

Belligerence as Argument: The Allure of the War Metaphor in Philippine Presidential Speeches

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Abstract: *This paper examines the “war on drugs” rhetoric of populist Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and argues that such a rhetoric is a reiteration of a kind of belligerent rhetoric invoked by his predecessors. Cognitive linguists like Semino (2008) have noted that the use of war as a metaphor serves as a means by which political rhetors frame their solutions to long-standing and intractable problems. The paper investigates more specifically how the use of war metaphor had been deployed in Philippine presidential speeches especially those of Duterte. Invoking the war metaphor involves not just the government’s strong resolve to address intractable national problems like poverty, the insurgency or drug abuse. The metaphor is also particularly useful when silencing opposing views or critical perspectives while boosting the position of the government as the infallible leader of the nation. The war metaphor then has not only constituted the government’s argument against what it deems as the causes of national problems; it has also launched an argument that has sustained the government’s legitimacy amidst dissent and opposition. The paper will end by reflecting on how the use of war metaphor in Philippine presidential rhetoric is inextricably interlinked with the global discourse on war and how such a framing potentially obliterates fundamental values of freedom and democracy in a postcolonial nation-state.*

Keywords: war metaphor, Philippine presidency, presidential rhetoric, Rodrigo Duterte, belligerent rhetoric

Introduction

Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte is arguably notorious the world over for his crude rhetoric. He cursed the Pope for causing traffic in Manila (Ranada 2015), called former US President Barack Obama a “son of a whore” (*South China Morning Post* 2016), made a rather distasteful rape joke about a dead Australian missionary (Romero 2018), likened himself to Hitler (*Agence France-Presse* 2018), cursed the European Union (*The Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2017), and released a few other statements that have made some observers call his demeanor “unpresidential” (*BBC News* 2016; Chandran 2017). What has made

him highly controversial though is not so much what Obama calls Duterte's "colorful language", but his "war on drugs" policy – a contested policy considered by critics to have sanctioned the extra-judicial killing of hundreds of suspected drug pushers and drug addicts in the Philippines.

The war on drugs policy is central to Duterte's presidency and his defense of this contested policy has often driven him to utter that most incendiary comments to get back at his critics. Interestingly, Duterte has sustained his massive popularity notwithstanding the criticism of his war on drugs policy from both local and foreign media, human rights groups, and politicians especially from the United States and the European Union. This paper suggests that Duterte's belligerent rhetoric expressed in his justification of his most controversial policy has to a large extent contributed significantly to his Teflon presidency (Chanco 2020) and his grip of power. Somehow reminiscent of Joseph Goebbels' powerful use of anti-semitic propaganda in Nazi Germany, this belligerent rhetoric casts Duterte as the quintessential Filipino macho who appears strongly as action-oriented and whose character appeals to the general public's penchant for quick fixes and instant results.

This paper ultimately seeks to shed light on Duterte's belligerent discourse by contextualizing it as a reproduction of a long-standing strand of presidential rhetoric crafted, recrafted, perpetuated and circulated by his predecessors. I argue that the war metaphor has particularly been useful when silencing opposing views or critical perspectives while boosting the position of the government as the infallible leader of the nation. The war metaphor then has not only constituted the government's argument against national problems; it has also offered an argument that has sustained the government's legitimacy amidst dissent and opposition.

Metaphor and War

This study situates itself in academic conversations on metaphor not just as a linguistic expression but as part of a person's conceptual system. This idea was advanced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*. These authors believe that metaphors play "a central role in the construction of social and political reality", as they are capable of creating new meanings, creating similarities, and defining a new reality (159, 211). Political leaders' choice of metaphors can reproduce or alter the way we conceptualize our socio-political reality (Navera 2011). The crafting of public policies is partly dependent on what metaphors are deployed to communicate them. To Lakoff and Johnson, the choice of metaphorical terms has significant implication on the political and economic system:

Political and economic ideologies are framed in metaphorical terms. Like all other metaphors, political and economic metaphors can hide aspects of reality. But in the area of politics and economics, metaphors matter more, because they

constrain our lives. A metaphor in political or economic system, by virtue of what it hides, can lead to human degradation. (1980, 236)

Charteris-Black (2004, 2005, 2007) extends Lakoff and Johnson's theory by underscoring the need to understand metaphor in public discourse from both cognitive-linguistic and pragmatic perspectives. By emphasizing the pragmatic view Charteris-Black recognizes that "metaphor is effective in realizing the speaker's underlying goal of persuading the hearer because of its potential of moving us" (11). This acknowledges the emotional impact of metaphors because its use "taps into an accepted communal system of values" (12).

