



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

### **PERSISTENCE OF PRIVATE ARMIES IN THE PHILIPPINES**

by

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December 2018

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**PERSISTENCE OF PRIVATE ARMIES IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Private armies and electoral violence are persistent phenomena in Philippine society. Together they have cost thousands of lives and sowed fear among politicians and voters alike, weakening democracy in the country. Defenders of private armies note their critical role in counterinsurgency operations against the communist and Muslim separatist groups. Nonetheless, Filipinos generally perceive private armies to be a menace, which has prompted the government to establish mechanisms to eliminate them. Although the 1987 Constitution gave the government a framework to abolish private armies, a substantial number still remain, especially in the countryside. This thesis examines the contributing factors that have led to the decline of private armies and, at the same time, their persistence. The research shows that the utility of private armies declined because other electoral tactics emerged in the more-developed areas of the country and because the twin insurgency threat largely diminished. Meanwhile, however, local politicians continue to use private armies' counterinsurgency operations as a cover to legitimize their presence in rural areas.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
BBL	Bangsamoro Basic Law
CAFGU	Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units
CHDF	Civilian Home Defense Force
COMELEC	Commission of Elections
CPP-NPA	Communist Party of the Philippines New People's Army
CVO	Civilian Volunteer Organization
IRA	Internal Revenue Allotment
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
NAMFREL	National Movement for Free Elections
NTF-DPAGs	National Task Force for the Disbandment of the Private Armed Groups
NUC	National Unification Commission
PNP	Philippine National Police
RAM	Reform the Armed Forces Movement
Three G's	Guns, Goons, and Gold

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Despite a constitutional ban on private armies in the Philippines, many remain. While their use has declined, why have private armies persisted despite repeated efforts to dismantle them? What enduring factors have prevented the government from entirely disbanding them?

Private armies and electoral violence are enduring features of Philippine politics. Since Philippine independence in 1946, political competition in local and national elections has been intense and often deadly. During the years following independence, as Benedict Anderson notes, the Philippine government, dominated by landed elites, was recovering from the ravages of World War II and made efforts to reestablish control of the countryside.<sup>1</sup> To accomplish this, Anderson adds, the landed elites used private armies to take back their haciendas from peasants and to spread terror during elections. Since then, private armies in the Philippines have remained common, especially in poorer parts of the country where politicians have used them to intimidate and punish their opponents. One of the worst incidents of election-related violence was the 2009 Maguindanao massacre. The victims were on their way to support a local politician who intended to challenge a member of a ruling family, the Ampatuan clan, in a gubernatorial election.<sup>2</sup> Two-hundred members of the Ampatuan family's private army kidnapped and brutally executed fifty-eight people, including the candidate's family, friends, allies, and journalists.

Since the 1970s, the Philippine government has made repeated efforts to eliminate private armies. These efforts have included confiscating weapons, drafting a provision in the 1987 Constitution, creating an operations plan for the Philippine National Police,

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, "Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams," *New Left Review* 169 (May 1988): 15.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch, *"They Own the People": The Ampatuans, State-Backed Militias, and Killings in the Southern Philippines* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010), 3.

establishing a truth commission, and making campaign promises.<sup>3</sup> According to the Philippine National Police (PNP), the country contained 558 private armies in 1993,<sup>4</sup> but this number declined to 107 in 2010—a figure corroborated by the Independent Commission Against Private Armies.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Commission on Elections noted 154 private armies in 2000, but just 115 in 2004 and only 93 in 2007. In 2018, recent reports show the remaining number of private armies at 77.<sup>6</sup> Despite the PNP’s claims of disbanding private armies in the past two decades, private armies still represent a significant threat to Philippine politics and society.

## **B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

This research is designed to deepen our understanding of the factors contributing to the persistence of private armies in the Philippines, and how they have impacted the country’s democracy. The research shows how private armies have added to election violence and counterinsurgency efforts since the formation of the Philippine republic in 1946. Additionally, the thesis explains why the Philippine government has failed to eliminate private armies; with this knowledge, Philippine government policy makers can begin to develop a method for permanently dismantling private armies, and thereby reduce election violence and strengthen the country’s democracy.

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson, “Cacique Democracy in the Philippines,” 22; “The Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines,” *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, accessed April 28, 2018, <http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/constitutions/1987-constitution/>; Luz Rimban, “Breaking the Cycle of Election Violence,” in *Democracy at Gunpoint: Election-Related Violence in the Philippines* (Makati City, Philippines: The Asia Foundation, 2011), xvi; Jose Melo et al., “Independent Commission to Address Media and Activist Killings” (report, Melo Commission, January 22, 2007); Human Rights Watch, *Philippines: Keep Promise to Disband Paramilitaries* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2012), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2012/country-chapters/philippines>.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Riedinger, “The Philippines in 1993: Halting Steps toward Liberalization,” *Asian Survey* 34, no. 2 (February 1994): 141, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645114>.

<sup>5</sup> Cate Buchanan, ed., *Armed Violence in Mindanao: Militia and Private Armies* (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> “Cops Affiliated with 2019 Polls Bets to Be Reassigned,” *Defense Journal Philippines*, October 9, 2018, <https://defensejournal.ph/2018/10/09/cops-affiliated-2019-polls-bets-reassigned/>.



## C. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review first establishes a working definition of the term *private armies* by examining their origins in the Philippines. Then it discusses the actions of different presidential administrations to disband private armies, and describes the contrasting actions that successive presidents have taken to perpetuate them.

### 1. Private Armies and Their Origins

Private armies are small, armed groups that powerful individuals hire to intimidate political opponents, to win elections, and to counter insurgencies. Private armies in the Philippines are not standing armies, nor are they ideologically or religiously driven. Scholars argue that they tend to be temporary and driven by economic benefits.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, private armies should not be confused with insurgencies, separatist movements, terrorist organizations, or vigilante groups, such as the communist New People's Army, the Moro National Liberation Front, the Abu Sayyaf Group, or the Alsa Masa.

Since 1946, powerful political elites in the Philippines have actively employed private armies to shape the outcome of elections through coercion and violence. Starting in 1947, Anderson explains, political warlords and their infamous private armies began to wreak havoc in electoral competitions across the country and to take advantage of a weakened state still recovering from the ravages of World War II.<sup>8</sup> Private armies have also played a role in Philippine counterinsurgency efforts since the Hukbalahap (Huk) peasant rebellion in the mid-1940s. Several authors argue that the government's all-out war policy in the 1950s enabled land-owning and political families to recruit private armies to

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Patino and Djinna Velasco, "Violence and Voting in Post-1986 Philippines," in *The Politics of Death: Political Violence in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aurel Croissant, Beate Martin, and Sascha Kneip (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), 231; Justus M. van der Kroef, "Private Armies and Extrajudicial Violence in the Philippines," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 13, no. 4 (December 1986): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.1986.9933662>.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, "Cacique Democracy in the Philippines," 15.

help protect their lands and fight the Huks.<sup>9</sup> The initial all-out war policy was a failure, and it was eventually replaced by President Ramon Magsaysay's holistic approach, which effectively ended the rebellion in 1954. However, Jennifer Conroy Franco argues that the political warlords saw the benefits of having private armies—not just for counterinsurgency operations, but also to help them win elections.<sup>10</sup> It was during this time, Franco argues, that the “three G’s” for which Philippine politics are known—guns, goons, and gold—took hold.

The members of private armies tend to be economically motivated. Herman Kraft explains, “Warlords provide food for their armed members and sometimes pay for hospital care and higher education.”<sup>11</sup> Cate Buchanan adds that the low-paid PNP officers tend to be vulnerable to bribery and corruption, which the powerful political warlords take advantage of when recruiting them to serve in private armies. Michael Cullinane describes members of private armies as individuals who are driven by money, not by loyalty to a political warlord.<sup>12</sup> The members also come from diverse backgrounds; they may be security guards, policemen, rogue police officers, local community leaders, members of political clans, and, in some cases, prison inmates.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Justus van der Kroef and Cate Buchanan note that the members are often from paramilitary organizations, such as the Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF), the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units (CAFGU), and the Civilian Volunteer Organization (CVO), which politicians and landowners hire for their political gain and security.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 190; Herman Kraft, “The Foibles of an Armed Citizenry: Armed Auxiliaries of the State and Private Armed Groups in the Philippines,” in *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines*, ed. Soliman M. Santos Jr. and Paz Verdades M. Santos (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2010), 188.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Conroy Franco, *Elections and Democratization in the Philippines*, Comparative Studies in Democratization Series (New York: Routledge, 2001), 80.

<sup>11</sup> Kraft, “The Foibles of an Armed Citizenry,” 222.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Cullinane, “Patron as Client: Warlord Politics and the Duranos of Danao,” in *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines*, ed. Alfred W. McCoy (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 191.

<sup>13</sup> Patino and Velasco, “Violence and Voting,” 231.

<sup>14</sup> van der Kroef, “Private Armies and Extrajudicial Violence in the Philippines,” 5; Buchanan, *Armed Violence in Mindanao*, 37.

## 2. 1960–1990

Private armies thrived throughout President Ferdinand Marcos's dictatorship and President Corazon Aquino's People Power era, despite both presidents' efforts to disband them. In the 1969 elections, President Marcos and his political allies used public funding to fuel Marcos's campaign and used private armies to secure his reelection.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, scholars have illustrated that Marcos's martial law not only allowed him to create a new society but also to crush the old oligarchic order and disband its private armies.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Marcos established new oligarchic rulers who created their private armies.<sup>17</sup>

Private armies continued to flourish under President Aquino's new democratic order, and they gained relevance in countering insurgencies despite their inherent abuses during the Marcos regime. Peter Kreuzer claims that the People Power revolution enabled the old oligarchs, who had been at odds with Marcos, to regain their power; the oligarchs continued, then, to use private armies as an instrument for political and economic gain—reminiscent of practices under the pre-martial law period.<sup>18</sup> Mark Fineman argues that, despite opposing views from her advisors, Aquino constitutionally ordered private armies to be disbanded in 1987 as a concession to the demands from peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA).<sup>19</sup> However, after the massacre of communist members and sympathizers and the fallout of the peace negotiations, the Aquino administration adopted an all-out war policy against the CPP-NPA and enlisted the help of private armies. The

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<sup>15</sup> Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (Latham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 198.

<sup>16</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, 205; Luis Francia, *A History of the Philippines: From Indios Bravos to Filipinos* (New York: Overlook Press, 2014), 242.

<sup>17</sup> Francia, *A History of the Philippines*, 242.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Kreuzer, "Private Political Violence and Boss-Rule in the Philippines," *Behemoth-A Journal on Civilization* 1 (2009): 48.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Fineman, "Aquino Orders Disbanding of Vigilantes, Paramilitary," *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1987, [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-03-17/news/mn-12461\\_1\\_vigilante-groups](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-03-17/news/mn-12461_1_vigilante-groups).

government's use of private armies to eradicate the communist insurgency contradicted its own constitutional ban on such armies.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to counterinsurgency objectives, the Aquino administration also used private armies for political objectives; the administration passed various laws that demilitarized the police and gave city mayors operational and administrative control over PNP units.<sup>21</sup> These laws only exacerbated the use of private armies for political and economic interests.<sup>22</sup> By the time President Fidel Ramos was in office in 1993, the estimated number of private armies was over 500.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. 1990–2010

During the Ramos administration, the number of private armies in the Philippines declined substantially. In September 1993, President Ramos issued Administrative Order no. 81 to dismantle private armies through the *Operation Plan Paglalansag*, or Operation Plan Dismantle.<sup>24</sup> Buchanan asserts that the Operations Plan Paglalansag enabled the PNP to take the lead in disbanding private armies in the country, from the provincial to the village level.<sup>25</sup> By the end of September 1993, the program had dismantled 283 private armies and continued to disband them across the country.<sup>26</sup> However, Buchanan and Jeffrey Riedinger argue that the program had limited success; the government was wary to confront and dismantle private armies belonging to powerful local politicians.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State*, New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 440; Kreuzer, "Private Political Violence and Boss-Rule," 54.

<sup>21</sup> Kreuzer, "Private Political Violence and Boss-Rule," 52.

<sup>22</sup> Kreuzer, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Kreuzer, 51. Prior to the Ramos administration, there was no accounting for the number of private armies in the Philippines; this thesis uses the Ramos-era estimate as a baseline.

<sup>24</sup> "Administrative Order No. 81, s. 1993," *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, September 13, 1993, <http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1993/09/13/administrative-order-no-81-s-1993/>.

<sup>25</sup> Buchanan, *Armed Violence in Mindanao*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Rimban, "Breaking the Cycle of Election Violence," xvi.

<sup>27</sup> Buchanan, *Armed Violence in Mindanao*, 24; Jeffrey Riedinger, "The Philippines in 1993," 141.

In the early to mid-1990s, the government managed to reduce both of its internal threats, the CPP-NPA and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Carolina Hernandez and Riedinger posit that the communist threat lessened because membership in communist groups was declining across the country—from 26,000 members in 1985 to fewer than 5,000 in 1995.<sup>28</sup> In 1997, Segundo Romero reported that the Philippine government reached a peace deal with the MNLF and integrated its troops into the Armed Forces of the Philippines.<sup>29</sup>

Literature on elections also indicates that vote-buying on the part of politicians has been increasingly used as a mechanism to win elections.<sup>30</sup> John Linantud states that vote-buying increased from 17 percent in 1998 to 60 percent in 2001 of voters who sold votes.<sup>31</sup> A 2012 report from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) indicates that vote-buying has served as the “carrot” in politicians’ carrot-and-stick election strategy; meanwhile, warlords use the “stick,” private armies, for intimidation and coercion to garner votes.<sup>32</sup>

During Gloria Arroyo’s presidency (2001–2010), the number of private armies continued to decline. Kraft reports that between 2004 and 2007, the estimated number of private armies dropped from 115 to 93;<sup>33</sup> however, President Arroyo did not take any action to disband the remaining private armies. Instead, she tended to bolster them to fight the war on terrorism, the CPP-NPA, and the Muslim rebels. Kraft notes that in 2006, President Arroyo reinforced the military by increasing the number of CAFGU personnel

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<sup>28</sup> Carolina Hernandez, “The Philippines in 1995: Growth amid Challenges,” *Asian Survey* 36, no. 2 (February 1996): 146; Jeffrey Riedinger, “The Philippines in 1994: Renewed Growth and Contested Reforms,” *Asian Survey* 35, no. 2 (February 1995): 211.

<sup>29</sup> Segundo E. Romero, “The Philippines in 1997: Weathering Political and Economic Turmoil,” *Asian Survey* 38, no. 2 (February 1998): 198, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645679>.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development, *Electoral Security Assessment: Philippines* (Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development, 2012), 20.

<sup>31</sup> John L. Linantud, “The 2004 Philippine Elections: Political Change in an Illiberal Democracy,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 27, no. 1 (April 2005): 86–87.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development, *Electoral Security Assessment*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Kraft, “The Foibles of an Armed Citizenry,” 198.

and arming the CVOs in response to the growing conflict with the MILF and intensifying attacks from the CPP-NPA.<sup>34</sup>

Arroyo's counterinsurgency efforts strengthened political warlords' hold on their local areas, which brought winning votes for President Arroyo and emboldened the warlords to act with impunity. Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso claim that Arroyo's presidency was marred by corruption and that she would not have been elected without support from influential politicians like the Ampatuans, who secured one million votes toward her 2004 victory.<sup>35</sup> However, this relationship abruptly ended in 2009 after the Maguindanao massacre.

Despite the 2009 massacre, the estimated number of private armies in 2010 grew, and some remained very strong.<sup>36</sup> President Arroyo had to declare a state of emergency to deal with the threat from the 3,000-man Ampatuan private army.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, in 2010, President Arroyo created the Independent Commission Against Private Armies, which investigated private armies and provided recommendations to abolish them.<sup>38</sup> However, the commission concluded at the tail end of Arroyo's presidency, and Arroyo did not have the opportunity to implement its recommendations. While campaigning for the presidency, then Senator Benigno Aquino III made promises to dismantle private armies, but he did not establish policies to support those promises once he became president.<sup>39</sup>

#### **4. 2010–Present**

President Benigno Aquino's administration understood that private armies posed a problem in elections and made efforts to disband them; at the same time, however, Aquino understood their significance for counterinsurgency operations. Human Rights Watch

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<sup>34</sup> Kraft, 193.

<sup>35</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 302–303.

<sup>36</sup> Rimban, "Breaking the Cycle of Election Violence," xvii.

<sup>37</sup> Herman Kraft, "The Philippines in 2009: The Fourth-Quarter Collapse," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2010): 239.

<sup>38</sup> Buchanan, *Armed Violence in Mindanao*.

