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# Understanding Filipino Political Culture: Shooting Competitions in the Philippines

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## **Abstract**

### *Understanding Filipino Political Culture: Shooting Competitions in the Philippines*

This paper analyzes Philippine shooting competitions by identifying similarities between the shooter's handgun and Filipino nationalism and between the shooter's uniform and Filipino elitism. Because Philippine shooting competitions are a sport in which many of the government's politicians and general officers participate, this paper argues that cultural observations made of the microcosm of Philippine shooting competitions are representative of the broader Filipino political culture. Although this paper argues that Filipino nationalism is not a concern to the United States, it does argue that Filipino elitism is a concern because it fuels insurgency in the Philippines. While appearing to be anti-elitist, President Duterte shows signs that he is using the elitist methods of past Philippine governments. As a result, insurgency is likely to grow in the Philippines. Finally, this paper recommends that Pacific Command (PACOM) use key leader engagements to influence Philippine general officers to encourage reforms in the Philippine National Police (PNP) that will stymie the rise of insurgency in the Philippines.

## INTRODUCTION

The most significant concern facing the United States Pacific Command (PACOM) in the Philippines is a resurgence of terrorist activity. As Michael Vatikiotis noted in his 2017 book, *Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia*, “the Philippines is a prisoner of oligarchy; its leading families have a lock grip on the institutions of government across the country and thus prevent meaningful social and economic reform which is why an armed communist insurgency thrives on the fringes.”<sup>1</sup> This significance of an insurgency problem becomes even more evident after analyzing Filipino political culture, which can be summed up by understanding two elements—nationalism and elitism, of which elitism is a more significant concern to American interests.

As has been seen in the past, identifying and resolving the underlying cultural grievances in a society is critical to achieving long-term success for that nation’s government. For example, in 2007, the U.S. Army realized that its tactical efforts in Iraq to counter Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) were not sufficient; as a result, the service developed the Human Terrain System to better understand Iraqi culture, which ultimately proved effective in mitigating the IED threat.<sup>2</sup> As Major Robert Castro identified in a 2009 Marine Corps’ Center for Advanced Operational Culture and Learning (CAOCL) publication, “lack of cultural knowledge within the national security establishment, limited guidance for nation-building and educational programs, and poor socio-cultural awareness development and planning are the root factors for security challenges of today and tomorrow.”<sup>3</sup> Both these authors realize the fundamental argument of this paper that the most effective way to combat an insurgency is not directly with military action but indirectly, through the population, in understanding the driving factors of an insurgency.

Understanding the microcosm of shooting competitions as a continuation of the political culture that has long been established in the Philippines- an elitism that is at the root of Filipino dissidence, U.S. government officials should encourage a broader governmental egalitarianism as a counter to an insurgency that will likely grow unless governance improves. Through the symbols of the shooter's handgun, which signifies nationalism, and the shooter's uniform, which represents elitism, American officials can better understand Filipino political culture and why elitism is such a threat to American interests in the Philippines.

Although anthropologists have studied many sports microcosms in the Philippines, which typically fall into two areas, they have not seriously considered shooting competitions. The first genre of sports microcosms studied by anthropologists are those sports imported into the Philippines from Spain and the United States. Often, Filipinos have adopted their own hybrid versions of these sports, e.g., in 1915, Filipinos beat their white-American opponents using a "deceptive" strategy of 52 hits before returning the volleyball in a championship game.<sup>4</sup> A second broad theme of microcosms are sports for the masses in Philippine society that include sports such as boxing, basketball, cockfighting, and spider wrestling.<sup>5</sup> Shooting competitions in the Philippines represent a third genre of sports where the political elite participate. Thus, unlike other anthropological studies, an analysis of Philippine shooting competitions will reveal insights specific to Filipino political culture, a critical area of interest for U.S. policy makers.

## **MAIN BODY**

Comparison between Shooting Competitions in the Philippines and Golf in the U.S.