But metaphors are not just a strategy for persuasion. They are constitutive of society, too. In regard to this idea, political discourse analyst Paul Chilton (2006) acknowledges the work of Giambattista Vico as the most significant early contribution to the study of language and politics. According to Chilton, Vico views metaphor not just as a strategy for persuasion but also as "an important ingredient in the historical evolution of societies and political cultures" (39):

For Vico, metaphor is both a process of understanding and a process whereby individuals and groups interact with one another in civil society and in the production of that society. *Metaphor is thus not a rhetorical ornament, but a constitutive part of thought and society.* (39; emphasis mine)

It is this constitutive role of metaphors that helps us explain the relationship between metaphors and policy making. As Chilton explains, "I assume policies result from perceived interests, are expressed in verbal formulations and declarations, and result in actions corresponding to a greater or lesser degree with those formulations and declarations" (68).

One of the most common metaphors used to frame public policies is the metaphor of war (Flusberg, Matlock and Thibodeau 2018). Semino (2008) notes that

war metaphors are often used in relation to particularly serious and intractable problems, and to the initiatives and strategies that are developed in order to solve them. This leads to expressions such as 'war against crime,' 'war against inflation,' 'war against drugs,' 'combating unemployment,' 'combating the drug trade' and so on. Metaphors such as these emphasize the gravity and urgency of the problem in question, and the seriousness of the effort that is being made to solve it. (100)

Flusberg, Matlock and Thibodeau (2018) in their examination of war metaphors in public discourse argue that war metaphors are omnipresent because of two things. One, "they draw on basic and widely shared schematic knowledge that efficiently structures our ability to reason and communicate about many different types of situations" (1). And two, "they reliably express an urgent, negatively valenced emotional tone that captures attention and

motivates action” (ibid.). However, they also contend that blanket statements or generalizations about the effectiveness of war metaphors cannot be made because the meaning and consequences of war metaphors are inextricably interlinked to the context in which they are used (ibid.). This emphasis in context has opened up a possibility for me to try to understand how the war metaphor is used in the evolving socio-political context of the Philippines.

Rodrigo Duterte and his War on Drugs Policy

Before becoming president, Duterte was a long-time mayor of Davao City, the Philippines’ largest city located in the southern island of Mindanao. He was particularly notorious for his strongman tactics and has been constantly linked to the Davao Death Squad, an underground group infamous for its vigilante-type of fighting criminality in the city. Duterte’s obvious disdain for human rights did not deter him from seeking the highest office and from getting a landslide victory in the presidential polls. In fact, his presidential victory is often attributed to his promise to exercise strong political will, including a promise to get rid of the drug problem through a “bloody” war against drug syndicates, drug pushers, and drug addicts within a short period of time.

Investigations on his involvement in the vigilante killings began when he was mayor, but it was during the first year of his presidency that a highly publicized senate hearing was carried out on Duterte’s drug war and its link to a disturbing increase in the cases of extrajudicial killings. As Duterte enjoyed the support of the majority of the senators, the result of the hearing went in his favor. In what seemed like a reversal of fortune, his justice secretary carried out an investigation that eventually implicated Duterte’s chief critic in the senate. That senator, Leila de Lima, has remained incarcerated since then.

Duterte’s war on drugs policy has been described by the Human Rights Watch as “murderous.” (Human Rights Watch 2019) While the drug problem in the Philippines remains palpable and should be dealt with in a systematic manner, Duterte’s policy has led to state repression and atrocities in the country. Specifically, it has resulted in extrajudicial killings (EJK) where suspected drug users and dealers had been executed without due process. The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) has reported that 4,948 drug users and dealers died from July 1, 2016 to September 30, 2018 (Human Rights Watch 2019). The figure excludes thousands executed by unidentified gunmen (ibid.). The Philippine National Police (PNP) has classified 22,983 deaths by unidentified, usually masked gunmen under the “war on drugs” policy as “homicides under investigation.” No exact official figure on the casualties of the drug war has been released by the government.

