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PETER KREUZER //

**“IF YOU CAN’T BEAT THEM, KILL THEM”.
FATAL VIOLENCE AGAINST
POLITICIANS IN THE PHILIPPINES**



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LEIBNIZ-INSTITUT HESSISCHE STIFTUNG FRIEDENS- UND KONFLIKTFORSCHUNG (HSFK)
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Cover:

Assassination of General Tinio Mayor Ferdinand Bote by unidentified gunmen on motorcycles in Cabanatuan city, Nueva Ecija province, Philippines, July 4, 2018.

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Since Rodrigo Duterte's inauguration as president of the Philippines in 2016, his war on drugs and several thousand related deaths have made international headlines. However, this form of state-sanctioned lethal violence is only the most recent, albeit numerically largest, expression of political violence. It stands alongside other, far more enduring forms of political violence that target journalists, activists, human rights defenders, lawyers, prosecutors and judges who pose a threat to the interests of the ruling political class.

In addition to these forms of political violence that target victims who are not members of the ruling class, there is another form that focuses on the core of the establishment: mainstream politicians, of whom on average 50 or more have been killed annually during the past decade, a striking number in a democracy, and only minimally surpassed by the most violent polities in Latin America. Even more thought-provoking is that the principals ordering the killings are normally not to be sought in the sphere of organized crime but in politics itself, among the victims' political competitors.

This report is devoted precisely to this phenomenon, which has persisted since Philippines independence in 1946. In a sense, the phenomenon is at the core of the Philippine problem of violence, in that it is directed not against socially or politically deviant groups, but against the bearers of order. What is more, it is often commissioned by members of this very group.

The central question posed and answered in this report is why so many members of the political class apparently feel empowered to eliminate other people who stand in the way of their ambitions and why this established practice does not provoke much public debate but is instead perceived as "natural." The analytical focus here is not on the immediate reasons for commissioning the killing of political rivals, but on the cultural framework that makes this a thoroughly realistic option in political competition. The aim of this report is to reconstruct the cognitive framework that opens up this option to established and aspiring politicians, rather than making it a taboo – a framework that embeds this action in a broader understanding of the potential role of violence in political and indeed wider social conflict. Thus, the report does not ask what motives typically underlie the individual decision, nor does it ask about structural conditions, but focuses on the systems of meaning that normalize or naturalize this option for action.

The analysis is introduced by briefly outline of the role families and the competition among families as well as personalism play as the core structuring features of Philippine politics (Chapter 2). The empirical analysis is divided into two sections. The first section (Chapter 3) is devoted to a detailed mapping of this form of political violence, tracing its modern history, identifying different manifestations, quantifying it as far as possible, and addressing its occurrence across space and time. It becomes clear that while this phenomenon can take different forms, targeted contract killing dominates. Further, it produces the bulk of its victims at the lowest levels of Philippine electoral democracy, the municipality and the barangay (village, municipal ward). The data also show that this form of violence should not be understood as a remnant of the past. Targeted killings are not only found equally in the rural periphery and the urban centers; their number also seemed to remain rather stable in the years before Duterte, with a significant increase since 2016.

The second section (chapter 4) analyzes various cultural practices aimed at containing this form of violence, all of which are variations on the theme of the peace covenant. Detailed analysis of these cultural practices for containing violence reveals the systems of meaning underlying them and the violence they seek to rein in. At the heart of the peace covenants is the recognition of the sovereign decision of the parties to the conflict to voluntarily renounce the use of violence for a specified period of time, expressed through a publicly witnessed oath in a political context.

To the extent representatives of state organs participate as witnesses, as do representatives of the church and various civil society organizations, these rituals implicitly indicate that the potential agents of violence are accepted as sovereign masters of their decision to renounce violence as well as to use it. The peace covenants reveal that their autonomy can only be limited by semi-traditional, hybrid forms of voluntary self-commitment. Although the peace covenants aim to contain violence, they are specific representations of a cultural frame that does not subject politicians to state law but sees them instead as semi-sovereign rulers.

The regular public performance of these rituals, which grant politicians such a prominent position, functions as a form of "cultural priming", in other words, as an amplifier of the message of the politician as a quasi-sovereign ruler. Peace covenants and the accompanying rituals undermine democracy and the people as the sovereign power which establishes laws of the land that are equally binding on all, rulers and ruled alike. As long as Filipinos and Filipinas find nothing strange about these performative rituals that implicitly recognize the politician as a semi-sovereign ruler, the use of deadly force the rituals seek to curb will remain a "natural" option open to politicians in their competition for power.

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1. ASSASSINATING POLITICIANS: ONE FACET OF VIOLENCE IN THE PHILIPPINES*

Despite the Philippines being Southeast Asia's oldest democracy, politics and violence have been intertwined there for decades. Deadly violence has been a constant companion for all who are active in the political sphere from the early years of independence to the present. Liberal media and NGOs in the Philippines and the Global North regularly criticize the violence emanating from the dominant political class and targeting of critical journalists, activists, lawyers and public prosecutors or judges who take action against local holders of power.

Despite this, they largely ignore the extraordinarily high level of intra-elite violence that targets establishment politicians and victimizes them on a globally exceptional scale. What makes this violence even more remarkable is that, unlike the violence in Mexico, for example, it cannot be attributed to organized crime and thus to criminal extra-state institutions bent on co-opting or weakening the state.¹ It also does not result in a public outcry. Instead, the majority of principals commissioning the contract killers² are themselves mainstream politicians. They thus substitute the bullet for the ballot, targeting members of their own collective "in-group." A final disturbing fact is the persistence of the violence: it is clearly not a remnant of an authoritarian past, but has been an integral part of Philippine democratic practice since independence in 1946.

The central question posed and answered in this report is why such a large number of people apparently feel empowered to eliminate other people who stand in the way of their own ambitions and why this practice does not provoke much public debate but is perceived as "natural." The focus of this enquiry is thus not on the immediate factors contributing to decisions to assassinate politicians, but on the cultural framework that includes the targeted killing of political opponents in the menu of implicitly recognized means of political contestation. The focus is on the societal normative and cognitive frame that normalizes this form of violence as one option open to politicians, incumbents and candidates alike.

In this paper I focus on the underlying cultural frame that permeates the very rituals used for containing this form of violence, at least during the especially violence-prone election periods: the so-called peace pacts or peace covenants. These are widespread public rituals in which candidates for elected office renounce the use of violence during the election period. Thus, candidates are asked to promise to refrain from certain practices that are patently illegal according to the law anyway. The

* The title of the report "If you can't beat them, kill them" is a quotation from Carla Crandall (2013):

1 For violence targeting politicians in Mexico see: Trejo/Ley 2021, Calderón 2018, Blume 2017. On violence targeting politicians in Brazil see: Borba et al. 2020, Terra de Direitos e Justiça Global 2020. The link between the assassination of politicians and organized crime observed for Mexico also holds for Brazil. Here, however, the link seems to be more strongly to local militias that actually control certain municipal regions in the large cities, which explains the concentration of much of this violence in the urban areas of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The third Region Pernambuco suggests that changes in the drug economy also play a significant role in this type of violence (see: Norris/Dalby 2020).

2 The price of a contract killing varies significantly. In rural regions it was as low as PP 20,000 (approximately \$US 450) in 2010 (Northern Philippine Times 2010b).

analysis of these rituals aimed at temporarily delimiting the politicians' sovereign power over life-or-death decisions reveals a great deal about the cultural frame underlying the violence itself.

The report is structured in three parts. In Chapter 2 the conceptual makeup of the family as the backbone of Philippine social order that overcomes the modern separation of economic, political and social spheres and configures all three equally is briefly considered. This review facilitates understanding political, economic and social order in the Philippines as an integrated "anarchy of families" (McCoy 1993) in which political power and authority emanate from individuals or "bosses" (Sidel 1999) and not from institutions.

Chapter 3 provides a broad mapping of the specific type of violence targeting establishment politicians. It gives an introduction to historical continuity and change and the forms such generally successful assassination attempts take. For the years since 2007 it also details the spatial patterns of their occurrence and the rates at which different types of elected officials become victims. The basis of this is a dataset I have developed that includes more than 900 assassination attempts. Chapter 4 takes an in-depth look at the peace covenant as an expression of a cultural mindset. While peace covenants seek to reduce violence, they simultaneously legitimate the self-empowerment of dominant political players at all levels to resort to extralegal practices if deemed necessary. This chapter first introduces some extraordinary practices akin to but separate from the widespread peace covenants also intended to control violence linked to political competition. Crucially, these practices share the core building-blocks of Philippine peace covenants in their various forms: a) the competing parties are individuals or families and never institutions such as political parties, b) the actors are free to decide to participate in the rituals, and c) state and wider society participate in a mediating or witnessing way. The analysis of peace covenants and the accompanying rituals combines three different perspectives. First, it introduces current peace covenants as outgrowths of traditional practices, then situates them in post-Marcos politics, and finally delineates the political symbolism of the covenants and the rituals associated with them. Finally, in Chapter 5, the Janus-faced character of peace covenants as an enculturated means of controlling election violence is summarized.

2. AN INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY AS THE CORE STRUCTURING PRINCIPLE OF POLITICS AND SOCIETY

"Tuesday's general elections [...] were fought on purely personal lines. Three parties – the nacionalista consolidado, the democrata and the radical – and many independent candidates were in the fight, but nowhere did party platforms or party principles rule over the personalities involved". (PFP 1931: 4)

This is how the Philippines Free Press (PFP) summed up the 1931 elections. Many efforts have been made by social scientists to replace the old-fashioned "boss" and "family" or "clan" by more modern concepts that provide structure to Philippine political, economic and social order, but the reality encapsulated in the concept of the political family or dynasty is still very much alive.

Despite more than 100 years of party politics, political competition in the Philippines is purely between individuals, families, or alliances of families. This social fact is cognitively and normatively deeply grounded. Despite some misgivings about the undermining of the formal order of political parties and state institutions by the informal familial order, the family acts as a widely accepted and legitimate ordering principle underlying everyday understanding, media reports and scientific analyses of Philippine politics and economy.

