terminated the peace talks between the Philippine government and the communist rebels in November 2017. Thereafter, the NDs were antagonized and red-tagged by the popular Duterte. This sequence of events affected the NDs’ credibility as accountability actors when they started to become active in anti-drug war protests. On the other hand, leftist groups affiliated with the social democrats (SDs), who were pivotal in street demonstrations against the Arroyo regime, did not actively mobilize against the drug war during the early Duterte presidency. At that time, the SDs were still reeling from unsettled inter- and intra-group disputes that transpired under the Benigno Aquino III administration. Specifically, the decision of the social democratic party Akbayan to coalesce with Aquino “in pursuit of electoral victory and bureaucratic appointments” produced internal conflicts (which led to some members bolting their party) and tensions with their allied social movements (Juliano, 2015, p. 14). This discord made it difficult for these CSOs to find common ground on how to engage with the Duterte government. As observed by Dressel and Bonoan (2019), “they are divided by partisan and ideological differences, and they also fear co-optation” (p. 144).

However, more than the dissonance among the NDs and SDs of the Philippine Left, civil society’s focus on human rights failed to resonate with the public. The use and abuse of illegal drugs had been successfully securitized by Duterte, allowing him to earn consistently high approval ratings (Quimpo, 2017; Ranada, 2021; Thompson, 2022). Furthermore, there was limited opposition mobilization against his rule, despite the drug war violence. This limited resistance was attributed to the framing strategies employed by the opposition and Duterte. On one side, the opposition (with civil society groups as key actors) framed the drug war primarily as a violation of human rights. This human rights-centric framing was effectively counter-framed by Duterte, who depicted the opposition as elitists who were sympathetic to lawbreakers and claimed instead that he was protecting law-abiding Filipinos (Thompson et al., 2024). Hence, while the drug war was seen as brutal, most Filipinos believed it was necessary to combat such a problem. This was verified in a June 2019 Social Weather Stations survey, which found that 82% of adult Filipinos stated their satisfaction with the drug war; only 12% were dissatisfied, and 6% were undecided (Social Weather Stations 2019).¹⁴ CSOs that mobilized

¹² These are: Department of Agrarian Reform, Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the Department of Labor and Employment.

¹³ Sison also served as Duterte’s instructor during his time as a student at the Lyceum of the Philippines University.

¹⁴ It has been suggested that Duterte’s record-high popularity levels can be attributed to many Filipinos pretending to support his administration due to the fear instilled by his war on drugs (Kasuya & Miwa, 2023). However, a more tenable explanation is that it is precisely the violence of his drug war against

against the drug war were also maligned by Duterte and his supporters as being lenient toward alleged criminals. This perception undermined the CSOs' credibility in advocating for human rights, which, in turn, drew negative undertones from the public. As admitted by Samira Gutoc, a civic leader known for her advocacy for women's and Muslim rights, the term 'human rights' was denigrated as connoting anti-government sentiments and support for underground groups (personal communication, 1 August 2023). Indeed, while populism is typically viewed as a contrast between the 'pure people' and 'corrupt elite' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), Duterte's populist approach demonstrated how a supposed dichotomy between 'good citizens' versus 'evil lawbreakers' can be used to justify mass killings (Thompson, 2022, p. 18) and spread suspicion towards civil society.