<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Philippines: Keep Promise to Disband Paramilitaries*.

reports that President Aquino did not deliver on his campaign promises to abolish private armies because of their utility in the fight against insurgencies.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, Aquino's administration did take measures to dismantle private armies; according to Nathan Quimpo, the government disbanded forty-one of the eighty private armies in central Mindanao in 2011, which suggests that the total number of private armies was significantly reduced in the country—reports suggest that the total number went down to eighty-five, though some argue the reporting is inconsistent.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, the current administration, under Rodrigo Duterte, has made no rhetorical promises to abolish private armies, but vowed to ensure the upcoming 2019 elections are safe. According to reports, President Duterte issued a warning to politicians that they will be punished if they form private armies during the elections. Additionally, the government, though absent a fully endorsed policy to eradicate them, has been actively monitoring seventy-seven private armies in the country.<sup>42</sup> When peace talks between the Philippine government and the CPP-NPA broke down in 2017, counterinsurgency forces became more important in the countryside; according to human rights observers, this has allowed private armies to persist in the countryside.<sup>43</sup>

## 5. Summary

As their policies and statements indicate, the Philippines' presidents since Marcos have indicated that private armies are problematic, especially in elections. Yet most of them have adopted policies that strengthened some of those armies. Despite this contradiction, the data shows that the number of private armies declined from several

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<sup>40</sup> "Philippines: Falling Far Short: Aquino's First Year and Human Rights," Human Rights Watch, June 29, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/29/philippines-falling-far-short>.

<sup>41</sup> Gemma Bagayau Mendoza, "85 Armed Groups Maintained by Politicians - PNP," Rappler, November 24, 2012, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections-2013/features/16706-85-armed-groups-maintained-by-politicians-ppnp>; Miann Banaag, Ronald Mendoza, and John Penalosa, "Political Economy of Federalism: Insight from Data on Guns, Goons and Gold" (working paper, Ateneo School of Government, September 2017), 3.

<sup>42</sup> Defense Journal Philippines, "Cops Affiliated with 2019 Polls Bets."

<sup>43</sup> Karapatan, *Duterte's Choice: The Tyrant Emerged* (Quezon City, Philippines: Karapatan, 2018), 7.

hundred in the early 1990s to less than one hundred in 2018. Although many armies have been eliminated, a large number remains.

#### **D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

There are several plausible explanations for the decline in—yet persistence of—private armies in the Philippines. To limit the scope, however, this thesis examines two hypotheses. The first hypothesis focuses on election tools, and the second on the decreased threat from communist and Muslim separatist movements.

##### **(1) Hypothesis 1**

The first hypothesis posits that there are fewer private armies in the Philippines because their utility for winning elections is decreasing. Politicians have relied on other tools to win elections, such as the media and vote-buying. However, private armies are still needed to secure bloc votes in highly armed conflict areas in the countryside—where coercion and fear are the most successful tactics—which is why they persist in these areas.

##### **(2) Hypothesis 2**

Alternatively, there may be fewer private armies in the Philippines because there are also fewer insurgency groups. The Philippine government has historically used private armies to fight insurgencies, but the number of insurgencies has declined since the Ramos era.<sup>44</sup> With the decline of communist rebels and integration of the Muslim separatist groups into the military,<sup>45</sup> there is also less need for private armies to fight the insurgencies. However, the insurgencies did not completely disappear, and other subversive militant groups emerged, waging war against the Philippine government and wreaking havoc in the countryside. This led the government to rely on old solutions to counter the internal threats in these areas. Thus, the old insurgency problem and new internal threats have allowed private armies to persist.

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<sup>44</sup> Hernandez, “The Philippines in 1995,” 211.

<sup>45</sup> Romero, “The Philippines in 1997,” 198.



## **E. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This thesis uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the validity of the previously described hypotheses, and to paint a picture of how Philippine politics are still ruled by the three G's—guns, goons, and gold.

First, the thesis examines the relationship between national politicians and powerful local politicians, as well as between local politicians and private armies—specifically, how these alliances and armies help national politicians get elected, and how local politicians receive political gains in return. To do so, the research reviews news media articles, historical texts, and scholarly journals that describe political alliances and the mechanisms used to win elections.

Next, the thesis examines why the government continues to use private armies for counterinsurgency operations and how politicians gain from this strategy. This research relies on commission reports, human rights reports, scholarly journals, and historical texts to examine how the military and local politicians benefit from private armies in counterinsurgency operations.

The final chapter summarizes the findings of the thesis, and provides policy recommendations and suggestions for further research.

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## **II. RISE AND DECLINE OF PRIVATE ARMIES (1969–2001)**

This chapter explains the role of private armies in the Philippines between 1969 and 2001, beginning with the Marcos dictatorship and ending with the Estrada administration. It discusses the impact of private armies during the Marcos regime as well as the challenges that subsequent administrations faced to disband them—while also relying on them for political necessity and survival. The chapter is divided into chronological sections that explain how private armies proliferated in the Marcos dictatorship and Corazon Aquino’s administration, and how they declined during the early phase of the Ramos administration (558 private armies in 1993), and later persisted through the mid-1990s to 2000 (about 150 private armies) during Estrada’s administration.<sup>46</sup>

### **A. THE FERDINAND MARCOS DICTATORSHIP (1969–1986)**

During President Marcos’s authoritarian rule, private armies helped Marcos consolidate his power over the national government. Regionally, Marcos subverted his political enemies by disarming their private armies, while strengthening his cronies’ coercive forces. In the fight against the growing insurgencies, Marcos created community self-defense forces that essentially proliferated private armies in the country. Politicians who were sympathetic to Marcos used their private armies not only to fight the insurgencies in the countryside, but to also help secure victory in elections.

Private armies were essential to Marcos’s authoritarian rule. Marcos strategically deconstructed the country’s democratic institutions and used the military to subjugate local governments. He systematically reorganized the military, retired generals, and replaced police commanders loyal to the landed elites in the provinces while assigning close allies and family members to key positions.<sup>47</sup> To advance his political ambitions, he used the military as his private army and staged terrorist attacks in Manila; he blamed those attacks

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<sup>46</sup> Lynn T. White, *Philippine Politics: Progress and Problems in a Localist Democracy* (London; New York: Routledge, 2015), 37.

<sup>47</sup> Eva-Lotta E. Hedman and John Thayer Sidel, *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century: Colonial Legacies, Post-colonial Trajectories* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 44.

on the New People's Army (CPP-NPA), which he used as an excuse to declare martial law.<sup>48</sup> Marcos's successful consolidation of the military gave him unimpeded access to the coercive force of the government, which in turn enabled the regime to put the country under martial law with little resistance from political opponents. Marcos finally cemented his power when he declared martial law in September 1972 and closed down Congress, banned political parties, and imprisoned political opponents.<sup>49</sup>

During martial law in 1972, private armies helped Marcos subjugate local governments in the provincial regions. He strategically neutralized the coercive arm of the powerful opposition elites across the archipelago and empowered his supporters. He understood that the provincial governments were critical in establishing further control of the Philippines because the local politicians held most of the political power. Many of these powerful local politicians, before martial law, used private armies to protect their land holdings in the countryside from the CPP-NPA, or from other politicians vying for political power during elections. So Marcos methodically took away the mechanisms that kept the local politicians in power. The national government issued a ban on firearms and confiscated the weapons from opposing politicians' private armies while allowing Marcos loyalists to retain theirs.<sup>50</sup> In total, Marcos's government disbanded 145 private armies and seized 523,616 weapons.<sup>51</sup>

Once Marcos neutralized his opponents' private armies, he easily dislodged his political enemies and replaced them with his cronies. One of Marcos's harshest critics, local warlord and Congressman Justiniano Montano, who had ruled the province of Cavite since the 1960s, fell from power and never regained his dominance after Marcos

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<sup>48</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, *Closer Than Brothers: Manhood at the Philippine Military Academy* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1999), 192.

<sup>49</sup> James Putzel, "Survival of an Imperfect Democracy in the Philippines," *Democratization* 6, no. 1 (March 1999): 208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510349908403603>.

<sup>50</sup> John Sidel, "Walking in the Shadow of the Big Man: Justiniano Montano and Failed Dynasty Building in Cavite 1935–1972," in *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 142.

<sup>51</sup> McCoy, *Policing America's Empire*, 400.

neutralized his private regional army.<sup>52</sup> Other traditional oligarchs suffered the same downfall as Montano: the sugar barons in the Negros province—led by the Lopez brothers, who also owned the ABS-CBN Broadcast Center and other corporations in the country—fell from power and lost ownership of their companies.<sup>53</sup> While Marcos subverted his political enemies, his cronies flourished. For instance, Marcos bolstered one of his staunchest allies in the Lanao province, Ali Dimaporo, who was then empowered to increase his private army to fend off the Muslim insurgency.<sup>54</sup>

In the early 1970s, while Marcos centralized the military and police forces in the country, the CPP-NPA's presence strengthened; this furthered the proliferation of private armies across the archipelago. As an instrument of counterinsurgency operations against the CPP-NPA, Marcos's military officers used violent tactics to interrogate political prisoners and fabricate evidence; "Star chamber methods [were] used on a wide scale to torture evidence into existence."<sup>55</sup> Marcos also created the Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF), under the auspices of the Philippine Constabulary, to help secure the villages in rural areas. This loose counterinsurgency organization, over time, not only resorted to banditry and human rights abuses in the local populations but also served as a coercive force for Marcos's cronies; this group eventually became the primary impetus for disbanding private armies in the 1987 Constitution.<sup>56</sup> These insurgency countermeasure tactics served as a warning not only against communist rebels but also to opposition politicians who openly defied Marcos's authoritarian rule.<sup>57</sup> In 1982, Marcos armed

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<sup>52</sup> Sidel, "Walking in the Shadow of the Big Man," 144.

<sup>53</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, "Rent-Seeking Families and the Philippine State: A History of the Lopez Family," in *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 508; Alfred W. McCoy, "The Restoration of Planter Power in La Carlota City," in *From Marcos to Aquino: Local Perspectives on Political Transition in the Philippines*, ed. Benedict J. Kerkvliet and Resil B. Mojares (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 114.

<sup>54</sup> G. Carter Bentley, "Mohamad Ali Dimaporo: A Modern Maranao Datu," in *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines*, ed. Alfred W. McCoy (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 253.

<sup>55</sup> McCoy, *Closer than Brothers*, 204.

<sup>56</sup> Justus Maria van der Kroef, *Since Aquino: The Philippine Tangle and the United States* (Baltimore: University of Maryland at Baltimore School of Law, 1986), 51.

<sup>57</sup> McCoy, *Closer than Brothers*, 207.

110,000 CHDF troops, who eventually became the political warlords' private armies in the countryside.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, in the early 1980s, private armies became very useful in the dictator's constitutional referenda and election preparations, during which CHDF personnel "acted to intimidate opponents of the regime, also functioning as a network to ensure desired election results."<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, Marcos's counterinsurgency strategy in eliminating the CPP-NPA, both in urban and rural areas, only exacerbated the insurgency problem and gave plenty of recruits to the communist movement. At the end of the Marcos regime, the CPP-NPA presence grew to cover nearly every province in the country, with a total of 25,000 insurgents.<sup>60</sup>

In the 1980s, Marcos's grip on power started to erode and his reliance on private armies became increasingly necessary to secure his presidency. After the beginning phases to lift martial law in 1981, the dictator permitted slight forms of free competition, which allowed a few anti-Marcos factions to slowly emerge and challenge his political party, such as the New Society Movement (Kilusan Bagong Lipunan, or KBL), in a few provincial regions. The 1984 unicameral legislative elections showed the KBL lost 61 of the 183 legislative seats, but the vote was far from democratic; the election was plagued by massive voter fraud and corruption, as well as 2,000 election-related incidences of violence.<sup>61</sup>

To prove his legitimacy as his power weakened, Marcos called for a snap election in 1986 and won, using public funds to employ the full effect of "guns, goons, and gold" in contested regions in the country.<sup>62</sup> Marcos allowed his military to distribute 9,000 automatic weapons to local warlords' private armies a few weeks before the elections to secure a victory.<sup>63</sup> For instance, in Mindanao, Marcos supplied 1,792 firearms to Dimaporo's 2,400-man private army, who then delivered a lopsided bloc of votes in favor

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<sup>58</sup> McCoy, *Policing America's Empire*, 405.

<sup>59</sup> van der Kroef, "Private Armies and Extrajudicial Violence in the Philippines," 4.

<sup>60</sup> Hedman and Sidel, *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century*, 54.

<sup>61</sup> van der Kroef, *Since Aquino*, 10–11.

<sup>62</sup> Hedman and Sidel, *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century*, 28.

<sup>63</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, *The Yellow Revolution* (Bedford Park, South Australia: Flinders University, 1986), 13.

of Marcos.<sup>64</sup> In northern Cebu, political kingpin warlord Ramon Durano, who maintained a large private army in Danao, delivered a crushing victory for Marcos as well; Durano completely controlled the “guns and goons” in his district, which allowed him to deliberately fabricate the 1986 election results to favor Marcos in the northern area of Cebu.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, in the Negros province where the feudal system dominated, Marcos’s loyal sugar barons deployed their private armies to intimidate vote observers from the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) and beat up pro-opposition elites, which skewed the election results favoring Marcos.<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, in other areas where higher levels of urbanization had been established, politicians did not use private armies in the snap election. In Zamboanga City, Mindanao, where there was diverse business and trade, there were no private armies or voter fraud.<sup>67</sup> Corazon Aquino won a majority of the votes in the area using grassroots campaign movements through students, churches, and media endorsements.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, in the rural areas of Cebu, districts such as Carcar and Valladolid, with their expanding urban middle class, the role of private armies seemed to be insignificant in the elections, which gave Aquino an overwhelming edge in total votes against Marcos.<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, and despite his waning power, Marcos’s control of the three G’s won him the snap election, which sparked a protest from the Filipino population. Ultimately, Marcos was ousted from the presidency in 1986 as a result of the protests, which became known as the People Power Revolution

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<sup>64</sup> Bentley, “Mohamad Ali Dimaporo,” 260.

<sup>65</sup> Cullinane, “Patron as Client,” 184.

<sup>66</sup> McCoy, “The Restoration of Planter Power,” 123.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Turner, “Politics during the Transition in Zamboanga City, 1984–1988,” in *From Marcos to Aquino: Local Perspectives on Political Transition in the Philippines*, ed. Benedict J. Kerkvliet and Resil B. Mojares (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 25.

<sup>68</sup> Turner, 18.

<sup>69</sup> Resil B. Mojares, “Political Change in a Rural District in Cebu Province,” in *From Marcos to Aquino: Local Perspectives on Political Transition in the Philippines*, ed. Benedict J. Kerkvliet and Resil B. Mojares (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 74–79.

In summary, private armies helped further entrench President Marcos's control in the countryside. In his quest to centralize his control of the country, Marcos systematically disarmed and disbanded his political opponents' private armies and made sure that his cronies' armies were well armed to help him fight against the growing insurgency problem across the archipelago. But more significantly, private armies allowed Marcos to stage terror attacks in the capital city—attacks he blamed on the communist movement, which enabled him to declare martial law. Private armies were again essential at the tail end of Marcos's reign, and helped him secure his victory during the 1986 elections; at the same time, however, this fueled many Filipinos' hatred toward the oppressive administration. His power weakening, Marcos armed his political allies' private armies in preparation for the elections, which helped him defeat Corazon Aquino. However, Marcos's coercive tactics backfired; the population largely ended up resenting his administration and catalyzed the People Power Revolution, which ultimately led to Marcos's downfall.

## **B. THE CORAZON “CORY” AQUINO ADMINISTRATION (1987–1992)**

During her ascension to power in 1986, Corazon Aquino acknowledged that private armies inhibited democratization. During her presidency, however, she reluctantly tolerated private armies as a security mechanism to ensure her survival in office. President Aquino faced an enormous challenge in uprooting the entrenched pro-Marcos politicians who controlled vast private armies across the country. She also had to counter the rising insurgencies, CPP-NPA and the Muslim National Liberation Front (MNLF), which both seemed insurmountable, and required the use of paramilitary forces. At the same time, Aquino had to preserve her legitimacy and protect her presidency from the ambitious members of the military elite—the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM)—who were gunning for her position.