Culturally meaningful patterns of political competition in the Philippines never focus on political parties. They do not focus on social-democratic versus liberal or conservative political party platforms. They almost exclusively focus on individual candidates, families, and family alliances whether at the national, provincial, or municipal level. Competition exists between individual leaders, who inevitably seek to establish a political family, between political families and at times between contending members of the same family.³ As families give structure to the political and economic realms, one fundamental principle of modernity, the separation of powers, is severely compromised as members of the same family share in cooperative governance, with some members taking on political leadership positions, while others steer the family businesses. The more powerful families also straddle politics from the local to the national level, in extreme cases with some members staying as barangay captains (village heads) and mayors of municipalities, whereas other members represent the family interests as governors and members of congress. Crucially important is to understand that this principle of family or dynastic politics is not only the dominant option available on the supply side, but is also dominant on the demand side of politics, and thus enjoys a fairly high level of legitimacy (Kreuzer 2020a: 9-10).

This study argues that the still dominant understanding of electoral politics as a competition among individuals and families or clans supports the cognitive and emotive primacy of the family-based social order over the state-based norms of rule of law and fair elections. This goes together with a culturally shared predilection for the cognitive privatization of public office, transforming local government units into the bailiwicks of political dynasties. At the core are "local political machines" that are "created and sustained to support the political ambitions of a politician or a clan [...]. Local machines are built from a combination of clientelist (including familial) ties and short-term instrumentalist arrangements. [...] Lurking in the background to varying degrees, is the coercive force the local machine may mobilize in support of its goals" (Hicken et al. 2019: 10). Thus, certain families basically control certain political territories, as for example the Belmonte family that controls Quezon City (Kreuzer 2020b),⁴ the Dy family, allied with the subordinate Albano family, which "own" the Province of Isabela, and the allied Cari and Petillas families, which "own" Leyte. Yet, even here ownership is always endangered, if for example the core family runs out of suitable family members to fill all political positions crucial for local dominance, thus opening up opportunities for other families to rise. For

3 See the classical study of family power in the Philippines: McCoy 1993. For short, more recent sketches see Rood, 2013; Mangahas et al. 2018. For a recent mapping of political families see: Bueza/Castro 2019.

4 See especially the online appendix (<https://www.hsfk.de/Report0520-Appendix>) with a detailed presentation of the Belmonte's political and economic basis.

dominant and competing families or rising families alike, the core cognitive frame of electoral politics is further structured by a winner-takes-all ideology that pits family fortunes against each other.

Thus, violence can become a rational means for achieving the end of gaining, upholding or extending power. On the one hand, established families at the provincial level may opt to kill aspiring officeholders at the lower level, while, on the other hand, aspiring lower-level politicians may choose to kill higher-level opponents if they believe they have no other chance of tipping the electoral scales to their advantage. A similar logic applies if two candidates of comparable strength compete for office.

While clearly an oversimplification, Edward Banfield's concept of "amoral familism" may be perceived as the underlying paradigm for politics in such an environment of unrestricted familial competition. Banfield developed his concept in the 1950s during his field research in a village in southern Italy. His idea of "amoral familism" can be reduced to one guiding principle: "Maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise" (Banfield 1958: 85). Banfield argues that in politics this maxim results in a polity in which "official position and special training will be regarded by their possessors as weapons to be used against others for private advantage." At the same time he adds that "the law will be disregarded when there is no reason to fear punishment," and the "amoral familist, who is an office-holder will take bribes when he can get away with it. But whether he takes bribes or not, it will be assumed by the society of amoral familists that he does." Further, Banfield argues that in "a society of amoral familists the weak will favor a regime which will maintain order with a strong hand," and the voter "will use his ballots to secure the greatest material gain in the short run" (Banfield 1958: 91, 92, 94, 96, 100). In such a society, normative impediments against applying extralegal means in the contest for power are all but absent. In principle a society based on the core maxim of "amoral familism" would perceive political violence targeting opponents as "natural" and as part of the culturally legitimate repertoire of ruling individuals and families. Such an adoption of Banfield's concept must fail in its pure form in any real society, as long as it is not understood as a selective exaggeration of certain sections of social reality. In this sense, Banfield's concept is an "ideal type" of social order in the Weberian sense (Weber 1949: 90), highlighting certain aspects of social reality and directing the researcher's attention accordingly. The following chapter will concentrate on establishing the empirical referent of Banfield's paradigm with respect to the use of lethal force for personal political advantage.

3. THE TARGETED KILLING OF POLITICAL OPPONENTS: A CONSTANT OF MODERN PHILIPPINE POLITICS

"Why will we kill her, assassinate her, when she is not even an official? And we know very well that she is not going to win. Maybe if she is 'winnable.'" (Baybay City Mayor Carmen Loreto-Cari denying involvement in an attempted assassination of her political rival Marilou Galenzoga in 2013; quoted in Rappler 2013)

"Under the circumstances, the best and most practical way to silence him should have been to fix him with cash, not with bullets." (Ilocos Sur Governor Chavit Singson denying involvement in the 2002 killing of a provincial auditor; quoted in Clapano/Molina 2002)

The first quote from a press conference of a local politician expresses two central messages: on the one hand, the mayor denies being behind a concrete assassination attempt. On the other hand, she states that she probably would give the order to kill a challenger if the challenger was "winnable." Killing the opponent was not necessary as she was not perceived as likely to win. The second quotation follows a similar line: the decision for or against ordering a killing is based on practical reasoning and weighing up the pros and cons. Both seem to blend perfectly with Banfield's paradigm of an amoral order focused on the interest of the members' own family. Such statements of establishment politicians ought to be remarkable. However, they did not attract any attention and did not threaten the mayor and the governor's further political career.

3.1 THE HISTORICAL CONTINUITY OF VIOLENT COMPETITION: BEFORE MARTIAL LAW

The targeted killing of political opponents as the most extreme means of political confrontation predates Philippine independence. An early, prominent case was that of future President Ferdinand Marcos, who barely a year after graduating with honors from law school most probably shot dead the candidate, who in 1935 had defeated his father for the second time in the congressional elections a day before. Not only was the crime itself paradigmatic for the decades that followed but so was the eventual acquittal by the Supreme Court. Marcos's acquittal foreshadowed the almost complete impunity⁵ shielding the perpetrators or principals of the killings to come in the decades to the present. Yet, even though this killing was not an isolated case, during the colonial period political killings targeting establishment politicians seem to have been a comparatively rare phenomenon.⁶

This changed the moment the Philippines became independent in 1946. The new violence of mainstream politics was already evident in the first elections in the now sovereign state in 1947 (for data on pre-election violence from 1947 to 2019 see Figure 2 below). A few days before the elections, seven escorts died in an armed attack aimed at the mayor of a small town in Ilocos Sur province, with

5 Here have been some exceptions, such as the killing of the Governor of Bataan, Conrado Lerma, in 1918. In this case the perpetrator had lost in the 1916 elections and took revenge two years later. He personally approached the governor in his office, killing him with several witnesses present, and made no effort to flee afterwards (Supreme Court of the Philippines 1919).

6 Whereas violence targeting politicians was comparatively rare, both vote buying and various forms of election fraud were already widespread in the colonial Philippines. For a large body of facts and widely accepted rumors concerning the 1928 elections see: PFP 1928a, b, c.

the mayor surviving unharmed. The assassins were associates of the opposing candidate for mayor (Patacsil 1947). A different type of confrontation took place in Batangas, where the candidate of the administration Liberal Party, Modesto Castillo, was proclaimed the victor in the contest for provincial governor after the opposition Nationalista candidate, Feliciano Leviste had been leading in the count for several days. Political organizers and approximately 150 followers of Leviste surrounded the provincial capital "armed with submachine guns, carbines, and grenades and pistols." These were surrounded by a large number of military police, who were in turn surrounded by further armed civilians. Eventually the local administration handed out the detailed election returns that showed the opposition candidate had actually won the elections (PFP 1947c). Despite these instances, with 28 reported casualties and 16 wounded the number of victims was still low compared with later elections (PFP 1947b).

Based on the comparison of colonial elections with these first post-colonial elections, the PFP commented:

"Reminiscent of the war, with its bloody casualty lists, is the battle of the ballots. Grim and gruesome it is, side by side with the count of the ballots the count of the dead, [...]. Past elections there have been, but never such unleashing of passions, such intense rivalries, such contemptuous disdain for the law, such a ruthless resort to violence and such widespread and wanton acts of terrorism". (PFP 1947a)

Just two years later, the elections of 1947 appeared relatively peaceful in retrospect. In 1949 the PFP commented on the 103 people reportedly killed in these elections: "Never in the history of the Philippines has there been such a bloody and violently lawless election as that just past" (PFP 1949b).

Local cases were minor news items. For example the shootout between two city councilors, one of them the son of Manila city mayor, and their bodyguards in Manila city hall, which resulted in one dead and two wounded bodyguards as well as one wounded secretary, while the two councilors, who reportedly started the shooting remained unhurt (PFP 1949a). Two years later, in 1951, a prominent incident rocked the Philippines, the case of Negros Occidental Governor Rafael Lacson, who ordered Moises Padilla, an aspiring politician, killed, after he dared to run for mayor of the newly established municipality of Magallon against the governor's will. The actual killing was only the conclusion of a lengthy and public process of torturing Padilla lasting three full days. In this case, the person who ordered the murder was convicted (Supreme Court of the Philippines 1961). This, however, was no triumph of Philippine rule of law, but due to the fact that the victim was a friend of then Secretary of National Defense Ramon Magsaysay, who made the governor's conviction a personal matter. A few years later, in the same province a municipal councilor of Sagay was killed by several of his political opponents, most of them local government officials, among them candidates who had lost in the last election. Together they used their knives to end his life in an attack that had been jointly planned for several months with the consent of their political patron (for a minute reconstruction see Supreme Court of the Philippines 1968b).⁷

7 For a rather similar case in Pinamungajan, Cebu province, that resulted in the death of the mayor and the wounding of several of his companions in an armed attack see: Supreme Court of the Philippines 1978.