Power Centralization

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Philippines, Duterte managed to consolidate his grip on power. This was evident in his administration's security-oriented responses (led by politicians and military officials) rather than focusing on a public health approach as demanded by the situation (Agojo, 2021; Calimbahin & Agojo, 2022; Hapal, 2021; Hecita et al., 2023). The Duterte government's reliance on curfews, hard lockdowns, and punitive responses led to not only the inability to implement more effective track-and-trace approaches against the virus, but also to the sharp economic contraction at the time (Kenny & Holmes, 2022). Undeterred, civil society proactively mobilized to aid the public. The most notable example was the emergence of volunteer-driven community pantries nationwide, where people could freely obtain and/or donate food and other necessities. Ana Patricia Non, known for organizing the first pantry in Quezon City, admitted that the national government's insufficiencies amid the pandemic prompted her to start this initiative (Grana, 2021). AYUDA Network, an alliance of CSOs, also asserted that "[c]ommunity solidarity filled the gap where the government failed to provide" (Torres, 2021). This initiative encouraged other volunteers and CSOs to establish pantries. Although they were subsequently subjected to red-tagging by state officials, such acts failed to dissuade them, as evidenced by the donations that community pantries received following red-tagging accusations (Madarang, 2021). The establishment of community pantries served as a form of "everyday resistance" (Kerkvliet, 2009; Scott, 1985) during the pandemic. Their proliferation resonated with the public, especially those from marginalized communities, because of the government's inadequate response to addressing food insecurity at the time. The spread of civil society-led pantries indicated that "while spaces for political mobilization are curtailed ... resistance during the pandemic is durable and can be channeled in different ways at smaller scales" (Auethavornpipat & Tanyag, 2021, p. 22).

But more than the health hazards and mobility restrictions caused by COVID-19, another challenge to civil society amid the pandemic was the Duterte regime's recourse to lawfare, which human rights lawyer Jose Manuel Diokno defined as the weaponization of laws to harass figures or entities perceived as critical of the government (Nonato, 2020).¹⁵ This allowed

alleged criminals that led him to earn such high levels of public support. He also effectively framed human rights advocates as sympathizers and protectors of the so-called social undesirables while, at the same time, positioning himself as the defender of law-abiding citizens (Kenny & Holmes, 2020; Reyes, 2016; Thompson & Agojo, 2024; Thompson et al., 2024).

¹⁵ Notable critics of Duterte include former Senator Leila de Lima and Rappler CEO Maria Ressa, who are both facing dubious court cases. Media firms which reported critical accounts on the Duterte administration also encountered autocratic legalism: Rappler was hounded with charges over alleged foreign

Duterte to intimidate or arrest his critics through legal means, providing him a convenient cover for his repressive actions. The enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) amid the pandemic in July 2020, which further enabled Duterte to centralize his already substantial powers, stood out as the most illustrative evidence of the Duterte regime's engagement in lawfare. Designed to "prevent, prohibit, and penalize terrorism" in a way that the erstwhile Human Security Act of 2007 supposedly failed to accomplish, the ATA's vague definition of terrorism and who can be declared as terrorists yielded grave concerns. It possesses "the potential to criminalize anyone in the country's rich civil society ecosystem" (Sajor, 2022, p. 52), even when they are defending democracy. This situation empowers the executive branch to use the legal system to its political advantage under the guise of protecting public security. Although scholars acknowledge the need to boost the state's ability to address terrorism, they contend that the timing of its enactment affected the public's perception of the law's true objective (Mendoza et al., 2021). Hence, the ATA was criticized by civil society, arguing that it would put people's constitutional liberties at risk. Karapatan (2020) contended that its enactment has "far-reaching implications not only on our work as human rights defenders but also on the public who stands to be terrorized by this law". Menchani Tilendo of Bulatlat, an alternative media outlet, nonetheless noted that even when the ATA was still being deliberated in the legislature, the Duterte regime had been amplifying its suppression of critical voices through questionable court cases (personal communication, 27 July 2023).¹⁶ The ATA, Tilendo argued, therefore serves as an additional legal arsenal against civil society participation and every individual's freedom to express dissent.