A helpful analogy to begin with is a comparison between shooting competitions in the Philippines and a similar sport played by elites in the United States—golf. In a 2014 NBC News interview, Abraham Lin, a member of the Filipino Diaspora living in Los Angeles, stated that the sport of shooting competitions in the Philippines is “a hobby, a sport for the wealthy...it’s like golf.”<sup>6</sup> Just as many politicians such as President Trump are known to participate in golf, many politicians in the Philippines regularly participate or support shooting competitions. One example is the “2017 President Duterte Shootfest,” which featured the brother of the president as a keynote speaker. Another example is Jack Enrile, former congressman and current president of the Philippine Practical Shooting Association (PPSA), the main shooting club in the Philippines recognized by the United States Practical Shooting Association.<sup>7</sup> A third example is President Benigno Aquino III. Up until his departure from office in 2016, President Aquino held an annual shooting competition to “foster camaraderie among generals in the uniformed service.”<sup>8</sup> Whether by design or by skill, President Aquino usually placed first in these competitions.<sup>9</sup>

Not only do some politicians participate in shooting competitions, but most of the general officers in the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) participate as well. For instance, a June 2016 video shows a competition between General Ronald de la Rosa, the current Director of the PNP and General Benjamin Magalong, the previous Director of the PNP.<sup>10</sup> Multiple articles, videos, and web pages provide evidence that the three top generals in the AFP—the Chief of Staff of the AFP, the Vice Chief of Staff of the AFP, and the Commanding General of the Philippine Army have either participated in or spoken at Philippine shooting competitions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the son of the incumbent AFP chief-of-staff is the owner of TOPSPOT Guns and Ammo, a business located near the PNP Headquarters that is the “exclusive local distributor” of COLT

firearms..<sup>12</sup> Substantial evidence exists showing that general officers from the PNP and AFP participate in this leisure activity, which comes as no surprise because most are graduates of a common institution—the Philippine Military Academy, an extremely selective school..<sup>13</sup>

In many ways, golf and shooting competitions are similar. Both sports emphasize precision and the application of fundamentals. Unlike basketball or boxing, distance and obstacles are the paramount factors in these sports, whether in relation to the target or the hole. In order to participate, both sports require specialized equipment and high costs, which are barriers to entry.

However, far more interesting are the differences because they provide the lens for a deeper understanding of how Filipino political culture is different from American political culture. Those differences are the handgun, a weapon symbolizing Filipino nationalism, and the shooter's uniform, a symbol of team identity representing Filipino elitism. Although the primary interest of this paper is Filipino elitism, which is the fundamental cause of an insurgency that threatens American interests, understanding Filipino nationalism is imperative because it continues to surprise U.S. policy makers. Once understood, it becomes apparent why elitism is more of a threat than nationalism to American interests in the Philippines.

#### Shooter's Handgun and Filipino Nationalism

Anthropologists have observed a worldwide relationship between the sport, the state, and nationalism. For instance, in Japan, anthropologists have identified how the sport of swimming during the country's modernization period helped the state to create a national identity..<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in the United States, many athletes from the National Football League have recently started taking a knee during the playing of the National Anthem, which President Trump has criticized by appealing directly to American patriotism or nationalism.

Indeed, the role of the state in espousing nationalism through sport appears to be universal. As anthropology professor Laura Podalsky observed in her introduction to a 2015 study of sports microcosms in Latin America, “the state has provided concrete support for the promotion of sports, often as part of nation building and modernization processes” and “star athletes and sports teams often serve as stand-ins for nations.”<sup>15</sup> Podalsky’s analysis is useful because it identifies two critical relationships for understanding nationalism—the active role of the state in promoting nationalism through the sport and the identification of an international competitor or team, who personify the nationalist identity.

Both of these relationships are apparent in Philippine shooting competitions. First, in July 2017, President Duterte attended the 25th Defense and Sporting Arms Show in Manila, hosted by the Association of Firearms and Ammunition Dealers of the Philippines (AFAD).<sup>16</sup> Often, AFAD sponsors shooting competitions in the Philippines, such as the previously mentioned June 2017 President Duterte Shootfest.<sup>17</sup> According to their website, AFAD has scheduled another arms show to take place from 16 to 20 November 2017, at which AFAD expects the attendance of many prominent Philippine leaders, including the current Secretary of Defense, the current National Security Advisor, the current Director of the PNP, and the Chief of Staff of the AFP.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, the current president of AFAD is Jethro “The Jet” Dionisi, known as “the fastest gun in the world” because of his success in international shooting competitions. Jethro is the embodiment of Philippine excellence in this sport, where Filipinos are perceived to have a “natural talent” because “you don’t need height or strength to dominate other competitors, just nerves of steel and great hand-eye coordination,” in the words of Epoch Quimpo, the Communications Senior Manager for Smart Sports.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the national identity of the Philippines is reinforced on an international level by Jethro’s star status in this sport.



