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Killing Politicians in the Philippines: Who, Where, When, and Why

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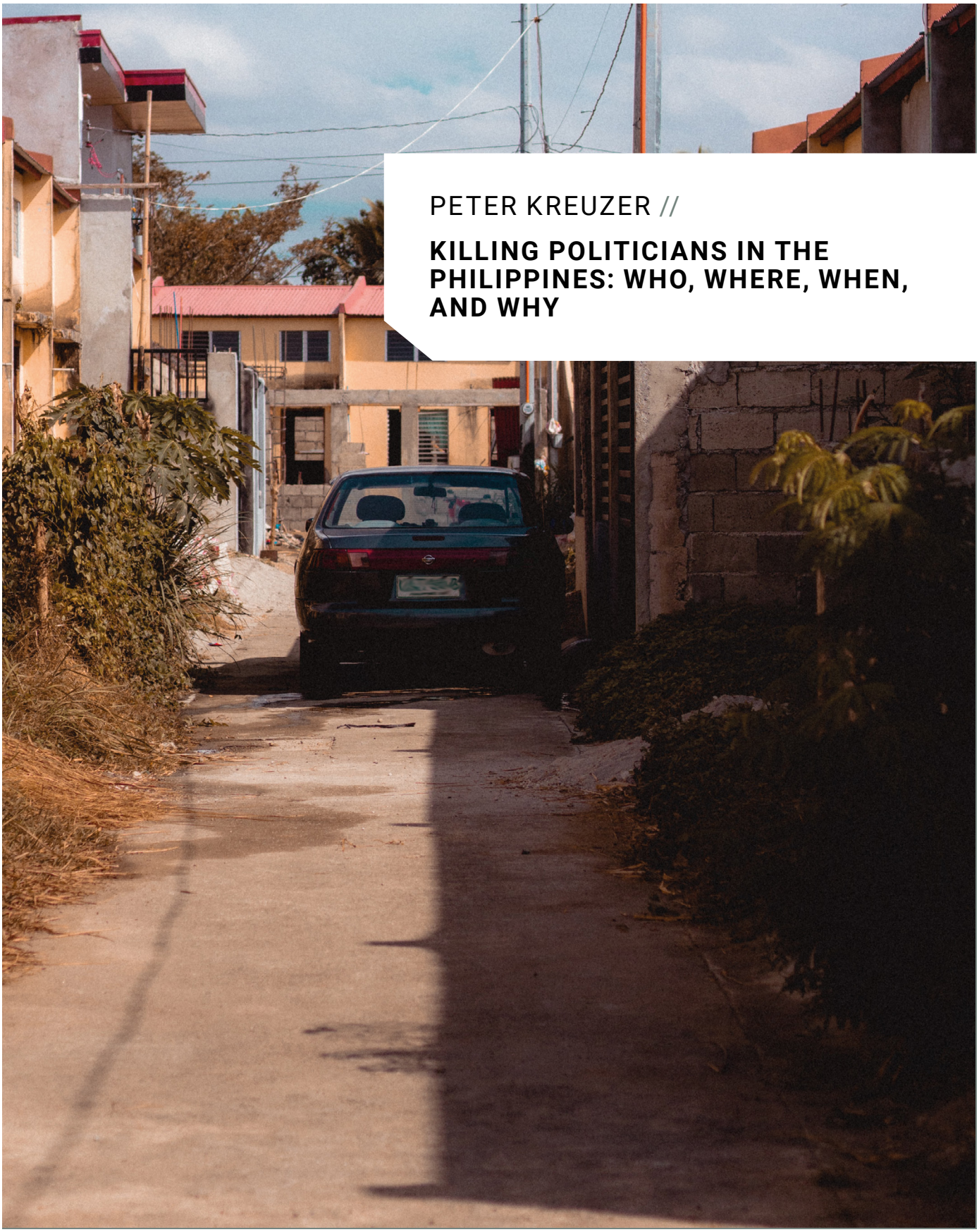

PETER KREUZER //

KILLING POLITICIANS IN THE PHILIPPINES: WHO, WHERE, WHEN, AND WHY

PRIF Report 2/2022

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PETER KREUZER //

IMPRINT

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This report focuses on a widely neglected aspect of fatal violence in the Philippines, the targeted killing of elected politicians and candidates for political office. This neglect is all the more surprising given that the level of fatal violence targeting politicians easily compares with countries notorious for high levels of fatal violence against politicians such as South Africa, Mexico, Colombia or Brazil.

This is the first study of its kind for the Philippines in a field of research that is also fairly new in other countries where this type of violence is prominent. It relies on a dataset established by the author that allows initial answers to the questions of who is targeted, where and when the violence occurs and who the instigators of these killings in the Philippines are.

The Philippines is especially conspicuous with respect to the magnitude of fatal violence. Close to 70 politicians have been killed annually over the past 15 years, with violence increasing over time, so that during recent years there have been more than 100 deaths per year. Responsible for the overall increase in the number of killings is a sharp increase in violence at the lowest level of the barangay (village, municipal ward), whereas lethal violence at the municipality level remained largely stable throughout the period. Vice-mayors and mayors still face by far the highest threat of assassination. Thus, the targets of the violence are almost exclusively local politicians.

Spatial patterns vary dramatically, with neighboring local government units (LGUs) exhibiting widely different levels of violence. In addition, temporal patterns of such violence also differ significantly. It was only during the first phase of the anti-drug campaign of the current president that the diversity of local patterns of violence was overridden by a uniform dynamic that resulted in high levels of violence in a large number of units. Thus, with the exception of a few years, violence targeting politicians has been a purely local phenomenon, largely driven by local dynamics.

The vast majority of killings are carried out by contract killers. The principals ordering the killings are not investigated, remain in the shadows and enjoy almost complete impunity. As a result, in the vast majority of cases it cannot be proven who actually ordered the killings.

The hypothesis broadly shared in the Philippines and by the author implicates the victims' adversaries in the struggle for posts and the associated financial and non-financial, legal and illegal rewards. Alternative hypotheses from other countries with high levels of fatal violence targeting politicians implicate organized crime, while ideological actors such as terrorist groups and rebels also have to be considered. My own dataset adds a final group, the police, who also use lethal force against so-called "narco politicians" in the context of extralegal killings of criminals.

For the Philippines all available evidence suggests that organized crime does not play a role and is not instigating the killing of politicians. However, the communist New People's Army, which is still active in a number of rural regions of the Philippines, can be identified as an actor that commissions and carries out targeted killings of politicians. Since Duterte's campaign against drug-related crime, a number of politicians have been killed by police. These killings were consistently underpinned by the narrative that these politicians were drug criminals who violently resisted arrest. Although these actors outside mainstream politics play some role, they are likely to be collectively responsible for

no more than 10 percent of the killings. By reconstructing several local dynamics of violence, some of which span several decades and resulted in casualties among several groupings, this report advances the argument that politicians from the establishment are responsible for the vast majority of targeted killings of politicians.

These killings are the paradoxical result of a democracy where state and non-state political institutions are completely subverted by an informal order in which individuals and families are the sole structural units. The values, norms and behavioral expectations that determine patterns of cooperation and conflict between individuals and families in social space also permeate political space. Whereas, ideally, democracy requires a privatization of kinship, Philippine democracy is a prime example of the exact opposite: the full politicization of kinship and the irrelevance of political parties in the sense of political institutions that discipline party members through party discipline and devalue social categories as structuring principles of political order.

Thus, the fatal violence targeting politicians follows a logic of feuding and reprisals, anchored in a family-oriented socio-political order where competing families fight for political positions and legal and illegal profits. Added to this is a political culture that accepts as normal and natural this form of violence (see *PRIF Report 2/2021* by the author), with the result that such violence is generally shrugged off.