However, Duterte's centralization of power amidst the pandemic and through ATA's enactment failed to dampen CSOs' vigor in expanding their advocacy and shaping policies. Ansheline Bacudio of IDEALS Inc. remarked that the pandemic spurred them to devise a plan to continue providing legal services to the people amid the health restrictions (personal communication, 25 July 2023). This led to the creation of Tisya Hustisya, an online platform where people can chat with actual lawyers. Tisya Hustisya represents a significant innovation in civic technology, exemplifying how technological advancements can serve a crucial role in legal mobilization and expanding access to justice. This is crucial in contexts where conventional strategies by CSOs (especially those involved in social justice) encounter significant challenges. As stated by Bacudio, "from there, the opportunities for us and our organizations to hire more lawyers boomed, so we were able to expand a bit because many people began using our Tisya Hustisya platform" (personal communication, 31 July 2023). Another notable civil society action during the same period was the CSOs' opposition to the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) Memorandum Circular 2021-12, which required CSOs to obtain clearance from state security forces, allegedly for security purposes and to determine their legitimacy, before they are allowed to participate in governance processes. Fifteen CSOs¹⁷ denounced this

ownership concerning while the franchise of ABS-CBN, which Duterte accused of biased coverage, was not renewed by the legislature which was dominated by Duterte's allies.

¹⁶ She specifically identified the case of Frenchie Mae Cumpio, a Tacloban-based journalist from Eastern Vista who was arrested in February 2020, allegedly due to illegal possession of guns and explosives (Pinlac, 2023).

¹⁷ These are: Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO, 2020), Paul Paraguya, National Anti-Poverty Commission NGO Basic Sector Sectoral Representative, Council for People's Development and Governance, IBON Foundation, Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates, CBCP-NASSA/Caritas Philippines, Non-Timber Forest Products-Exchange Program, Philippine Human Rights Information

requirement for military and police clearance, contending that it is redundant given that they are already required to undergo a stringent accreditation process with official agencies. The involvement of state security forces in this matter represented an extension of Duterte's populist delegitimization strategies. Following opposition from CSOs, the DILG removed the requirement (United States Agency for International Development, 2022).

Political Dominance Through the Party-List System and Digital Space

Another sphere of civil society's work and influence, at least in theory, is the Philippines' party-list system. Theoretically, the party-list system is the most viable space for civil society's political participation. It was designed to promote the legislative representation of marginalized and underrepresented segments of society without well-defined political constituencies. The party-list system's institutionalization in the 1987 Constitution was "a recognition of the important role to be played by the wider civil society in democratic policy-making" (Tigno, 2019). Since its inception, however, the party-list system has been exploited by political clans and non-marginalized sectors for their vested interests (Teehankee, 2019).

This distortion of the party-list system was also evident during the Duterte presidency, as pro-Duterte party-lists won legislative seats in the 2019 and 2022 elections. Lisay (2019) found that 31 out of the 134 party-lists that competed in the 2019 election had links to the Duterte administration through ties with PDP-Laban (Duterte's political party), were endorsed by Duterte himself, or ran under the *Hugpong ng Pagbabago* (Alliance of Change) coalition (a political alliance created to support the Duterte administration). It was also noted that 12 out of the said 31 party-lists were novice parties or parties that had existed for merely three years before the May 2019 election. Despite concerns about the sectors they claim to represent, Duterte-linked party-lists capitalized on the president's popularity, enabling them to perform well and earn seats in both elections (Dela Peña, 2021; Lalu, 2022; Yee, 2019). On the other hand, party lists critical of the Duterte regime, such as Gabriela, ACT Teachers, Kabataan, and Anakpawis, did not fare well in the elections. They were also red-tagged by Duterte himself as "legal fronts of the Communist Party of the Philippines" (Gita-Carlos, 2022). In light of this situation, Kontra Daya (2025) has advocated for substantial reforms to the party-list system, emphasizing the need to challenge the 2013 Supreme Court ruling that expanded the eligibility criteria for participation in party-list elections.