Capitalizing then on the assertion that Philippine shooting competitions are representative of Filipino nationalism, the handgun illustrates how Filipino nationalism is unique. A good baseline for understanding the significance of the firearm in Philippine society is the Filipino gun culture, prevalent in a society where although the overall number of crimes in the Philippines is decreasing, the number of homicides is increasing, and where President Duterte has been known to, on occasion, join his soldiers by firing a rifle at the enemy.<sup>20</sup> At least one anthropologist has suggested that American influence has shaped this gun culture, and as evident in the recent Las Vegas shooting, the U.S. continues to wrestle with its own gun policies.<sup>21</sup> But what makes the handgun so unique from an anthropological perspective is its symbol as a paradox. On the one hand, the handgun is a means to provide protection; but on the other hand, it becomes a tool to inflict violence. Similarly, Filipino nationalism is a paradox. As professor Sharon Delmendo notes in her 2004 book, *The Star-Entangled Banner*, “while anti-Americanism provides the foundation for one school of Filipino nationalism, another school posits economic, political, and military cooperation with the United States as the means to Philippine prosperity.”<sup>22</sup> From one point of view, Filipino nationalism is anti-American; however, from an opposing point of view, it is pro-American. Just like the handgun, Filipino nationalism fluctuates between these two extremes, dependent on the sentiment of the user.

This bipolar nature of Filipino nationalism becomes especially apparent in the national decision making of the Philippine government. For example, in his 2004 book, *Globalization, Democratization, and Asian Leadership*, professor Vincent Pollard provides convincing evidence that the 1991 decision by the Philippines to close the U.S. military bases was based not on international relations but on domestic reasons, specifically Filipino nationalism.<sup>23</sup> Filipino nationalism is also apparent today in the government’s international

relations. The primary motive behind President Duterte's submission to China over the South China Sea disputes was Filipino nationalism, specifically the anti-American pole of Filipino nationalism. This motivation becomes evident in President Duterte's later comments on 20 October 2016 to the Philippine-Chinese trade forum, asking "what is really wrong with an American character?" Americans are "loud, sometimes rowdy, and they have this volume of their voice...not adjusted to civility."<sup>24</sup>

In his book on Southeast Asia, Michael Vatikiotis anticipates a push-pull interaction between China, Southeast Asia and western countries. "It is hard to keep demands for 'tribute' at bay when senior Chinese officials can fly in and bang the table with their demands. I suspect there will be strong urges to moderate the pushiness of big Asian powers—China included—with the residual pull of the West."<sup>25</sup> This prediction is especially germane to the Philippines. At times, U.S. policy makers will be pulled by the Philippines to offset China's pushiness. At other times, they will be pushed as the Philippines is lured by Chinese investments. As a result, American officials should provide the Philippine government with some slack by expecting that the Philippine government, much like Filipino nationalism, will shift back and forth between two extremes along a China-U.S. axis.

Despite its bordering on the extremes, Filipino nationalism does not threaten the United States; rather, it is a boon in advancing U.S. national interests in Asia. In his speech to the United Nations on 19 September 2017, President Trump emphasized a strong belief in a respect of state sovereignty (he used the words "sovereign" or "sovereignty" twenty-one times in the speech).<sup>26</sup> From the president's perspective, given his own affinity with nationalism, he does not perceive it as a threat to American interests. Admittedly, in the past, nationalism has triggered military violence but only when a state believes that it has been

encircled, e.g., Germany at the start of World War I or Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. If, however, Filipino nationalism is not a concern, Filipino elitism is a concern because of its potential to threaten American interests in the Philippines.

### Shooter's Uniform and Filipino Elitism

Academia widely accepts the pervasiveness of Filipino elitism in the country's political culture. Most scholars trace elitism's origin to the Philippines' Spanish colonial period and the feudal system introduced by the Catholic Church..<sup>27</sup> Elitism continued into the American colonial period when Americans used the elites to oversee the peasant sector..<sup>28</sup> Today, elitism becomes evident in how the family dynasties dominate the Philippine government. Approximately 70% of the elected members in the lower house of the Philippine Congress have relatives who have served or are serving in elected positions; in the senate, that figure rises to 80%..<sup>29</sup>

But less understood is why Filipino elitism persists despite Philippines' democratization. Political science professor David Rosenberg provides a helpful analogy for understanding the durability of Filipino elitism in a chapter from a 1991 book entitled *Democracy and Development in East Asia: Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines*. Rosenberg begins his analysis stating that "it has often been said that electoral success in the Philippines depends on 'goons, guns, and gold.'" However, he argues that a fourth factor "is at least as important," which he describes as "the fourth 'g' of 'glitter' or 'glamour' or more generally as the power of symbols." He elaborates further by describing the clothing of President Marcos, whose traditional clothing embodied Filipino versions of the "personal leader" and "popular sovereignty." He then observes the contrast in clothing with that of his successor- President Aquino, whose apparel personified her as the Filipina, matriarchal

version of the “simple housewife.”<sup>30</sup> Understanding this “power of symbols” is critical to understanding how Filipino elitism is unique.