However, these cultural factors can only ultimately become effective because sanctions by an efficient criminal justice system are not to be feared. That is, neither political institutions nor law contain robust institutional barriers that would stop political competition between individuals and families from escalating into violence.

In this respect a change for the better is not to be expected for the foreseeable future as this would necessitate a comprehensive empowerment of criminal justice institutions. Even with good will, this is a Herculean task that has not yet been successfully dealt with by any of the other states of the Global South affected by high levels of fatal political violence. Furthermore, the existence of good will among the members of the political class should not be assumed a priori, given that a well-functioning criminal justice apparatus could not easily be limited to prosecuting assassinations of politicians and putting those who commissioned them behind bars. Such law enforcement would also confront everyday corruption and thus threaten the working basis of current politics and the vested interests of establishment politicians.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Philippines has been in the headlines of international media because of its drug war declared by President Rodrigo Duterte when he took office in the summer of 2016. However, and in contrast to this, the violence to which elected politicians have fallen victim for decades has received little attention. It seems to be largely treated as natural in the political discourse inside and outside the Philippines and regarded as a fact of Philippine politics and democratic competition. This seems all the more surprising given that the Philippines is one of the world's leading countries in the murder of politicians, with more than 100 currently killed per year. Even though numbers did increase under Duterte, the phenomenon has existed at least since the first elections after Philippine independence in 1947.

This report presents the first results of a quantitative assessment of this form of violence from 2006 to the present.[1] The focus is on a precise mapping of deadly violence against politicians and of continuity and changes over time. The goal is to answer a series of W-questions fundamental to any causal analysis: who, when, where, and why. The analysis is based on a dataset developed by the author based on Internet research on newspaper articles. It includes, for the period January 2006 to June 2021, a total of 999 attempted targeted killings[2] of incumbent elected politicians, in which 945 politicians died; 163 were reported injured, and 91 escaped unharmed. In addition, there were 131 assassination attempts on former officeholders and 55 attempts on candidates who ran for public office without also being incumbents. These resulted in a further 210 deaths. These figures do not consider the victims among companions (bodyguards, employees, friends, family members and bystanders), who account for several hundred more fatalities. Not included are also targeted killings of nonelected public officials, other state employees, followers, or relatives of politicians.

This PRIF Report is divided into three broad sections. The following Chapter 2 provides a conceptual introduction to the topic of political killings in the broader and the targeted killing of politicians in the narrower sense, and compares Philippine violence to other countries that figure prominently with respect to the killing of politicians. Chapter 3 provides answers to three W-questions: who is killed, where and when. Chapter 4 addresses the question of who ordered the killings and why. The conclusion sums up the research and provides a tentative assessment of where the Philippines are heading in the near future.

2. THE KILLING OF POLITICIANS AND THE POLITICS-CRIME NEXUS: A CONCEPTUAL APPROXIMATION

The rather limited literature on killing or assassination with a focus on politics is separated into two different strands. One sets high requirements for a political assassination, namely that the assassin's

1 For the (preliminary) dataset with information on its establishment see the online appendix (hsfk.de/prifrep0222appendix) to this report.

2 Cases which were of a visibly private nature, such as quarrels among neighbors or killings by the partner are not included.

motives must be driven by ideology. The other departs from a much more mundane understanding of what is "political," including base motives such as gaining or retaining power by bypassing the rules of electoral democracy.

2.1 FROM IDEOLOGY TO POWER, FROM POLITICAL KILLINGS TO THE KILLING OF POLITICIANS

The first perspective focusing on political assassinations is represented by authors like Arie Perliger (2015a, 2015b), Bruno Frey (2007), Zaryab Iqbal, and Christopher Zorn (2008). According to this line of thought,

> "a definition of political assassination should include three elements. First, the target is an individual who is part of the leadership of a group that operates within the political sphere to promote a specific ideology or policy. […] Second, the perpetrator's goal is a political one; thus, the assassination aims at promoting or preventing specific policies, values, practices, or norms pertaining to the collective's way of life. Third, the act includes actual direct or indirect action that leads to the death of the targeted individual". (Perliger 2015b: 21)

In line with other authors working on political killings in various countries, I question the interchangeability of the terms "political" and "ideological" and argue that politics is firstly a competition for political power. When violence is used to influence this competition, it ought to be understood as political violence, regardless of whether the principals ordering the violence or the perpetrators have any ideological motives. Thus, political contestation is put at the center of the understanding of political killings as for example by David Bruce who argues that "[f]or a killing to be 'political' it must be motivated by or connected to contestation or rivalry, either regarding access to political power, or conflict over how the individual targeted (or a group aligned with that individual), is exercising his or her political power" (Bruce 2013: 13–14). Thus, killings that are commissioned by political opponents who simply want to increase their election chances or by a criminal organization that wants to get an incorruptible politician out of the way are also included in the category of political assassination, as are revenge killings by unsuccessful candidates who order the killing of the winner in an election.

However, political killings cannot be reduced to the killing of elected politicians. Actually, this fatal violence against a specific type of target has up to now largely been ignored by violence research, even though in a number of countries mainstream politicians are eliminated in large numbers, especially at the subnational level. Despite this, research has largely focused on the killing of social activists, of journalists, of human rights defenders and various other actors who in one way or another challenge the powers to be. Here, the core logic is one of a ruling class, whose representatives eliminate challengers to their rule by force if necessary. Violence emerges when members of one social and political class target members of another class who, in one way or other, aim at the redistribution of material or nonmaterial resources to the detriment of the ruling class or its individual members.

When it comes to the killing of mainstream politicians, however, the challengers to the establishment are not the main culprits responsible in a number of countries with high rates of such killings. Rather, research findings suggest that in most cases the victims' colleagues and competitors for public office are responsible for the killings. Available research suggests that in a number of countries fatal violence of serious proportions exists that emerges from members of the same social group whose members are targeted. This is precisely what is suggested by the literature on Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and South Africa (Terra de direitos e justicia global 2020; Centro de Estudos de Seguranca e Cidandania 2020a, 2020b; Borba 2020a, 2020b; Observatorio Politico-Electoral de la Democracia 2018ff; Calderón 2018; Esparza and Mancera 2018; Justice in Mexico 2020; Martínez Trujillo and Fajardo Turner 2021; Etellekt Consultores 2021; Bruce 2013, 2014; Steyn 2017; Kim 2018, 2021).

The large number of deaths and the fact that the world's leading countries with respect to such killings appear to be fairly well functioning democracies make it particularly important to focus on this hitherto largely neglected category of political assassination: the killing of elected politicians and candidates.

Thus, this report focuses on the "heart" of democracy: the persons who represent the public will and translate it into political action at all levels of government. While such a focus on elected politicians and candidates has its drawbacks, it makes it possible to pose more precise questions concerning the dynamics of electoral competition in such democracies, where politicians run a serious risk of being killed on the orders of their competitors.

2.2 THE KILLING OF POLITICIANS IN VIOLENT DEMOCRACIES BEYOND THE PHILIPPINES

Obviously, irrespective of regime type, public office may be especially dangerous in civil war circumstances. Thus, cases like democratic India, where politicians are targeted alongside civilians in traditionally troubled areas like Jammu and Kashmir in the context of an armed rebellion against Indian rule are unsurprising. The same holds true for other countries with active armed resistance or terrorist groups.