In 1986, many political warlords used their private armies to threaten Aquino's attempts to democratize the countryside. To garner support for her new government, she immediately reshuffled the local government positions and replaced pro-Marcos officials (i.e., KBL officials) with “officers in charge” (OICs). Her intent was to stamp out the entrenched, tyrannical systems from the Marcos era; however, the attempt fueled



resentments from Marcos cronies and Aquino supporters alike.<sup>70</sup> Not only did many of the appointed OICs lack the desired qualities of political leaders, some even interfered in the counterinsurgency operations against the CPP-NPA.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, many of the OICs belonged to the group of pre-martial law, landed political elites who were essential in passing the new Constitution.<sup>72</sup> OICs took their positions in the local governments, but many incumbent politicians refused to be replaced. For example, Dimaporo and thirty-seven KBL local leaders in Mindanao, Marcos's most loyal cronies, refused to relinquish their positions to Aquino's OICs and used their private armies to prevent OIC leaders from entering their government offices.<sup>73</sup> The government tried to disarm Dimaporo's private army, but failed to do so; in turn, Dimaporo protested that he needed his private army to protect him from the CPP-NPA and MNLF insurgencies.<sup>74</sup>

The Aquino administration officials did not agree on the utility of private armies in counterinsurgency operations. On the one hand, some of Aquino's cabinet members thought it was necessary to dissolve the CHDF, since its members were used as private armies for politicians. Others—more specifically, Aquino's military leaders—believed the CHDF was useful for the country's security defense. Ultimately, the Aquino administration decided to reform the country's security forces and consolidated the Constabulary forces into a central, internal security organization, which later became the Philippine National Police (PNP).<sup>75</sup> Aquino's consolidation of the Constabulary forces also meant that the CHDF would be dissolved. The military's chief of staff, General Fidel Ramos, pushed, instead, to simply reduce the overall number of CHDF forces down to 45,000, citing their importance for internal defense.<sup>76</sup> Despite Ramos's opposition, Aquino heeded the advice of her local government minister, Aquilino Pimentel Jr., to dissolve the 70,000 CHDF

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<sup>70</sup> van der Kroef, *Since Aquino*, 17.

<sup>71</sup> van der Kroef, 19.

<sup>72</sup> van der Kroef, 19–20.

<sup>73</sup> Bentley, "Mohamad Ali Dimaporo," 268.

<sup>74</sup> Bentley, 270.

<sup>75</sup> McCoy, *Policing America's Empire*, 434.

<sup>76</sup> van der Kroef, *Since Aquino*, 51.

personnel and 131 private armies.<sup>77</sup> This action aligned with the CPP-NPA demands for the government to disband the CHDF and dismantle private armies before they would engage in peace talks or cease-fire discussion.<sup>78</sup>

In February 1987, Constitution article 18, section 24, announced:

Private armies and other armed groups not recognized by duly constituted authority shall be dismantled. All paramilitary forces including Civilian Home Defense Forces not consistent with the citizen armed force established in this Constitution, shall be dissolved or, where appropriate, converted into the regular force.<sup>79</sup>

Although the Constitution called to disband private armies, it also created an ambiguous interpretation of what constituted legal forces and allowed the possibility of converting paramilitary forces into a functioning part of the military.<sup>80</sup> In March 1987, Aquino initially followed through on the constitutional provision and ordered the secretaries of the defense and local government departments, Rafael Ileto and Jaime Ferrer, respectively, to immediately dissolve private armies and the CHDF.

Despite Aquino's efforts to implement the constitutional provision, private armies' utility in counterinsurgency operations overshadowed the mandate. The military, specifically Chief General Ramos (Aquino's military adviser), Brigadier General Jose Magno, and other senior military leaders, disagreed with the administration's plan to completely abolish private armies and the CHDF, claiming that doing so would weaken the military in the fight against the insurgencies in the countryside.<sup>81</sup> This forced Aquino to revise the order and instead have secretaries Ileto and Ferrer provide recommendations to implement the ban by 30 April 1987.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> van der Kroef, 50–51.

<sup>78</sup> van der Kroef, 51.

<sup>79</sup> *Official Gazette*, "Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines."

<sup>80</sup> Justus Maria van der Kroef, "The Philippines: Day of the Vigilantes," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 6 (June 1988): 632.

<sup>81</sup> van der Kroef, 633.

<sup>82</sup> van der Kroef, 633.

Furthermore, the Aquino administration's directive to dismantle private armies also included vigilantes, but this countered the initiatives that the military leadership had established to combat the communist problem in the countryside. Aquino's order included anticommunist vigilante groups, such as Masses Arise (*Alsa Masa*) and the People United for Democracy (*Nakhahiusang Katawan Alang sa Kalinaw*, or *Nakasaka*).<sup>83</sup> These groups received warm support from the military, especially the field commanders and local politicians who controlled and relied on vigilantes in the fight against the communist insurgency, which led Defense Secretary Ferrer to push back on Aquino's directive.<sup>84</sup> In response to the military's opposition against dissolving vigilantes, Aquino reversed her decision and praised the vigilantes for defending their communities from the CPP-NPA.<sup>85</sup>

In May 1987, private armies' utility further increased with the first bicameral elections under the new democratic constitution. The motivation to follow the constitutional disbandment of private armies lost its steam. Competition from the pre-martial law "democratic" political elites, which involved political warlords and their private armies, took the stage. "By the end of the elections, according to Philippine Constabulary sources, '65 candidates were shot dead and 65 wounded.'"<sup>86</sup>

After the bicameral elections, the fight to disband private armies weakened further. Two other provisions in the 1987 Constitution, article 13 section 5 and article 2 section 23, called for independent people organizations and non-community based organizations to promote the protection and welfare of the nation's population.<sup>87</sup> Van der Kroef suggests, "Top Philippine officials have interpreted these clauses to mean the right of community self-defense."<sup>88</sup> Aquino, during a *Los Angeles Times* interview conducted in March 1987,

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<sup>83</sup> van der Kroef, 632.

<sup>84</sup> Justus M. van der Kroef, "The 'Rambo Mystique': Philippine Para-military and Society," *Internationales Asienforum* 21, no. 1-2 (1990): 11.

<sup>85</sup> van der Kroef, "The Philippines: Day of the Vigilantes," 636.

<sup>86</sup> van der Kroef, 634. The author also notes that the reports from the 1988 elections suffered the same violent electoral contestation, but with higher total casualties.

<sup>87</sup> van der Kroef, "Rambo Mystique."

<sup>88</sup> van der Kroef, 11.

stated that she was “‘enthused’ over the concept of using local civilians to police their towns and villages against Communist guerrillas.”<sup>89</sup> In the interview, Aquino further explained that she wanted to incorporate private armies in the local police department under the authority of the local mayors; however, her plan did not fully materialize until May 1987, when the government established the Civilian Volunteer Defense Force Organization (CVFDO), simply known as Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs).<sup>90</sup>

Although CVOs were intended to be volunteer forces operating at the district level, they quickly became private armies, working for local political leaders. In May 1987, the government not only established CVOs as a defense against the CPP-NPA, but expanded their role to fight crime and poverty.<sup>91</sup> However, the military did not envision that CVOs would be armed or have military skills; their job would be to provide intelligence to the military during counterinsurgency operations. Additionally, the Aquino government did not perceive the importance of formally organizing the CVO program, and the “volunteer” aspect of the job did not appeal to the participants. Instead, members of CVOs looked for opportunities to work for private armies for wealthy politicians to earn a decent wage.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, the Aquino government could not stop CVOs from arming themselves since, as civilians, they had the right to bear firearms in their pursuit of protecting the Philippines from subversives in the hinterlands.

Despite the problems with political warlords’ control of private armies, the Aquino government enabled politicians to retain some influence over the coercive forces in the countryside. The failed negotiations between the government and the CPP-NPA reignited the conflict that led Aquino to declare total war against the communist insurgency. With the CHDF dissolved, the Aquino administration needed additional forces to help the military with counterinsurgency operations, so the government created the Civilian Armed Forces Geographic Units (CAFGU) in July 1987. According to Kraft, “the military area

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<sup>89</sup> Fineman, “Aquino Orders Disbanding of Vigilantes.”

<sup>90</sup> van der Kroef, “Rambo Mystique,” 6.

<sup>91</sup> van der Kroef, 7.

<sup>92</sup> van der Kroef, 7.

commander screens candidates, with input from local executives and civic and business leaders who make up the Peace and Order Council.”<sup>93</sup> Unlike the CHDF, the CAFGUs fell under the auspices of the military as a reserve component, but were strictly used for counterinsurgency tasks.<sup>94</sup> The CAFGU became a lethal tool against the CPP-NPA, credited for 70 percent of the armed engagements against the communist insurgents. Furthermore, in 1992, as a result of the Aquino administration’s “total war,” the counterinsurgency operations significantly reduced the CPP-NPA forces to 13,000 and reclaimed 70 percent (8,496 to 2,819) of the insurgency-controlled areas.<sup>95</sup> However, the CAFGUs were also accountable for 3,146 human rights abuses, such as torture, rape, murder, and massacre.<sup>96</sup> These abuses were attributed to lack of training and discipline that stemmed from former members of the CHDF, auxiliary forces, and vigilante groups with criminal records.<sup>97</sup> Ironically, the CAFGUs’ essential functions were to protect business organizations and local government units, which caused them to fall prey to the political manipulations of the local government leaders and warlords, who were part of the CAFGU selection process.<sup>98</sup>

In addition to the counterinsurgency operations, the Aquino administration had to deal with disenfranchised military renegades. The rebel leaders of the coups were the same military officers of the RAM during the Marcos rebellion in 1986.<sup>99</sup> Their contributions to the success of the People Power Revolution empowered them to claim a bigger share of power in Aquino’s government. Aquino feared that the considerable influence of the military institution in the government might hinder the country’s economic progress.

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<sup>93</sup> Herman Kraft, “The Foibles of an Armed Citizenry: Armed Auxiliaries of the State and Private Armed Groups in the Philippines,” in *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines* (Geneva, Switzerland: South-South Network for Non-State Armed Group and the Small Arms Survey, 2010), 191–92.

<sup>94</sup> Kraft, “The Foibles of an Armed Citizenry,” 191.

<sup>95</sup> McCoy, *Policing America’s Empire*, 441.

<sup>96</sup> McCoy, 441.

<sup>97</sup> Kraft, “The Foibles of an Armed Citizenry,” 193.

<sup>98</sup> Kraft, 192–93.

<sup>99</sup> McCoy, *Policing America’s Empire*, 414.

Therefore, Aquino denied the RAM leaders' overtures to share a bigger role in government, held military officers accountable for their human rights violations during the Marcos regime, and declined to increase the military's budget.<sup>100</sup> As a result, some of the military felt marginalized by the administration's policies and targeted by the human rights prosecutions, which led former RAM leaders, from 1986 to 1990, to reassemble the RAM cause and vow to overthrow the president through a series of military coups.<sup>101</sup>

Aquino's defense against the RAM rebellion further weakened her efforts to disband private armies. One of the RAM leaders, Governor Rodolfo Aguinaldo, used his 1,200-man private army to help the 1989 coup and to resist government arrest.<sup>102</sup> To help counter the coup attempts, Aquino's brother, Congressman Jose Cojuangco, hired Israeli forces to train Aquino's private army to protect her family and deter attacks in Malacañang.<sup>103</sup> Throughout Aquino's administration, the RAM attempted seven coups, all of which failed. In 1990, the Aquino government went after the perpetrators of the 1989 coup and arrested the leaders—including one senator, two generals, and nineteen officers.<sup>104</sup> Although Aquino successfully repelled the RAM coups, her tolerance of private armies for her own protection came at a cost to her image as the leader of the country. According to van der Kroef, "Defense Minister and now Senator, Juan Enrile, an Aquino critic ... notes a failure of 'leadership by example,' citing for example the existence of President Aquino's own 'family army' and her personal, heavily armed 1,000-man 'Presidential Security Group' as the reason why 'lower-echelon officials are emulating the presidential example.'"<sup>105</sup> Aquino's private army in the Malacañang palace contradicted her efforts to abolish private armies through the 1987 Constitution.

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<sup>100</sup> McCoy, *Closer than Brothers*, 261.

<sup>101</sup> McCoy, 259–62.

<sup>102</sup> McCoy, 305–306.

<sup>103</sup> McCoy, *Policing America's Empire*, 448.

<sup>104</sup> David G. Timberman, "The Philippines in 1990: On Shaky Ground," *Asian Survey* 31, no. 2 (1990): 154.

<sup>105</sup> van der Kroef, "Rambo Mystique," 10.

Aquino's democratic reform unintentionally provided local warlords a mechanism through which to fund their coercive forces. In 1991, the Aquino administration passed the Local Government Code, which inherently decentralized the control of the national government, gave some governing powers to the local governments, allowed local governments to receive a more significant share the revenue allotments (also known as Internal Revenue Allotment [IRA]), raised revenue, and levied property taxes on government and business entities in their areas.<sup>106</sup> Concerning the funds that the local government received, the code allowed local politicians discretion to spend the money on social and development projects ranging from establishing community hospitals to fighting corruption.<sup>107</sup> In essence, the code strengthened the political warlords in the countryside by providing them direct control of the funding they can use to maintain their private armies. Or, at least, to use their private armies to maintain a monopoly of the economic resources in their respective area.<sup>108</sup>

In summary, security threats from the insurgencies and coups during Aquino's presidency negated the popular desire to disband private armies. While Aquino worked to abolish private armies, CHDF units, some members of her administration, and top military leaders did not fully support her decision to implement the new constitutional provision. Furthermore, the language in the Constitution did not articulate the enforcement aspect and left the law open for interpretation. Military leaders were able to exploit a vague definition of "legal paramilitary force" to convert private armies into regular forces. Aquino's hypocritical maintenance of a large private army further weakened her cause as her focus shifted to the upcoming election, prioritizing the first democratic transition of the government. The elections in 1987 for the bicameral legislature, followed by the local elections in 1988, brought political violence back into the limelight, but President Aquino's hands were tied; she needed private armies to engage in counterinsurgency operations. However, Aquino's counterinsurgency operations did significantly reduce the communist

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<sup>106</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 237–38.

<sup>107</sup> White, *Philippine Politics*, 146.

<sup>108</sup> Patino and Velasco, "Violence and Voting," 229.

threat in the countryside. In 1991, the decentralization of the government further entrenched local political warlords, since they now controlled the economic resources in their territories, as well as the funds for their private armies to protect and extend their power. On the other hand, decentralization contributed to further democratization of the country and enabled economic developments. Thus, the combination of wide support from the military, the administration's creation of various paramilitary forces, involvement of local politicians in the counterinsurgency operations, and Aquino's poor leadership led to the persistence of private armies throughout the administration.

### **C. THE FIDEL RAMOS ADMINISTRATION (1992–1998)**

During Ramos's presidency, private armies, to a large extent, became less prevalent in the political competitions in developing regions of the country. Ramos implemented policies that were consistent with his economic development goals. As the insurgency had been significantly reduced, the Ramos administration had to come up with a peaceful transition from Aquino's "total war" campaign. The Ramos administration expanded Aquino's policies and implemented comprehensive reforms that further diversified political participation and improved socioeconomic conditions of developing regions in the country. Concurrently, Ramos's economic agenda further entrenched political elites and introduced new ways for both traditional and aspiring politicians to win elections without using private armies.

Ramos's economic development plan required ending the conflict and establishing peace in the country, but peace also required disbanding private armies. Political instability in the country hindered Ramos from entirely elevating the economic status of the Philippines, and peace was the only path to stabilization. Resolving the conflict with the insurgency factions was a critical part of Ramos's economic agenda; with significantly weakened CPP-NPA forces and overtures of peace from the MNLF, abandoning the hardline approach and opening up to overall peace was the only option that Ramos felt was



appropriate.<sup>109</sup> Thus, in July 1992, he created the National Unification Commission (NUC) to provide solutions for establishing peace with the armed groups, to include the CPP-NPA, MNLF, RAM rebels, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and PNP.<sup>110</sup> The NUC identified several reform recommendations—including dismantling private armies—which Ramos included in his overall peace strategy.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, the NUC recommendations resulted in peace agreements with the military rebels in 1995 and the MNLF in 1996, as well as a ceasefire with the MNLF breakaway faction, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 1997.<sup>112</sup>

More importantly, Ramos's efforts to disband private armies, in accordance with the NUC recommendations, could only go so far; the recommendations lacked the enforcement power needed to go after the influential politicians who controlled private armies. In July 1993, Ramos issued Administrative Order no. 81 to disband private armies.<sup>113</sup> The order mandated the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) to disband private armies in all local governments, from provincial to barangay levels, by 9 September 1993. This effort—coupled with Operation Dismantle (*Operation Paglalansag*), which confiscated legal or illegal weapons from the population—resulted in a sharp decline in private armies, from 558 in July to 275 by 16 September; 3,600 weapons were also confiscated in September.<sup>114</sup> However, the private armies that were disbanded were small ones, and the deadline was not met—it was extended to November 1993. According to Riedinger, “Critics claim[ed] that the government [was] ignoring the large

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<sup>109</sup> A factional split occurred between the political arm, the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDF), and the military arm, CPP-CPP-NPA, in 1992. Miriam C. Ferrer, “Philippines National Unification Commission: National Consultations and the ‘Six Paths to Peace,’” *Conciliation Resources*, no. 12 (2002): 82.

<sup>110</sup> Ferrer, 82; McCoy, *Closer than Brothers*, 303.