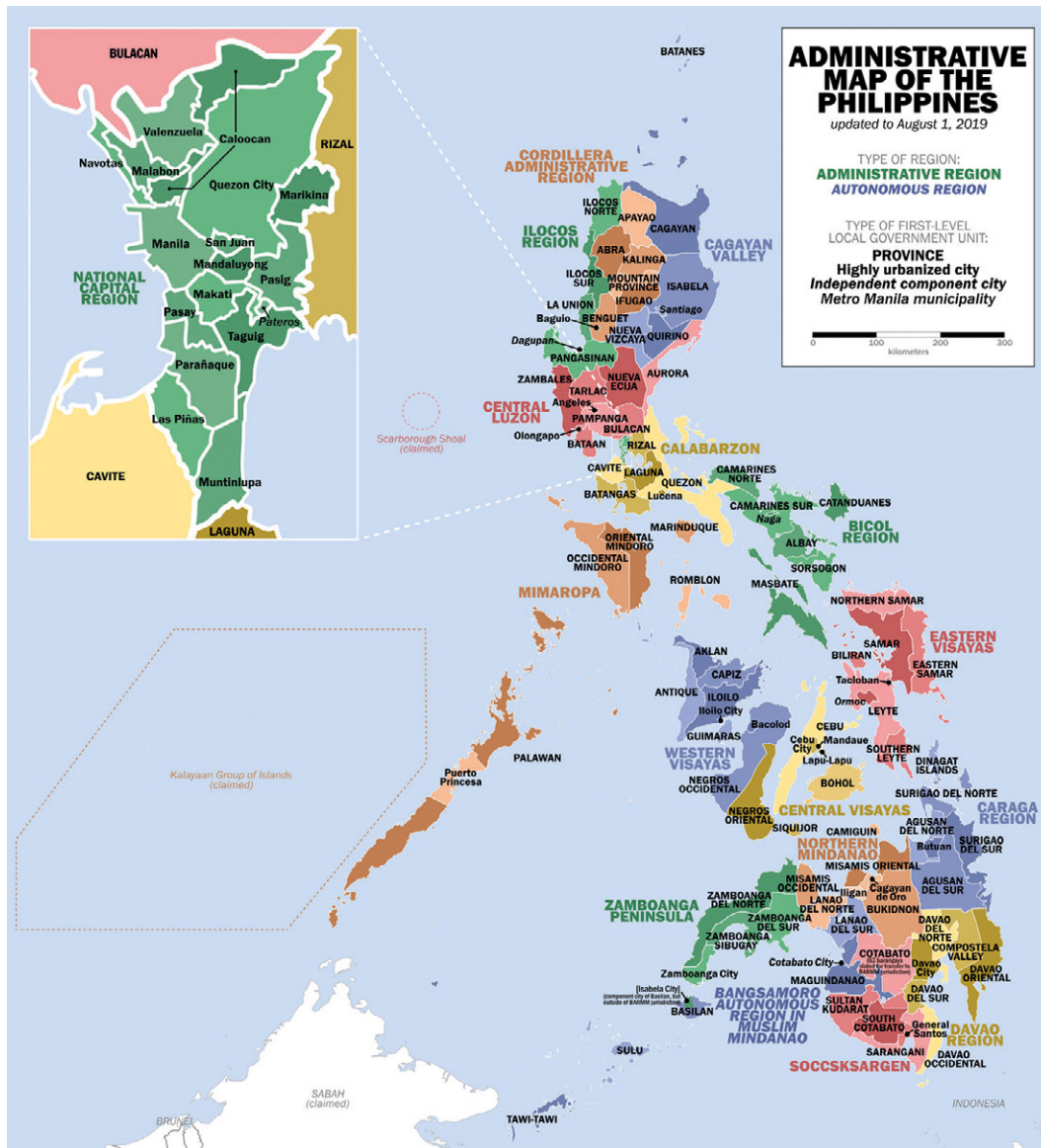


Fig. 1: Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/PH_Administrative_Map.svg by Dakilang Isagani (Own work; adapted from Felipe_Aira's Municipal and city map of the Philippines); license CC BY-SA 4.0.

An interim summary of election violence several weeks before the 1961 elections already lists the death of several dead leaders (i.e., organizers) of high-ranking politicians. In the case of the political organizer of one candidate, the son of then-president Garcia, the president himself was quoted: "I want the killers arrested soon regardless of who gets hurt" (as cited in PFP 1961). At that point, several barangay (then still barrio) officials, among others in Ilocos Sur, had also already been killed. This province also saw the ambush of congressman Floro Crisologo's car that wounded Floro's wife Car-

men. Neighboring Ilocos Norte saw a gun battle between a mayor and the municipal police chief on the one side and the former mayor and several of his bodyguards on the other. The outcome was three killed and two wounded. Only a few days later, "the principal witness during the gun battle has [...] been liquidated, ostensibly to prevent him from testifying during the trial of the murder case" (PFP 1961).⁸

In the 1965 election in "passionately violent" Ilocos Sur, a chance encounter of the campaign convoys of two political rivals, Floro Crisologo and Pablo Sanidad, resulted in "an hour-long gun battle that resulted in seven persons dead and five others wounded" (PFP 1965).

The elections in 1969 saw the next major shootout in Ilocos Sur, this time between congressman Floro Crisologo and his nephew Luis Chavit Singson, who was running for the same seat as his uncle. The convoys of the campaign staffs of the two inadvertently met in a small town, resulting in a shootout between the candidates and their entourages that lasted for several hours and resulted in at least one killed and six wounded (PFP 1969a). In the same year, Floro's son Vincent was charged (but not convicted) with murdering a campaign manager of Chavit Singson, with two witnesses claiming that "they saw the young Crisologo get out of a yellow car in front of the house, point an Armalite at Parel, and ask him in Ilocano if he was 'a strong leader' of Singson. 'Yes, sir, please forgive me,' Parel reportedly replied [...]. It was then that Crisologo allegedly shot him" (PFP 1969b). The feud continued when Floro Crisologo was assassinated in the church of the provincial capital by a contract killer, with everybody assuming that his nephew and political opponent Chavit Singson had given the order. Floro's son Vincent took revenge by burning two barangays (municipal wards) in a town controlled by Singson. This prevalence of gun violence led the Philippines Free Press to title an account of the upcoming 1969 elections: "Have Gun, Will Run For Office" (Lacaba 1969).

Two years later, in 1971, the Plaza Miranda bombing in Manila made the headlines, when several grenades were thrown onto the stage of a Liberal Party campaign rally, killing and wounding several politicians and spectators. This was by all accounts the bloodiest election since Philippine independence. A total of 223 candidates, supporters, bodyguards and bystanders were reportedly killed in connection with the campaign (Tutay 1971).

Far less sensational were the assignments completed in the 1960s by Pepe Sacleo, an unassuming contract killer serving local mayors, police officers and other officials first in Nueva Ecija then also in other provinces (De Manila 1969). His case of contract killing illustrates the less glamorous everyday use of targeted killing as a means of social and political control at the municipal level. Sacleo's clients included larger groups in his earlier years a mayor, and several policemen and barangay captains on several occasions, who had a common interest in eliminating certain individuals. Already notorious as a contract killer he was also linked to the killing of Catanduanes Governor Juan Alberto and Tarlac Vice-Governor Nicolas Feliciano. No headlines at all were made by peripheral cases such

⁸ A broadly similar case of a public killing occurred in the same province in 1957, when, in broad daylight on a public square and in the presence of the mayor, his security detail killed a political organizer of congressman Floro Crisologo and the vice-mayor, both of whom supported another political camp (Supreme Court of the Philippines 1962).

as when the bodyguards of the mayor of a small municipality in Cagayan province shot and killed a vice-mayor after the latter protested against tampering with election documents in the presence of the mayor in 1967 (Supreme Court of the Philippines 1968a).

Thus, already before the period of martial law under President Marcos from 1972 to 1981 politics was firmly established as a competition for power that did not exclude the use of violent means up to the killing of political opponents. During these early decades it seems that open use of violence signaling anger and uncontrolled emotion was the prevalent pattern.

3.2 THE HISTORICAL CONTINUITY OF VIOLENT COMPETITION: AFTER MARTIAL LAW

Anyone who may have harbored the illusion that post-authoritarian democracy might bring lower levels of fatal intra-elite competition for political positions was to be disappointed. The Philippines seamlessly continued this practice after the fall of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.

3.2.1 ELECTION-RELATED DEATHS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Initial evidence is provided by the number of victims who died in connection with elections (see figure below), even though it is necessary to keep in mind that the reported numbers include not only politicians and candidates but also supporters and bystanders who became victims. The data encompass targeted killings of politicians, gunfights between candidates, and clashes between political supporters of competing camps, to mention only a few forms of violence included in the database.

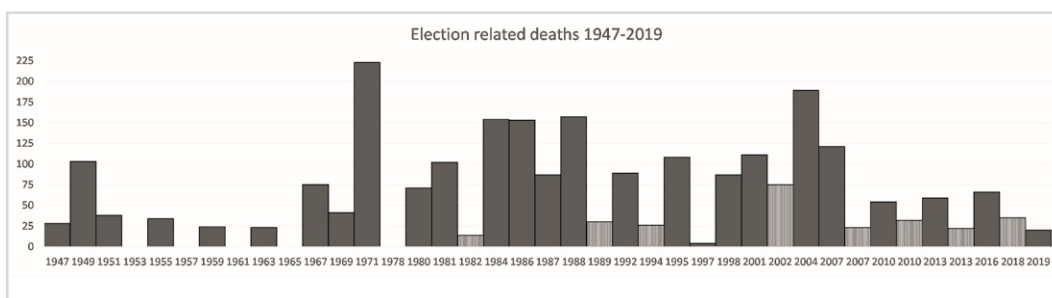


Fig. 2: Sources: Carlos/Banlaoi 1997, Patino/Velasco 2004, Iper 2010, DIDM 2013a, DIDM 2013b, Inquirer 2013, UNTV 2016, Talabong 2018, Caliwán 2019; Peralta-Malonzo 2019. Empty years: no data on election-related killings; striped columns: Barangay elections; gray columns: national/provincial/municipal elections).