Next to the misuse of the party-list system, another major challenge that confronted civil society was the pervasive disinformation and covert social media operations that shaped political discourses, mostly to Duterte's advantage. More than a political tactic, disinformation has morphed into a "linchpin of Philippine politics" and "a necessary political scheme" to acquire power (Gaw et al., 2023, p. 16). Unlike previous Philippine presidents, Duterte benefited from digital technologies that enabled a powerful force of internet trolls to reinforce narratives favoring him, often at the expense of accurate information (Cabañes & Cornelio, 2017). The cyber trolling aimed at Duterte's critics, including human rights organizations, became rampant. They were labeled in social media as immoral entities and accused of sympathizing with criminals,

Center, Alyansa Tigil Mina, Public Services Labor Independent Confederation, In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity Movement, BALAOD Mindanaw, Center for Migrants Advocacy, Kaagapay OFW Resource & Service Center, Inc. Center for Emergency Aid, Rehabilitation and Development Inc. The official statement can be accessed through the official portal of CODE-NGO (2021).

among other defaming allegations (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018). The rise of a lucrative disinformation industry thrust the manipulation of public opinion into “a dominant political strategy” (Gaw et al., 2023, p. 16). An estimated PHP 600 million to 1.5 billion was spent on influencers in the 2022 election alone.¹⁸ The covert manipulation operations varied based on the platform: Facebook for disinformation amplification, TikTok for algorithmic manipulation, Twitter for politicized interaction, and YouTube for hyper-partisan news and information (Gaw et al., 2023, p. 12).¹⁹ But this disinformation phenomenon, nonetheless, goes beyond the impacts of Duterte’s troll armies in the digital space. It is instead “hinged on lingering skepticism the public has on institutions of liberal democracy, whether it is about the role of the political establishment, the legacies of ousting a strongman, or liberal institutions like the free press” (Ong et al., 2019, p. 35). The Filipino people’s skepticism towards liberal democratic institutions can be attributed to the perceived failures of the democratic regimes in the country’s post-martial law era. Following the ouster of Marcos Sr. through the “people power” revolt in 1986, public expectations were high that the government would address corruption, criminality, and inefficient public services, among other issues. However, many citizens became frustrated when such expectations were not met. Not only did this erode public trust towards liberal democratic institutions, but it also paved the way for the presidential election of Duterte, who promised *tunay na pagbabago* (genuine change) by any means necessary (Batalla, 2024; Teehankee & Thompson, 2016). A tall task thus looms for civil society, as it must outperform interest groups that exploit the party-list system and utilize online platforms to their advantage, while addressing the growing distrust towards democratic institutions.

PERILS AND PROSPECTS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER ANOTHER MARCOS PRESIDENCY

Former Senator Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son of the late dictator, won the presidency in the May 2022 elections. In his inaugural address as Philippine president, Marcos Jr. evoked his campaign promise of unity by urging Filipinos to unite and repair “a house divided, to make it whole and to stand strong again” (Marcos, 2022). However, a gap between rhetoric and reality has been apparent, especially when one examines the extent of civil society participation under the Marcos Jr. administration. CIVICUS Monitor retained its description of civic space in the Philippines as repressed in its March 2024 report, stating the civil society’s documentation of assaults against activists, often through trumped-up charges (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024). Nymia Pimentel-Simbulan, chair of the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates and executive director of the Philippine Human Rights Information Center, lamented the lack of improvements vis-à-vis the space for civil society under Marcos Jr. (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023). She cited the continued red-tagging spree by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) as a major impediment to the CSOs’ human rights advocacies. UN Special Rapporteur

¹⁸ The price measures were obtained from proprietary data on influencer rates by a public relations firm. Such data included historical cost details for over 300 influencers who have worked with commercial brands. Due to a lack of standard rates for political influencers, Gaw et al. (2023) used industry data as a substitute to estimate their rates.

¹⁹ In the report by Gaw et al. (2023), it is recommended that civil society expand its functions as a vigilant watchdog, particularly in monitoring election manipulation on social media and exposing illicit influence operations within communities where such acts have become a source of income. In a separate recommendation, Jaca (2022) asserted the necessity of pursuing information drives that are “non-discriminatory and inclusive” (pp. 5-6), arguing that such campaigns should benefit the electorate, particularly those who may lack the tools to fact-check information.