<sup>111</sup> Ferrer, “Philippines National Unification Commission,” 83–84.

<sup>112</sup> Buchanan, *Armed Violence in Mindanao*, 21–24; McCoy, *Closer than Brothers*, 441; Soliman Santos, “MNLF Integration into the AFP and the PNP: Successful Cooptation or Failed Transformation? (Case Study),” in *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines* (Geneva: South-South Network for Non-State Armed Group and the Small Arms Survey, 2010), 163.

<sup>113</sup> *Official Gazette*, “Administrative Order No. 81.”

<sup>114</sup> Jeffrey Riedinger, “The Philippines in 1993,” 141.

armies of prominent Filipinos.”<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, politicians had circumvented Ramos’s efforts to dismantle their private armies since the enforcement law did not exist and claimed that their private armies were for security purposes.<sup>116</sup> Congressman Jose Cojuangco, brother of former President Corazon Aquino, for instance, claimed that he needed his private army to secure his family’s hacienda.<sup>117</sup> Throughout Ramos’s term, however, the PNP continued to disband private armies; the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) reported that from the mid-1990s to the end of Ramos’s term, 150 private armies remained.<sup>118</sup>

Ramos also ensured that the main sources of private army personnel were reduced. Administrative Order no. 81 also required the AFP to eliminate the excess number of CAFGU and CVO personnel not required for counterinsurgency operations.<sup>119</sup> The CAFGU end strength had reached 75,461 personnel, but the AFP slowly reduced the paramilitary personnel to its lowest numbers—32,748—by 1998.<sup>120</sup>

Instead of employing private armies, politicians in developing areas found more attractive alternatives for winning elections. In Cavite and Cebu provinces, where the housing and industrial development took off, some of the traditional political warlords found ways to manipulate the political competition in their districts using the profits gained from their economic activities. To fuel his political machine, warlord Johnny Remulla, a longtime Marcos crony, used land conversion arrangements with foreign-owned companies, illegal numbers game (*jueteng*) kickbacks, and earnings from construction companies.<sup>121</sup> With his increased wealth, Remulla abstained from using his private armies to garner bloc votes. Instead, he bought votes, and was reelected as Cavite governor in

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<sup>115</sup> Riedinger, 141.

<sup>116</sup> Rigoberto Tiglao, “Philippines: Safety Catch—Slow Progress in Campaign to Curb Private Armies,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 156, no. 37 (September 16, 1993): 26.

<sup>117</sup> Tiglao, 26.

<sup>118</sup> White, *Philippine Politics*, 37.

<sup>119</sup> Buchanan, *Armed Violence in Mindanao*, 21.

<sup>120</sup> Kraft, “The Foibles of an Armed Citizenry,” 192–93.

<sup>121</sup> Hedman and Sidel, *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century*, 96.

1992. However, during the 1995 elections, despite Remulla using private armies and buying votes, he lost the election to Epimaco Velasco, who was a former police officer.<sup>122</sup> Velasco, a Ramos political ally, won the election by utilizing the PNP during the elections and partnering with a well-known celebrity, Ramon Revilla Jr. More importantly, the majority who voted for Velasco were not economically dependent on Remulla.

Similarly, in the town of Bantayan, located in the province of Cebu, the Escario clan had politically dominated the town since the late 1930s.<sup>123</sup> The Escarios had been known to use private armies during elections but started to supplement their coercive tactics by paying off election observers to circulate fake ballots.<sup>124</sup> Election fraud continued to become more prevalent; Operation Addition-Subtraction (*Operation Dagdag-Bawas*), in which votes were added to preferred candidates while taking away from unwanted candidates, became a national issue during the 1995 elections.<sup>125</sup>

Private armies became less practical, as well, as people employed outside of their local residencies, moving from agricultural farming to manufacturing, became less susceptible to direct forms of intimidation. With urbanization and widened job opportunities—not just locally but also overseas—available to residents from the hinterlands, such as Cavite, the voter population diversified.<sup>126</sup> The new generation of residents in these areas became more economically independent from the political bosses who used to control their villages, towns, and municipalities. These residents gained access to information that expanded their knowledge in the democratic discourses of the country.

As private armies became less viable, new kinds of candidates were able to emerge—specifically, candidates who were able to appeal directly to voters. Ramos's amnesty program in 1993 gave RAM rebels a new lease on life and they wanted to express their frustrations with the government through non-violent means. The Party-List System

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<sup>122</sup> Philip F. Kelly, *Landscapes of Globalization: Human Geographies of Economic Change in the Philippines* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 155.

<sup>123</sup> Hedman and Sidel, *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century*, 96.

<sup>124</sup> Hedman and Sidel, 102.

<sup>125</sup> Hernandez, "The Philippines in 1995," 143.

<sup>126</sup> Kelly, *Landscapes of Globalization*, xiv, 93, 157.

Act in February 1995, which gave 20 percent of the seats of the House of Representatives for the marginalized and underrepresented groups, allowed a small portion of aspiring politicians to run for office.<sup>127</sup> These new political reform developments enabled former RAM rebels to run for legislative and local elections in 1995 and push their agendas in government. In total, ten RAM candidates ran for office, most notably Gringo Honasan, who ran under the party-list system, and Governor Aguinaldo, who was up for reelection.<sup>128</sup> With the RAM candidates, popularity from their coups during the Corazon Aquino administration, campaign support from film actors, and Ramos's backing, Honasan won the Senate seat, and Governor Aguinaldo was reelected. It can be argued that Honasan's and Aguinaldo's popularity and success in the 1995 elections were a prelude to the 1998 and 2000 elections, when a total of thirty celebrities—from professional athletes to television reporters—ran for office.<sup>129</sup>

In summary, Ramos's economic liberalization policies sought to stabilize the country's security landscape and highlighted the need to disband private armies. As a result, the Ramos administration acted on the NUC recommendations, which led to the creation of Administrative Order no. 81, which required the elimination of private armies and deactivation of excess counterinsurgency paramilitary forces. As some peace agreements with the insurgency factions materialized in the mid-1990s, it can be argued that the decline of the insurgency threat corresponded to the reduction in private armies (from 275 in 1993 to 150 in the mid-1990s). However, powerful political warlords were able to circumvent the law, which allowed private armies to persist. Furthermore, economic developments in the country undermined private armies' utility for winning elections. Socioeconomic developments provided political candidates non-violent options for gaining votes. The 1991 Local Government Code enabled political warlords to accumulate economic resources and gave them opportunities to buy off voters and poll handlers to influence the election results instead. Socioeconomic progress in developing areas,

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<sup>127</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 291.

<sup>128</sup> McCoy, *Closer than Brothers*, 315.

<sup>129</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 262.

combined with Ramos's policies, helped open up the political space and diversified the voter population, which allowed political candidates to run for office without using private armies to compete against entrenched political warlords. These political developments illustrate the decrease in utility of private armies in the election competition, and show an increase in other election tools, such as, vote-buying and celebrity power.

#### **D. THE JOSEPH ESTRADA ADMINISTRATION (1998–2001)**

During President Joseph Estrada's short two-year term, private armies continued to decrease in more developed areas, though they did persist across the country as a whole. The rise of populist candidates had changed the electoral contestation of the country in 1998, reducing the use of coercive forces in the more populated and urbanized areas. On the other hand, as the insurgencies regained some strength in the countryside after a brief hiatus during the Ramos administration, the government ramped up its counterinsurgency operations, contributing to the persistence of private armies in the countryside.

The results of the 1998 elections brought a new breed of electoral candidates that relied on their popularity rather than on private armies. Urbanization and the proliferation of television in the country connected entertainment personalities to voters.<sup>130</sup> During the Ramos administration, major television companies such as ABS-CBN and GMA Network gained national coverage and innovatively interwove news, politics, and entertainment into their programming.<sup>131</sup> Estrada's past celebrity status and his common-man persona helped him gain widespread support from the masses, absent any stable political platform.<sup>132</sup> Estrada's success in the 1998 election promulgated a new way to gain political office without having to rely on the old "guns and goons" in elections. Politicians who sensed the growing importance of this new formula "turned to television to maintain a high profile or boost their flagging popularity."<sup>133</sup> At the same time, the marriage of news and

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<sup>130</sup> Mark R. Thompson, "After Populism: Winning the 'War' for Bourgeois Democracy in the Philippines," in *The Politics of Change in the Philippines* (Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil Publishing, 2010), 29.

<sup>131</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 260.

<sup>132</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, 261.

<sup>133</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, 261.

entertainment turned newscasters into celebrities and entertainment figures into political pundits; movie and television stars recognized their power to influence public opinion.<sup>134</sup> Media popularity became an essential tool in campaigning for election support.<sup>135</sup>

There were no efforts to disband private armies during Estrada's administration, and his all-out war policy against the insurgencies may have contributed to the persistence of private armies in the countryside. In 1999, Estrada focused on making economic changes to the 1987 Constitution and stayed away from making political changes.<sup>136</sup> This stifled the efforts that Ramos had initiated during his presidency to disband private armies. Then, in 2000, Estrada engaged in an all-out war against the MILF, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and a revitalized CPP-NPA force.<sup>137</sup> As a result, the government started to ramp up the CAGFU forces to counter the increasing insurgency threat.<sup>138</sup>

In sum, private armies seemed irrelevant during the Estrada administration. During the 1998 elections, celebrity status—not private armies—was the election tool of choice. More importantly, Estrada, a former movie star, was able to use his celebrity appeal and pro-poor persona to attract the masses.<sup>139</sup> Allegations of mass vote-buying were attributed to Estrada's election campaign, but cheating in the national-level elections seemed to have been limited.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, with Estrada's economic agenda at the forefront, his administration abandoned any political changes to the 1987 Constitution. Estrada's approach differed from—and therefore neglected to follow through with—the previous administrations'. In Estrada's short presidency, the insurgency had only started to reemerge; the build-up of the paramilitary forces to support Estrada's all-out war policy,

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<sup>134</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, 261.

<sup>135</sup> Thompson, "After Populism," 29.

<sup>136</sup> Emil Bolongaita, "The Philippines in 1999: Balancing Restive Democracy and Recovering Economy," *Asian Survey* 40, no. 1 (February 2000): 68.

<sup>137</sup> Mel Labrador, "The Philippines in 2000: In Search of a Silver Lining," *Asian Survey* 41, no. 1 (February 2001): 221.

<sup>138</sup> Kraft, "The Foibles of an Armed Citizenry," 193.

<sup>139</sup> William Case, "The Philippine Election in 1998: A Question of Quality," *Asian Survey* 39, no. 3 (June 1999): 478.

<sup>140</sup> Case, 480–482.

however, may have contributed to their persistence. Estrada was impeached in January 2001, and therefore the private armies' political effects did not materialize during his administration; additionally, there were no elections during his tenure.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

This chapter highlighted the proliferation, decline, and persistence of private armies from the Marcos regime until the end of the Estrada administration. It described the security and political landscape in the Philippines as private armies were used to combat the communist and Muslim insurgencies. Counterinsurgency operations included the creation of paramilitary forces, like the CHDF under Marcos and the CAFGU, vigilantes, and CVOs under Aquino, contributing to the rise and persistence of private armies in the countryside. Despite private armies' utility in the counterinsurgency operations, they were easily manipulated for political gain during the Marcos regime. This led the government to make efforts to disband private armies during the Corazon Aquino and Ramos administrations; Aquino established the provision to disband private armies in the 1987 Constitution, while Ramos implemented Administrative Order no. 81. During the Ramos administration, the government managed to significantly reduce the number of private armies in the country, from 558 in 1993 to 150 by the end of his term. In addition to the Ramos administration's active efforts to abolish private armies, political and security factors significantly contributed to their decline. Specifically, improved socioeconomic conditions in the developing provinces led to the decreased viability of private armies in elections, and a decline in the insurgency threats. However, the Aquino and Ramos administrations failed to completely eradicate private armies for a variety of reasons, including military leaders and politicians who continued to circumvent the law, the presidents' lack of resolve, bad leadership, protection of legitimacy, and military necessity. During Estrada's short presidency, his lack of interest in making political changes to the 1987 Constitution prevented any momentum to continue to disband private armies, which allowed them to persist.

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### III. PERSISTENCE OF PRIVATE ARMIES (2001–PRESENT)

This chapter explains the role of private armies in the Philippines between 2001 and 2018, covering the Gloria Arroyo administration through the current Duterte administration. It discusses how each administration addressed the issue of private armies in elections and explains the counterinsurgency policies that exacerbated the abuses of political warlords and their private armies. The section covering each administration is subdivided into the themes of elections and counterinsurgency. The chapter also uses the 2009 Maguindanao massacre as a case study.

#### A. THE GLORIA ARROYO ADMINISTRATION (2001–2010)

During Arroyo’s presidency, previous trends continued; private armies’ relevance in more developed metropolitan cities declined but they remained prominent in the less developed areas in the countryside. Socioeconomic changes in the state, such as heightened poverty and the increasing influence of media broadcast, continued to shape the Philippines’ political landscape, especially in elections.<sup>141</sup> Other election tactics became more prevalent, such as vote-buying and vote-rigging. Meanwhile, private armies became increasingly useful for counterinsurgency efforts across the country as Arroyo joined the “coalition of the willing” to promote the United States’ global war on terror efforts in response to the September 11, 2001, attacks.<sup>142</sup> The coalition between the Philippines and the United States also brought military and economic assistance to the country.<sup>143</sup> Arroyo’s hard-line approach against the insurgencies enabled her political allies in the countryside to bolster their private armies. Nonetheless, the COMELEC reports that, in

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<sup>141</sup> Julio Teehankee, “Image, Issues, and Machinery: Presidential Campaigns in Post-1986 Philippines,” in *The Politics of Change in the Philippines* (Philippines: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2010), 121; Thompson, “After Populism,” 26–27.

<sup>142</sup> Mel Labrador, “The Philippines in 2001: High Drama, a New President, and Setting the Stage for Recovery,” *Asian Survey* 42, no. 1 (February 2002): 147.

<sup>143</sup> Labrador, 147.

total, the number of private armies during the Arroyo administration declined from 150 in 2000 to 107 in 2010.<sup>144</sup>

After Arroyo took office in 2001, two significant social variables shaped the electoral competition and contributed to both the decline in utility and persistence of private armies: poverty and the media. With a population of over 80 million, 35 million people in the Philippines have lived below the poverty line since 2001.<sup>145</sup> Poor domestic employment opportunities compounded the problem, creating high unemployment and underemployment rates—12.7 percent and 20.8 percent, respectively, in 2003.<sup>146</sup> Although the poverty level was high, households were gaining television sets; in 1995 only 57 percent of households had a television, but in 2001 the number jumped to 85 percent.<sup>147</sup> Additionally, the country's broadcasting changed its programming language from English to Tagalog, which made programming more accessible to poor audiences in the country.<sup>148</sup> The Arroyo administration passed the Fair Election Act in 2001, which legalized political advertising and provided rules for print, radio, and TV campaigns.<sup>149</sup> As the media's prominence increased, the Arroyo administration capitalized on its benefits in the elections. Julio Teehankee argues that the combination of rising poverty and the proliferation of political media campaigns perpetuated the "celebrity politics" phenomenon in the country, to the benefit of Arroyo's candidacy.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Lynn T. White, *Philippine Politics*, 37.

<sup>145</sup> Michael Montesano, "The Philippines in 2002: Playing Politics, Facing Deficits, and Embracing Uncle Sam," *Asian Survey* 43, no. 1 (February 2003): 160.

<sup>146</sup> Michael Montesano, "The Philippines in 2003: Troubles, None of Them New," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 1 (February 2004): 99.

<sup>147</sup> Julio Teehankee, "Consolidation or Crisis of Clientelistic Democracy? The 2004 Synchronized Elections in the Philippines," in *Between Consolidation and Crisis: Elections and Democracy in Five Nations in Southeast Asia*, edited by Aurel Croissant and Beate Martin (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), 230.

<sup>148</sup> Teehankee, "Image, Issues, and Machinery," 121.

<sup>149</sup> Teehankee, "Consolidation or Crisis," 218.

<sup>150</sup> Teehankee, 137.