One would think that the drug policy-related issues confronting Duterte would result in a slide in his popularity. But the opposite is true. Duterte has not only remained hugely popular in the Philippines; he has also become more brash in his actions and decisions in both the domestic and international fronts.

Duterte's popularity and his audacity to be more aggressive with his war on drugs policy may be attributed to Duterte's mobilization of belligerent rhetoric, which is not unique to him, but can in fact be traced back to the rhetoric of his predecessors.

War Rhetoric in Philippine Political Discourse

The use of war metaphors is arguably a common feature of Philippine presidential discourse, but it might have found its full expression and fortification in Ferdinand Marcos's rhetoric of constitutional authoritarianism (Navera 2018a). In my study of Marcos's use of metaphor to frame his imposition of martial law in 1972 and his justification of it after its lifting, I argue that "Marcos's rhetoric on martial law suggests two seemingly contradictory but complementary conceptualizations: on the one hand, martial law is a democratic instrument to preserve society; on the other hand, martial law is a democratic agency of change. Both these conceptualizations appear to constitute the broader frame: martial law is democratic" (445). In other words, martial law which is essentially a means to wage war against what Marcos considered "the perils of society" is rendered acceptable through democratic metaphors. This then renders war as a useful resource to discuss how society can be both protected and developed. Notwithstanding staunch resistance from activists, journalists, and Marcos's political opponents (*Makibaka* 1978, Quimpo and Quimpo 2012, Reyes 2018), the repeated use of the Marcosian metaphors through a sustained series of presidential statements and publications has made martial law palatable even long after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship.

In fact, Marcosian rhetoric has been so pervasive that it has been invoked by his successors in their presidential addresses. Marcos's belligerent rhetoric may be gleaned from his successors' metaphoric constructions of rebellion, the military solution, political stability, and even dissent or criticism of the incumbent leader (Navera 2018a, 441). In other words, Marcos's militaristic view of the national problems has been conveniently invoked by his successors.

For instance, in the State of the Nation Addresses of Joseph Estrada and Gloria Arroyo, the communist rebels or insurgents are framed as diseases, pests, or terrorists that need to be expelled from communities and the national body at large while rendering the militarist solution as the much-needed antidote:

Hindi binebeybi ang rebelyon. Pinipisa. Kaya, huwag n'yo kaming hamunin! Gayon din ang masasabi ko tungkol sa krimen at mga salarin. Hindi nilalambing ang krimen. Dinudurog. Hindi kinukupkup ang kriminal. Pinaparusahan. [Rebellion is not to be treated like a baby. It is squashed. So don't you dare challenge us! The same applies to crime and its perpetrators. A crime is not something to be coddled. It is crushed. A criminal is not somebody to be harbored. He is punished.]. (Estrada 1999)

And we will end the long oppression of barangays by *rebel terrorists* who kill without qualms, even their own. Sa mga lalawigang sakop ng 7th Division, nakikibaka sa kalaban si Jovito Palparan.¹ Hindi siya aatras hanggang makawala sa gabi ng kilabot ang mga pamayanan at maka-ahon sa bukas ng liwayway ng hustisiya at kalayaan. [For those provinces covered by the 7th Division, Jovito Palparan is fighting against the enemy. He will not stop until you are freed from the dark night of fear and reach the dawn of justice and freedom.]. (Arroyo 2006)

The expressions used in the extracts are not only reminiscent of Marcos in that they remind us of how martial law rendered rebellion as objects to be crushed and eliminated. They also suggest the all too familiar Marcos war frame that is conveniently invoked to address national problems like the insurgency. The war frame involves the use of military or hard power in order to eliminate the enemy. In various ways and levels, this frame was also present in the rhetoric of other post-Marcos presidents such as Corazon Aquino, Fidel Ramos, and Benigno Aquino III, especially when dealing with the communist and Moro rebellions and even public criticism (Navera 2018a, 442-443).