In Philippine shooting competitions, the shooter’s uniform represents the “power of symbols.” After reviewing multiple videos and photographs of these matches, what stands out are the shooters’ bright, colorful, and sharp uniforms, which display their names, affiliations, and sponsors similar to the uniform of a soccer or football player. However, more like a golfer’s attire, the shooters have uniforms made of fashionable, expensive materials. Moreover, each shooter has his own entourage of coaches and support staff, all wearing the same uniform. From the outside looking in, the uniform becomes the immediate focus of attention. Compared with the more important aspects of a shooter, e.g., the stance, grip, or hand-eye coordination, the uniform is the bright, shiny object that distracts from what is truly important.

Similarly, in Philippine society, the “power of symbols” distracts the masses from what is important in Philippine politics. This masquerade is the subterfuge by which the Filipino elite remain in power. Although almost every president in the Philippines has campaigned on an anti-elitist or anti-corruption platform, once elected, the president either fails to implement reform or is restricted from doing so by the military or the Congress; as a result, the political culture remains unchanged. This power of symbols in Philippine society explains why many in the masses are fooled by a false bill of goods. A prime example is the drug user described by Wataru Kusaka in his 2017 book, entitled *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy, and the Urban Poor*, as someone who “expressed support for Duterte” because he believed “that Duterte’s presidency would emancipate him from his vicious habit.”<sup>31</sup> Instead of realizing that he might lose his life over President

Duterte's war on drugs, the drug user chose to self-identify with the anti-elite movement. Instead of perceiving President Duterte as his punisher, he chose to see him as his savior.

President Duterte's administration is rife with the power of symbols. In addition to the president's previously mentioned affinity for guns, President Duterte is typically dressed in a white, collared shirt, often behind a podium with the seal of the Philippine government in the background. All of these symbols invoke his authority as his country's president. However, he rarely wears a tie; in an image search of President Duterte, only two of one hundred photos show him with a tie. In contrast, in a similar search of former President Benjamin Aquino, about half of the pictures show his predecessor wearing a tie. Thus, although President Duterte appears presidential, he also chooses his attire carefully so that he seems more approachable than his predecessor.

President Duterte's war on drugs is also rife with the power of symbols. Recognizing the pervasiveness of Filipino elitism, President Duterte stated in the lead-up to his election that "it's the oligarchs on top, the limited few, the elitists who can buy whoever is in power, whoever wins. We are in a feudal state."<sup>32</sup> Eager then to be perceived as a reformist, he quickly turned to the PNP shortly after assuming office and began his war on drugs, which he termed an anti-corruption effort. Now, after over 12,000 extra-judicial killings, President Duterte has halted the PNP's actions shortly after his popularity rating dipped below 50%..<sup>33</sup> President Duterte's war on drugs has been a symbol (corruption in the masses) that misses what should have been its target (corruption in the elites). Furthermore, as non-governmental organizations have pushed back, exposing the malfeasance of violence orchestrated by the Duterte administration, President Duterte has responded using the power of symbols: "you idiots came to our land, Indonesia, Malaysia...the British and the Philippines for the Americans and Spaniards and you have the gall to say to us, we will expel you... Why?

Because we are angry at you for colonizing and stealing our resources for so many hundreds of years.”<sup>34</sup> President Duterte distracts attention on his mistakes by appealing to Filipino nationalism. Filipino elites, such as President Duterte, are continually adapting and shifting, using the power of symbols to create a false myth of representative governance.

Understanding the power of symbols in Filipino political culture is essential because it fuels two insurgencies that are likely to grow in the future. The main grievance for the communist insurgency in the Philippines is land ownership disputes, sparked by a Maoist type insurgency where the communist insurgents seek political reform and concessions from the government. In contrast, the primary grievance for the Moro insurgency is Muslim ideology, sparked by a grassroots Islamic insurgency where the insurgents are seeking secession from the government. Although the sparks may be different, both the communist (CPP-NPA-NDF) insurgency and the Muslim insurgency in Mindanao have been fueled by an elite political class that fails to recognize or adapt to fundamental insurgency grievances. Filipino elites are content using the power of symbols to support military actions without attempting to employ the non-military instruments of power, which are the necessary tools for addressing the underlying grievances..<sup>35</sup>

As the insurgency grows, it is likely to threaten the sovereignty of the Philippine government. Because of the Filipino Diaspora, the U.S. government will be pressured to support a government whose legitimacy is questionable. Unfortunately, the U.S. Government has a lousy track record of managing these relationships in Asia, e.g., U.S. support for Chiang Kai-shek after World War II and Ngo Dinh Diem during the Vietnam conflict. The United States should avoid adding Rodrigo Duterte’s name to this list. Fortunately, the U.S. government can take steps now to prevent this eventuality from

happening by addressing the root of the problem that is fueling the insurgency—Filipino elitism.