## 1. Elections

In 2001, Arroyo's fight to establish her legitimacy as the leader of the country contributed to her unwillingness to abolish private armies. Arroyo's political party needed to dominate the midterm elections to silence her opposition, and it did, winning a majority victory in both upper and lower houses of the legislature.<sup>151</sup> These elections were the bloodiest since the post-Marcos era, with a reported 100 election-related deaths and 141 casualties. Furthermore, violence and vote-buying continued to plague the elections.<sup>152</sup> Political warlords and their private armies abducted political candidates during campaigns and murdered law enforcement officers in polling places, among other violent acts.<sup>153</sup>

Arroyo made rhetorical efforts to curb private armies during the midterm elections, but the efforts were politically motivated—they were designed to bolster her allies in the countryside by targeting the opposition's private armies, and to position Arroyo to win the next presidential election in 2004. Marichu Villanueva reports that Arroyo ordered the PNP and AFP to curtail private army activities during the 10 May elections in the areas with high election violence, also known as "hotspots."<sup>154</sup> However, Arroyo's directive did not specify which private armies the PNP and AFP were to eradicate. The opposition party suspected that the Arroyo administration's order was a ploy to reduce the opposition's sphere of influence and enhance Arroyo allies' chances of winning the elections. The PNP chief of operations director, Avelino Razon, explained that the hotspots were insurgency areas in some local regions of Southern Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. In these areas, the private armies served as bodyguards for the politicians from the CPP-NPA who collected money, also known as permit-to-campaign, or PTC, and threatened to harm politicians who refused to pay.<sup>155</sup> In essence, politicians and their private armies became necessary to

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<sup>151</sup> Labrador, "The Philippines in 2001," 143.

<sup>152</sup> Labrador, 143.

<sup>153</sup> "Arroyo Edges Ahead," BBC News, May 15, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1331306.stm>.

<sup>154</sup> Marichu Villanueva, "GMA Orders Crackdown on Private Armies," Philstar Global, March 19, 2004, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2004/03/19/243120/gma-orders-crackdown-private-armies>.

<sup>155</sup> Villanueva.

Arroyo, who agreed with the CPP-NPA's political arm, the CPP, to let her political party campaign in CPP-NPA territory and, in return, provided support for CPP party-list candidates.<sup>156</sup>

The bloodshed perpetrated by private armies in the 2004 presidential elections negated Arroyo's efforts to curb private armies and illustrated her lack of total control in the countryside. In many ways, political warlords found private armies useful in the electoral competition in the countryside. On election day, the government deployed 115,000 PNP and AFP troops across the country, monitored 115 private armies, and apprehended 1,800 individuals in possession of illegal firearms.<sup>157</sup> Despite these efforts to ensure peaceful elections, some political warlords managed to unleash their private armies in the countryside. In the Abra province, located in the northern area of Luzon, local warlords' private armies killed a gubernatorial candidate and a provincial representative during the election period.<sup>158</sup> Additionally, in some regions in Luzon—such as Cavite, Misamis Occidental, Angeles City, Ilocos Sur, and Sorsogon—the opposition's private armies killed candidates' military escorts.<sup>159</sup> In the Visayas region, such as in Bohol and Leyte, mayoral candidates' rivals used their private armies to shoot and kill their opponents, to include family members who were campaigning on their behalf.<sup>160</sup> In Mindanao, private armies contributed to the increase in total crimes related to elections, from 19.64 percent in 2001 to 26.7 percent in 2004.<sup>161</sup> Election-related violence increased across the country; as Teehankee accounts, “the PNP recorded 192 incidences in which 121 people were killed and another 208 wounded ... the 2004 elections had the highest number of fatalities since 1995.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 273.

<sup>157</sup> Teehankee, “Consolidation or Crisis,” 228.

<sup>158</sup> White, *Philippine Politics*, 44.

<sup>159</sup> National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, *Report on the 2004 Philippine Elections* (Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, August 2004), 22, [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/1745\\_ph\\_elections\\_083104\\_body\\_1.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/1745_ph_elections_083104_body_1.pdf).

<sup>160</sup> National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 22.

<sup>161</sup> Patino and Velasco, “Violence and Voting,” 231.

<sup>162</sup> Teehankee, “Consolidation or Crisis,” 228.

Arroyo's close ties with political warlords in the countryside enabled private armies to influence the 2007 midterm elections as well. Much like the 2004 presidential election, the 2007 midterms were marred by fraud, intimidation, and violence. Delegates from the Compact for Peaceful Election's International Observers Mission witnessed acts such as vote-buying and delays in counting votes.<sup>163</sup> They also noted that the COMELEC's voter list was not updated, and that eviction and death threats to voters who supported some party-list and gubernatorial candidates were rampant.<sup>164</sup> Similar threats occurred in the local elections in the province of Negros Occidental. The province is home to five million people who rely on the sugar industry—5,000 are sugar mill workers, but the province is also known for its wealthy sugar barons, who run the politics in the rural areas.<sup>165</sup> During the election, many of the polling places in these areas were held in the political warlords' haciendas, and they used their private armies to guard and prevent supporters of their political opponents from casting their votes. Additionally, in the poor communities in Negros Occidental, the political warlords used their private armies to enforce threats and evicted farmers who did not vote for the party they supported.<sup>166</sup>

Apart from private armies, Arroyo and her allies utilized various election tactics and fraud to secure victory in the 2004 elections. As the incumbent leader of the country, Arroyo had the resources to influence the outcome of the polls and exploited this advantage to its fullest. With Arroyo's political allies strategically positioned in the government through key appointments in the COMELEC, coupled with sympathizers from NAMFREL who contributed to Arroyo's campaign, vote-rigging was easy.<sup>167</sup> Arroyo coalesced the COMELEC and NAMFREL officials to ensure the votes reflected a substantial margin—

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<sup>163</sup> "Philippine Elections 2007: A Climate of Resignation, Fraud, and Violence," *KASAMA* 21, no. 2 (June 2007): 2.

<sup>164</sup> "Philippine Elections 2007," 2.

<sup>165</sup> Lawrence Surendra, "Philippine Elections 2007: Negros Occidental-Sugar and Philippine Politics," *KASAMA* 21, no. 2 (June 2007): 2.

<sup>166</sup> Surendra, 2.

<sup>167</sup> Cleo Calimbahin, "Capacity and Compromise: COMELEC, NAMFREL, and Election Fraud," in *The Politics of Change in the Philippines* (Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil Publishing, 2010), 183–84.

one-million votes ahead of her opposition—using vote-shaving and padding.<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, Arroyo's political connections with COMELEC officials enabled her supporters to engage in voter fraud: they manipulated the voters list, which prevented 900,000 people from casting their votes.<sup>169</sup> More importantly, Arroyo's political alliances with the kingpins in the south helped secure her victory. Arroyo's close associations with political warlord Andal Ampatuan Sr., who ruled the Maguindanao province in Mindanao with his 1,000 man-private army ensured Arroyo won a landslide victory over movie star Fernando Poe Jr. in the region.<sup>170</sup>

Furthermore, in the 2004 elections, the media became the main campaign battleground at the national level.<sup>171</sup> Teehankee asserts that the top two presidential candidates, Arroyo and Poe, dominated the media campaign efforts, receiving 50 percent of total coverage and spending more than half of their campaign budgets on advertising. However, Arroyo had not won the support of the poor population, and it showed; with this population, she trailed behind Poe in the polls before the election.<sup>172</sup> To overcome her popularity disadvantage, Arroyo used the media to discredit Poe through a series of negative messages. Arroyo also filed a disqualification case with the Supreme Court, which further eroded Poe's image in the media.<sup>173</sup> Most importantly, Arroyo knew the power of populism in the elections, so she allied with former TV news anchor Noli de Castro, who, as her presidential running mate, allowed her to reach the poor voters— her opposition's natural supporters.<sup>174</sup>

While Arroyo's political machine seemed unstoppable in local elections in the countryside, a few candidates found other ways to win without the use of private armies. Two prominent political warlords in the provinces of Cainta and Isabel, the Felix and Dy

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<sup>168</sup> Calimbahin, 184.

<sup>169</sup> Teehankee, "Consolidation or Crisis," 222–23.

<sup>170</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 68.

<sup>171</sup> Teehankee, "Consolidation or Crisis," 230.

<sup>172</sup> Teehankee, "Image, Issues, and Machinery," 137.

<sup>173</sup> Teehankee, "Consolidation or Crisis," 231.

<sup>174</sup> Teehankee, 232–33.

clans, respectively, were defeated despite alliances with the Arroyo administration.<sup>175</sup> In the municipality of Cainta, the second most populated municipality in the country and an economic hub for Metro Manila, new opportunities emerged for politicians to challenge the established political kingpins.<sup>176</sup> New generational candidate running for mayor, Ramon Ilagan, defeated the established candidate Nicanor Felix from the Felix clan in the 2004 and 2007 elections through strategic alliances with the oppositional party, mass appeal as a media celebrity, reform policies, and changes to the voting population impacted by the shift in the socioeconomic conditions of the municipality.<sup>177</sup> Similarly, in Isabela, the second largest province in the country, located in the northern region of Luzon, and one of the country's largest producers of rice and corn, Grace Padaca defeated Faustino Dy from the Dy Clan who reigned the province for more than thirty years.<sup>178</sup> Padaca not only defeated her opposition in the 2004 elections but also won her reelection in 2007. Padaca's media personality as a famous local radio host, and the political reforms she represented, helped her succeed in both elections against a powerful political warlord.<sup>179</sup>

## 2. Counterinsurgency

During Arroyo's presidency, the twin insurgencies against the Philippine government continued to strengthen private armies in the countryside. Arroyo's support for the United States and the fight against terrorism in the wake of September 11 gave the counterinsurgency efforts against communist and Muslim separatist groups a lift. According to Mel Labrador, "President Arroyo was the first Asian leader to have called President Bush in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, offering Philippine

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<sup>175</sup> "The Philippines: Limping Forwards," *Economist*, March 17, 2005, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2005/03/17/limping-forwards>; Raymund John P. Rosuelo, "The Erosion of the Political Dominance of an Entrenched Political Clan: The Case of the Felix Political Clan of Cainta, Rizal," *Philippine Political Science Journal* 37, no. 3 (September 2016): 196, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01154451.2016.1251609>.

<sup>176</sup> Rosuelo, "The Erosion of the Political Dominance," 204.

<sup>177</sup> Rosuelo, 195–99.

<sup>178</sup> Isa Lorenzo, "Isabela's Non-Dynasty Detour," Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, April 11, 2007, <http://pcij.org/stories/isabelas-non-dynasty-detour/>.

<sup>179</sup> Lorenzo.

support for the war on terrorism.”<sup>180</sup> The counterinsurgency arrangement between the Philippine government and the United States meant that the AFP received financial assistance and military support from the U.S. special forces to go after the Abu Sayyaf in Mindanao.<sup>181</sup> With additional funding from the United States, over time, the Arroyo administration boosted its military capabilities in the countryside and increased its counterinsurgency forces, such as CAFGUs and CVOs.<sup>182</sup> Mostly, Arroyo used the counterterrorism efforts as a catch-all approach to the counterinsurgency problem in the country.

In turn, the combination of boosting counterinsurgency forces and decentralizing control of paramilitary forces to the local governments contributed to the persistence of private armies in the countryside. Once the military cleared the insurgency areas, the CAFGU and CVO counterinsurgency forces prevented rebels from re-occupying the areas.<sup>183</sup> The private militia forces were essential not only in securing the rebel areas in the countryside but also in ensuring a cost-effective solution (compared to regular military personnel).<sup>184</sup> As an economical and useful counterinsurgency tool, the AFP increased the CAFGU forces from 52,748 in 2006 to 61,148 in 2007.<sup>185</sup> With 13,400 CAFGU units deployed within the country, the military deployed 70 percent in central Mindanao and 30 percent in other insurgency-prone areas.<sup>186</sup> These CAFGU forces were easily manipulated by the political warlords in the countryside; Arroyo’s administration enabled contractual agreements between the CAFGU units and the local governments.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Labrador, “The Philippines in 2001,” 147.

<sup>181</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 300.

<sup>182</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 22–23.

<sup>183</sup> Buchanan, *Armed Violence in Mindanao*, 21–22.

<sup>184</sup> Keeping a regular AFP private costs \$2,000 per year, while a CAFGU member costs \$550 per year. Rommel Banlaoi, “CAFGUs, CVOs, and The Maguindanao Massacre,” *Autonomy & Peace Review* 6, no. 1 (January–March 2010): 64.

<sup>185</sup> Buchanan, *Armed Violence in Mindanao*, 19.

<sup>186</sup> Banlaoi, “CAFGUs, CVOs, and The Maguindanao Massacre,” 67–69.

<sup>187</sup> Maria Anna Rowena Luz G. Layador, “Of Auxiliary Forces and Private Armies: Security Sector Governance (SSG) and Conflict Management in Maguindanao, Mindanao,” No. 267 (working paper, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Singapore, 2014), 8.



While the government provided more control of the CAFGUs to the local government units in the countryside, they also armed the CVO forces. With a total of 800,000 personnel across the country, Arroyo understood that CVOs played a critical role in ensuring peace, security, and development in the countryside,<sup>188</sup> which contradicted her rhetoric about curbing private armies. In October 2001, the Arroyo administration authorized arming the CVOs in insurgency areas but specified that only qualified members, trained by the PNP and AFP could carry firearms.<sup>189</sup> However, Arroyo's authorization required the local governments to supply the weapons to the CVOs.<sup>190</sup> Thus, political kingpins in these troubled areas were able to provide weapons to the CVOs who worked for them. It would seem, in effect, that the government's efforts to devolve control of CAFGUs to the local government units and the arming of CVO forces created private armies for politicians in the countryside, using public funds to maintain them.

The increased hostilities between the communist insurgencies and the government further exacerbated the problem. In 2004, the U.S. government listed the CPP-NPA as a foreign terrorist group, which caused the collapse of the peace talks between the Philippine government and the communist organization.<sup>191</sup> In 2005, following the election scandal in 2004, the CPP-NPA took advantage of the political instability to intensify its assault against the military, killing 50 personnel and prompting the government to reassess its security strategy against the CPP-NPA.<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, in 2006, the CPP-NPA stepped up its assault against the government in response to the extrajudicial executions of leftist organization members.<sup>193</sup> In response to the heightened attacks from the CPP-NPA, the

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<sup>188</sup> Banlaoi, "CAFGUs, CVOs, and The Maguindanao Massacre," 68–71.

<sup>189</sup> Agnes Zenaida V. Camacho, Marco P. Puzon, and Yasmin Patrice Ortiga, "Children and Youth in Organised Armed Violence in the Philippines: Contextualisation, Personal Histories, and Policy Options," in *Neither War nor Peace: International Comparisons of Children and Youth in Organised Armed Violence*, edited by Luke Dowdney (Rio de Janeiro: Children in Organised Armed Violence, 2005), 276.

<sup>190</sup> Camacho, Puzon, and Ortiga, 276.

<sup>191</sup> Rivera, "The Philippines in 2004," 129.

<sup>192</sup> Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, "The Philippines in 2005: Old Dynamics, New Conjuncture," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 1 (February 2006): 190.

<sup>193</sup> Sheila Coronel, "The Philippines in 2006: Democracy and Its Discontents," *Asian Survey* 47, no. 1 (February 2007): 179.

Arroyo administration issued Executive Order 546 and declared an all-out war against the communist organization also known as Operation Freedom Watch (*Oplan Bantay Laya*), committing \$20 million in the military campaign to eliminate the insurgency.<sup>194</sup> The executive order not only gave the military financial support for the counterinsurgency but also empowered local politicians to implement the necessary actions to help deter the communist threat. In other words, the executive order allowed political warlords in the countryside to strengthen their private armies by deputizing and using them as force multipliers under the pretense of combatting insurgencies, which further fortified the elites' hold in local areas.<sup>195</sup> In essence, the executive order enabled the Ampatuans to create the conditions that led to the massacre in 2009.

### **3. Case Study: 2009 Maguindanao Massacre**

This case study illustrates how national politicians—in this instance, President Arroyo—can partner with local warlords and tolerate private armies in exchange for their political benefits. Although this type of relationship is not unique to Philippine politics, this case serves as an example of how far politicians are willing to go to win elections and stay in power. In this case, the Ampatuan clan continually used its private army to threaten and eliminate its opposition, which also allowed the clan to monopolize the polling activities in its areas to help Arroyo and her allies secure a victory. To better explain this phenomenon, this case study section provides a brief background on the economic, security, and political situation in Maguindanao that enabled the Ampatuan clan to stay in power. It discusses how Arroyo's alliance with the Ampatuan clan strengthened the Ampatuans' political power in the region and allowed the clan to use its private army to threaten and eliminate any contenders, which ultimately led to the massacre of fifty-eight people in Maguindanao.

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<sup>194</sup> Gloria Arroyo, "Directing the Philippine National Police to Undertake Active Support to the Armed Forces of the Philippines in Internal Security Operations for the Suppression of Insurgency and Other Serious Threats to National Security, Amending Certain Provisions of Executive Order No. 110 Series of 1999 and for Other Purposes," Pub. L. No. Executive Order 546, 1 (2006); Coronel, "The Philippines in 2006," 179.