Apart from the special case of civil war and armed rebellion, a number of reasonably well-working democracies that have extremely high levels of lethal violence against politicians can be identified, even though no ideological motives can be discerned for the bulk of this violence. Probably the most prominent cases are the ones mentioned above: Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and South Africa. As is also true for the Philippines, these countries achieved polity scores of 7 to 9 for the past decade (2009–2018), signaling a rather stable and reasonably well functioning democracy with no serious defects (Systemic Peace n.d.). A similar, if somewhat less favorable, assessment is provided by the Economist's Democracy Index, where all have been located in the category of flawed democracies since 2006 with minor ups (Colombia) and downs (South Africa) (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021). With respect to freedom, all five countries have scored 2 to 3 in almost all years since 2010, indicating

that they have been either free or at the upper end of partly free status throughout (Freedom House, n.d.).

At the same time these countries exhibit excessively high levels of fatal criminal violence in either global or at least regional comparison. Rates per 100,000 population stood at an average of 32.4 intentional homicides for South Africa for the years from 2010 to 2018, at 30.0 for Colombia, at 27.3 for Brazil, at 21.8 for Mexico and at 9.0 for the Philippines, whereas the global average stood between five and six only (World Bank n.d.).

These countries also belong to the most prominent cases of "violent democracies" (Arias and Goldstein eds. 2010) with respect to the regularity with which active politicians and candidates fall victim to lethal violence. For all countries but Mexico one core problem is that political killings are not differentiated from the targeted killing of politicians. Despite this problem, the available data allow a rough estimate to be made for all of these countries that have drawn attention in the international media and social sciences. For *South Africa*, overall numbers of elected officeholders who have been killed can be estimated to be fewer than three per year for the past two decades, with 2007 and 2017 having outstandingly high numbers of 8 and 9 killed (Bruce 2013; Steyn 2017). Even if the category is broadened to include politically involved victims beyond the holders of elected office, the overall annual rate remains below 20 deaths per year (Kim 2018, 2021). For *Brazil* numbers are contradictory to some extent, with several studies reporting an average of fewer than 15 officeholders killed per year for the past few years (Terra de direitos e justicia global 2020; Borba 2020a, 2020b). However, a detailed analysis of the 2020 pre-election period conducted by the Centro de Estudos de Seguranca e Cidandania counted 85 candidates killed in the 11 months prior to the elections (Centro de Estudos de Seguranca e Cidandania 2020a; 2020b). *Colombia* also made global headlines on account of its high levels of political violence. Yet, according to available documentation by the Centro de Recursos para el Análises de Conflictos (CERAC) and the Observatorio Politico-Electoral de la Democracia, overall violence targeting elected politicians is fewer than 30 persons killed per annum (Observatorio Politico-Electoral de la Democracia 2018ff various issues). In *Mexico* the focus of research on killings is clearly on local political officeholders and candidates. Calderon (2018), Esparza and Mancera (2018), Justice in Mexico (2020: 32–35) and also Martínez Trujillo and Fajardo Turner (2021) come to broadly comparable results of between 15 and 18 mayors and mayoral candidates killed per year for the past decades. Compared with this group, politicians at other levels of governance are hardly present among the victims.

Summing up this impressionistic comparison of countries where the killing of politicians is a serious topic in media and research, the bird's eye result suggests that the Philippines has the highest rate, with at least 60 and during the past few years regularly more than 100 politicians and candidates killed. One caveat should be mentioned: While the Philippines outperforms the countries mentioned above in absolute and relative numbers of assassinated politicians measured by population, it can be argued that this is no longer true if reference is made to elected posts, of which there are significantly fewer in the other countries than in the Philippines. In the Philippines the additional level of the barangay with an elected council below the level of the municipality exists which results in a multiplication of elected posts compared with the other countries. Despite this caveat, the comparison with

the other cases makes it abundantly clear that the Philippines has a serious and persistent problem with respect to the assassination of politicians.

2.3 MERGING CRIME AND POLITICS

Explanations of this type of violence are not easy to find in any of the cases. In Mexico mainstream explanations relate the killings to the drug market and efforts by crime groups to dominate in certain regions and secure the support of or toleration by the local politician. Thus, politicians can be killed for refusing to cooperate with a cartel. They can also be killed because they cooperate with one cartel and an opposing cartel wants to redefine its sphere of influence (Calderon 2018; Esparza and Mancera 2018). This monocausal explanation is contradicted by the latest spatial analyses that confirm "that incidences of violence do not necessarily coincide with the most relevant so-called 'drug-trafficking routes' or 'locations'. […] [T]he states with the highest number of incidents have a long history of political-electoral violence, predating the so-called 'war on drug cartels' and the violence this caused" (Martínez Trujillo/Fajardo Turner 2021). Thus, electoral competition comes into consideration as a probable cause of fatal violence against politicians, a perspective that is also prominent in comparative analyses of the other countries discussed above.

If the targeted killing of political opponents is mainly a result of electoral competition and the unconditional will to obtain or defend an elected position, it is not so surprising that the top scorers in this respect belong to the category of democratic states. Only in democracies that function fairly well can electoral victory realistically lie within reach of more than one candidate. By contrast, in highly flawed democracies and autocracies the political establishment has a multitude of legal and not-so-legal nonfatal means of excluding their potential political opponents from acquiring political positions through the ballot box. Thus, a significant level of real democratic competition is an institutional requirement and necessary condition for high rates of politician killings.

Incumbents standing for re-election may have the bonus of holding office and, in less than perfect democracies, often also better options for corrupting important parts of the electorate or rigging elections. Thus, it clearly enhances the chances of challengers if they manage to have the incumbent killed shortly before the elections. In a similar way, incumbents can maximize their chances of re-election by eliminating serious challengers before a decision is made at the ballot box. Thus, there are significant incentives for what may be defined as "endogenous competitive violence," that is, violence where both the principal and victim belong to the same political class. There is only one crucial condition underlying this calculation: impunity must be so widespread that the principals involved in the killings can largely disregard the danger of being caught and sentenced. Under these circumstances, assassination may be perceived as a cost-efficient method for eliminating serious political opponents by officeholders and candidates alike.

The alternative to fatal violence emerging from and targeting competing members of the political establishment is a political system where politicians are to a significant degree at the mercy of external armed actors in the form of crime syndicates. The assassination of politicians is seen as a

result of crime syndicates striving for control over politics in order to carry on their business. Fatal violence aims at politicians and promising candidates who oppose criminal business and can neither be co-opted, corrupted nor intimidated. Here, the political and criminal spheres are conceptualized as juxtaposed, with one aiming at exerting control over the other by way of co-optation and coercion. Targeted killing is the ultimate form of coercion that not only aims at eliminating the specific recalcitrant politician, but at signaling to all others the consequences of resistance. Given that criminal syndicates are perceived as exerting pressure on politicians from outside the political sphere, this type of violence may be defined as "exogenous control violence."

The variations this merger of crime and politics can take are neatly conceptualized by Albarracin with the notion of "criminalized electoral politics," that is, a "conjunction of violence and clientelism" (Albarracin 2018: 554). The relationship between criminal actors and politicians can vary from near total integration, where political families also handle the complete set of illicit activities, to alliances where politicians and criminal groups cooperate (Albaraccin 2018: 569). While empirically focusing on variations of targeted killings in Brazil, this typology provides a more broadly applicable set of subtypes of such "criminalized electoral politics" that vary in the concrete modes of the crime-politics nexus. These are on the one hand the "neopatrimonial" and the "fusion" type, with families or kin-like groupings as core actors in both politics and crime. Whereas the former focuses largely on taking over local political institutions for private gain, the latter focuses on rent seeking via extortion from the local population and businesses. On the other hand, we find "delegation" and "alliance" type links between crime and business that are characterized by a fairly clear-cut separation between politicians and criminal organizations, both of which cooperate for mutual gain. In concrete cases, it is sensible to assume that voluntary or coerced co-optation of politicians by criminal groups transforms the majority of political officeholders over time into active participants in criminal endeavors. At least a minority probably also become willing to endorse or even commission the killing of political opponents who threaten their political survival. They thus bring into politics new cultural repertoires and social practices, transforming the political sphere accordingly over time into one in which extralegal norms provide the informal standard of behavior. On the other hand, violent in-group competition in neopatrimonial or fusion type political orders indicates a cultural repertoire that includes and normalizes criminal behavior. It is thus to be expected that at least a significant minority of politicians will be indirectly (e.g., through rent seeking) or directly involved in organized crime. As a result, the two conceptions of endogenous competitive and exogenous control violence against politicians are not mutually exclusive, but are broadly configured as an overarching conceptualization in which politics and crime are tightly interlinked.