Despite significant problems with the database, it is clear that competitive violence must be considered a constant in Philippine politics. While it may be assumed that data for earlier decades are less reliable than those for more recent ones, the dataset suggests that actual levels of election campaign

violence were at least no higher from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s than the corresponding levels in the 36 years since the downfall of Marcos. The lower figures since 2010 must be viewed with caution, given that since the final days of the 2007 elections the police and other institutions observing elections have tended to reduce numbers by including only incidents where a direct link to the elections could be “confirmed” (ACE 2007: 6). While this is fairly easy in cases of group violence, targeted killings of politicians or candidates are hard to “confirm” as related to politics given that almost none of these cases are solved. Thus, numbers can be reduced almost at will.⁹

3.2.2 TARGETED KILLINGS OF POLITICIANS SINCE 2008

The dataset above does not really fit the research interest of this study for several reasons. First, it distorts the overall picture, as it only measures violence that occurs during the election period, in other words generally for a period of half a year every three years. Further, it includes supporters and others who are victims in the context of the elections. For several, although not all elections, the number of incumbents and candidates who become victims can be determined. Furthermore, as the author’s own dataset for the most recent years since 2007 shows, the datasets of election-related killings seem to be incomplete.

In the absence of consistent and accurate data on the killing of current and former politicians as well as candidates, the author decided to establish a new dataset. Given that relevant information becomes sparser the further back in time data go, the initial dataset only uses data from 2007 to 2020. While earlier incidents are coded, it is assumed that the “sample” becomes too small and the dark field becomes too large to allow for plausible statements about the extent and distribution of this type of violence to be made. In order to make such statements, research would have to go beyond the analysis of online news media. Given that one of the highest levels of assassinations had already been established for the year 2009, it is assumed that for the years since 2007 both the extent and the distribution of violence are fairly representative.¹⁰ The dataset from which the calculations below are drawn is still a work in progress, although additional incidents have been rare in the past few rounds of online search. Furthermore, their “placement” confirmed the already established patterns. Currently the dataset includes a total of 971 assassination attempts with a total of 1150 victimized politicians (including candidates and former incumbents). Of these 929 were killed, 146 were wound-

9 The 2016 figure is derived from 72 incidents confirmed by the Commission on Human Rights, with 30 deaths. However, the results for another 62 incidents with 36 deaths were still pending – and were never subsequently submitted. The 66 deaths mentioned in the graph are therefore the possible maximum.

10 The dataset was established via online search of Philippine newspapers and other media. This also included various media outlets, Facebook accounts and a number of media homepages and reports that are no longer online, but were downloaded by the author in earlier years. The search was undertaken manually combining various search terms in a google search (mayor, captain, councilor, chairman, barangay, kagawad, candidate etc. often combined with names of specific local government units; i.e. provinces and independent cities and limitations to the years for which the search was conducted). In addition, the archives of a number of national and local news media were scrutinized along with a number of high-quality blogs that have proved highly reliable in past research. Specific sources were also examined via google programmable search.

ed and 75 were reportedly unharmed. This makes for a kill-rate of 81%.¹¹ In addition, the assassination attempts resulted in “collateral damage” to at least 596 further persons (265 killed, 331 wounded): bodyguards, employees or relatives who happened to be accompanying the targets as well as bystanders. These numbers do not include the assassination attempts that targeted non-elected civilian public employees. Senior officials at all local levels, with responsibility for finances, projects or elections, figure prominently in this area. Police and military personnel were also not considered.

In most cases the perpetrators were professional contract killers often using motorcycles for approaching their victim and escaping afterwards. The majority of victims among the political class were incumbents and to a lesser extent former elected government officials (885 killed and 140 wounded). By contrast, candidates for elected office hardly figured as victims of assassination attempts (37 killed or wounded).¹² By far the largest number of victims comes from the category of incumbent barangay captains; that is, the executive officers at the lowest level of Philippine politics (324 killed, 50 wounded) from 2007 to 2020. This category is followed by incumbent barangay councilors (236 killed, 24 wounded), incumbent municipal councilors (110 killed, 27 wounded) and incumbent mayors (47 killed, 14 wounded). For incumbent mayors the risk of getting killed or wounded stood at 230 per 100,000 positions and year. This is more than 20 times the Philippine homicide rate, approximately 45 times the US and 230 times the German homicide rate. For barangay captains it still stood at an excessively high rate of 57. Brazil, which is a high violence country in all respects had an average of 13.6 killings of politicians for the past years from 2016 to mid 2020 (LaurisHashizume 2020), even though it has twice as many inhabitants as the Philippines.

Finally, the temporal analysis shows that the Duterte presidency has by far the highest numbers of killings.¹³ Whereas during the final years of the Arroyo administration to June 2010 the average annual kill-rate of incumbents stood at 49.7, it rose slightly under Aquino to 54.3 (7/2010-6/2016) and almost doubled under Duterte to 98.6 (7/2016-2/2021). A small portion of the additional deaths since 2016 is probably due to Duterte’s war on drugs, as the president made it clear that narco-politicians were living dangerously during his presidency. As a result, a number of politicians previously named on Duterte’s lists died either at the hands of unknown perpetrators or in “armed encounters” during police anti-drug operations. Despite such instances, in the vast majority of cases there is no visible link to Duterte’s war on drugs. It seems that the violence-prone language and the violent campaign targeting suspected drug criminals had significant unintended consequences in the political realm

11 For additional detail going beyond the data presented in the text of this report see the online appendix, available at: hsfk.de/online-appendix-prif0221 The appendix provides the detailed numbers of past and present office holders as well as candidates killed and wounded from 2007 to 2020, by year and political position and as an overview also by month. It also records the “collateral damage” i.e. companions and bystanders that were killed or wounded as well as the spatial distribution of the killings.

12 Here a caveat seems in order: with respect to this category the probability of under-reporting should be higher, for two reasons. First, the number of candidates is very high and thus the news-value of an assassination attempt targeting a candidate is comparatively low. Second, there is also a large number of incumbent officials who stand as candidates for election. These were coded on the basis of their current position and not their candidacy. Third, information on candidacy is less readily available than information on incumbency, thus again making under-reporting more serious.

13 For a detailed presentation by month and province see the online appendix (Incumbent politicians killed and wounded 1/2007 to 2/2021 by month).

with a rise in assassinated politicians. As in earlier years almost all killings occurred at the local level of municipality and barangay. Then as now there are no indications of any links to higher-level politics. Assumptions about motives voiced by media and police point in the direction of local political competition, business disputes, or the broad category of "old grudges." This last category stands as a black box for longstanding conflicts between individuals and families that may have differing triggers, which, however, tend to include frequent instances of "honor-related" injuries and anger.¹⁴

In the final analysis, motives and thus context are normally not established due to the almost complete impunity shown by the principals ordering the killings. At best, the actual perpetrators are caught, but almost never the clients. If at all, the contract killers divulge that, as in the case of the killing of Renato Malabor, a provincial district board member of Negros Occidental, "the plan to assassinate Malabor was in consideration of a P1.7 million reward from an unnamed principal or principals" (Gelera 2016). Alternatively, plausible links are made as in the 2013 bombing of the house of a mayor, who survived unharmed. In this case the provincial governor had a strong motive as the mayor had just filed a plunder complaint against him on account of rent seeking in illegal gambling (Casauay 2013). Despite the dearth of reliable information, it can be assumed that political competition between individuals and political families is the trigger for most of the violence targeting elected politicians.

Evidence of this is provided by a small number of assassinations in which the politicians ordering the killing could be identified. This was easiest in current replays of older patterns as in armed clashes between contending camps. One such clash occurred in 2007, when the convoys of two competing political leaders met at a roadblock in the municipality of Jaen, Nueva Ecija. As far as could be ascertained, "police assigned to pro-administration Nueva Ecija Rep. Rodolfo Antonino opened fire on a convoy, which failed to stop at a roadblock" (Felipe/Cervantes 2007). After the smoke had cleared four persons were dead and 12 wounded, 10 of whom were policemen detailed as security escorts to the competing politicians. In the same year's barangay elections two local politicians clashed in Pangasinan province. After "a heated exchange ... [local barangay captain] Ozon allegedly pulled out a handgun and fired at Ugaban" (GMAnews 2007). Such heated arguments resulting in armed encounters are more prevalent in marginal regions, as in Maguindanao, where in 2010 two opposing parties met in town by chance: "a heated exchange began and soon, as is so often the case here, the guns came out." (Focus on Mindanao 2010).

At times, politicians also simply use one-sided violence to kill their opponents such as in 2001 when the mayor of a town in Iloilo province shot his election rival to death. What is interesting in this case is that the mayor made no effort to hide his intentions from his companions, but simply "alighted from the backseat [of the car] and shot him with a 45 pistol" (Padilla/LabisteBurgos 2001). The death of a local police commander during pre-election campaigning in Zamboanga del Norte in 2016

14 One of the clearly documented cases – although from 1988 – is the killing of the mayor of Ilagan in Isabela, which resulted from a quarrel with his political opponents that turned into an armed confrontation which culminated in cold-blooded murder. This left the mayor, a municipal councilor and several others on the mayor's side dead and several others wounded. Most interestingly, even in such a rather obvious case, the initial investigation led to nothing until the Manila office of the National Bureau of Investigation took over (Supreme Court of the Philippines 1998). This type of case has become rather rare compared with earlier decades. Instead it should be assumed that in more recent decades anger is more controlled and retributive action is delayed and a contract killing commissioned instead.

falls into a different category. He was shot when he and two other policemen "were trying to intercept a pickup truck where armed men had been spotted." Instead of stopping, the men "opened fire on the policemen." Later it was found that the group were a politician running for mayor and three of his bodyguards (Mindanao Examiner 2016). As was the case with the pre-martial law shootouts mentioned above, these latter cases indicate the potential role of emotionally highly loaded situations exploding into violence in chance encounters.