<sup>195</sup> Filomeno V. Aguilar, Meynardo P. Mendoza, and Anne Lan K. Candelaria, "Keeping the State at Bay: The Killing of Journalists in the Philippines, 1998–2012," *Critical Asian Studies* 46, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 659, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2014.960719>.

a. *Economic, Security, and Political Context*

The Maguindanao province is one of the poorest and most dangerous places in the Philippines. Maguindanao is located in central Mindanao, and it is one of the five provinces that make up the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The area was among the lowest performing provinces in the country based on Philippine human development indices from 2003 and 2006.<sup>196</sup> In 2009, it remained one of the poorest provinces in the country despite billions of pesos in development funding allocations from the government through the IRA.<sup>197</sup> The funding from the IRA had not been adequately accounted for or used to improve infrastructure in the province; as Carolyn Arguillas reports, Maguindanao is a “development black hole.”<sup>198</sup> While the province is stricken with poverty, it is also the MILF’s central provincial and ethnic base, which has spurred many armed conflicts with the military.<sup>199</sup> According to the Philippine human development index in 2003, Maguindanao had the most encounters and casualties from the MILF or MNLF.<sup>200</sup>

Maguindanao, importantly, is also the political turf of the Ampatuan clan, and the clan consolidated its power in the region when Arroyo took office in 2001.<sup>201</sup> The Ampatuan family patriarch, Andal Ampatuan Sr., politically maneuvered his family and allies to monopolize the local government positions in Maguindanao, electing twenty-two of the twenty-seven mayors in the province and securing the ARMM governorship in

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<sup>196</sup> Human Development Network, *Philippine Human Development Report 2005*, 2nd ed. (Quezon City, Philippines: Human Development Network, 2005), 19, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/philippines\\_2005\\_en.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/philippines_2005_en.pdf); Human Development Network, *Philippine Human Development Report 2008/2009* (Quezon City, Philippines: Human Development Network, 2009), 111, <http://www.hdn.org.ph/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/chapter-3-provinces-and-human-development.pdf>.

<sup>197</sup> Layador, “Of Auxiliary Forces and Private Armies,” 10.

<sup>198</sup> Carolyn O. Arguillas, “Maguindanao a Development Blackhole: The Poor Get Poorer, Ampatuans Get Richer as IRA Billions Pour,” Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, March 29, 2010, <http://pcij.org/stories/the-poor-get-poorer-ampatuans-get-rich-as-ira-billions-pourin/>.

<sup>199</sup> Soliman Santos, “The Maguindanao Massacre, the Bangsamoro Problem, and the Peace Process,” *Autonomy & Peace Review* 6, no. 1 (January–March 2010): 49.

<sup>200</sup> Human Development Network, *Philippine Human Development Report 2005*, 19.

<sup>201</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 18.

2005.<sup>202</sup> Furthermore, Governor Ampatuan Sr. successfully ran for reelection in 2004 and 2007, unchallenged.<sup>203</sup>

***b. The Alliance that Empowered the Ampatuans' Private Army***

Ampatuan Sr., a former commander of the paramilitary forces during the Marcos dictatorship, started out as vice mayor and eventually became mayor in the town of Maganoy.<sup>204</sup> He was reelected as mayor of Maganoy during the Aquino administration and used his private army to murder his opposition. Throughout the 1990s, the Ampatuans continued to employ violence to eliminate their opponents and gain political power in the region.<sup>205</sup>

After Arroyo took office in 2001, the Ampatuans' private army grew and became increasingly useful in consolidating their power in Maguindanao. Between 2004 and 2006, Arroyo's counterinsurgency policies increased the CAFGU and CVO personnel in the countryside, and issued Executive Order 546, which armed the CVOs that helped fortify the Ampatuan clan's private army.<sup>206</sup> The Ampatuans controlled all aspects of its private army, from recruitment to training.<sup>207</sup> In certain villages in Maguindanao, men were forced to join the CVOs. For instance, in the municipality of Shariff Aguak, men were required to work for the Ampatuan clan; if they refused, they were considered enemies.<sup>208</sup> In 2009, the Human Rights Watch organization reported that the Ampatuans controlled an over 5,000-man private army consisting of police, military, police auxiliary, CAFGU, CVO, and

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<sup>202</sup> Human Rights Watch, 18; Layador, "Of Auxiliary Forces and Private Armies," 11.

<sup>203</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 18.

<sup>204</sup> Human Rights Watch, 16.

<sup>205</sup> Human Rights Watch, 16–18.

<sup>206</sup> Edwin Espejos, "40 Years and Counting: The Communist Movement in Mindanao," ABS-CBN News, December 29, 2008, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/features/12/29/08/40-years-and-counting-communist-movement-mindanao>; Layador, "Of Auxiliary Forces and Private Armies," 8; Ed Lingao, "Why Poor Maguindanao Is Awash with Weapons of War: Ampatuans Used Public Office to Amass Mostly Illegal Guns," Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, February 3, 2010, <http://pcij.org/stories/ampatuans-used-public-office-to-amass-mostly-illegal-guns/>.

<sup>207</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 62.

<sup>208</sup> Human Rights Watch, 62.

bodyguards.<sup>209</sup> Essentially, the Arroyo government empowered the Ampatuans by supplying the personnel and weapons to nullify the MILF influence in Mindanao.<sup>210</sup> This arrangement between Malacañang and the local warlord helped foster a mutual relationship extending not only to counterinsurgency operations but also to the political arena.

Although the CAFGU and CVO units were solely intended for counterinsurgency operations, the Ampatuans exploited them to preserve their political power in the region. Human Rights Watch revealed numerous instances in which the Ampatuans' private army executed political rivals.<sup>211</sup> In 2001, for example, the Ampatuans killed and abducted several family members of the then-incumbent Maguindanao governor Zacaria Candao before and after the elections. In 2005, the Ampatuans' private army murdered Mando Tambulangan's wife and child because he ran for vice mayor of Datu Piang in 2001. In 2007, the Ampatuans' private army gunned down Robel Sakilan and his brother in the municipal hall because he was running for village (*barangay*) representative. In 2008, the Ampatuans' private army massacred eight farmers because their political loyalty to the Ampatuans was in question.<sup>212</sup> The crimes and abuses perpetrated by the Ampatuans and their private army were not reported due to fear of reprisal; according to Human Rights Watch, the local population and witnesses of these crimes believed that the Ampatuans owned the police and the judges.<sup>213</sup> More importantly, the Ampatuans' alliance with President Arroyo further insulated them from any political consequences—the Ampatuans served as Malacañang's instrument to control the province of Maguindanao and the ARMM.<sup>214</sup>

The Ampatuans' coercive monopoly in the region translated to election success for Arroyo and her political allies. Soliman Santos suggests that the Ampatuans were the

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<sup>209</sup> Human Rights Watch, 58.

<sup>210</sup> Lingao, "Why Poor Maguindanao Is Awash with Weapons of War."

<sup>211</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 26.

<sup>212</sup> Human Rights Watch, 34–35.

<sup>213</sup> Human Rights Watch, 62.

<sup>214</sup> Santos, "The Maguindanao Massacre," 49.

“political entrepreneurs” to the Arroyo administration, sharing mutual political benefits.<sup>215</sup> The entrepreneurial transactions came through in election successes in 2004 and 2007. In the 2004 elections, the Ampatuans delivered the entire province of Maguindanao to vote for Arroyo against Poe, who was the much-favored candidate in the region.<sup>216</sup> In 2007, the Ampatuans’ monopoly of the coercive forces, local government institutions, and the COMELEC was vital in delivering a landslide victory, a 12–0 win in the senatorial race in favor of Arroyo’s allies.<sup>217</sup> Furthermore, in the local elections for provincial and municipal positions, the Ampatuans dominated, capturing thirty out of thirty-two towns in Maguindanao.<sup>218</sup> The Ampatuans’ supremacy in the region, anchored by Ampatuan Sr.’s gubernatorial position in Maguindanao, was challenged however, when Ampatuan Sr. became ineligible to run another term and promoted his son, Andal Ampatuan Jr., to take his place.<sup>219</sup>

The opportunity to replace a political warlord came at a deadly cost to the opposition. Former ally and vice mayor of Buluan, Datu Ismael ‘Toto’ Mangudadatu, decided to challenge the gubernatorial position against Ampatuan Jr. while promoting a change in leadership in the province to national leaders.<sup>220</sup> Despite the danger of going against the Ampatuans and the counsel from the Arroyo administration to concede to Ampatuan Jr., Mangudadatu proceeded and filed for his certificate of candidacy.<sup>221</sup>

On 23 November 2009, heeding advice from his mother, candidate Mangudadatu had his female family members file for his candidacy in the capital of Maguindanao,

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<sup>215</sup> Santos, 49.

<sup>216</sup> Calimbahin, “Capacity and Compromise,” 184; Mercado, “The Maguindanao Massacre and the Making of the Warlords,” 21.

<sup>217</sup> Eliseo Mercado, “The Maguindanao Massacre and the Making of the Warlords,” *Autonomy & Peace Review* 6, no. 1 (January–March 2010): 22.

<sup>218</sup> Mercado, 22.

<sup>219</sup> Mercado, 13.

<sup>220</sup> Mercado, 23.

<sup>221</sup> Miriam C. Ferrer, “The Maguindanao Massacre, Perspective from Political Science,” *Autonomy & Peace Review* 6, no. 1 (January–March 2010): 44.

accompanied by political allies and journalists.<sup>222</sup> With assurance of safe passage from the region's military units, the Mangudadatu convoy journeyed to the capital. On the way, however, the Ampatuans' private army rerouted the convoy to an open quarry, where they proceeded to massacre the entire group, including bystanders.<sup>223</sup> In total, fifty-eight people were killed; it was considered the bloodiest election-related violence in the history of the country.<sup>224</sup> Fearing the massive coercive forces under the Ampatuans' control, the government declared a state of emergency, and later martial law in the region, to apprehend the perpetrators, including Ampatuan Jr.<sup>225</sup> Two months later, reports indicated that Arroyo's political party had distanced itself from the Ampatuans and allied with another warlord in the province who also employed a large private army.<sup>226</sup> Nonetheless, the Ampatuans' stranglehold in the province allowed the other culprits to evade apprehension. According to a Human Rights Watch report, "Ampatuan, Jr. was put on trial in Manila for the killings, together with 16 police officers and two alleged militia members. Currently, 195 people had been charged, including 29 members of the Ampatuan family and their allies; over half of those charged remain at large."<sup>227</sup>

The prosecutions did not prevent the Ampatuans from ruling Maguindanao, nor did they destroy the clan's private armies. Many of Ampatuan Sr.'s children and his son's wives were still in power and running for office in the 2010 elections.<sup>228</sup> Regarding the Ampatuans' private army, the AFP and PNP disarmed CAFGU personnel and relocated most of the policemen, but hundreds of the CVOs were still unaccounted for and scattered

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<sup>222</sup> Mercado, "The Maguindanao Massacre," 15.

<sup>223</sup> Mercado, 17.

<sup>224</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 3–4.

<sup>225</sup> Mercado, "The Maguindanao Massacre," 26–28.

<sup>226</sup> Sophia Dedace and Jun Verzola, "Despite Massacre, Private Armies May Be Here to Stay," GMA News, November 21, 2010, <https://ph.news.yahoo.com/despite-massacre-private-armies-may-stay.html>.

<sup>227</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 3.

<sup>228</sup> International Crisis Group, "Philippines: Pre-election Tensions in Central Mindanao," Asia Briefing No. 103 (briefing, International Crisis Group, May 4, 2010), 4.

in different areas in the region. The military perceived that many of the CVOs were still under the command of the Ampatuans.<sup>229</sup>

After the massacre, the Arroyo administration put together a commission to investigate the existence of private armies and provide recommendations to abolish them.<sup>230</sup> The summary report explained why private armies exist, acknowledging other factors as well as highlighting political warlords and CAFGU, CVO, police officers, and military personnel as the prominent contributors to the proliferation of private armies. The report also found that the spread of firearms and the lack of gun ownership enforcement laws in the country perpetuated the existence and abuse of private armies. Furthermore, the report identified the provinces and cities with the most private armies in the COMELEC-identified hotspots.<sup>231</sup> The report recommended several actions but mainly focused on disarming and dismantling private armies, and discussed joint activities between the COMELEC, the AFP, and PNP to disband private armies before the 2010 elections. More importantly, the report proposed that the Philippines pass an anti-private army act to criminalize private armies and remove the administrative controls that local politicians have over local police officers.<sup>232</sup> However, at the time when the commission concluded its investigation, Arroyo's term as president was ending; the recommendations were left for the subsequent Benigno Aquino III administration to address.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> "Philippines: Pre-Election Tensions in Central Mindanao," 3–4.

<sup>230</sup> The actual Zenarosa report at the time of this writing was not available. The author gathered evidence based on the summary report. Buchanan, *Armed Violence in Mindanao*.

<sup>231</sup> Buchanan. The report identified several regions and areas labeled as hotspots: Cordillera region, Abra, Masbate, Samar, ARMM region, Zamboanga del Norte, and Davao. Many of the government officials in these areas used their CAFGUs, police personnel, rebel returnees, bodyguards, former employees, and family members as members of their private armies. These officials used their private armies to gain political advantage, and some politicians used them for criminal activities.

<sup>232</sup> Buchanan.

<sup>233</sup> Sophia Dedace and Jun Verzola, "Ampatuan's Private Army Part of Bloody Political Custom," GMA News, November 22, 2010, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/206566/ampatuans-private-army-part-of-bloody-political-custom/story/>.



#### **4. Summary**

During the Arroyo administration, the president and her allies found private armies increasingly necessary to achieve electoral advantage and combat insurgencies in the countryside. Arroyo's partnership with the United States against terrorism after September 11 boosted the AFP's counterterrorism efforts against the Abu Sayyaf Group in Mindanao and counterinsurgency operations against the communist and Muslim separatist organizations. Significantly, these counterterrorism efforts gave Arroyo an opportunity to gain political legitimacy. The Arroyo administration issued policies under the guise of bolstering the military's counterinsurgency operations; in reality, however, they were a ploy to strengthen her political allies in the countryside. Despite Arroyo's vocal support of curbing private armies, her administration's actions contradicted her rhetoric. Arroyo's policy allowing politicians the operational and administrative control of the CAFGUs and to arm the CVOs in the countryside authorized political warlords to use these forces as their private armies. Political warlords then deployed their private armies to eliminate political opposition, and harass and threaten voters. Unfortunately, as illustrated by the Maguindanao massacre case study, the economic, security, and political conditions in the countryside fostered by the Arroyo administration led the Ampatuans and their private army to commit an atrocious act of violence. The Maguindanao massacre forced President Arroyo to take a serious look at the problem of private armies in the country; the administration established a commission to investigate them.

Ultimately, Arroyo's efforts to address private armies may have been born of political convenience; her term was ending, and the commission's recommendations would be left to the next administration. While this action to address private armies suggests that the Arroyo administration was not guilty of proliferating private armies in its counterinsurgency operations, the commission's summary report implicates some of the political warlords and their counterinsurgency forces. On the other hand, as a result of the commission's investigation and AFP and PNP dismantling efforts, the government's actions in preparation for the 2010 elections contributed to the decline of private armies from 150 in 2000 to 107 in 2010.

While private armies became increasingly useful in some regions of the countryside, the proliferation of the media aided the election process and Arroyo's political machine. Arroyo used the media to her advantage, employing negative publicity campaigns against her opponent and partnering with a famous TV anchor as her running mate, which gave her a boost in the 2004 presidential elections. In many ways, the improved socioeconomic conditions in certain areas in the countryside helped the media penetrate the voting population, giving them more access to political candidates during the elections. With these socioeconomic improvements, a few aspiring politicians gained the advantage, using their media popularity—not private armies—to defeat entrenched political warlords in the countryside.

In addition to the media, other election tactics increased in utility. These tactics included vote-rigging and vote-buying, which gained more prominence in ensuring election success for Arroyo's corrupt administration. Thus, Arroyo gained an unfair advantage over her opponents, infiltrating the democratic institutions of the country and co-opting them to manipulate the electoral competition to favor Arroyo and her political party, from the national to the local level.

## **B. THE BENIGNO AQUINO III ADMINISTRATION (2010–2016)**

During Benigno Aquino III's presidency, the combination of technological advancements and efforts to reduce violence in the election process further undermined the broad utility of private armies in political contestation. However, Aquino's goal to expand economic opportunities in the countryside further entrenched private armies. Despite efforts to disband private armies, the administration lacked the resolve to entirely abolish them, driven by political, security, and economic opportunities.

### **1. Elections**

The 2009 Maguindanao massacre brought the issue of private armies back into the spotlight; accordingly, the government increased its efforts to eradicate private armies and prevent violence in both the 2010 and 2013 elections. In the 2010 elections, according to reports from Human Rights Watch, the AFP and PNP issued sanctions to military and CAGU personnel engaged in partisan politics, and police officers in local government

units, to reduce the number of private armies before the elections.<sup>234</sup> In total, the AFP and PNP disbanded thirty-five out of the 107 identified private armies.<sup>235</sup> The use of electronic voting for the 2010 elections further reduced the utility of private armies and weakened other forms of election fraud; automation helped reduce the old forms of cheating and contributed to more peaceful elections.<sup>236</sup> However, the cheating was only reduced temporarily; politicians found new ways to perpetrate fraud in the next elections.

