



Fig. 1 (above): General Eduardo Manahan Año shakes U.S. Marine Corps Lance-Corporal Barrett's hand at Marine Corps Training Area Bellows Beach, Hawaii, 2017. Photo: Corporal Robert Sweet. Image in Public domain, from www.pacom.mil.

Fig. 2 (right): Balikatan 2019 Combined Arms Live-Fire Exercise, Tarlac, Luzon, Philippines. Photo: Sergeant 1st Class John Etheridge, U.S. Army. [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balikatan_2019_Combined_Arms_Live-Fire_Exercise_Tarlac_Luzon_Philippines).



Praetorian network politics in the Philippines

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The recent rise of right-wing demagogues issuing unsettling challenges to liberal democracies has garnered no shortage of academic commentary. Populists have deployed inflammatory rhetoric and contrarian policies to slaughter more than a few sacred cows. Nevertheless, such figures face structural constraints to enacting their unorthodox agendas. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte's demagogic warlordism has been contained by an extensive praetorian network. For the past five decades, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have constructed, consolidated, and sustained a power network that exercises influence over local, national, and supranational affairs. Since Marcos's ouster, civilian politicians hoping to remain in power have had to accommodate these extraconstitutional praetorian interests.

From colonial enforcers to the oligarchy's soldiers

Under Spanish rule, Philippine military forces wielded despotic power over society on behalf of foreign overlords. Armed service overseas served Spanish colonial, rather than domestic proto-national, concerns. The mercenary character of Philippine troops disconnected them from indigenous communities. Subalterns viewed soldiers with deep suspicion, whereas soldiers themselves remained reliant on the privileges granted by alien political elites. American rule developed, but did not fundamentally alter, this coercive structure. Philippine Scout and Constabulary units projected power through society more effectively than their Spanish-era predecessors, yet they remained an internal army geared toward domestic repression.¹

American policymakers handed off this revamped security apparatus to their Filipino charges as they indigenized the colonial state. Oligarchic elites directed army units towards external defense during the Commonwealth era (1935-1942), while retaining the Constabulary for internal security. However, social upheavals generated under Japanese occupation precipitated an embedded agrarian insurrection that necessitated a military shift towards counterinsurgency. Special operations coupled with civic action programs aimed at winning hearts and minds made the AFP a more visible presence in postwar Philippine society. Soldiers protected oligarchs from leftist movements and derived substantial benefits from continuing American

assistance. President Ferdinand Marcos spent his first term in office (1965-1969) cultivating military support for his creeping authoritarian takeover by distributing state patronage to key units and senior commanders. Having tasted power, the AFP supported the imposition of martial law in 1972 as a means to expand its prerogatives and influence.

Praetorian politicization and network expansion

As the most autonomous element of the Marcos regime, the Philippine defense establishment derived lasting benefits from authoritarian rule. Increased budgets, weapons procurements, illicit rackets, and the formation of militias enriched and empowered the military to a point where it could no longer be controlled. The AFP maintained separate linkages with the United States, an imperial benefactor that could provide vast quantities of supranational patronage. Marcos managed to endow his kin and cronies with huge wealth while keeping most of them loyal. He could not, however, prevent senior military officials from carving out autonomous means to enrichment. Defending these means ultimately came before defending the regime.

Authoritarian rule promised extensive socioeconomic development, but only ended up exposing resource-rich provinces to a new layer of plunderers. Regime predation was particularly virulent in the Visayas and eastern Mindanao. These crony-run zones became epicenters of the Communist Party of the

Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) insurgency. Consequently, cronies allowed military units to partake in their fiefdoms' illicit economies in exchange for praetorian protection.

Marcos's corruption of the military ultimately expanded praetorian political networks beyond his control. While an officer's commission brought great social prestige to men of humble means, it seldom led to great wealth. This changed under martial law. Budgetary increases and slush funds obtained from the United States in return for sending civic action troops to Vietnam garnered the loyalty of senior officers. Personnel expanded exponentially. The AFP grew from a force of 35 thousand in the late 1960s to over 113 thousand in 1976.² Military liaison officers inserted into corporations became the main points of contact for foreign investors. They received percentages and kickbacks in exchange for facilitating contracts.