Intrafamily conflicts can also become ugly, as in the case of the Espinosa family in Iloilo City, where an initial intrafamily shootout in 1993 resulted in the deaths of six members of the family, among them a former congressman, and five other family members wounded. In 2002 two further family members were killed. In the same year another family member survived an assassination attempt, supposedly orchestrated by a family member (a convicted murderer), who was, however, acquitted in January 2010. A few months later, the recently acquitted family member, Jesus Espinosa Jr., had a shootout with two other family members, who were seriously injured. One of the victims, Pascual Espinosa III, declared the following day in an interview: "This is the second time that he tried to kill me. This is too much. We have no recourse but to defend ourselves when cross paths. I am asking persons outside the family not to intervene in our family feud" (as cited in Balitang Ilonggo 2010). Directly afterwards, family members not involved in the feud intervened and asked two high-ranking and neutral family members to act as peace mediators. These were the then city councilor and vice-mayor elect of Iloilo, Jose Espinosa III, and Iloilo mayor and congressman-elect, Jerry Trefias, who is related to the Espinosas by marriage. This proved successful and led to a tri-family alliance for the control of Iloilo City with Trefias as congressman, Jose Espinosa as vice-mayor and Jed Patrick Locsin-Escalante Mabilog as mayor of Iloilo. Espinosa took over as mayor in 2017 after Mabilog fled the country in fear of his life because he was a prominent politician on president Duterte's list of "narco-politicians." In this as in all other cases, the question whether the killings are politically motivated remains open. Even though such killings target politicians, the actual source of competition and conflict may also lie with illegal business, which, at least in the form of rent seeking, is a widespread source of incidental income for local politicians. The Espinosa family for example has been rumored since the 1960s to control Iloilo harbor and all the illegal business including drug smuggling going on there. Jesus Espinosa Jr., twice convicted for murder, was rumored to be the number two leader of the largest drug cartel in Iloilo, in addition to his position as barangay councilor. He held this position until 2016, when he was incarcerated on account of his conviction for frustrated murder. His wife, who took over his position as barangay captain, was rumored to also have replaced him in the drug syndicate. In 2016 she was investigated "for the proliferation of drugs in her barangay" and "found liable for grave misconduct. Still, she was reelected during the May 2018 barangay election" (Tayona 2018).

Despite such exceptional cases, the majority of killings follow the alternative script of premeditated contract killing. This was the case in the killing of a barangay chairwoman in Dingras town, Ilocos Norte, in 2009, for which eventually the "lady mayor here [and] the president of the Association of Ba-

rangay Captains and six others” were charged (Northern Philippine Times 2010a).¹⁵ San Carlos City, Pangasinan province, saw four barangay captains killed within a few years within the same barangay. In 2006 the first barangay captain, Severino Tamondong, was shot dead. In 2009 barangay captain Carmelita Torre was killed. Shortly after the 2010 barangay elections, the new barangay captain, Alberto Manzon, was killed. The councilor who then took over as barangay captain, was in turn killed in October 2011. Shortly after this latest assassination another barangay captain was killed in the same city in November 2011, as had been the mayor of the city four years earlier in 2007. (Punch.Dagupan 2011). In 2016 “a barangay captain and known leader of the Dawis Drug Group was killed when he attempted to shoot law enforcement officers who were serving a search warrant in his house” (Baguio Herald 2016). This all happened in a city with fewer than 200,000 inhabitants and a total of 86 barangays. In the whole province of fewer than 3 million inhabitants, the author’s dataset records a total of 77 deaths from 2007 to 2020, including bodyguards, relatives and aides or an average of 5.5 deaths per year.

Obviously, politics is a field highly loaded with emotion and fairly often also an unconditional will to win and an equally dangerous obsession with revenge in cases of defeat. This is made worse by the tight link between politics and illegal business. Since this is not curbed by state institutions, it translates into a high level of political violence directed against members of its own political class.

Even though fatal violence against politicians is a national phenomenon and patterns of killings are fairly uniform, with hired assassins doing the handiwork in most cases, the local magnitude of such violence differs strongly.¹⁶ It is not surprising that the National Capital Region (NCR) tops the list with 71 reported killings of active or former politicians and candidates during the 14 years from 2007 to 2020. More astonishing are provinces like Abra, where a total of 35 local officials and candidates were killed from 2007 to 2020.¹⁷ An additional 13 were wounded in assassination attempts. Thus 3.4 politicians were killed or wounded per year in a province with only 240,000 inhabitants and fewer than 2,700 elected positions.¹⁸ Adjusted by population this would equal approximately 126 politicians killed and wounded in assassination attempts per year in London, or 53 in Berlin.

15 The mayor was ultimately charged in court in 2013, but not convicted. In 2010 the police reported her as one of the politicians maintaining a private armed group. In the US she had a standing warrant of arrest issued for altering traveler checks. Later charges were for master-minding the assassination attempt on a Dingras mayor-elect in 2008, and ordering the killing of an executive of the Ilocos Norte Electric Cooperative in 2009. She was arrested in Quezon City, NCR, in June 2019, only to be released after two weeks.

16 In more rural regions with a strong presence of Communist guerilla forces, other forms of fatal violence targeting politicians and civil servants also occur. These are executions perpetrated by the Communist New People’s Army in the wake of death penalties handed down in so-called people’s courts.

17 The preceding years saw even higher levels of violence with 30 local politicians killed in the six years from 2001 to 2006 (Philippine National Police, Task Force Abra – COR 2007). Even though Abra, at least with respect to magnitude, is not representative of the Philippines, it provides a paradigmatic example of the dynamics driving such violence: this is competition between political families vying for public office and the perks that come with it. An anonymous female member of one of the local political families wrote: “A YOUNG Abra warlord once told me he did not expect to grow old because politics is in itself a death sentence. For sure, most of those who go into politics do so with the intention of playing it clean and fair. But they end up forming their own private armies anyway because in Abra one cannot be in politics and not have a platoon of goons” (Balesta 2007).

18 These are provincial governor and vice-governor, municipal mayor and vice mayors, members of the municipal boards and barangay captains, and members of the barangay councils.

Overall top scorers with regard to current and former local officials killed for the whole period were Cotabato City with 193 deaths per 100,000 elective positions and year, Abra (100), Sarangani (69), General Santos City (69), Zamboanga City (64), Negros Occidental (59), Maguindanao (53), South Cotabato (49), Masbate (49), Basilan (43), Nueva Ecija (42), Bulacan (41), Negros Oriental (37), Ilocos Norte (43), Pampanga (39), Agusan del Norte (37), the National Capital Region (35), Sultan Kudarat (32), Pangasinan (31), Angeles City (27), Batangas (27), Laguna (26), Cotabato province (25), Davao City (25), Iloilo City (25) and Bukidnon (25), Rizal (24), Cebu Province (23), Cebu City (22), Ilocos Sur (22), Surigao del Norte (21) and Iligan City (20) to mention only those with 20 or more politicians killed per 100,000 elected positions and year.¹⁹ On the other hand, we find provinces with rates well below 10.

A similar extreme spread of numbers and rates can be found within the NCR, where the total of 69 local government officials killed is spread very unevenly. A full 19 come from Caloocan, 27 from Manila followed by 8 from tiny Malabon, and 6 from the most populated city, Quezon. Given that Malabon has less than 200 elective positions this equals a rate of 318 per 100,000 positions. Rates for Caloocan are 89, for Quezon City 37 and for Manila 27. The other 13 local government units (LGUs) together share in the remaining nine deaths. Whereas in the NCR the killings took place overwhelmingly in the years since 2016 (68%) the rates are less uneven for the total sample (2007–2015: 47%; 1/2016–2/2021: 53%). In both cases, however, the Duterte period stands out as the most violent one.

This group of high violence LGUs encompasses the whole range of Philippine political and economic patterns: from peripheral, rural and poor LGUs like Maguindanao and Abra via mid- to highly-developed provinces, directly adjacent to the NCR such as Pampanga and Bulacan, all the way to highly urbanized cities such as Cebu City, Iloilo City and LGUs that comprise the National Capital Region itself. While violence targeting politicians might be unevenly spread across the Philippines, it is neither a remnant of the rural past nor a sole practice of peripheral areas far away from the grip of the central government (for the spatial distribution across LGU levels see the online appendix). Further, the temporal spread of violence within the units is highly uneven, with some exhibiting almost no fatal violence against politicians before the Duterte presidency, to some with high or low levels throughout the three presidencies²⁰ encompassed by the data, to those that had high levels before but not during the Duterte presidency. Thus, the assassination of politicians can be either an enduring or a sporadic local phenomenon. Put simply, while the policies of successive presidents do have an influence on the overall magnitude of such killings, the actual dynamics driving them are to be found at the level of local politics, mostly at the municipal level.

19 Calculation from my own dataset. These numbers exclude those cases listed as "candidates" as this latter group comprises only those of whom no other information is given with respect to any current political position. The vast majority of victims (86%) were incumbents.

20 These are the Macapagal-Arroyo presidency to June 2010, the Aquino presidency to June 2016 and the current Duterte presidency since June 30, 2016.

4. VARIATIONS ON THE PEACE PACT AS A WAY TO PREEMPT AND HALT VIOLENCE

While it is hard to prove directly that the use of violence by members of the political class is informally accepted as legitimate, an indirect approach to the cultural framing of the political elite is feasible that focuses on the strategies employed for channeling and mitigating this form of violence, the peace covenant in its various manifestations. These are understood as specific culture-bound and thus fairly resilient “good enough” solutions to the perceived problem. They are, as Evans (2012: 97) argues, “relative, evolving and culturally defined aspiration[s]” and thus represent and mirror the cultural mindset of those who created and use them widely. In other words, they provide a specific “meaning-making framework, a ‘mindset’ that influences what feels fluent, what is attended to, which goals or mental procedure is salient. [...] This meaning-making framework both constrains and enables perception and reasoning. Culturally appropriate situations seem right; culturally inappropriate situations seem wrong or off-key (Oyserman 2015: 2-3). Yet, people are not cultural robots nor is culture a single framework. Culture involves cultural practice and it always exists in the plural. Thus, as regularly performed public rituals, widely disseminated through the media, peace covenants also function as priming mechanisms. Priming means the more or less targeted exposure of a person or a group of persons to certain stimuli that has an effect on the person’s or group’s subsequent perception and feelings. What is often used in psychological experiments has its origin in real life, as processes that influence which of the many cultural mindsets accessible to the individual is actually chosen as a frame for perceiving, evaluating and acting upon a given situation. Priming makes certain perspectives, interpretations, evaluations and feelings salient in the minds of people at the cost of others. One technique for priming in real life consists of rituals; in other words, pursuing “conventional, causally opaque procedures” (Souza/Legare 2014: 153), as for example a Catholic Mass, a pledge of allegiance, an oath, saying grace before meals, or a political party convention, to mention only a few more or less elaborate ritual events that aim at enhancing the accessibility and salience of a certain worldview, a mindset, a value system or a set of norms. Thus, the analysis of priming strategies is an apt means of making visible the mindset that underlies the practice processed by means of the ritual.