According to the Legal Network for Truthful Elections (LENTE), an election monitoring nongovernment organization, the 2013 midterm elections were marred with manipulated ballots and names absent from voter lists, and pervasive vote-buying in many regions.<sup>237</sup> Some candidates provided voters with small amounts of cash for daily subsistence, or even large sums of up to 2,000 pesos per voter.<sup>238</sup> While cash bribes were prevalent, in provinces such as Pangasinan, Rizal, Palawan, Surigao Del Sur, Negros Oriental, Tawi-Tawi, and Palawan, candidates also gave valuable items to their voters such as groceries, phones, clothing, employment, farm equipment, and boats.<sup>239</sup> In the province of Sarangani, Congressman Pacquiao's reelection strategy involved several vote-buying schemes, from paying voters who supported the opposition to ink their fingers before they cast their votes, which disqualified them from voting, to buying 20,000 hamburgers and giving out adobo lunchboxes during campaign rallies.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 83.

<sup>235</sup> Human Rights Watch, 83.

<sup>236</sup> "Electoral Security Assessment: Philippines" (United States Agency for International Development, July 2012), 22; Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Countries at the Crossroads 2011: Philippines" (Freedom House, 2011), 3; White, *Philippine Politics*, 159.

<sup>237</sup> "Eleksyon 2013: 'There Was No Genuine Elections,'" Legal Network for Truthful Elections (LENTE), May 26, 2013, <http://lente.ph/eleksyon-2013-there-was-no-genuine-elections-lente-post-election-evaluation-statement/>; LENTE; Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Can the Philippines' Wild Oligarchy Be Tamed?" in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, ed. William Case (New York: Routledge, 2015), 346.

<sup>238</sup> Fernan Gianan, "Votes Bought for P1K Each," *Inquirer*, October 29, 2013, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/516211/votes-bought-for-p1k-each>.

<sup>239</sup> National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), "NAMFREL Report on the 2013 National, Local, and ARMM Elections" (report, NAMFREL, August 12, 2013), 24–25.

<sup>240</sup> White, *Philippine Politics*, 216.

President Aquino made a campaign promise to disband private armies, and acted on it, but the promise fell short after he won the 2010 elections.<sup>241</sup> Aquino had ordered the military to assess the CAGU forces and determine if they were acting as private armies or as legitimate counterinsurgency personnel—and to keep the administration apprised of efforts.<sup>242</sup> These efforts did gain some momentum; in May 2011, Local Government Secretary Jesse M. Robredo declared that the government disbanded forty-one of the eighty private armies in the ARMM region.<sup>243</sup> However, subsequent accounting from top military and police authorities was inconsistent. Some reports indicated as many as 250 private armies in October 2012, with the number down to 45 in early November 2012, then back up to 86 in late November.<sup>244</sup> The fact that the government did not provide the names of political warlords who were employing private armies suggests that these numbers may have been politically driven. Despite the inconsistent reporting, to some extent, the Aquino government managed to tame the proliferation of private armies in the countryside leading up to the 2013 elections.

In addition to the disbandment efforts, the COMELEC authorized the AFP and the PNP to help with securing the elections; they deployed thousands of personnel to hotspot areas. In Western Mindanao, the military sent 14,000 troops to safeguard two million voters and 6,940 voting centers across the region.<sup>245</sup> In the province of Negros, the government increased its security by deploying 2,876 military personnel and 1,767 PNP officers due to the high activity of private armies in several districts.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Philippines: Falling Far Short,” 4.

<sup>242</sup> Human Rights Watch, *They Own the People*, 84.

<sup>243</sup> Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, “Countries at the Crossroads 2011: Philippines” (report, Freedom House, 2011), 6.

<sup>244</sup> Mendoza, “85 Armed Groups Maintained by Politicians.”

<sup>245</sup> Karlos Manlupig, “14,000 Troops to Guard Polls in Western Mindanao,” Rappler, May 13, 2013, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections-2013/28992-14,000-troops-to-guard-polls-in-western-mindanao>.

<sup>246</sup> Gilbert Bayoran, “Gov’t Troops Boost Security in Negros,” Rappler, May 12, 2013, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections-2013/28928-govt-troops-boost-security-in-negros>.

Despite these efforts, however, private armies persisted during Aquino's administration. National-level politicians still relied on local warlords' support, and local warlords still controlled private armies. In 2010, according to Lieutenant General Raymundo Ferrer, former AFP commander of Eastern Mindanao and head military overseer of martial law in the area, Arroyo's former political party partnered with the Ampatuans' rivals, the Masturas, who are also warlords and retain private armies.<sup>247</sup> Aquino's Liberal Party partnered with the Mangudadatus and the Sensuats, who also employ private armies in the province of Maguindanao.<sup>248</sup> In the case of ARMM local politicians, in September 2012, 168 former Arroyo allies—who were also known to retain private armies—switched their alliances to President Aquino's Liberal Party,<sup>249</sup> to include some members of the Ampatuan clan and the Mangudadatus in Maguindanao.<sup>250</sup> It can be argued that the numbers of private armies from the newly established alliances were not included in the overall accounting.

As a result of politicians fostering political warlords in the countryside, private armies persisted and managed to inflict violence in hotspots in both the 2010 and 2013 elections. The PNP recorded 180 election-related incidents in the 2010 elections, which was lower than in 2004 and 2007 (249 and 229, respectively).<sup>251</sup> Some of these incidents were perpetrated by the political warlords and their private armies in the countryside. For example, in the province of Leyte, political warlord Ramil Artoza, who supported Mayor Rolando Cerebre for reelection, sent his private army to harass the opposition party's

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<sup>247</sup> Ed Lingao, "Fear, Terror, Poverty Mix in Maguindanao: Arroyo, Ampatuans Mocked Agencies in Crafty Power Play," Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, February 4, 2010, <http://pcij.org/stories/arroyo-ampatuans-mocked-agencies-in-crafty-power-play/>.

<sup>248</sup> Lingao.

<sup>249</sup> Sara Fabunan, "Palace Asked to Revoke EO on Private Armies," *Manila Standard Today*, September 15, 2012, <http://manilastandardtoday.com/2012/09/15/palace-asked-to-revoke-eo-on-private-armies>.

<sup>250</sup> Reynaldo Santos, "Big Majority of Ampatuans Lose in Maguindanao," *Rappler*, May 23, 2013, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections-2013/29851-big-majority-ampatuans-lose-maguindanao>.

<sup>251</sup> Rimban, "Breaking the Cycle of Election Violence," xii.

village supporters.<sup>252</sup> In the province of Zamboanga, private armies gunned down local opposition candidates, injuring three people.<sup>253</sup> In the 2013 elections, the election-related violence decreased significantly to eighty-one incidents. Some of these incidents happened in the province of Samar, where private armies gunned down and injured the incumbent mayor and his son.<sup>254</sup> Another incident occurred in the province of Bohol, where Ester Corazon Galbreath's private army shot incumbent mayor Norman Palacio, wounding him during the shooting.<sup>255</sup>

## 2. Counterinsurgency

During the Aquino administration, the overstretched military was another cause for the continued utility of private militias. After Aquino took office in 2010, his administration reached out to the communists to bargain a peace deal, and also reinitiated discussions with the MILF.<sup>256</sup> Although the Aquino administration pursued peaceful strategies to end the insurgency conflict, it also retained its counterinsurgency forces in the countryside. According to reports, the AFP chief, General Ricardo David, affirmed that the CAFGUs were "force multipliers" needed to supplement the thinly deployed military personnel in Mindanao.<sup>257</sup> Furthermore, General David acknowledged that the Philippine government saved money by employing CAFGUs instead of regular military troops; the daily subsistence rate per CAFGU member was only 90 pesos (about 2,700 per month), compared to 10,000 pesos per month for an AFP private. In addition to the cost savings, the AFP chief also claimed that many of the local officials in the countryside had requested

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<sup>252</sup> Reyan Arinto and Ven Labro, "Eastern Visayas: No Stopping 'Guns, Goons and Gold,'" in *Democracy at Gunpoint: Election-Related Violence in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Vera Files Incorporated, 2011), 79.

<sup>253</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development, *Electoral Security Assessment: Philippines*, 23.

<sup>254</sup> NAMFREL, "Report on the 2013 ARMM Elections," 28.

<sup>255</sup> Connie Fernandez, "Rival Political Groups in Bilar Town, Bohol Clash; 1 Wounded," *Inquirer*, May 12, 2013, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/406975/rival-political-groups-in-bilar-town-bohol-clash-1-wounded>.

<sup>256</sup> Patricio Abinales, "The Philippines in 2010 Blood, Ballots, and Beyond," *Asian Survey* 51, no. 1 (February 2011).

<sup>257</sup> "AFP to Recruit More CAFGUs Despite Calls for Abolition," GMA News, November 24, 2010, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/206820/afp-to-recruit-more-cafgus-despite-calls-for-abolition/story/>.

more CAFGU personnel to help secure the local communities. In spite of the political implications of CAFGUs being used as private armies in the past, the AFP chief asserted that CAFGUs were under the command and control of the military and should not be supervised by civilians.<sup>258</sup>

Exacerbating the problem, counterinsurgency forces also helped protect the mining industries in the countryside. To promote economic growth, the Aquino administration was aggressively attempting to attract foreign investors in the country's mining industry, which was forecasted to account for \$2.27 billion in investments in 2012.<sup>259</sup> In October 2011, to help protect the mining companies, the administration authorized the military to deploy paramilitary forces and agreed to allow the mining companies to fund them.<sup>260</sup> The following year, the CPP-NPA perpetrated violent attacks on the indigenous people in mining communities; in response, the Aquino administration ordered the military to increase its security for mining companies.<sup>261</sup> The CPP-NPA attacks in the countryside were used to justify Aquino's decision to renege on his campaign promise to revoke Executive Order 546 and abolish private armies.<sup>262</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, Aquino stated that disbanding private armies was not the solution, since they were essential for protecting the countryside and mining operations against the communists and Muslim separatists.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> GMA News.

<sup>259</sup> Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, *The Philippines: Human Rights Defenders at the Forefront Despite an Ongoing Culture of Violence and Impunity* (World Organization against Torture and International Federation for Human Rights, February 2015), 7, [http://www.omct.org/files/2015/07/23254/v1.3\\_en\\_w\\_rprrtphilippines\\_obs15.pdf](http://www.omct.org/files/2015/07/23254/v1.3_en_w_rprrtphilippines_obs15.pdf); Marina Wetzlmaier, "Cultural Impacts of Mining in Indigenous Peoples' Ancestral Domains in the Philippines," *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2012): 336.

<sup>260</sup> Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, *The Philippines*, 11.

<sup>261</sup> Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, 11; "Philippine Army Says Mining Firms Need Militias," Reuters, October 11, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/philippines-security/philippine-army-says-mining-firms-need-militias-dUSL3E7LA1GQ20111010>.

<sup>262</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Philippines: Falling Far Short"; Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, *The Philippines*, 11.

<sup>263</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Philippines: Keep Promise to Disband Paramilitaries*.

In March 2014, the Aquino government signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) with the MILF. The CAB generated the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) for the Philippine Congress to approve into law, which essentially created a new regional entity to replace the ARMM.<sup>264</sup> The BBL proposed a joint strategy between the Philippine government and the MILF authorities to disband private armies.<sup>265</sup> However, in January 2015, the massacre of forty-four PNP Special Action Force personnel in MILF territory prompted a public outcry against the BBL.<sup>266</sup> As a result, the BBL did not receive enough support in the Philippine Congress to be signed into law. This derailed Aquino's opportunity to abolish private armies in the proposed BBL region, at least temporarily.<sup>267</sup> In September 2015, the Aquino administration established the National Task Force for the Disbandment of the Private Armed Groups (NTF-DPAGs) in the proposed Bangsamoro regions and adjacent areas, which was to operate until the conclusion of the peace agreement between the government and the MILF, or until all private armies in the region have been completely dismantled—whichever came first.<sup>268</sup> However, at the time of this writing, the accomplishments of the NTF-DPAGs have not been published.

### 3. Summary

Though many private armies were disbanded during Benigno Aquino's presidency in the name of peaceful elections, the efforts did not go far enough to abolish them altogether. While deploying AFP and PNP personnel to hotspots helped counter violence during the elections, some powerful political warlords known to have large private armies continued to stay in power. The government made only vague statements about dismantling

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<sup>264</sup> John Sidel, "The Philippines in 2014 Aquino Fights Back," *Asian Survey* 55, no. 1 (2015): 222.

<sup>265</sup> "Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro," March 3, 2014, *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2014/03mar/20140327-Comprehensive-Agreement-on-the-Bangsamoro.pdf>.

<sup>266</sup> Carolina Hernandez, "The Philippines in 2015: A House Still Not in Order?," *Asian Survey* 56, no. 1 (2016): 117.

<sup>267</sup> Hernandez, 117.

<sup>268</sup> "Memorandum Circular No. 83 Creating the National Task Force for the Disbandment of the Private Armed Groups in the Areas of the Proposed Bangsamoro and the Adjacent Regions IX to XII," *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, March 3, 2014, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2014/03mar/20140327-Comprehensive-Agreement-on-the-Bangsamoro.pdf>.



activities; it cannot be shown which private armies were targeted by law enforcement, and it seems that the private armies of Aquino's allies were spared even identification. This selective disbandment also suggests skewed reporting about the decreasing number of remaining private armies. In reality, private armies persisted because the corrupt government tolerated them to help secure victory in the elections. While electronic voting helped to undermine the utility of private armies, it also caused politicians to look for creative, more efficient ways to win elections—such as vote-buying.

Furthermore, the Aquino administration's aggressive pursuit of economic benefits from the mining industry contributed to the persistence of private armies. Paramilitary forces killed two birds with one stone: they were a cost-effective way to secure mining companies in the countryside, and they gave the military some flexibility since they guarded the firms against insurgencies. However, this security relationship perpetuated the problem of private armies in the countryside, since they were easily manipulated by politicians in contested areas. Meanwhile, Aquino tried to leverage the BBL to help disband private armies, but an unfortunate massacre derailed his efforts, leaving the task of dismantling private armies in Mindanao for the next administration to tackle.

### **C. THE RODRIGO DUTERTE ADMINISTRATION (2016–PRESENT)**

In the current administration, under Rodrigo Duterte, efforts to abolish private armies seem limited to election periods. A crime- and drug-fighting politician hailing from Davao City in Mindanao, Duterte, a former mayor, is known to have used his private army, Davao Death Squad, to rid the city of criminal and subversive elements.<sup>269</sup> Essentially, Duterte's iron-fist approach cleansed the city, transforming it into a thriving business and tourist community.<sup>270</sup> This track record earned him support from diverse social classes—not just in the provinces but also among the middle and poor classes, as well as with the

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<sup>269</sup> Nicole Curato, "We Need to Talk about Rody," in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency* (Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 18–19.

<sup>270</sup> Curato, 20.

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs).<sup>271</sup> Duterte's media presence, from radio to social media,<sup>272</sup> and his strong political machine maximized his popularity during elections. Unlike his predecessors, Duterte did not promise to abolish private armies; however, in his two years in office he has made efforts to suppress private armies ahead of the 2019 elections. Despite plans to subdue private armies in the polls, Duterte's counterinsurgency policy has further entrenched political warlords and their private armies.

## 1. Elections

In 2016, the internet—the new election battleground—led politicians to diversify their political machines. According to the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA), the over 47 percent of the population in the Philippines had access to mobile data and the internet during the campaign.<sup>273</sup> Furthermore, the COMELEC joined forces with media platforms to support presidential debates held in all three regions (Cagayan De Oro, Mindanao; Cebu, Visayas; and Pangasinan, Luzon).<sup>274</sup> With these developments, the presidential hopefuls in the 2016 elections understood the importance of social media and established their accounts, garnering, in aggregate, millions of followers online:

Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago leads the pack among presidential aspirants with 3,205,407 followers on Facebook and 2,094,618 on Twitter. Vice President Jejomar Binay comes in second with 1,802,535 Facebook followers and 271,111 on Twitter, while former Interior Secretary Manuel Mar Roxas II has 1,138,162 followers on Facebook and 547,449 on Twitter. The candidate actually leading the surveys, Senator Grace Poe, lags in social media: She only has 737,711 fans on Facebook and 58,154 on Twitter.

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<sup>271</sup> Jason Vincent Cabanes and Jayeel Cornelio, "The Rise of Trolls in the Philippines (And What We Can Do About It)," in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, ed. Nicole Curato (Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 240.