Personnel expansion and provincial counterinsurgency allowed the AFP to embed its predatory practices across the archipelago. Insurgencies put a premium on military protection and corporations regularly paid off commanders to provide security. Senior officers also engaged in smuggling, extortion, and black market weapons sales. Ending hostilities would only cut into profit margins. As a result, counterinsurgencies became institutionalized. Giving the military a vested interest in seeing conflicts continue made them very difficult to end. Civilians in insurgent zones were subjected to strategic hamlet programs, sexual violence, torture, and extrajudicial killings. Militia units of the Civilian Home Defense Forces committed some of the worst abuses. These

units worked in tandem with local commanders, providing a force multiplier and plausible deniability for atrocities brought to light by church and human rights groups.

Most infractions were initially confined to fringe areas. In the mid-1970s, 85% of the military's combat troops were based in Muslim regions. After 1980, the CPP-NPA insurgency gained traction as crony rule ran much of the Visayas and eastern Mindanao into the ground. This compelled Marcos to widen the swath of territory subject to military repression. By 1984, 50% of the AFP was deployed to Christian areas of Mindanao, including most of its special forces.³ More and more Filipinos were exposed to AFP brutality and criminality over time.

AFP linkages with the United States predated and circumvented the Marcos regime. From 1950 to 1976, 16 thousand Filipino servicemen received training in American military schools and academies.⁴ This consolidated transnational connections between the two defense establishments and gave Washington valuable intelligence on Philippine military developments. American strategic priorities for the AFP shifted as the 1970s progressed. A gradual rapprochement with the People's Republic of China altered the AFP's remit from external defense to internal security. Vietnam-era surplus weaponry, most of it designed for counterinsurgency, was sold in increasing quantities to the Philippines. These newfound capabilities helped contain Muslim separatist aspirations, but they also raised civilian casualties. Furthermore, escalating state violence against leftist groups only increased popular support for the CPP-NPA.

In addition to facilitating predatory enrichment, counterinsurgency campaigns created deep divisions between junior and senior ranks. Recent graduates from the prestigious Philippine Military Academy were brutalized and politicized as state violence turned inward. They faced execrable conditions in combat zones as well-connected commanders siphoned off resources to line their own pockets. Having experienced severe depravation, junior officers felt entitled to demand reform and play a larger role in Philippine society. By 1985, the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) had emerged to issue an open challenge to the Marcos regime. Made up of junior officers with combat experience in Mindanao, it had the support of defense minister Juan Ponce Enrile and Constabulary chief Fidel Ramos. The Enrile-Ramos faction took heed of growing cleavages within the military and sought to coopt rebellious elements. In linking up with a groundswell of praetorian discontent from below, they gambled on drawing enough military support for their position when they turned on Marcos after the 1986 snap election. The Pentagon had expressed avid support for RAM in congressional testimony.⁵ Senior U.S. defense officials felt Marcos was losing control of the country to the communists and a communist victory would mean losing highly strategic military bases. Only the AFP could short-circuit this slow motion collapse, hence American planners encouraged its politicization. The Enrile-Ramos-RAM nexus might not have toppled the regime, that required massive support from social activists and religious groups, but it did fragment Marcos's coercive phalanx. Forces still loyal to the regime were reluctant to fire on colleagues surrounded by unarmed demonstrators. Faced with burgeoning popular and praetorian opposition, Marcos had no choice but to flee.

Senior defense officials utilized authoritarian rule to construct lucrative predatory rackets and deepen linkages with the American military establishment. The AFP managed to institutionalize counterinsurgencies that provided rents, weapons, and plunder. Factional rivalries remained rife but would gradually be contained under Ramos's leadership. Faced with deepening political unrest, the military abandoned Marcos and focused on defending its privileges.

Cacique restoration, praetorian consolidation

It is unnecessary, at this late date, to provide an extensive reiteration of cacique restoration under the Aquino administration (1986-1992).⁶ Corazon Aquino used the popular mandate gained from rallying People Power to declare a revolutionary government in 1986 that vested her with legislative and executive authority. This allowed her coterie to promulgate a constitution in 1987 that restored most old cacique families to power. Yet, a widespread communist insurgency meant that the privileges of a politicized military would have to be confirmed and extended. The rapid dissipation of cacique legitimacy among social activists compelled the national oligarchy to dispense ever greater quantities of patronage and protection to military commanders who kept reformist movements in line. This further consolidated praetorian network power.