4.1 NEGOTIATING AND ENFORCING PEACE

Before turning to the peace covenant as a widely employed symbolic strategy for preventing violence, it seems useful to briefly digress to a specific manifestation of the same cultural logic of preventing dispute through a quasi-sacred oath to which sovereign actors voluntarily bind themselves. The actors themselves initiate the process and are in charge throughout the process and the process focuses on a specific problem of concern to the two parties. Specifically, these peace covenants aim at preventing violence by preventing competition at the ballot box by means of prior allocation of posts among the competing parties.

One tragic juxtaposition of traditional forms of conflict prevention and modern state law occurred in the Muslim South in 2009. In the previous two years, two powerful families, the Ampatuan and

Mangudadatu families threatened to clash over political control over Maguindanao, which was then controlled by the Ampatuan, whereas the Mangudadatu controlled adjacent Sultan Kudarat while holding a number of positions in Maguindanao. The solution found in 2006 was the partition of Maguindanao into two provinces by the Autonomous Region Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). This strategy, which is resorted to quite often at the lower levels of municipalities or even lower, is supposed to serve the needs of competing families by simply enlarging the cake of available positions. The creation of new entities is “viewed as a way of avoiding rido or clan war that may stem from political rivalries over local government positions. Creation of these LGUs ... give each political family in the region an enclave to govern” (Llanto 2009). Thus from 2005 to 2009 at least one province (Shariff Kabunsuan), 18 municipalities and a number of barangays were newly created by the ARMM.²¹ In the case of the newly created province, the strategy failed, as the Supreme Court decided in 2008 that the ARMM lacked the power to create provinces. Thus, the partition was declared void, bringing the two clans into direct competition for the governorship of Maguindanao province in the 2009 elections, with the office-holding Ampatuans deciding to attack a convoy of the opponent Mangudadatus as the latter were on their way to file the certificate of candidacy. None of the more than 50 persons in the convoy survived. Actually, political actors from the local to the national level sensed what was coming before. As one high-ranking member of the ARMM administration told the author a few months after the incident:

“The national government was saying [to Mangudadatu] ‘Don’t run anymore, don’t run anymore’. Because that upsets the order, that they had set up. But they could not in an ostensibly democratic society with democratic space, they could not just tell him not to run. They were still behind Ampatuan, they knew that Ampatuan will crush him. But for Ampatuan the social practice was ‘You don’t challenge the lord.’ So, he took it very personally” (Interview Manila 2010; see also: Kreuzer 2010).

A somewhat similar event has been crucial with respect to competitive violence in Abra that culminated in the 2006 killing of then congressman Luis Bersamin, who was a political rival of provincial governor Vicente Valera and his wife Zita (then mayor of Bangued) and the Bersamin family. The destructive potential of this feud was to be controlled by a “secret” covenant of unity five months before the 2004 elections. In this agreement, the parties involved divided the leading political positions up for election among themselves. In particular, Ms. Valera promised not to run for parliament in the 2004 election, thus ensuring Bersamin’s re-election as congressman. In return, Bersamin pledged not to run in the following elections and to leave the position of congress representative to Ms. Valera. In exchange, she promised to give Mr. Bersamin the post of mayor of Bangued she held at the time.

Luis Bersamin signed his informal death sentence when he proclaimed that he would stand as congressman again in the 2007 elections, even though he had pledged in 2004:

21 For specific details see: The LawPhil Project (no year).

“In due recognition of Mayor Ma. Zita Valera’s statesmanship and magnanimity, I Congressman Luis P. Bersamin, Jr., do hereby declare my unqualified support for and endorse the candidacy of Mayor Ma. Zita C. Valera in the next Congressional elections after the 2004 elections” (Covenant of Unity 2004).

It is important to note that the 2004 “Covenant of Unity” is formulated as if it were an official document, an international treaty that is put into force by the signatures of sovereign powers. Even more astounding should be that the document carries the signatures of all mayors of the municipalities of Abra who signed as witnesses. Not only is this document entitled a “Covenant of Unity,” but it commences with the old-fashioned words: “Know all men by these presents,” which in everyday language equals “Let it be known to all.” And then the covenant continues

“We, the undersigned LEADERS of the Province of Abra, ever mindful of the welfare of our provincemates [sic] as well as the progress and development we have initiated in the province, and desirous of ensuring the unity and harmony of the leadership in further realization of our visions for the province, do now jointly DECLARE and ANNOUNCE our solemn COVENANT OF UNITY.”

The covenant comes to an end with an almost sacred promise: “We, as responsible leaders of Abra further COMMIT ourselves to UPHOLD and MAINTAIN this COVENANT OF UNITY” and the signatures of the representatives of the three parties and all municipal leaders (Covenant of Unity 2004, capital letters in the original).

Analyzed from the vantage point of this document, the killing of Congressman Bersamin in 2007 was not a common crime, nor was it simply the act of a power-hungry politician eliminating a competitor. It was an act of punishment for the capital crime of treason and breach of trust. And it was a necessary act in order to re-establish an order that had been damaged by Congressman Bersamin. The language of the covenant suggests that the signatories did not conceive of it as a simple back-room deal aimed at transforming a local system of violent political competition into a power cartel, jointly controlled by the leading political families. The covenant is an expression of quasi-sovereign rulers’ unrestricted power to decide on the fate of their people and territories. It is a document that signals a very specific self-image of the ruling families as sovereign rulers of their respective realms.

Similar to the 2004 Abra covenant of unity, several clans united in 2019 in Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat provinces to avoid electoral competition. In late 2018 representatives of several ruling families, the Ampatuan, Mangudadatu, Mastura, Midtimbang and Sinsuat, attended a “thanksgiving affair that highlighted their unity. [...] The activity, witnessed by more than a thousand barangay officials and leaders of different sectors from Maguindanao, was organized by political allies Gov. Esmael Mangudadatu and Vice Gov. Lester Sinsuat” (Unson 2018b). Shortly before this, the two had patched up some differences in a “political unity covenant by Maguindanao’s noble [sic] Mangudadatu and Sinsuat clans in preparation for next year’s local elections” to which “they convened the

local executives politically loyal to both of them to end stories spreading around that their clans are now estranged" (Unson 2018a). As a result, the majority candidates for local and provincial positions won unopposed, with each family guaranteed its share in the pool of political positions. The only real competitive election was for the top position of provincial governor of Maguindanao between two competing members of one clan, the Mangudadatu. Both, the content of the agreements and their form in public rituals convey a self-image of the political families as sovereign rulers of land and people. Yet, with the problem of controlling future competition in mind, shortly after the 2019 elections, Maguindanao lawmaker Esmael Mangudadatu introduced a motion to split Maguindanao into two provinces, a bill that passed the Senate on its third reading in March 2021.

An unorthodox way of enforcing peace is a credible show of overwhelming power by a superior "strongman," whose authority must be recognized by both parties to the conflict. This happened in the run-up to the 2019 elections in the municipality of Moises Padilla in Negros Occidental. There, two close relatives of a candidate for mayor died in the run-up to the elections. Everything spoke against the incumbent mayor, who had a history of violence. To end the violence, President Duterte personally flew to the area, accompanied by the secretaries of the Interior and Defense and several high-ranking military officials. The President visited both parties to the conflict and declared that he did not want to see further violence but peaceful elections. The incumbent mayor, suspected of ordering the killings, stated in an interview, "Consider it done [...] That's what the President ordered...He wants peaceful elections, I said 'You're the boss, done'" (Guadalquivir 2019). This reaction clearly signals not subservience to the law, but to a superior warlord, to the "boss," respected on a personal basis. This was also the background of the president's later statements: "I frankly told him, I told him if you create so much problems for everybody, you might find yourself the ultimate solution. [...] I issued that warning because he was my supporter" (as cited in Rappler 2019). Emotional bonding had also been the basis of the initial request of the surviving candidate, Ella Celestina Garcia-Yulo, for Duterte to intervene in the conflict. She publicly addressed Duterte by his nickname "Digong" and the term "Tatay" meaning father/dad: "Tatay Digong, please help us. Tatay Digong, we need your assistance, we are helpless here." (Politiko Visayas 2019, my translation). This mimicked a child's request for the strong father to intervene in a hopeless situation. With Duterte's personal commitment, violence stopped. While the murders were never solved, the mayor was voted out of office.

All these practices share the trait of pervasive personalism. The state as an institution or a formal set of rules and regulations is relegated to the sidelines. It only manifests itself in the form of specific representatives, who, however, are chosen on account of their personal charisma and the trust they enjoy with the parties to the conflict. Thus, we see a state at the service of political families and bosses who rely on extra-governmental forms of creating and maintaining order. These forms, however, have wide currency and significant legitimacy in Philippine society, as will be seen in the following sections that focuses on the popularized form of the pre-election peace covenant.