Corazon Aquino, who emerged as the anti-dictatorial heroine by casting herself as the anti-thesis of Marcos, invoked democracy as a “weapon” against communist insurgency and military rebellion (Navera 2012). Her successor Fidel Ramos was more implicit by invoking “political stability” in order to gain “global competitiveness” (ibid.). This political stability entailed the militarization of economic zones in order to protect foreign investments from labor strikes and disruptive protests. Joseph Estrada waged an “all-out war” against separatist movements in Southern Philippines in the name of national unity (ibid.). Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who was president for almost a decade, recontextualized the US-led “global war on terror” in order to pursue her government’s “war on poverty” (Arroyo 2002, Navera 2011). Benigno Aquino III did not particularly invoke the war metaphor, but his combative rhetoric toward criticism and dissent betrayed his consistency with his predecessors’ belligerent rhetoric (Navera 2018b).

Among the post-Marcos presidencies, it is Duterte who has expressed openly his admiration toward Marcos as a national leader (e.g., Morallo 2017). Duterte has not balked at expressing the need for martial law in order to address national problems. In fact, Duterte issued Presidential Proclamation 216 (PP 216) due to the series of terroristic activities committed by a rebel group in Marawi City in Lanao del Sur province. The said presidential proclamation declares martial law and suspends the writ habeas corpus not just in the province of Lanao del Sur, but in the entire Mindanao, the second largest island of the Philippine archipelago. The proclamation expresses the urgency to contain a purportedly flagrant rebellion. Martial law, the proclamation asserts, ensures public safety. To some extent, this proclamation channels Marcos’s conceptualization of martial law as a democratic instrument to preserve society.

More than the presidential proclamation, however, it is Duterte's outright dismissal of the critics that echoes Marcos's authoritarian rhetoric. In responding to critics of his proclamation, Duterte emphasized the primacy of the state forces in addressing the problem in Marawi while declaring that he would ignore congressional and judicial review of his policy:

Hanggang hindi sinabi ng pulis pati Armed Forces na safe na ang Philippines, this martial law will continue. Hindi ako makinig sa iba. Mga Supreme Court, 'yung mga congressman, wala man sila dito. (Until the Armed Forces and the police say that the Philippines is safe, this martial law will continue. I will not listen to anyone else, be it the Supreme Court, congressmen. They're not here.). (Duterte 2017)

The post-Marcos presidencies in other words have all channeled Marcosian tendencies by mobilizing military forces in the countryside not only to contain insurgent elements. They also rely heavily on these state forces in order to maintain peace and order which they deem necessary to boost the touristic economy and to attract more domestic and foreign investment (e.g., Margold 1999, 65–67). The military solution has also been invoked to quell strikes and protests in industrial economic zones largely driven by foreign investment. In my analysis of the legacy of Marcos's rhetoric, I posit that

the specter of Marcos's constitutional authoritarianism realized through martial law has persisted in the succeeding presidencies, and it has been conveniently invoked by his successors and the Filipino public whenever there is a perceived threat to democracy, when the peace and order of the status quo is troubled, or when the economy is perceived to suffer from dissent, protest, or criticism, even when the latter are principled and ideologically justified. (Navera 2018a, 445)

It may be argued that Marcos heightened the use of war rhetoric by conceptualizing martial law in ways that are palatable to the public mind. War, through martial law, was Marcos' target domain that needed to be conceptualized through a rich democratic lexicon with which democracy-loving Filipinos identified. Over time, the target domain has been turned into a meaningful resource that it became convenient for his successors to use it as the vehicle or source domain to conceptualize solutions to long-standing and intractable national problems. In other words, war turned from a target to a source domain, transformed from a token to a vehicle, and has become a useful and strategic lens for Marcos and his successors when dealing with national concerns.

I now turn to a more detailed discussion of Duterte's war rhetoric and its implications to the Philippine sociopolitical context. I specifically highlight how this rhetoric has been used to silence opposition and dissent and has resulted in intimidation and harassment of his staunch critics.