The Aquino years saw an increasingly coherent praetorian bloc drive itself into the heart of Philippine national politics. Military factionalism was reduced as Fidel Ramos sidelined rivals and consolidated AFP influence over civilian officials. Ramos began his association with the Aquino government as AFP Chief of Staff. After a short period as Aquino's defense chief Enrile was replaced by General Rafael Ileta, a seasoned soldier marginalized during the Marcos era because of his opposition to the declaration of martial law. Ileta quickly dismantled Enrile's network in the defense establishment by purging the latter's clients.⁷ As this occurred, Ramos consolidated his hold over Aquino, using the threat of RAM-directed coups as leverage. By early 1988, Ramos had assumed the defense portfolio and gradually brought RAM to heel. Most officers jailed for their role in the attempted December 1989 coup came under his protection and were later granted amnesty.

Upon winning the 1992 presidential elections, Ramos established the National Unification Commission (NUC) to facilitate a negotiated settlement with all rebel forces in the country. Although the NUC had some success in curtailing Muslim and NPA insurgents, it appears to have been primarily directed at incorporating RAM rebels into government. Negotiations made mutinous soldiers into legitimate political players. Gregorio Honasan, RAM's principle leader, used this opportunity to relaunch his career and win a senatorial seat in 1995. With one of their own in Malacanang, military coups became redundant. Ramos reined in extraconstitutional praetorian violence in exchange for consolidating the AFP's institutional privileges.

Failure to fully end provincial insurgencies after Marcos gave AFP senior officers continuing access to conflict rents. Beyond justifying defense budgets, unrest kept protection prices high. Corporations continued to pay commanders for security while rank-and-file soldiers extorted money from urban and rural inhabitants across insurgent zones.⁸

Post-People Power developments also witnessed the increasing use of militias. Marcos had expanded militia organizations as a counter-force to the military's growing power. Yet, almost immediately, militia formations fell under the influence of local AFP commanders. AFP-militia linkages deepened further after 1986. The military armed and encouraged anti-communist vigilante groups such as *Alsa Masa* (masses arise) and *Tadtad* (chop-chop) to combat the NPA. Several groups were inspired by various forms of quasi-Christian fanaticism that viewed leftists as godless heathens. They subjected suspected dissidents to sexual violence, murder, and mutilation, often displaying dismembered corpses as a warning to potentially disloyal communities.

AFP commanders transferred vigilantes into more regimented paramilitary formations as needed. Although given more advanced weaponry and training, they lost none of their brutality. In addition to standard usages, such as giving the AFP plausible deniability for human rights violations, militia expansion gave the military added muscle to let loose on tribal minorities, small farmers, and peasant squatters. The need for military and militia coercion increased as Philippine logging and mining industries boomed at the turn of the twenty-first century. These low-intensity counterinsurgencies, interspersed with periodic accelerations, impeded genuine sociopolitical reform and confirmed praetorian power.

All this reached a high point during Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's presidency (2001-2010). As Joseph Estrada's vice-President, Arroyo came to power after the former's downfall during a second People Power revolution in 2001. Lacking electoral legitimacy, she had to construct a political coalition with powerful predatory groups inside and outside civilian government.⁹ A strategic alliance with the United States aimed at combating Islamic extremists provided aid and training that kept the AFP happy. Arroyo skillfully deployed the patronage available to incumbent Philippine Presidents to clinch alliances with senior military officers and provincial warlords. This won her re-election in 2004, but only through the use of staggering violence and fraud. Few were fooled by the subterfuge. Several impeachment attempts followed and were defused with further corruption. Junior officers in the AFP frequently rumbled at presidential plunder and delayed promotions, going so far as to attempt a coup in 2006. The coup was aborted when senior officers refused to join and exposed the conspirators. Continual government dysfunction led to resurgent leftist activism in the countryside. These political headwinds made Arroyo all the more committed to her military and warlord allies. 2006 saw an acceleration of counterinsurgency operations by the AFP and its paramilitary associates.

In Nathan Gilbert Quimpo's view, the Arroyo administration was a predatory regime that corroded state institutions into mechanisms solely geared toward extracting wealth from society.¹⁰ Since the turn of the

twenty-first century, Philippine institutions have mutated into criminal enterprises that cannot be reformed, only dismantled and replaced by more democratic ones. Quimpo's point is well taken, but the degree to which the state's coercive institutions have achieved autonomous means of predation and the ability to impose conditions on chief executives merits further consideration. Presidents neglect praetorian network interests at their peril.

In more recent years, the military has tried to recast itself into an external defense force. The AFP disgorged itself of the Philippine Constabulary, now called the Philippine National Police, in 1991. Riddled with corruption and responsible for numerous abuses, the Constabulary could be discarded and left to handle domestic order issues while the AFP focused on defending national frontiers. Fidel Ramos was the main architect of this initiative. Ramos came from the core of the armed forces' counterinsurgency establishment.