With these remarks I turn to the empirical part of this report. This consists of first, a detailed mapping of the phenomenon of targeted killings of politicians, providing answers to who is targeted and where and when assassinations take place (chapter 3). This is done via a descriptive analysis of the dataset developed by the author that encompasses more than 1,000 assassination attempts for the years 2006 to 2021. This is followed by a second empirical section in which the questions of who orders the murders and why are explored (chapter 4).

3. MAPPING THE ASSASSINATION OF POLITICIANS IN THE PHILIPPINES

3.1 THE VICTIMS: AN OVERVIEW

Philippine politics have four levels. At the lowest level are the barangays (municipal ward, village), with a barangay council with seven councilors (kagawad) and a chairman (barangay captain; punong barangay). Then follows the municipality with a municipal council of similar size, a mayor and a vice-mayor. In addition, there are several independent cities with varying numbers of councilors (from 10 to 36 elected positions) plus a mayor and vice-mayor. Next to these and above them are further elected posts (congress representative, senator, party list representative, etc.). More than 90% of the elected politicians are found at the barangay level.

This distribution is broadly reflected in the number of politicians killed at the respective levels: 708 of the politicians killed were either barangay councilors or chairmen and 219 were either municipal councilors, mayors or vice-mayors. However, by proportion of officeholders the municipal level is clearly more dangerous than the barangay level for politicians. Given that there are only about 1,500 municipalities and independent cities but approximately 42,000 barangays with more than 330,000 elected barangay chairmen and councilors, it is clear that the rate of killings of chief executives at the municipal level far exceeds all others. The distribution within the levels shows that the respective decision-makers, barangay captains and mayors are disproportionately affected by the violence.

Table 1: Incumbent elected local government officials who were victims in assassination attempts 1/2006–6/2021

	Killed	Wounded	Unharmed	Total
Barangay councilor	306	35	16	357
Barangay captain	402	61	33	496
Municipal/city councilor	126	34	5	165
Vice-mayor	35	10	8	53
Mayor	58	16	23	97
Total barangay + municipality/city	927	156	85	1168
Total of all elected positions	**945**	**163**	**91**	1199

Source: own dataset

The annual victimization rate is approximately 8 per 100,000 elected positions and year for barangay councilors, 76 for barangay captains, 89 for municipal councilors, 227 for vice-mayors, and 417 for municipal and city mayors. Stated simply, the chance of a vice-mayor or mayor dying a violent death while in office is approximately four to ten times the homicide rates of the world's most violent states, which generally fluctuate between 40 to 50 per 100,000 inhabitants. Such officials have been

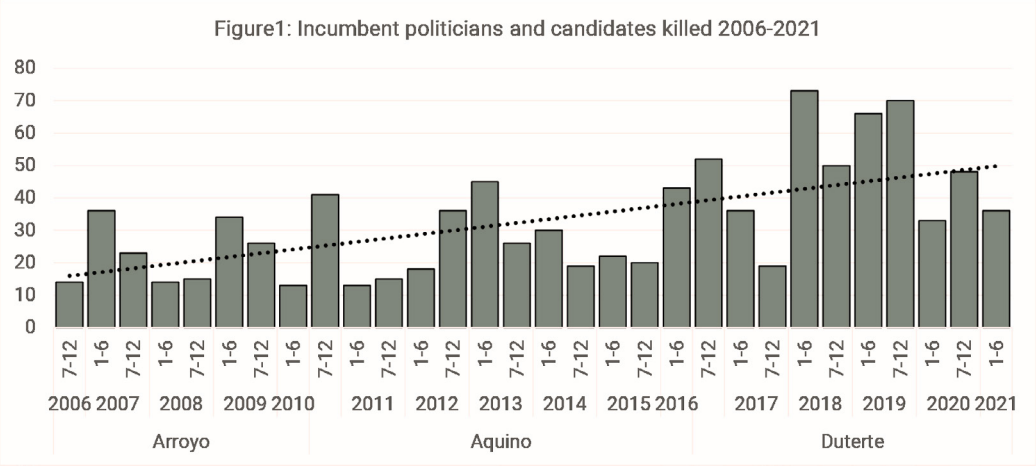
more than 20 to 40 times more likely to suffer a violent death than the average homicide rate in the Philippines over the past decade, which stood at approximately 10 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.

Comparing the number of elected officeholders killed with those wounded and unharmed suggests that violence is used against politicians not to intimidate but to kill. A qualitative analysis of the assassination reports leads to the same conclusion: virtually all of the assassinations were carried out by hired killers, and in many cases a large number of bullets were fired at the victims. In several cases, it is also reported that the perpetrators still fired a well-aimed kill shot to ensure that the victim would not survive.

3.2 GROWING VIOLENCE, CYCLES OF VIOLENCE AND NEW CATEGORIES OF VICTIMS

Violence against politicians only becomes prominent in Philippine discourse during elections, that is, the campaign period and the immediate aftermath. The temporal pattern of overall violence against incumbents and candidates indicates that this selective attention is generally warranted to a certain extent, as the rhythm of elections (2010, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2019)[3] broadly corresponds to the peaks of deadly violence against politicians (see figures 1 to 3 below).

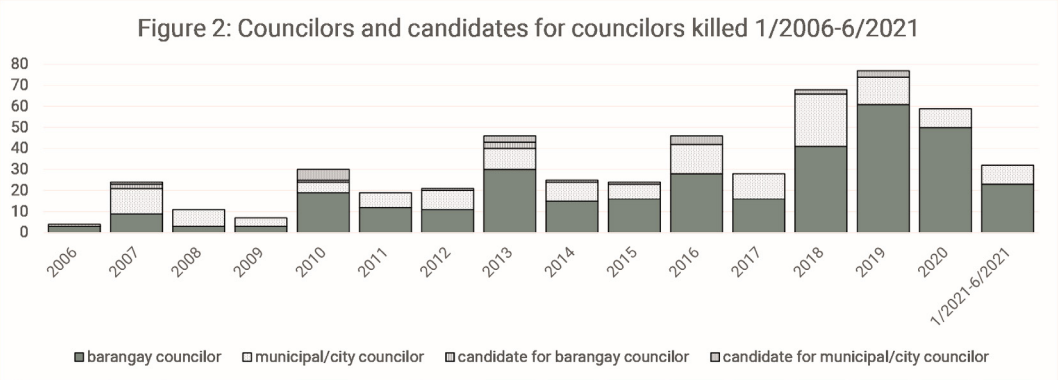
Behind the curved pattern (see figure 1 below; separating 6-month periods) lies an overall rise in fatal violence targeting politicians that gained significant momentum during the Duterte presidency. Average annual killings rose from 43.75 during the final four years of the Arroyo presidency, through 54.34 killings per year during the six years of the Aquino presidency to a staggering 90.2 during the Duterte presidency.