4.2 PEACE PACTS AS AN OUTGROWTH OF TRADITIONAL PEACEMAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF A FEUDING SOCIETY

In Muslim society in the Philippine South the blood feud (*rido*, *pagbuno*) is as alive as ever, with a significant number of active blood feuds at any given time. Various actors, from traditional leaders to specialized NGOs, to local politicians and members of the police or Armed Forces, offer their services in mediating between feuding families or clans.²² When in 2019 a 40-year feud was finally settled in the province of Lanao del Sur, prominent mediators were local mayors, with the leadership of the local army detachment in a supportive role. Its commander, hailing from the Northern Luzon Cordillera region pointed out that in his home region the “equivalent to the *rido* is intense. When one camp gets hold of a member of the other clan, he will be beheaded” (as cited in Umel 2019).

Feuding also intermingles with modern forms of armed conflict, as when feuding broke out between two clans affiliated with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2020. After an initial gun battle that left the son of one clan leader (and MILF commander) dead, the local mayor, himself a member of an important clan, stepped in as mediator. The Philippine News Agency reported that the two parties to the feud “agreed to allow the provincial governments of Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat to grace the peace covenant signing” (Fernandez 2020).²³ Not only does the language of this report clearly signal the sovereignty of the warring parties over the peace process but the state itself does so, when it renounces its role in law enforcement, with no effort made at identifying, arresting and convicting the perpetrator. While this has positive repercussions insofar as only traditional forms of conflict resolution are able to put a stop to the cycles of retributive violence, it also has drawbacks, as the submission of the state to societal forces signals the continued primacy of those forces over the state, a signal that extends far beyond the narrow sphere of mediation in blood feuds.

While pre-election peace covenants differ in many respects from settlements of feuds, they share important aspects: they are meant to regulate conflict between families or clans, state actors are involved, although only as observers or witnesses, state law has no place in the agreements, and the whole process is owned by the parties to the conflict, given that they are free to ignore the process or withdraw from it.

4.3 PEACE COVENANTS AS A POST-MARCOS PHENOMENON

To a large extent peace covenants aimed at reducing violence in election periods are a fairly new phenomenon. While there were some initial efforts at controlling electoral violence with the help of agreements between the competing individuals or families, these were fairly exceptional in the early post-Marcos years.

²² Still the most comprehensive study of the phenomenon is Torres (ed.) 2014. For the shift of these conflict resolution mechanisms from traditional leaders and institutions to politicians and state institutions see Adam and Vanden Boer 2015. The state is crucial as access to it provides additional means of coercion and crucial means of patronage.

²³ On another settlement in Lanao del Norte in 2020 see: Antonio 2020. For a settlement prominently involving the local detachment of the Armed Forces see: 55th Infantry Battalion, Philippine Army 2020.

Several such agreements were reported in Pampanga, Cavite and Manila City during the campaign period for the January 1988 local elections (Manila Standard 1987, 1988a, 1988b). Peace pacts did not really prosper during the late 1980s as the particular problem was perceived as negligible in the civil-war like environment of the early years of the Aquino presidency, when the NPA and other left-wing groups and right-wing vigilantes, local militias and the Armed Forces fought for control over the Philippines countryside and cities, leaving thousands dead.

By the mid-1990s pre-election peace pacts had gained in prominence and in ritual elaboration. In the municipality of Luna, La Union province, the two mayoral candidates "agreed not to use guns, goons and gold during the campaign and election period to give the electorate genuine free choice during the polls" in a ritual that was witnessed by the provincial governor, the regional director of the Commission on Elections, and a number of other high-ranking representatives "from the religious sector and non-governmental organizations in the town" (Manila Standard 1995a: 6). The very sizable events of today were already foreshadowed in Pampanga province, where "some 300 candidates" assembled for the ritual, including a public mass oath taking by all candidates, with the convener group's leader Archbishop Aniceto officiating (Manila Standard 1995b: 4).

In those earlier decades, peace pacts were most prominent as a means of defusing tension in the Muslim regions, where their link to sources of legitimacy beyond the state was especially obvious, as the participants had "to swear before the Holy Qur'an." Then regional governor Pangandaman made clear that: "violating the laws of the land is one thing ... transgressing the commandments of Allah is another" (as cited in Manila Standard 1996, 11). Yet, symbolism signaling the limited role of the state is also expressed by representatives of the national government such as Undersecretary Jesus Dureza, who in 2001 commented that the government hopes to "bring warring political forces to the negotiating table" (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2001a: 13). Three years later the Interior Secretary argued that religious leaders and police officers should take the lead in brokering the covenants and not the government, as "some candidates might [otherwise] accuse it of partisanship" (as cited in Esguerra 2004).

Local government leaders also signaled their autonomy, for example by explicitly refusing any participation as a mayor in Abra (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2001b: 13) and the majority of candidates in Pangasinan province did (Manantan-Yparraguirre 2001). Despite these minor expressions of misgiving, by the mid-2000s peace agreements had become widely accepted as a regular measure aimed at reducing election violence. In 2004 the government already aimed at establishing such pacts in 500 election hotspots (Esguerra 2004).

During the past decade, peace covenants have become a highly ritualized mass phenomenon,²⁴ a regular part of the election campaign, generally preceded by so-called "unity walks." Those events gained a semi-religious status given the often religious framing with Catholic Masses or interfaith prayers that precede the public signing of the covenants. Extraordinary binding power is attributed to

24 In 2016 the corresponding event saw a total of 5,703 candidates for local position attend the provincial ritual (Arcellaz 2016).

these agreements that is obviously not expected from state law, when, for example, a Bishop argues that “for the record they signed the covenant as we have done here and we can make them accountable after” (as cited in: Punay 2019).

A similar belief that assumes that personal pledges are imbued with a superior quality can be seen in the “oaths of non-partisanship” signed by police officers in the run-up to elections. In those oaths they pledge, for example, not to “engage in any partisan political activity during the upcoming national and local elections. We shall be free from any party affiliation or exhibit any bias to any group, party, or cause. [...] Towards this end, we shall conduct ourselves as professional police officers worthy of the trust and confidence of the Filipino people. So help us God!” (Philippine National Police 2016). Thus, in these pledges the police officers pledge to uphold what is their professional duty anyway and also promise this for only a certain period – during the elections.

In all of these cases the pledges, while outwardly similar to oaths of office, differ from the latter in crucial aspects. Whereas the peace covenants are voluntary, the oath of office is not. While not universal, in many countries a prospective officeholder who refuses to take the oath, cannot take office.²⁵ Thus, the oath of office is a mandatory requirement for all officeholders. If prospective officeholders refuse to take the prescribed oath, they cannot assume the powers and authority linked to the office. This obligation to take the oath subjects the officeholder to the law, whereas the voluntary nature of the promise under a peace covenant conveys precisely the opposite message.

4.4 THE POLITICAL SYMBOLISM UNDERLYING THE PEACE COVENANTS AND THE RITUAL EVENTS

While texts of peace covenants varied in earlier years, in the past decade a master text has been developed by the Commission of Elections that is currently widely used and also provides the blueprint for any small variation. The covenants have also changed their “official” name to “integrity pledge.” Currently the so-called “integrity pledge,” developed and disseminated by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), encompasses the following promises among others:

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 ensure the prompt and accurate reporting and disclosure of campaign-related expenses. I will not offer or give bribes or gifts to corrupt the integrity of our democratic process. [...] All these, I commit and

25 For Switzerland see for example Bundesgesetz über die Bundesversammlung Art. 3: “Wer sich weigert, den Eid oder das Gelübde zu leisten, verzichtet auf sein Amt” (Whoever refuses to take the oath or vow renounces his office.). For the United States all state constitutions have fairly similar regulations. On the specific case of Obama’s 2009 inauguration see: Peabody 2009. Members of the UK parliament who refuse to take the oath “cannot take their seat, speak in debates, vote or receive a salary until taking the oath or affirmation. They could also be fined £500 and have their seat declared vacant ‘as if they were dead’ if they attempted to do so. The same rule applies to Members of the Lords” (UK Parliament, n.d.).

subscribe to, freely and voluntarily, fully accountable to Almighty God and to the Filipino people as my witnesses.²⁶

This COMELEC-designed blueprint is often adapted on the spot, so that different emphases become visible. The 2013 peace covenant of Sarangani in part reads that candidates "refrain from the use of guns, goons and gold and other fraudulent means." In a similar way, in Camarines Sur the violence-related promise becomes more expressive, as the pledge is to not "employ any form of violence, force/goons, gun or threat." In Siquijor the pledge in question is completely different: "Each of us shall not resort to violence or intimidation as means of getting votes or support to our candidacy," and in the City of La Carlota the particular passage is that candidates "renounce the use of threats, violence, force, intimidation, partisans/private armed groups (PAGS) and other illegal means." In the 2018 Barangay election campaign even more lively pledges could be found, as in Baguio City, where the pledge not to resort to violence was subdivided into a pledge to the voter "not to impose our will upon him by way of force, violence, threat or intimidation" and to the "fellow candidates," to whom the signatory promises "to preserve peace and order by not resorting to the use of guns, goons and gold in the conduct of the campaign during election time."

Even though the peace covenants have increasingly become popularized mass events, the central message itself has remained unaffected. The pledges oblige politicians, on the one hand, to refrain from the use of violence in the run-up to elections and, on the other, also not to retaliate with violence after elections have been lost. The point of reference is always individual politicians and their potential refusal "to accept setbacks in their respective political careers," which may lead them "to embrace extraordinary means to get back at their opponents and those who did not support them" (Baguio Herald 2015).

Representatives of state institutions also emphasize the voluntary commitment of candidates to a non-violent election campaign as the purpose of the rituals. For example, the provincial police director of Nueva Ecija highlights that the purpose of signing the peace covenant is to "encourage the opposing candidates to bind themselves and express their commitment to ensure a peaceful election" (as cited in Nagano 2018). His colleague, the Eastern Visayas police regional deputy director, pointed out that the police chiefs in the region would "invite all candidates and initiate the signing of peace covenants. Candidates are not obliged to join, but their presence is a manifestation of their commitment to peaceful and orderly elections" (as cited in Meniano 2018). In Bulacan province, directly north of the NCR, the regional director of the Commission on Elections defined the ritual as "an agreement for an honest and peaceful election this coming May" (as cited in Balbin 2019).