Irene Khan emphasized the perils of red-tagging during her visit in early 2024, where she examined the state of freedom of expression in the country. Despite government assurances that they neither encourage nor endorse red-tagging, Khan (2024) observed that there exists “clear evidence” that it is enacted “by security forces as part of their counter-terrorism strategy” (pp. 3-4). Khan (2024, pp. 4-5) argued that red-tagging fosters public distrust and recommended that the Philippine government denounce the red-tagging activities of state actors, legislate a law to define and prevent red-tagging, and abolish the NTF-ELCAC. Khan (2024, p. 8) also underscored the role of civil society, stating that strengthening human rights and accountability mechanisms is anchored on enacting “tough reforms” and involving civil society “as an equal partner” in addressing human rights issues.

It is, thus, unsurprising that CSOs were called upon amid the investigation of the killings during the Duterte presidency. In March 2018, the International Criminal Court (ICC) launched a preliminary probe into the drug war. This prompted the Duterte administration to issue a notice of withdrawal from the ICC, which became official in 2019. Despite such a decision, the ICC approved in September 2021 a formal inquiry into the possible crimes against humanity committed before the Philippines withdrew from the ICC.²⁰ Given this ICC-sanctioned investigation, the role of civil society has become critical in ensuring the delivery of justice to the families of drug war victims (Burgos, 2023). Bacudio from IDEALS Inc. stated that they anticipate undertaking more efforts amidst the ICC probe. This includes submitting relevant data, which shall assist both the ICC and local CSOs in holding perpetrators accountable for their abuses of authority during the drug war (personal communication, 25 July 2023).

Earlier in his presidency, Marcos Jr. admitted the drug war abuses during the Duterte regime (Galvez, 2023) and ordered an internal cleansing of the Philippine National Police (PNP), who serve as the chief actor in the anti-drug campaign (Jensen & Hapal, 2023). After the collapse of his alliance with the Duterte clan and their allies, congressional inquiries into the drug war were conducted. Moreover, in March 2025, former President Duterte was arrested by the PNP and the International Criminal Police Organization under an ICC warrant for alleged crimes against humanity during his drug war. The Marcos Jr. government played an instrumental role in the arrest, affirming that it is part of the country’s commitment to the international community (Lalu, 2025). “To redeem the family’s honor” (Teehankee, 2023, p. 27), following their ouster from power in 1986, was arguably part of Marcos Jr.’s motivation to seek the Philippine presidency. Marcos Jr.’s presidential election in 2022 brought him into a position to not only do so but also to demonstrate that he is not a brute like his father. In light of the ongoing investigation into the drug war, it is possible for Marcos Jr. to serve as an unexpected ally of the ICC and local CSOs in seeking accountability for the Duterte regime’s abuses. Indeed, in settings where civil society is effective and the government is responsive to the civil society, one should expect “greater movement toward the consolidation of democratic norms, institutions, and practices” (Backer, 2003, p. 311). In a relevant point, Gallagher (2017) argued that the dynamics between CSOs and the government are crucial for activating necessary legal processes vis-à-vis the judgment of cases involving acts of lethal violence. Specifically, the civil society actors’ impacts in pressing the state for results and facilitating trust and communication between the

²⁰ The ICC’s jurisdiction in the Philippines only covers the period when it was a state party to the Rome Statute (1 November 2011 to 16 March 2019). As a result, the ICC investigation covers Duterte’s tenure as Mayor of Davao City and his first three years as Philippine President, during which his regime’s war on drugs was at its peak.

state and victims of violence “more than doubles the probability that these cases will be investigated and enter the judicial pipeline” (Gallagher, 2017, p. 1689). Therefore, delivering justice to drug war victims and coordinating with CSOs in this endeavor is an opportunity that Marcos Jr. should not want to waste.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK: A POTENTIAL CIVIL SOCIETY RESURGENCE?