Source: own dataset.

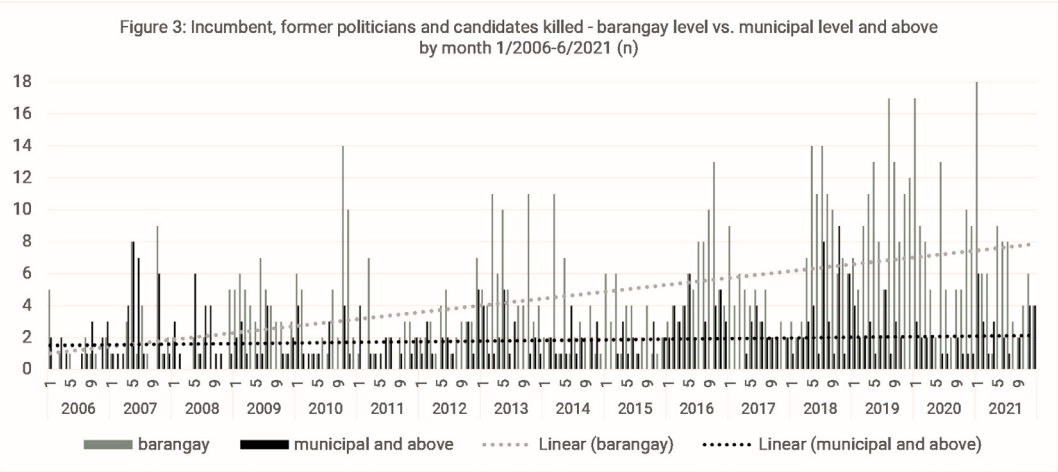
3 The years 2007 to 2016 saw elections for the national and all subnational levels, in May for all levels but the Barangay, and for the Barangay positions in October. The barangay elections were postponed several times until May 2018. As a result elections were held only at all other levels in 2019. The next barangay elections are currently slated for December 2022.

The rise in the level of fatal violence is caused mainly by increased attacks against incumbent barangay and municipal councilors (see figure 2 below). The average annual killings of incumbent barangay councilors rose from 4.44 under Arroyo (1/06–6/10) through 16.3 deaths under Aquino to 33.6 under Duterte (7/16–6/21). In a somewhat less spectacular fashion, the corresponding killings of municipal councilors rose from 4.89 through 7.33 to 11.8.



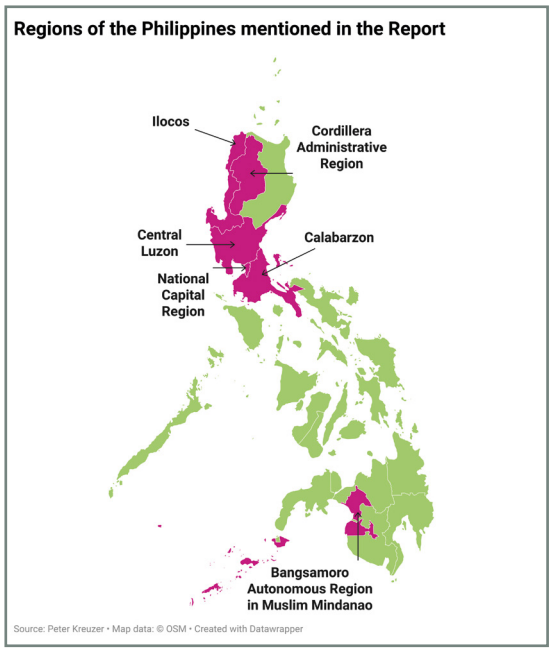
Source: own dataset

Contrasting the barangay with the other levels of government shows that overall violence against municipal and higher-level elected politicians and candidates for office remained generally stable from 2006 to 2021, as the black lines in Figure 3 show. The rather dramatic rise during the Aquino and especially the Duterte years can be fully attributed to the increasing violence against politicians at the barangay level, as indicated by the blue lines in Figure 3.



Source: own dataset.

3.3 SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL VARIATION IN KILLINGS



The magnitude of fatal violence targeting current and former politicians and candidates varies widely. In absolute numbers, Region 1 (Ilocos) in northwest Luzon stands out with 128 killed from January 2006 to June 2021. It is followed by regions 3 (Central Luzon) and 4a (Calabarzon), directly adjacent to Metro Manila (National Capital Region; NCR) in the north and south, with 110 and 105 killed respectively.

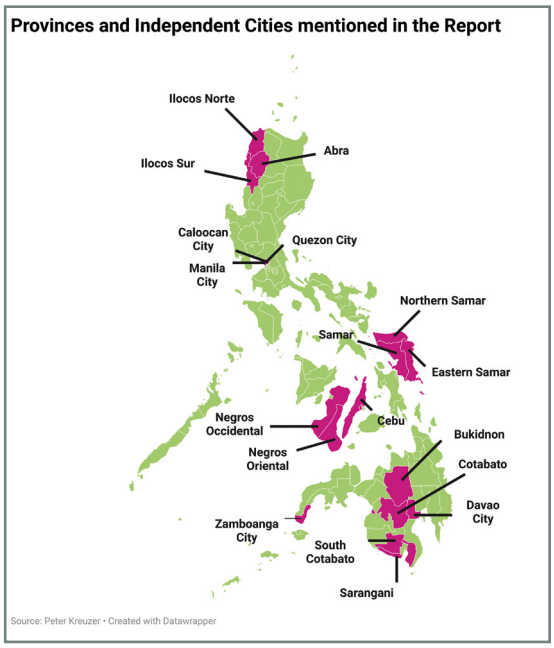
The focus on the regional level can only be the first step in analysis. The regional level is a purely administrative level of national agencies without political reference to elected offices. While national institutions typically have regional branches, linking upwards to the national level and downwards to province and independent city, there are no corresponding political institutions at the regional level. The highest subnational political level is province and independent city.

Against this backdrop it is, for example, essential to realize that while Metro Manila (NCR) is an economically highly integrated and densely populated territory there is no government on this level that can formulate an integrated policy. Instead, the NCR is "governed" by a weakly coordinated grouping of 16 city and one municipal mayors. The same holds true for all other regions. Integrated regional governance does not exist. Consequently, variation in the magnitude of killings becomes politically meaningful only at the level of province/independent city and below.

To illustrate this point, a look at the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) in the northern part of Luzon seems sensible. For the whole region the datasets record the "inconspicuous" number of 59 killings from January 2006 to June 2021. However, of these, a total of 49 took place in the province of Abra, with the remaining nine killings distributed among four other provinces and one independent city. Thus, 83 percent of all killings took place in Abra, even though it contains only approximately 14 percent of the population.

Further, absolute numbers are misleading as they do not account for the vast differences in elected offices between local government units (LGU). These vary widely between units with approximately similar populations, as for example for Caloocan and Manila City, with 1.6 and 1.8 million inhabitants respectively. Whereas Manila has close to 900 barangays, Caloocan has only 188, meaning that Manila has nearly five times the number of elected positions. On the other hand, Quezon City has approx. three million inhabitants but only 142 barangays. To adjust for this, the analysis below focuses on killings related to the number of elected offices in an LGU.