At the center of these remarks by state representatives is not state law and order, but, as the Baguio Herald paraphrases Abra governor Eustaquio Bersamin, "the sacred peace covenant that embraced traditionally accepted practices of indigenous peoples in settling disputes and conflicts" (Ba-

26 This is the extended 2019 version which differs from the older ones in its inclusion of final pledges to stand against discrimination and violence against women and promote gender sensitivity.

guio Herald 2015). Before the 2019 elections, the Bishop of Dumaguete City on the occasion of the signing of the local peace covenant reminded participating candidates that signatures “are not just scribbling on paper but [...] etched in our hearts and mind, not just for today, not just for display but it is sacred” (as cited in Sunstar 2019).

The “sacredness” of the promises is further underscored by the increasing complexity and the growing number of participants and witnesses. Thus, the last few years have seen a growing number of “unity walks” with which the rituals are initiated and in which large crowds participate, “pilgrimag-ing” to the church or large public venues where the central rituals then take place. These generally include either a Catholic Mass or an ecumenical service as for example in 2018 in the municipality of Sta. Rita in Pampanga province, where “a Eucharistic Celebration was held [...] for those running for office in the Synchronized Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections” (Santa Rita Government 2018).

The solemn nature of such rituals is regularly documented with a host of images, in the case of Santa Rita showing, *inter alia*, candidates and officials solemnly signing the over 4m² poster with the text of the covenant set up diagonally in front of the altar and candidates and supporters filling the rows of the church seats with hands raised for the oath. The rituals are often “sealed with the releasing of doves, symbolizing participants’ high hopes and commitment to achieve peaceful, safe and fair upcoming” elections (DILG Bulacan 2019). When the local situation is perceived as especially prone to violence, there can even be special events, as happened in four municipalities in Negros Occidental in 2019. The municipalities were perceived to be threatened by “emerging intense political rivalry” and as a result “were directed to conduct separate signing activities to prevent any election-related incidents” (Masculino 2019) in addition to the more general efforts of the provincial government.

The resulting situation is paradoxical and the message ambivalent. On the one hand, the ritual aims to reduce violence emanating from elites competing for positions by getting these elites to voluntarily renounce the use of violence in a public process visible to all. On the other hand, the ritual thereby confirms that this duty to refrain from violence emerges from the ritual and not from state law itself. The additional pledge and the binding character attributed to it signal that the elites competing for posts are perceived to be insufficiently bound by state law. Put simply, by its very existence and broad acceptance the ritual recognizes the autonomy of the political class from the laws of the land to which they explicitly subscribe on a voluntary basis in a public ritual. The participation of high-ranking representatives of the state, from officers of the army to police commanders and leading officials from various ministries or the state election commission to higher-ranking elected politicians, shows that the state itself confirms this symbolic re-evaluation. The participation of dignitaries from the various faith communities gives the act a sacred character, which is enhanced when the act takes place in a church and when it is preceded by a “march of unity” very similar to a religious procession.

Given the unabatedly high and actually rising number of more or less successful assassination attempts and other forms of political violence during the election period, one of the most surprising phenomena after each election, is the official assessment that recent elections were fairly peaceful

and more orderly than earlier ones.²⁷ These assessments are repeated regularly despite detailed reporting of cases of election violence in the months preceding and the weeks following the elections. In the wake of the 2018 local elections, the Philippine police and Armed Forces concluded – with no objections from media – that the elections had been peaceful given that only 13 persons were reportedly killed in election-related incidents (Laude 2018). Despite this, the author’s dataset documents a total of 33 deaths of incumbents and candidates for the first five months of the year, after 56 were killed in 2017. Furthermore, the political violence between election seasons is almost completely ignored. In 2018 the rise of killings in the aftermath of the elections went unnoticed (80 killings from June to December out of 113 in the whole year). Neither the excessive levels of killings in 2019 and 2020 (112 and 91), nor the 22 deaths in January 2021 alone elicited any serious response from either media or the state. Finally, there is no effort at comparing the Philippines with its neighbors, neither of which exhibits kill levels of politicians that even remotely approach that of the Philippines except for Thailand to a certain extent and in certain periods (Vititanon 2017; Kongkirati 2013, 2017). Thus, cognitively, the preceding violence is to a large extent erased and the strategies employed to control this violence validated.

5. THE JANUS-FACED CHARACTER OF A CULTURAL SOLUTION TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The immediate reasons for targeted killings are varied, ranging from the desire to eliminate an opponent who probably cannot be defeated to the wish for revenge against an opponent who has won at the ballot box. In addition, there are many economic motives, since most politicians are also involved in a variety of local businesses for which access to public resources can be central. The close connection between politics and certain forms of crime should not be overlooked (illegal gambling, drug trafficking, the kidnapping industry, or organized car or motorcycle larceny and protection money). Finally, the cryptic phrase “longstanding grudge” is repeatedly found in media and police reports, which can refer to land or other business conflicts as well as insults and other banalities. The large number of semi-public armed encounters attests to the non-negligible role of the emotional dimension, of anger, pride and honor in the escalation of political competition. Which of the many conflicting motives apply in individual cases remains unclear, as do the principals who ordered the killings but are almost never brought to justice.

27 In 2016 the National Citizens Movement for Free Elections was of the opinion that the election was not only more orderly than previous elections, but also that election violence was “minimal” (UNTV 2016). Reports on the 2013 national elections “prompted the Philippine National Police to declare the May 2013 election more peaceful” than earlier ones (VeraFiles 2013a). The October 2013 Barangay polls were perceived to have been “generally peaceful; incidents isolated” (VeraFiles 2013b). In 2010, the Asian Network for Free Elections, ANFREL, summed up that “the elections no doubt were an important step in strengthening the democratic order through electoral politics” with, among other things, much lower levels of violence that “is said to have resulted from the cooperative approach of the various elections stakeholders” (ANFREL 2010, pp. 16, 91). With respect to the 2001 elections, the Philippine Daily Inquirer carried two headlines on the same page, the one proclaiming “Polls ‘generally peaceful’” and the other “72 Dead: 2001 elections turning out to be the bloodiest since ‘92” (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2001, May 15, p. 1). No wonder that the recent 2019 election was also portrayed in positive terms. The PNP detailed that “incidents of election-related violence this year declined by 60 percent as compared to the last elections” (Caliwan 2019).

While democracy is about political competition, it is rule-based and the most crucial rule is that bullets must not replace victory at the ballot box. This report asked why politicians include murder into their menu of appropriate strategies for political competition to such a large extent and why this perversion of democratic competition has been so easy to sustain in the Philippines during the past decades, why this enduring way of doing politics does not spark public outrage.

This report provides a preliminary answer by focusing on a strategy employed to control this type of violence at least during election times, the peace covenant. It is argued that the widespread use and affirmative presentation of the peace covenants actually confirms the cultural acceptance of murder as a means for gaining, upholding or furthering political power or taking revenge in the case of failure. It also affirms that neither of the participants, that is to say, incumbent politicians and candidates on the one hand and representatives of state and civil society on the other, assumes that state law prohibiting murder is a meaningful reference guiding politicians' calculations. Instead, the language of the covenants and the ritual itself are understood as a superior means of committing candidates to non-violent action, albeit only in a narrowly defined framework: in relation to their election campaigns.

These covenants fulfill one of the core functions of rituals, that is "to maintain an illusion of control. An illusion of control is inferred when participants believe or respond as if contingencies between their behavior and the outcome exist, even if outcomes are random" (Souza/Legare 2014: 153). This gives rise to the post-election necessity to frame elections as fairly peaceful and orderly despite overwhelming proof of the opposite.

In both the traditional peace covenant as a means of ending family feuding and the modern variations aimed at preventing violence, the seemingly sacred oath and the elaborate ritual show that the submission of the political class to the law is not self-evident from the point of view of either the rulers or the ruled. The regular repetition of peace covenant rituals throughout the country confirms and reinforces the right of politicians to use extralegal force in political competition as part of the cultural repertoire of political rule in the Philippines, notwithstanding the fact that such use of force is, of course, illegal in the Philippines as in all other states of the world.

It is precisely the voluntary renunciation of violence and the subordinate role of state and social actors in the rituals that testify to the social perception of political actors as essentially sovereign rulers over life and death, who are in many respects not subject to law, but empowered to freely decide whether, when and under what conditions they submit to it. Thus, the killing of a politician, generally commissioned by one of his or her competitors, never results in moral outrage, neither within the political class nor from the public at large, as it has its place in the cultural universe of acceptable strategies for political survival.

While the specific strategies designed to prevent or halt violence may be more or less functional as a social practice, these strategies highlight a collective refusal neither to commit politicians to observing state law nor grant them a special position in society in this regard. These strategies also perpetuate an order that normatively and cognitively legitimizes incumbents and candidates employ-

ing fatal violence as long as they have not sworn to abstain from it. Thus, they diminish democracy and the people as sovereign by allowing politicians to decide for themselves whether they "freely and voluntarily" submit to the laws of the land, which have been enacted by the people as sovereign and binding on all. As long as Filipinos and Filipinas find nothing strange about these practices in which the position of politicians above the law is implicitly recognized in ritual, the practices the ritual aims to temporarily suspend will remain a "natural" option for action, and will continue unchanged. Given that up to now there has been little to suggest that peace covenants are actually capable of reducing violence to any significant degree, it is time to critically rethink their application and question the patterns of societal meaning associated with this form of political violence.

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PETER KREUZER //

**“IF YOU CAN’T BEAT THEM, KILL THEM”.
FATAL VIOLENCE AGAINST
POLITICIANS IN THE PHILIPPINES**

The killing of political opponents is an established practice in the Philippines, to which several dozen officeholders fall victim each year and which undermines democracy. In this report, Peter Kreuzer presents a detailed data set on this type of violence and answers the questions why the practice is so widespread and why it hardly ever provokes public debate. The analysis focuses on the peace covenant, a central means of symbolic politics to contain violence, but one that unintentionally naturalizes it.

Dr Peter Kreuzer is a senior researcher in PRIF’s research department “Intrastate Conflict.” In his research he focuses on Philippine domestic politics, violence in multiethnic societies, and maritime conflicts in East and Southeast Asia.