#### The PNP: The Critical Link to Overcoming Filipino Elitism

Although multiple organizations in the Philippine government support the Duterte administration's anti-elitism efforts, the group that is central to these efforts is the PNP. In his 2015 book, *Democracy, Inequality, and Corruption*, political science expert Dr. Jong-Sung You recommends a two-prong approach to overcoming elitism in the Philippines—eliminating voter fraud and increasing efforts to curb patronage in the government.<sup>36</sup> Voter fraud, especially vote buying, is an endemic problem in the Philippines.<sup>37</sup> Despite its ubiquity, laws are in place that make vote-buying illegal in the Philippines; the problem is not the laws but in the lack of enforcement by the PNP.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, patronage and corruption are widespread within the PNP. A recent report from the Ombudsman identified the PNP as the most corrupt federal agency with 1,022 corruption cases in 2016. In comparison, the AFP, whose active component is approximately the same size as the PNP, had 201 corruption cases in 2016. For the past six years, the PNP has continually ranked as the most corrupt agency in the federal government, averaging over 1,000 cases per year.<sup>39</sup> What has been said in the past is likely still true today: there are two kinds of PNP officers—“millionaires and stupid ones.”<sup>40</sup> As a 2016 RAND study notes, the PNP has “a significant gap” and has “no good middle management or leadership to grow in the ranks.”<sup>41</sup> Considering how significant a concern elitism is to American interests in the Philippines, U.S. government officials should contemplate what it can do to influence the Philippine government to carry out broader reforms of the PNP.

#### Key Leader Engagements: The Indirect Path to the PNP

Recently, graduates of the classes of 1985 and 1986 from the Philippine Military Academy have risen to key leadership positions in the Duterte administration. In the past two months, President Duterte has declared Maj. Gen. Rolando Bautista and Lieut. Gen. Galileo Kintanar as the future commanding generals of the Philippine Army and Philippine Air Force, respectively; both are graduates of the class of 1985. Additionally, Gen. Dela Rosa is a graduate of the class of 1986. He served previously under President Duterte as the police chief of Davao City and was hand-selected to become his director of the PNP shortly after the election. A classmate (or “mistah”) of Dela Rosa is Brig. Gen. Alvin Parreño, who on 5 September 2017 became the Commandant of the Philippine Marine Corps. Unequivocally, these leadership changes in the top positions of the AFP, all within the past couple months, indicate that President Duterte is strengthening his base of support in the military. They represent a new generation of general officers and a potential shift in the Philippine government.

Because of the heavy-handed approach of the Duterte administration, these general officers are likely to experience increasing strains as the political environment becomes more tumultuous. As a result, senior U.S. military officials should seek to offset this pressure by reassuring AFP leaders of America’s commitment to the Philippines’ sovereignty through key leader engagements. In the wake of Secretary Mattis’ and President Trump’s visit to the Philippines, more general officers from the United States are likely to visit the Philippines in the future, especially as the volatility in East Asia continues to rise. The PACOM staff should take advantage of these opportunities by encouraging more interaction between American and Philippine general officers, which may prove a boon to the long-term effort needed to root out corruption in the PNP. Based on the analysis in this paper, an excellent



venue for this interaction is the shooting range, an environment familiar to both politicians and general officers from the Philippines.

## **CONCLUSION**

In closing, this paper presented the previously unstudied subject of Philippine shooting competitions as a useful microcosm for understanding the country's political culture, specifically the shooter's handgun, which symbolizes Filipino nationalism and the shooter's uniform, which represents Filipino elitism. Comparatively, policymakers should not perceive nationalism as a threat to American interests; meanwhile, elitism is a concern because it fuels two insurgencies in the Philippines that are likely to grow in the future. Finally, corruption in the PNP is the crux of the problem, and the U.S. military should foster key leader engagements with officials from the Philippine government to encourage long-term reforms needed in the PNP.



## NOTES

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