3.3.1 GENERAL TRENDS IN KILLINGS AT THE PROVINCIAL LEVEL



Concerning local variation, two aspects stand out. On the one hand, the number of LGUs without killings became smaller. For the whole period (1/16 to 6/21), a mere 10 percent of LGUs had no reported killings of politicians. These LGUs comprised not more than 3.5 percent of the Philippine population. On the other hand, the average rate of killings rose. Taken together this signals a widening spread and an increase of this form of violence. While provinces and independent cities with zero killings remained for each of the periods, both in electoral terms and in presidencies, the median level of fatal violence shows an accelerating rise between presidencies, with a median of 2.9 for the Arroyo, 7.6 the Aquino, and 15.1 the Duterte years; the maxima rose from 104 through 364 to 610 per 100,000 elected positions (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Median, minima, and maxima of fatal violence against politicians (rate per 100,000 positions)

Presidency	median	max	min
1/06 to 6/10 (Arroyo)	2.9	105	0
7/10 to 6/16 (Aquino)	7.7	364	0
7/16 to 6/21 (Duterte)	15.1	610	0
Electoral term	**median**	**max**	**min**
7/04 to 6/07*	0	381	0
7/07 to 6/10	4.2	262	0
7/10 to 6/13	3.5	606	0
7/13 to 6/16	4.0	546	0
7/16 to 6/19	15.0	729	0
7/19 to 6/22**	10.9	303	0

Source: own dataset * data are limited to 1/2006 to 6/2007; ** data are limited to 7/2019 to 6/2021

A more detailed view according to legislative terms shows that during the first of the six periods up to June 2007 at least 50 percent of the LGU were violence-free (see Table 2). A more detailed analysis also shows that the spike of killings of politicians coincided with the first three years of the campaign against drug crime and that the maxima had already receded to lower levels than during the Aquino period for the period after July 2019, even though the median was still almost three times the median of the Aquino years.

3.3.2 TEMPORAL VARIATION OF FATAL VIOLENCE AT THE PROVINCIAL LEVEL

While overall the number of killings rose as detailed above, local temporal patterns are far from uniform and vary significantly. These LGU-specific temporal variations become visible through a focus on individual cases. Abra, already mentioned above as one of the prominent cases with high levels of violence targeting local politicians, had excessively high levels of killings varying from 36 to 271 per 100,000 positions and year for the six electoral terms that are either entirely or partly covered by the dataset (mean value 115).

Another prominent case is Caloocan in the National Capital Region, with a mean value of 80. There were, however, three years from 7/07 to 6/10 with no recorded killings, followed by two terms with extreme levels of 197 and 175 respectively. Cebu province and Cebu City in turn are rather stable at approximately 35 deaths per 100,000 positions and year before Duterte. Here, rates exploded to 195 during the first three years of the Duterte presidency. Put simply, examination of the local temporal patterns of violence reveals huge variation, with some units maintaining fairly similar levels over extended periods of time, whereas others alternate between different levels. Cycles are not synchronized as the low points of some units may be the high points of others. It was only during the first years of the Duterte presidency that a resounding national effect on local diversity can be detected.

These years led to extreme rates for the large majority of provinces and independent cities. However, this national "alignment" of local political dynamics deteriorated in the wake of the 2019 elections, when relative uniformity again gave way to diversity, when local dynamics again gained the upper hand over national ones.

This relative strong role of local dynamics is also underscored by an analysis of the development of local violence levels between electoral terms or presidencies. If the triggers of violence were rather uniform and national politics and structural factors were the core determinant of violence levels and the observable spatial variation, it would be possible to hypothesize that the magnitude of violence moves in similar directions between LGUs and thus that an LGU's current rank within the universe of LGUs broadly corresponds to its past rank. How far this is actually the case, can be tested by a Spearman rank order correlation for the 107 LGUs in the dataset. A value of 1 would indicate perfect correlation between prior and later ranks. A zero would equal perfect "non-correlation." Theoretically, values to -1 would be possible, indicating a negative correlation, which, however, would be fairly surprising. The Spearman rank-order coefficients for the three presidencies, as well as the six electoral terms for which data are available, show that prior rank is a predictor of future rank to a fairly strong extent (see table 3). However, while prior local magnitude seems to play a significant role, a large share of variation cannot be explained by a uniform triggering effect of national politics.

Table 3: Pearson rank order correlation: previous-term kill rates compared with later-term kill rates

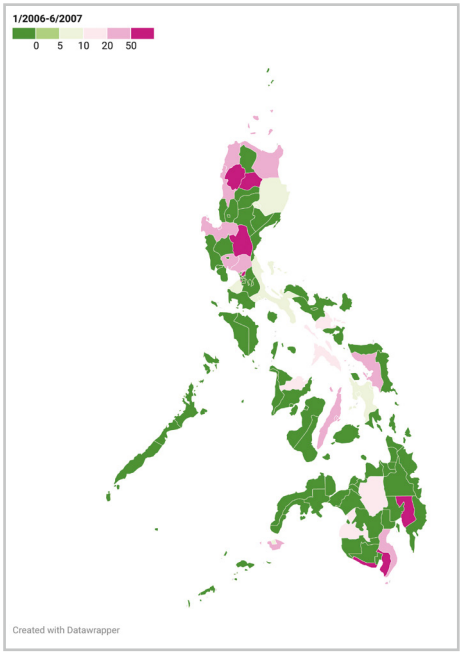
	Periods compared	n	r_s	p
elect. term	1/06–6/07 to 7/07–6/10	107	0.1803	<0.05
elect. term	7/07–6/10 to 7/10–6/13	107	0.3116	<0.0001
elect. term	7/10–6/13 to 7/13–6/16	107	0.4541	<0.0001
elect. term	7/13–6/16 to 7/16–6/19	107	0.3952	<0.0001
elect. term	7/16–6/19 to 7/19–6/21	107	0.5288	<0.0001
Presidency	1/06–6/10 to 7/10–6/16 (Arroyo-Aquino)	107	0.3710	<0.0005
Presidency	7/10–6/16 to 7/16–6721 (Aquino-Duterte)	107	0.4006	<0.0001

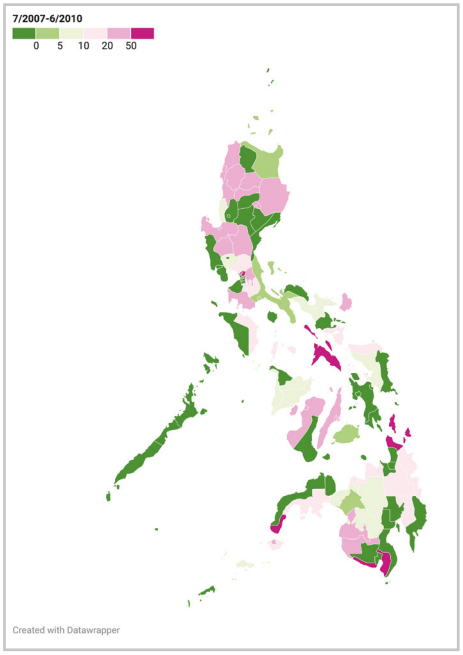
3.3.3 A SOUTHWARD SHIFT IN FATAL VIOLENCE

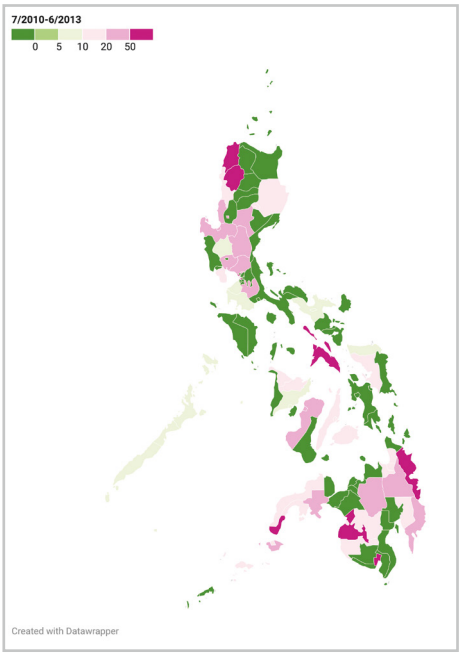
While up to now it has been shown that continuity and change combine in the local development of assassination attempts targeting politicians, both the concrete patterns of spatial distribution and spatial shifts in violence over time have so far remained invisible.