<sup>272</sup> Cabanes and Cornelio, 231–36.

<sup>273</sup> Krista Garcia, "Statistics on Broadband and Mobile Internet in the PH," Rappler, January 29, 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/brandrap/tech-and-innovation/120737-ph-internet-statistics>.

<sup>274</sup> Maria Buenaobra, "Social Media: A Game Changer in Philippine Elections," Asia Foundation, April 27, 2016, <https://asiafoundation.org/2016/04/27/social-media-a-game-changer-in-philippine-elections/>.

Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, the on-again, off-again candidate, has 1,176,664 Facebook fans and 13,230 followers on Twitter.<sup>275</sup>

To generate more support for candidates, the political parties employed advertising companies who helped create campaign communication plans.<sup>276</sup> These plans involved deploying professional trolls, individuals who manipulate conversations online, to help messages trend.

Social media also allowed politicians to reach voters virtually, without the need of coercive forces. Then-Mayor Duterte's social media team was staffed by hundreds of volunteers whose tasks were to distribute campaign messages to voters located in all three major islands, and including Filipino workers abroad.<sup>277</sup> Furthermore, Duterte's media presence reached diverse social classes; as Nicole Curato observes, the campaign "[cut] across classes, generations, gender, and geography."<sup>278</sup> Curato adds that Duterte did not have to force or pay lip service to voters to get their support; many of his constituents voluntarily provided their own time, effort, and money for the campaign.<sup>279</sup>

Duterte's media popularity, combined with the strength of his political machine, allowed him to dominate in the 2016 elections. Large organizations gave Duterte a boost in votes: two of the largest block voting organizations, Iglesia ni Cristo and Cebu One, endorsed his candidacy.<sup>280</sup> Duterte also partnered with coalitions, such as political warlords, the CPP, Marcos's family and sympathizers, and business groups, and received \$7.5 million in campaign donations from a few wealthy businesspeople and politicians.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> "Social Media and the 2016 National Elections," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, November 25, 2015.

<sup>276</sup> Cabanes and Cornelio, "The Rise of Trolls," 236.

<sup>277</sup> Lauren Etter, "What Happens When the Government Uses Facebook as a Weapon?," Bloomberg, December 7, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-07/how-rodrigo-duterte-turned-facebook-into-a-weapon-with-a-little-help-from-facebook>.

<sup>278</sup> Nicole Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 97.

<sup>279</sup> Curato, "We Need to Talk about Rody," 7.

<sup>280</sup> Edward Aspinall et al., "Local Machines and Vote Brokerage in the Philippines," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 38, no. 2 (August 2, 2016): 195.

<sup>281</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 341; Curato, "We Need to Talk about Rody," 7.

Duterte's massive campaign funding enabled him to spend \$200,000 on professional trolls to promote and defend him on social media.<sup>282</sup> The trolls also helped to counter the opposition's black campaign against Duterte using TV and radio stations.<sup>283</sup>

Although the media drastically changed the electoral contestation in 2016, vote-buying and private armies persisted. In the local-level competition, politicians payed anywhere from 20 pesos (\$0.42) to 5,000 pesos (\$106) for a vote.<sup>284</sup> Election-related violence persisted as well, though it was less severe than in previous elections. Months before the elections, the Philippine government activated law enforcement personnel to monitor private army activities in hotspots in the countryside, including Pangasinan, Masbate, Negros Oriental, Negros Occidental, Lanao Del Sur, Maguindanao, and Western Samar.<sup>285</sup> Unfortunately, private armies continued to sporadically inflict violence during the election period; according to the Carter Center, the AFP reported twenty-two violent incidents on polling day.<sup>286</sup>

After the election, Duterte's administration did not make promises to abolish private armies but did begin to take measures to secure the 2019 midterm elections. In August 2018, Duterte cautioned politicians from creating private armies and tasked the PNP and AFP with dismantling private armies formed by politicians.<sup>287</sup> As a result, as of October 2018, PNP and AFP leadership, PNP Director General Oscar Albayalde and AFP

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<sup>282</sup> John Paolo Bencito, "Duterte Admits Paying Trolls for 2016 Elections," *Manila Standard Today*, July 26, 2017; Cabanes and Cornelio, "The Rise of Trolls," 237.

<sup>283</sup> Nestor Corrales, "ABS-CBN on 'Anti-Duterte' TVC: We Are Duty-Bound to Air Legitimate Ad," *Inquirer*, May 6, 2016, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/783574/abs-cbn-on-anti-duterte-tvc-we-are-duty-bound-to-air-legitimate-ad>.

<sup>284</sup> Aspinall et al., "Local Machines and Vote Brokerage," 194.

<sup>285</sup> Marchel Espina, "4 LGU in Negros Occidental Likely Poll Hotspots," *Sunstar*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/65666>; "Three Cases of Election-Related Violence Recorded on Second Day of Campaign Period," *CNN Philippines*, February 10, 2016, <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2016/02/10/election-violence-gun-ban.html>.

<sup>286</sup> "Limited Election Observation Mission to the Philippines: June 2016 Statement," The Carter Center, June 2016, 5, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace\\_publications/election\\_reports/philippines-june-2016-election-statement.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/philippines-june-2016-election-statement.pdf).

<sup>287</sup> Genalyn Kabilig, "Duterte Warns Politicians Against Forming Private Armies," *Manila Bulletin*, August 22, 2018, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2018/08/22/duterte-warns-politicians-against-forming-private-armies/>.

Chief of Staff General Carlito Galvez, are looking for methods to provide a coordinated approach for securing the midterm elections.<sup>288</sup> In addition to coordination between the PNP and AFP, the PNP is also looking into reassigning police officers who have ties with the local incumbent politicians and candidates.<sup>289</sup> Furthermore, Director General Albayalde identified seventy-seven active private armies for the PNP to monitor, and identified 7,926 villages in 896 municipalities that are considered hotspots, such as ARMM, Eastern Visayas, and Central Visayas.<sup>290</sup>

## **2. Counterinsurgency**

Since Duterte took office in 2016, the administration's main focus has been the war on drugs; however, it continues to engage in counterinsurgency operations in the countryside, despite its pursuit of peace with the insurgent groups. When the BBL was signed into law in July 2018, the MILF and the Philippines reached a peace agreement.<sup>291</sup> However, plans to disband private armies—as required by the BBL—have not yet materialized at the time of this writing. While the MILF insurgency may be suppressed, for the time being, a few Muslim terrorist groups, such as the ASG, continue to plague the internal security of the country.<sup>292</sup> After a brief ceasefire and peace talks between the Philippine government and the CPP-NPA, Duterte declared an all-out war against the CPP-NPA; the administration continues to support Executive Order 546, which allows politicians to arm their CVOs—who serve as private armies—in conflict areas.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> “PNP, AFP Team up to Secure 2019 Polls,” *Defense Journal Philippines*, October 17, 2018, <https://defensejournal.ph/2018/10/17/pnp-afp-team-secure-2019-polls/>.

<sup>289</sup> *Defense Journal Philippines*, “Cops Affiliated with 2019 Polls.”

<sup>290</sup> *Defense Journal Philippines*; “PNP, AFP Team up to Secure 2019 Polls.”

<sup>291</sup> Fausto Ximenes, “Bringing Peace to the Philippines’ Troubled South: The Bangsamoro Organic Law,” *Diplomat*, October 2, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/bringing-peace-to-the-philippines-troubled-south-the-bangsamoro-organic-law/>.

<sup>292</sup> Ximenes.

<sup>293</sup> Karapatan, *Duterte’s Choice*, 7.

### **3. Summary**

In the two years of Duterte's administration, private armies—though they are a less appealing strategy for winning elections—persist. Despite Duterte's successful use of social media and political prowess, private armies remain viable for local warlords in hotspots. To safeguard elections, Duterte issued rhetorical statements warning politicians about forming private armies, and intensified PNP and AFP security measures. However, these efforts, like those from previous administrations, only temporarily dismantle private armies. At best, this Band-Aid approach only curbs political warlords from activating private armies during the election period; afterward, it can be argued, they can reactivate the armies to do their bidding. Furthermore, Duterte's counterinsurgency operations include supporting political warlords to arm CVOs. This approach, which is similar to the approaches of the Arroyo and Benigno Aquino administrations, only perpetuates the problem of private armies in the countryside, negating the election-related efforts.

### **D. CONCLUSION**

From 2001 to the present, private armies were not the predominant election strategy. Vote-rigging and vote-buying grew increasingly pervasive after the introduction of computerized polling. The media also became increasingly critical in the electoral contest at the national level; presidential candidates invested more in campaign advertisement and social media tactics to reach voters.

Although private armies are becoming less useful in elections and have declined in numbers, they have persisted in the countryside. Policies to address private armies have been temporary—isolated to election periods—and therefore ineffective. There is also evidence of inaccurate reporting and skewed dismantling efforts that fail to target, or account for, the private armies of warlords who are allies to the prevailing administration. As observed, many of the political warlords switched their allegiance to the newly elected president as soon as the elections were over. With the bloc of votes that the political warlords had provided on behalf of their provinces, the leaders in Malacañang tended to tolerate the abuses that these warlords committed during the elections.

Private armies have persisted, too, because politicians exploit them as a cover for counterinsurgency operations. The administrations allowed warlords in the countryside to control paramilitary forces, enabling corrupt politicians to manipulate private armies. Furthermore, when the government gave political warlords the authority to arm their private armies to protect their communities, it only legitimized the status and actions of private armies under the administrative and operational control of their political masters. Although these counterinsurgency policies may be intended for internal security, their political manipulation for personal gain has contributed to their persistence.

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## **IV. CONCLUSION**

This thesis sought to explain why—despite their shrinking numbers and repeated efforts to dismantle them—private armies have persisted in the Philippines. The research examined the enduring factors that have sustained private armies, proposing two hypotheses centered around private armies’ utility for elections and counterinsurgency efforts. Both hypotheses partially answered the research question. The use of private armies has declined in developed areas where economic improvements have allowed politicians to reach voters in different ways, minimizing the use of force in elections. However, private armies persist in the countryside, where they are useful for winning elections in hotspots, and where the counterinsurgency narrative has legitimized their presence. The findings presented in this chapter illustrate these trends. The chapter also provides recommendations that could help remedy the persistence of private armies. Finally, this chapter acknowledges factors that were not addressed in the research and that could help provide a more holistic picture to explain why private armies persist.

### **A. FINDINGS**

Chapter I addressed the historical roots of private armies, characterizing their decline and persistence since the mid-1940s. Given the country’s instability after World War II, Chapter I found that political elites used private armies to help restore order and win back their lands in the countryside. The rise of the Huks in the mid-1940s prompted local politicians to rely on private armies to fight the insurgency, but also to win elections. Unfortunately, the same practice continues in the present-day democracy of the Philippines, as examined in Chapters II and III.

Chapter II discussed the factors that led to the proliferation of private armies in the country and examined the government’s efforts to disband them. Politicians in the countryside used the paramilitary forces to counter the insurgency problem but also exploited the forces for their own political gain. In the early 1970s, private armies became increasingly important to counter the rise of the CPP-NPA and Muslim separatist groups, but were also critical in preserving Ferdinand Marcos’s power. In the mid-1980s, the

Corazon Aquino administration believed private armies threatened democracy, and established a provision in the 1987 Constitution to abolish them. Aquino lacked the resolve needed to enforce the provision, and found that private armies were critical to her administration's survival—as well as her own physical security. Efforts to reduce private armies continued during the Fidel Ramos administration in 1993, as the government's peace efforts with the insurgency groups hinged upon disbanding private armies. The utility of private armies further eroded as candidates in more developed areas found ways to reach voters in communities with no political ties to warlords, and methods of winning elections without the use of coercive forces. However, some politicians in the countryside were able to circumvent the government efforts to disband private armies due to their utility in counterinsurgency operations and elections. Similarly, the Joseph Estrada administration, though truncated compared to the previous administrations, generally ignored private armies, which contributed to their persistence. Thus, the Ramos administration's disbanding efforts and the broad economic improvements in developed areas in the country led to the decline of private armies. However, the political and security utility of private armies in the countryside, as well as the lack of government resolve to fully abolish private armies, contributed to their persistence.

Chapter III also discussed how private armies persisted despite government efforts to disband them. On paper, the government claimed to reduce the number of private armies; in reality, however, a large number of private armies still were maintained in the countryside and known to engage in highly armed conflicts. Nonetheless, in general, the broad economic changes in the country continued to reduce the utility of private armies in elections, but the ongoing insurgency threat led to the government's reliance on private armies to supplement the military's counterinsurgency operations. In 2001, the Gloria Arroyo administration's counterinsurgency policies further entrenched political warlords in the countryside and empowered them to maintain private armies. In return, political warlords helped Arroyo secure victory in the elections. Unfortunately, as the 2009 Maguindanao massacre case study illustrated, Arroyo's symbiotic relationship with the political warlords who employed private armies proved to be costly. In 2010, the lessons learned from the massacre pushed the Benigno Aquino III administration to abolish private

armies. However, the government failed to completely eliminate the structure that enabled private armies. Moreover, the Aquino administration focused on enhancing the country's economy by promoting the mining industry, which needed to be secured by private armies. Aquino's alliances with political warlords—which he needed to win elections—negated any efforts to disband their private armies. In 2016, Rodrigo Duterte made no promises to abolish private armies; however, he has vowed to punish politicians who form private armies in the 2019 elections. Despite this, Duterte continues to use the same paramilitary forces to confront insurgencies, leaving the same structures intact that enabled politicians to transform counterinsurgency forces into their own private armies.

Thus, similar patterns endure today. Private armies still persist because they help politicians win elections and because they are a useful counterinsurgency mechanism in the countryside. On the other hand, wide economic improvements have brought about other methods for politicians to win elections, and so private armies have decreased in developed areas of the country.

## **B. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The thesis found several implications regarding the decline and persistence of private armies in the Philippines. First, the widely reported data of the number of disbanded private armies is inaccurate. Furthermore, the results of the disbanding efforts fell short of eliminating private armies and do not explain what the law enforcement authorities did. Additionally, the disbanding efforts have been made only during election periods. These corrupt and seasonal disbanding efforts have not been effective, which explains why so many private armies still exist. The Philippine government should revisit the 1987 Constitution and strengthen its provision on private armies by incorporating enforcement policies to eliminate and ban them permanently. The enforcement efforts should not be limited to election periods but actively pursued year-round. To prevent partisan politics from hindering this process, the Philippine government should create an independent, non-partisan law enforcement organization to oversee the disbandment efforts and ensure that the law against forming private armies is followed.

Second, local governments have decentralized authority over paramilitary forces, which allows political warlords to transform counterinsurgency forces into their own private armies. The local politicians' administrative and operational control of paramilitary forces enables corrupt political warlords to exploit and manipulate CAFGU and CVO members to serve as members of their private armies. In return, members of their private armies are given money and special favors. Essentially, the government's policies perpetuate this patron-client relationship. The government should transfer the administrative and operational control of paramilitary forces, CAFGUs and CVOs, to the AFP and PNP, respectively. Furthermore, to eliminate or at least limit any influence political warlords have over paramilitary forces, the government should remove politicians from the selection process of CAFGU members.

Third, the use of public funds to maintain counterinsurgency forces contributes to the persistence of private armies. The Philippine government has authorized the local government units to use IRAs to pay for the CAFGUs and CVOs, which has led local warlords to build and maintain their private armies. Once the government has transferred administrative and operational control of counterinsurgency forces to the AFP and PNP, the government should ensure adequate funding is allotted to maintain these forces. This should allow local governments to use IRAs for their intended purpose—development, not private armies.

And finally, Executive Order 546 created loopholes that empowered local politicians to arm CVOs, which contributed to the persistence of private armies in the countryside. The executive order essentially deputized CVOs and permitted politicians to arm them as “force multipliers” in the counterterrorism campaign. The government should rescind this law.

In sum, the persistence of private armies is a political problem; the government will need to use a comprehensive approach to combat it. The recommendations in this section address the root of the problem, and a resolute administration will be needed to enact them. Similarly, both executive and legislative bodies of government, as well as local government units, should work closely to ensure the appropriate laws are in place to not only execute but also follow through with the recommendations to their fullest.

### **C. AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This thesis focused on the decline yet persistence of private armies in the Philippines from the Marcos regime to the present Duterte administration; a few other areas of focus, however, would enhance the research. First, the scope of this project narrowly focused on the elections and counterinsurgency perspectives. Future research could analyze the relationship between landed elites and politicians. The data gathered in such a study would do much to explain how landowners influence the efforts to abolish private armies in the country. Additionally, further research could examine the proliferation of firearms in the Philippines and how it contributes to the persistence of private armies, or the perspective of private army members (in an attempt to understand why they join). These areas of future research could paint a more complete picture about the persistence of private armies in the Philippines.

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