Duterte's War Rhetoric and the Silencing of Dissent

Drawing from this long-standing tradition in Philippine presidential rhetoric to invoke war in order to address the social ills, Duterte has crafted a policy that then easily appeals to the electorate. The war on drugs can therefore be seen as an extension of belligerent rhetoric in Philippine presidential discourse. In Duterte's rhetoric, an aggressive war needs to be waged against drug lordism, drug dealing, drug pushing, drug peddling, and even drug use. This war is unapologetically bloody, it is deadly, it reeks of lifeless bodies. In this war, the government is rendered as the combatant that aims at protecting individuals and communities from the threat brought about by illegal drugs. The war frame in dealing with drugs inevitably puts the issue as central to the Duterte administration's concerns. It is urgent; it is of grave concern; and it requires immediate, persistent, and concerted action. It is unperturbed even by critics and human rights advocates; it does not compromise.

In his 2018 State of the Nation Address, President Duterte remains clearly unperturbed by critics of the drug war policy. Such is the importance of the policy that it is foregrounded in his national address to the Filipino people before members of congress, his cabinet, the diplomatic community, and members of the Philippine and foreign press.

Let me begin by putting it bluntly: the war against illegal drugs is far from over. Where before, the war resulted in the seizure of illegal drugs worth millions of pesos, today, they run [into] billions in peso value. I can only shudder at the harm that those drugs could have caused had they reached the streets of every province, city, municipality, barangay and community throughout the country. This is why the illegal drugs war will not be sidelined. Instead, it will be as relentless and chilling, if you will, as on the day it began.

In the same address, he lashed out at human rights advocates, impugned them for failing to mount a "forceful and vociferous" protest against "drug-lordism, drug dealing and drug pushing", labeled the demonstrations against his drug war policy as "misdirected". He justified his policy using a dissociation: "Your concern is human rights, mine is human lives". The statement, which generated applause from the audience, reduced "human rights" to an abstract concept which Duterte pits against the materiality and palpability of the term "human lives".

However, the centrality of war in Duterte's presidential rhetoric is manifested not just in his war on drugs rhetoric; it also pervades his discourse against women, the communist insurgency, journalists, critics, and the political opposition. For instance, in a well-circulated speech before over 200 former communist insurgents in the presidential palace in February 2018, Duterte declared: "There's a new order coming from the mayor, 'We will not kill you. We will just shoot you in the vagina'" (Ellis-Peterson 2018). He then went on to assert that sans their vaginas, women would be "useless". Such a statement

from no less than the president of the republic reflects his misogynistic rhetoric and his utter disregard of the cause of the communist insurgency, something that he claims to have identified with when he was mayor of Davao City (McBeth 2016). Despite having received criticism for his misogyny and macho-fascist style of leadership, there has been no letdown as far as Duterte's attack on women is concerned. In a speech that supposedly celebrated Outstanding Women in Law Enforcement, Duterte called women "crazy" and complained about feminists and women activists for "depriving me of my freedom of expression" (Romero 2018). It must be noted that some of the most vocal critics whom Duterte's administration has silenced or tried to silence are women: Philippine Senator Leila de Lima who is incarcerated from trumped up charges, former Chief Justice of the Philippine Supreme Court Maria Lourdes Sereno, 71-year old Australian nun and missionary Patricia Fox, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial killings Agnes Callamard, and Filipino journalist Maria Ressa, among others.

As president, Duterte's disdain for the communists is also ironic considering that he received support from Left-leaning groups and organizations in his campaign for the presidency and his early months in power. Duterte's disdain for the communists especially during his administration is probably best exemplified by his speech in December 2018 where he expressed his intent to wipe out communist insurgents in the country (Parrocha 2018). Simangan and Melvin (2019) account for Duterte's anti-communism rhetoric by situating it within the long history of communist insurgency in the Philippines. They also suggest that Duterte's plan to pursue an "all-out war" and "strategic hamletization" of the communist rebels somehow reflects the rhetoric and strategies carried out by the Indonesian military under the Suharto regime.

Duterte's war rhetoric also extends when dealing with journalists, critics and the opposition. This is something he shares with his predecessors from Marcos to Benigno Aquino III. Disdain for criticism has been a constant feature of Philippine presidential rhetoric. This is manifested in Duterte's words: "*Pero pag ako ang pinaabot niyo ng sagad, I will declare a suspension of writ of habeas corpus and I will arrest all of you. Isama ko kayo sa mga kriminal, rebelde, pati drogista,*" (If you push me to my limit, I will declare a suspension of writ of habeas corpus and I will arrest all of you. I will put you together with the criminals, rebels, and drug lords.) (Ranada 2019).