In this study, we demonstrated how the Duterte regime caused a decline in overall political participation by civil society through strategies similar to those of authoritarian governments and dictatorships to maintain power, as argued by proponents of Regime Maintenance Theory (Diamond et al., 2016; Geddes et al., 2018). These strategies include the persecution of dissenting voices, personalized rule, centralization of power, as well as exercising dominance in the party-list system and the digital space. As this article contends, what is unique about Duterte’s regime maintenance playbook is its ability to shape civil society’s political participation without relying exclusively on overt legal constraints or widespread physical repression. The unpopularity of human rights-focused messaging from civil society reinforced this dynamic, enabling the Duterte regime to curtail civic engagement without exclusively relying on blatant restrictions on their political participation. Despite Duterte’s regime-maintenance strategies, some CSOs resisted through a combination of traditional methods and new approaches. These included setting up community pantries, expanding their advocacies through online platforms, and campaigning for opposition candidates in elections. These efforts, however, produced limited success. Fragmented and unable to deliver a unified response to Duterte’s strongman politics, the civil society failed to effectively counter the democratic backsliding in the Philippines (Lorch, 2021).

An encouraging development that occurred during the run-up to the 2022 election, nonetheless, was the emergence of new CSOs that champion good governance and electoral reforms. Many of these organizations are led by and comprised of promising young leaders. A church leader surmised that the advent of such organizations may have been borne out of frustration with the re-election of those from traditional political dynasties. He also lauded the objectives of these new CSOs, arguing that they can help alleviate the country’s problems of corruption and poverty, which he described as two sides of the same coin (personal communication, 21 June 2023). Hence, Marcos Jr.’s approach towards civil society has so far been different from that of Duterte’s. Moreover, in September 2025, a wave of protests led by students, religious groups, and civil society was organized across the Philippines in response to exposés of corruption and misconduct in government-funded flood control projects. Key CSOs in these protests, advocating for transparency and accountability, include the Taumbayan Ayaw sa Magnanakaw at Abusado Network Alliance (People Against Thieves and Abusers Network Alliance, TAMA NA), a coalition of organizations from schools in the City of Manila, and the student-led Panatang Luntian Coalition. Thus far, the anti-corruption messaging is resonating broadly with the public (especially when compared to the human rights discourse, which Duterte effectively countered, as discussed earlier). TAMA NA has vowed to maintain these anti-corruption efforts and asserted the necessity for long-term measures beyond protests (Baroña, 2025).

However, a clear and sustained resurgence of civil society has yet to materialize. As shared by a CSO figure, Duterte’s violent populism and the subsequent presidential victory of a Marcos scion in the 2022 election forced civil society to self-reflect and find a way to reach a consensus on key issues, which they failed to do during the Duterte years (personal communication, 7 July 2023). Compared to Duterte, Marcos Jr. has taken a less antagonistic approach toward civil so-

ciety. Still, in light of unresolved challenges such as red-tagging, disinformation, and state-sanctioned harassment, it is essential to approach civil society's capacity to promote social accountability and foster democratic citizenship with caution and optimism. Additionally, a daunting task for CSOs is understanding how to expand their networks rather than remain confined to their respective bubbles. "It is really important to build the strength of citizens from the ground up", said Palabay (personal communication, 27 June 2023). From thereon, she asserted that the resurgence of civil society can and will take place. Tilendo, however, expressed a different opinion regarding the state of civil society in the Philippines. She noted that a resurgence of CSOs should not be expected because they "were never gone. CSOs normally endure peaks and lows and crisis situations" (personal communication, 27 July 2023). What matters in the bigger picture, she argued, is that CSOs constantly seek ways to connect with the people and broaden their alliances with other organizations, especially in times of crisis. Civil society in the Philippines must, therefore, strive to enhance its political engagement while simultaneously grappling with persistent challenges. Striking a balance between hope and a grounded assessment of the political landscape is crucial for civil society to make a meaningful contribution to the development of democratic institutions.



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