He knew who the rotten apples were, how to marginalize or redistribute them, and could reduce bloated budgets without facing criticism from AFP ranks. Government posts, rather than conflict rents, appear to have been the primary mode of praetorian

accumulation during the Ramos era. Yet, this trend was reversed during Estrada's and Arroyo's administrations as the AFP was deployed to crush internal dissent.

Nevertheless, Arroyo's reestablishment of close relations with the United States after 9-11 allowed the AFP to reconsolidate linkages with its traditional supranational patron. Closure of U.S. military facilities in 1992 removed fixed territorial infringements on Philippine sovereignty. The bases had drawn sharp criticism from nationalist groups who claimed that the Philippines languished under neo-colonial American oppression, a charge not easily refuted by conservative elites. Rather than using the War on Terror as a pretext to reconstruct military bases in the Philippines, American policymakers emphasized close human relationships with senior AFP officers. Joint training exercises and arrangements allowing for the rapid deployment of American military forces onto Philippine soil in the event of external, namely Chinese, aggression provided the AFP with patronage outside Malacanang's direct control. Counterinsurgency operations throughout the Sulu archipelago were depicted as defensive measures against foreign jihadists radicalized in island Southeast Asia or the greater Middle East. In addition, AFP commanders continued to profit from illicit economic activities conducted across highly porous maritime zones. The praetorian network was well entrenched by the time Duterte came to power.

Praetorian constraints on warlord rule

Rodrigo Duterte's iconoclasm stems less from his foul-mouthed tirades and devotion to extrajudicial violence than his political origins. Coming from a peripheral elite family based in southeastern Mindanao, Duterte spent the 1980s and 90s deepening his hold on Davao City. As mayor, he successfully marginalized and coopted NPA violence while encouraging multinational investment. Japanese and Chinese corporations repatriated substantial profits as Duterte minimized NPA extortion. Having imbibed radical revolutionary ideology, and reaping rewards from Chinese investors, the mayor harbored a deep dislike for the United States. He attempted to expand on these connections by sidelining American strategic interests in the Philippines after assuming the presidency. Yet, on catapulting from Davao City to Malacanang, Duterte entered a more crowded political landscape than Marcos initially had to deal with. In addition to restored caciques, he encountered a praetorian network that had spent thirty years entrenching its power. At first, Manila's structures of illicit accumulation demonstrated their plasticity by accommodating the Duterte clique's entry into national patronage networks. Presidential

control over pork barrel projects and budgetary transfers guaranteed outward obedience among most Manila politicians. Unlike Marcos or Ramos, however, Duterte had not spent prolonged periods hovering around the center of power. He lacked a solid Manila client base that previous parvenu oligarchs mobilized to consolidate control. As Duterte began to threaten established patrimonial and political relationships he faced significant praetorian pushback. AFP senior officers did not comply with Duterte's attempted tilt toward China as this would jeopardize training, weaponry, and security guarantees provided by the United States. Furthermore, the AFP felt Chinese military base construction throughout the South China Sea impinged on Philippine territorial sovereignty. Given their purported focus on external defense, the generals simply could not oblige. Senior military commanders appear to be ignoring Duterte, even going so far as calling in American special operations forces during 2017's Marawi City siege without the president's prior knowledge. In addition, the AFP has thus far refused to take part in the Drug War, at least as it is being waged in major metropolitan areas, for fear that individual units would be corrupted by engaging in extortion or mutating into de facto drug gangs beyond their superiors' control. Moreover, Duterte's initial efforts to broker a peace with the CPP-NPA have collapsed, further increasing his reliance on the AFP. The Duterte challenge has indeed shaken up the Philippine political scene, but it has also demonstrated the resilience of incumbent power structures.

Duterte's rise proves that a warlord with a compact support base can win the presidency when he forms opportunistic alliances with Manila elites and deploys demagogic rhetoric. This combination allowed a local warlord to become a national oligarch. Upon entering office, however, the limits of parvenu oligarchic power became readily apparent. Praetorian network interests have placed severe constraints on national warlord rule. Combat operations against the NPA continue and the U.S. alliance has remained intact. Rents associated with these realities still flow into praetorian hands. Baring a major political rupture, Duterte will, like Arroyo, have to construct an oligarchic-praetorian coalition that maintains established interests if he wishes to remain in power beyond current constitutional limits.

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