This war against journalists, critics and the opposition is, however, concretized by actual intimidation, if not trumped up accusations of wrongdoings and irregularities against the staunchest of his critics (CNN Philippines 2019). This is what actually happened to Senator de Lima, Supreme Court Chief Justice Sereno, and journalist Maria Ressa. This war rhetoric is also extended to the Catholic priests who are critical of Duterte's drug war (Cabato 2019). They are often intimidated, wrongly accused of supporting drug lords or committing immorality, and targeted with death

threats from what could only be surmised as hard-core supporters of the President (ibid.).

In the next section, I explicate the notion of belligerent rhetoric and discuss how and why belligerence is deployed with success in the Philippine sociopolitical context. The final section that follows reflects on how the war metaphor used in Philippine presidential discourse resonates with the broader global discourse on war and how such a metaphor predisposes strongmen leaders like Duterte to undermine fundamental values of human rights, democracy, and freedom.

Belligerence as Argument

Notwithstanding the anti-democratic implications of Duterte's rhetoric, he remains popular among the Filipinos. His satisfaction rating remains very high among adult Filipinos (Flores 2019, Tomacruz 2020). It then begs the question: what makes belligerence both appealing and convincing to the Filipino public?

I would like to suggest that belligerent rhetoric is implicated in the multiple, and oftentimes clashing, linguistic and cultural practices of the Philippines. Flusberg, Matlock and Thibodeau (2018) contend that blanket statements or generalizations about the effectiveness of war metaphors cannot be made because the meaning and consequences of war metaphors are inextricably interlinked to the context in which they are used. This emphasis in context necessitates an understanding of how the war metaphor is used within the historical and the current sociopolitical contexts of the Philippines. While Filipinos are culturally a cooperative people, they also like to compete and win competitions. This is evidenced in their enthusiasm to compete and win in contests like boxing, basketball, and beauty pageants. The national anthem itself contains a patriotic expression of fighting or war against oppression ("Sa manlulupig, di ka pasisiil" [You shall never be oppressed by conquerors]). In other words, the war metaphor is not new to the Filipino people. It is common in their linguistic and sociocultural experiences. One can even say that war against forces of oppression and suffering and death is embedded in the Filipino linguistic and cultural DNA.

But this penchant to adopt war rhetoric in framing public policies can also be linked to the Filipinos' seeming collective impatience toward finding, formulating, deliberating, and deciding on complex solutions to the country's complex problems. War metaphors appeal to the public's yearning for immediate, if not, instant justice. War suggests eradicating, purging, exterminating, wiping or damaging the challenges people face through ammunition and weapons oftentimes at the expense of what would be labeled as "collateral damage" – and that includes human lives and our living environment. War suggests that challenges are framed as targets that need to be wiped out or killed permanently so that people can go on with their lives supposedly satisfied and free from the burdens these challenges bring them.

War rhetoric is attractive then to this socially constructed mentality that embraces easy and radical solutions, aspires for instant and quick gratification, and glorifies individuals who can promise these things, rendering them as the heroes we need in our time.

Belligerent rhetoric is also quintessentially macho – it consolidates support for the macho heroic figure who can salvage society from the evils that surround it (real or imagined). It creates fear that is associated with discipline and punishment for the wrongdoers and the wayward. It re-expresses the public's fascination with public fights and battles (e.g., Boxer Manny Pacquiao punching or knocking down opponents from other nations, ethnicities or cultural backgrounds) and at the same time reaffirms group pride. Belligerent rhetoric articulates the public desire for retaliation against those who wronged them. It is blood thirsty, it celebrates the self as it downplays the other, and it makes heroes of those who promise instant salvation. Belligerence as argument though is simplistic, absolutist, and moralistic. It does not acknowledge nuance or complexity. It privileges strength of character and so it does not care about the weaknesses of those in the margins primarily due to structural problems. It is definitive of its decision, it does not recognize faults, and the one who deploys it finds himself incapable of self-correction. It will fulfill what it declares to fulfill even if evidence suggests that its declaration cannot be done or that it had failed in the past. It ignores due process, it cuts corners, it privileges short cuts.