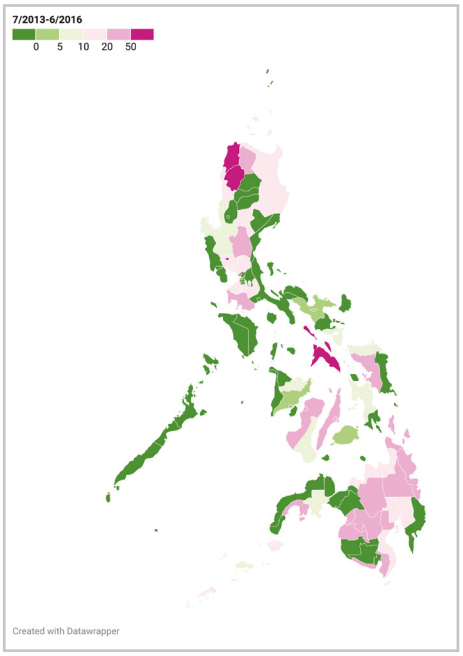
Questions are, for example, whether fatal violence against politicians is predominantly a rural or an urban phenomenon, whether it is related to higher levels of poverty or inequality, whether local levels of other forms of violence, such as criminal violence or the killing of political activists, is a geographically stable phenomenon or, as the data for variation within an LGU over time presented above suggest, a fluid phenomenon, and whether such fluidity follows more general patterns, indicating that

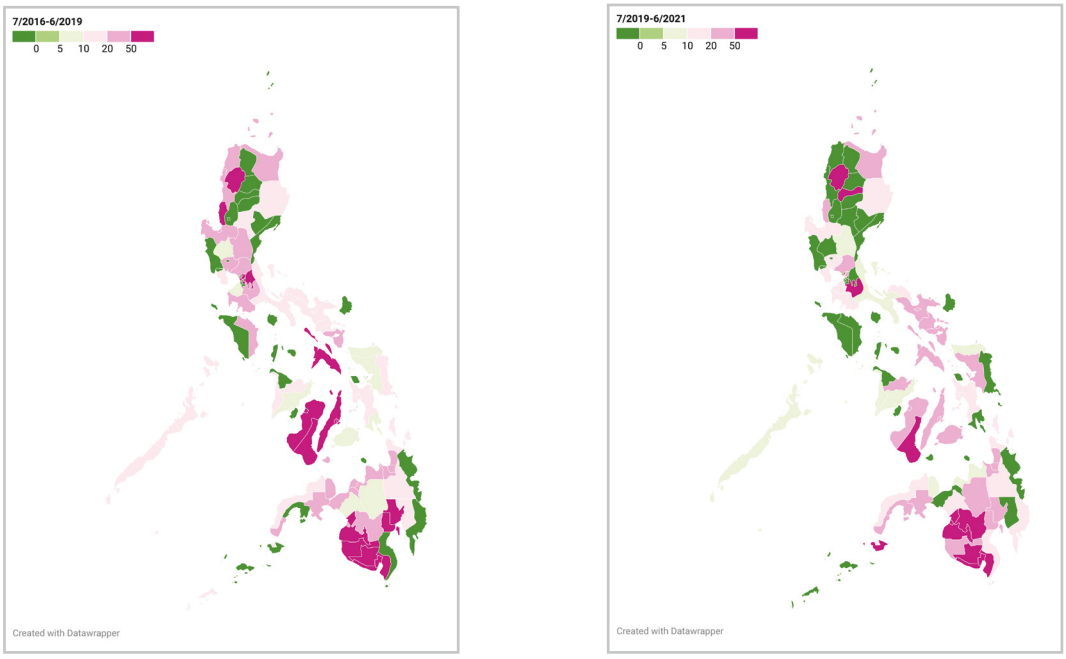
Spatial distribution of incumbent politicians killed in Philippine provinces by election period 2006 to 2021 (killed per year per 100,000 electoral positions)











Source: own dataset

violence travels between spaces. This latter question on the distribution of violence in the political space and shift in geographical patterns will be dealt with as the next topic in this analysis.

The mapping of different levels of killings (see heat maps above) shows that the number of violence-free LGUs (dark green) was reduced during the last years of the Arroyo presidency (2007–2010). More pronounced is the subsequent spread of violence to more and more regions in the Visayas and Mindanao, which began with the first electoral term of the Aquino presidency in 2010.

The graphical analysis also suggests that there is no straightforward relationship to how rural a province is or to poverty and violence levels, with some rural provinces in the north (Abra, Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur) remaining prominent during all or most of the periods. By contrast, other predominantly rural provinces directly to the south of the provinces with the highest levels of violence displayed low levels of violence for most of the time. A similar observation holds true for the component cities of the NCR, where vast temporal and spatial variation in the rate of killings occurs, even though all cities qualify as 100 percent urban and overall poverty levels of the component cities are among the lowest in the Philippines. In the Eastern Visayas the province of Samar stands out, whereas its neighbors, the equally rural and poor Northern and Eastern Samar maintain low levels of violence. In Mindanao, where initially fatal violence against politicians was surprisingly low, except for the southernmost province of Sarangani, violence spread to almost the whole region, even if only on a fairly low level initially. In contrast to most other regions, violence levels were not reduced after the 2019 elections, but rose further, especially in large parts of the BARMM and the central and southern

Mindanao provinces of Bukidnon, Cotabato and South Cotabato, and Davao City. Thus, in addition to the overall rise a southward movement of this form of fatal violence occurred.

3.4 WHO, WHERE AND WHEN: A PRELIMINARY CONCLUDING ASSESSMENT

Although this involves oversimplification, the wide-ranging analyses of victims, level, and temporal and spatial distributions of violence can be summarized as follows:

- The victims come almost exclusively from the municipal and barangay level. The highest mortality rate is found among executive officials at the municipal and barangay levels (mayor, barangay captain). However, in recent years violence has diffused both vertically and horizontally, increasing the number and share of victims among rank-and-file council members.
- Violence against politicians is not aimed at intimidating them or making them comply with other powers' interests, but at killing them. Concerning this objective, the assassinations appear to be conducted with extreme efficiency.
- Over the past 15 years, two overlapping trends have emerged: a steady increase in lethal violence directed against politicians, overlaid by a ripple effect in which the peaks of violence generally correlate with elections and the troughs occurring during periods that are at least half a year removed from the previous or next election.
- Throughout the pre-Duterte period under analysis, more than 50% of provinces had at least one single term of office without any targeted killings. Yet, already then, violence became more widely distributed with most units recording at least one elected politician or candidate killed in the period from January 2006 to June 2016. Those which did not, were a small marginal minority with respect to both population and elected positions.
- The Duterte presidency had a far-reaching disinhibiting effect on the use of lethal violence. The relatively stable levels of violence targeting politicians suddenly and significantly increased. LGUs with rates above 20 killings per 100,000 elected posts and year doubled in their share of killings.
- The overall temporal pattern shows a rising overall level of fatal violence established in cyclical shifts. This national trend emerges from a multitude of different curves of violence at the level of province and independent city.
- The spatially and temporally widely varying trajectories of fatal violence illustrate that while national factors in the sense of overarching "enabling structures" cannot be neglected, the explanations for the magnitude as well as the increases and decreases in violence are to a large extent found at the local level.
- Slow-moving structural variables (like poverty and "rurality") seem to offer only limited potential for explaining spatial variation, as there is huge variation between units of similar level and within the same units over time. There must be additional "fast-moving" factors that underlie within-unit variation over time, as slow-moving structural variables cannot explain the sudden shifts in levels of violence observed at the LGU level. There must also be additional "non-structural" factors that explain variation between LGUs that are broadly similar in their structure.