Within this frame, speeches are weaponized to silence critics and encourage supporters' disdain toward those who dissent and disagree with government policies. It should also be noted that war rhetoric is mobilized by repressive governments or authoritarian rulers in order to ensure no contestation against interest-driven national policies or some shady deals with big business and capitalists. Such is the case throughout history and throughout the contemporary world – from Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels of Nazi Germany to Ferdinand Marcos and his think tank during the period of martial law in the Philippines, from Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orban in Europe to Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Eurasia and Rodrigo Duterte in Southeast Asia (Bremmer 2018). Repression means no unionism, no labor strikes, no dissent, no criticism, no disruption.

The War Metaphor and the Global Discourse on War

While it is useful to search for explanation within a people's linguistic, sociocultural, and collective experiences, it might also help if this frame or metaphor of war deployed to communicate public policies is viewed within the network of war frames used around the world. Because local and national discourses are inextricably interlinked with colonial discourse and the globalist discourse (Navera 2011) that tend to be dominated by the American military-industrial complex, the specific use of the war metaphor in the Philippines can be considered as an adoption, if not, a recontextualization, of a broad,

dominant and more powerful frame undergirding global rhetoric that is aided, sustained, and circulated by corporatist media (Kellner 2003). The war metaphor that is used locally may then be linked to the global war frame circulated by dominant global players like the United States of America.

Given this assumption, I see the war on drugs, war on poverty, war on insurgency as expressions that cluster and work within the rubric of the global war on terror. They are permutations, re-expressions, recontextualizations of a broad discourse formation that was originally meant to target a specific cultural other – non-Western, colored, non-Christian, purportedly non-democratic in orientation – through military forces or hard power (Lazar and Lazar 2004). This military force or hard power is supposed to be an instrument of emancipation, a liberatory force that carries with it the promise of democracy and freedom through a western liberal democratic lens.

The same frame that prioritizes hard power is employed in the local scene. But the object of war changes – it could be drugs, poverty or local criminals and terrorist groups. The meaning of terror or the objects of war also tend to be fluid. Terror could mean anything that is disruptive; dissent, opposition or contrarian views that go against the grain of what is deemed peaceful and developed and good are silenced or kept at bay. When the meaning of this war frame is mapped out, we begin to realize that a polity may be dealing not just with national or social problems that it needs to address with urgency. That polity may potentially be obliterating fundamental values that make freedom and democracy possible in its national context.

While the war on poverty suggests that people remain committed to fighting the spread of hunger, disease, and the incapacity to move beyond one's station in life, it may very well serve as a frame that justifies the use of hard power or militarization in the countryside. Militarization after all is seen in counter-insurgency programs as part and parcel of the development process so that communities are supposedly made secure and stable from those who are thought to wreak havoc and stunt economic growth and development. However, it is also this militarization that enables abuse and violation of human rights in the countryside that it ought to protect.

War on drugs is intentionally meant to eradicate the problem brought about by drug abuse and misuse that lead to crime and public danger. But it undeniably justifies extrajudicial killings or even state-sanctioned extermination of drug users and small-time drug pushers because they are a nuisance and they disturb peace and order in communities, gated or otherwise.

War on terror is expressed to prevent, stop, and respond to terroristic acts committed by the extremists among us, but it quite unnervingly justifies state definition of what is “terroristic” and this includes criminals, rebels, separatists, insurgents, dissenters, critics or opposition members who are viewed as destabilizers of the incumbent.

This is not to say that the problems of poverty, drug addiction, and terrorist acts should not be persistently and systematically addressed. Surely,

they should because they affect lives, people's livelihood, and their productivity as individuals, as a community, and as a nation. But we need to be cognizant of the implications of war metaphors or discourses that tend to justify or sanction acts that are ultimately inimical to our human and societal progress. We need to be conscious of how we are using them. We need to constantly interrogate, define, and make explicit what is covered and included in these frames. We need to make our leaders and policy-makers accountable, not to make it difficult for them to get things done, but to ensure that our policies are just, fair, humane, and consistent with the democratic ideals for which postcolonial nation-states like the Philippines continue to aspire.

Notes

- ¹ Jovito Palparan was a high-ranking military officer during the Arroyo administration. He is regarded by the militant left as the "butcher" and as responsible for extra-judicial killings during the presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

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