- The visual analysis of "kill rates" for the provinces of the Philippines and the NCR showed that not only levels of violence increased over time, but also that the areas in which violence occurred expanded and violence migrated southward to the Visayas and Mindanao.
- Whether on the periphery or at the heart of power in the NCR, there is tremendous variance in lethal violence directed against politicians. Violence-free spaces coexist with highly violent spaces, sometimes in close proximity, over long periods of time.

4. THE PHILIPPINES AS A CRIMINALIZED ELECTORAL POLITY

Thus far this report has developed a fairly detailed map of killings of politicians in the Philippines and answered the corresponding W-questions concerning victims as well as spatial and temporal variation. It has also compared the Philippines with several other countries with high levels of political killings. This final analytical chapter presents available evidence showing that similarly to the other cases such as Brazil sketched out above, the Philippine situation is characterized by a merger of politics and crime. It thus examines the W-question that has not been addressed so far: Who generally are the instigators of the assassinations? At least to some extent, it also addresses the question of motive, or the last of the relevant W-questions for the perpetrator category of politicians: Why?

Before turning to the evidence incriminating fellow politicians as the most likely principals responsible for the killing of their colleagues, the role of several other categories of probable actors will be discussed: organized crime, the armed communist movement, and state security organizations, specifically the Philippine National Police.

4.1 PRINCIPALS BEYOND MAINSTREAM POLITICIANS

Organized crime in the sense of huge mafia-like criminal organizations can be excluded as a major principal or contractor in the killing of politicians, even though a small number of contract killers may come from its ranks. Based on the available data on arrested contract killers, it is safe to say that such guns-for-hire are in the vast majority either lone offenders or members of small groups or bands of criminals often specializing in a combination of robbery, car or motorcycle theft, and contract killing. Until now, there has been no indication that those contract killers act on behalf of larger crime syndicates, nor are there any news reports or assessments by the Philippine National Police (PNP) that would link more than a trifling number of killings of politicians to organized crime. This is broadly in line with the literature on such killings in South Africa but displays some differences to the case of Mexico, where drug syndicates have often been mentioned as principals and executioners of the killings. Even here, however, as in the other cases of Brazil and Colombia, more recent research indicates that observable special patterns of such killings do not neatly fit this assumption, as killings are also prominent in regions far from areas with a strong presence of drug cartels.

In the Philippines it is important to note that there are no indications of the existence of large, highly integrated, efficient or especially violent criminal syndicates such as those reported for the Latin American countries with high levels of violence discussed above. While in the Asian context the

Philippines has for the past decades had the highest homicide rates, there are, unlike a number of Latin American countries, no indications that large crime syndicates are responsible for a significant share of these homicides.

A small number of killings has been at least partially ideologically motivated, as the perpetrators came from the communist *New People's Army* (NPA). While in some regions the NPA cannot be discounted as a perpetrator, the overall number of 39 reported killings of elected politicians from 2007 to June 2021 is fairly low and marginal compared with the overall number of politicians killed. This number should be fairly precise with only a small gray area, because the NPA typically admits its killings, generally claiming that the victims had been sentenced to death for oppressive acts against the people in a people's court. A more mundane reason for killings before election time seems to be politicians' refusal to pay "revolutionary taxes," which in some regions are a de facto precondition for an undisturbed election campaign.

Since Rodrigo Duterte came to office, the *police* also "officially" figure as perpetrator in the killing of politicians who are accused of being members or supporters of drug syndicates. In these cases, it is argued that the "narco politicians" shot it out with the apprehending law enforcers in what is defined as a legitimate encounter. The overall number is fairly low with 32 cases/victims killed, which, however, are concentrated in the years 2016 to 2021. The first documented case occurred in 2015, when one former municipal and one former barangay councilor were killed in a "One Time Big Time" police operation in Zamboanga City in a drug raid. This type of operation was introduced under Local Government Secretary Manuel Roxas from 2014 onwards in reaction to what seemed a dramatic rise in crime. It was conceived as one building block of a broader new integrated national plan (*Oplan Lambat Sibat*), in which dragnet operations figured prominently, leading to the killing of rising numbers of suspected drug-criminals already before Duterte initiated his campaign.

The Duterte presidency saw a drastic rise in politicians killed by the police, as Duterte explicitly included politicians in the category of people who were to be targeted in the campaign against drug crime. The president himself released several lists of so-called "narco politicians" with alleged links to illegal drug business. This turned politicians, who had hitherto been untouchables for local police, into a legitimate target of their operations. The more than 30 politicians killed between July 2016 to June 2021 in police anti-drug operations are only approximately 6 percent of the total number of former and incumbent politicians and candidates killed in the same period. Further politicians mentioned by Duterte were killed by unidentified assailants, who may but need not have been linked to police as contract killers.

Despite these cases that illustrate a certain role for the armed communist movement and the police in the killing of politicians, neither these two nor crime groups appear to be central actors in explaining the vast majority of targeted killings of politicians. Instead, all available evidence points to fellow politicians of the victim as responsible for the vast majority of targeted killings

4.2 POLITICIANS AS PRINCIPALS IN THE KILLING OF POLITICIANS

> "Most people may dismiss political violence as personal feuds, and there are those who think the country is a better place when politicians kill each other. Using murder to eliminate political rivals, however, weakens the democratic process. During elections, murder is the ultimate form of cheating and undermines the voters' will. […] Guarding the people's vote includes preventing politicians from murdering their rivals." (Philippine Star 2018)

This quotation succinctly summarizes the general opinion concerning who is responsible for the targeted killing of politicians in the Philippines: political colleagues and opponents. However, evidence is hard to come by, as impunity reigns in almost 100 percent of cases. While a certain share of the perpetrators, mostly contract killers, are caught, the principals remain in the shadows. Further, even in those few cases, where politicians are indicted, the typical trial ends either in charges being dropped or in the defendants' acquittal after several appeals and over the course of many years.

4.2.1 THE PRECONDITION FOR HIGH INSTANCES OF POLITICAL KILLINGS: IMPUNITY

The malaise of the security sector begins with police who in the majority of cases are not able to charge any perpetrator. If the police apprehend the suspected killers, the cases are generally closed within a short time. Thus, there are almost no cases of contract killing (irrespective of victim type) in which the principals are charged, and that already results in an overwhelming rate of impunity for this group at the first step in the prosecution process.

Added to this is the dismal conviction rate in Philippine courts. While there are no data on the specific subcategory of killing of politicians, it can be assumed that conviction rates would not be higher than in other cases of murder. On average, there have been more than 8,000 intentional homicides per year up to 2016, yet the complete caseload of all trial courts nationwide stood at 7,206 for those three years of 2016 to 2018, for which detailed data are available. This means that with all probability more than 50 percent of cases do not make it to the courts in the first place. Of those that do make it, only 25 to 30 percent result in a conviction. An overwhelming proportion of the remaining cases are dismissed or archived. Acquittals stood at four to nine percent (Department of Justice, n.d.).

Given that the theory advanced above assumes a criminalized polity in which the killings of politicians are embedded, it seems sensible to also examine the extent to which otherwise criminal politicians should fear punishment. The *Sandiganbayan* conviction rate, where corruption cases involving public officials and politicians are heard, is helpful here. A check on all cases in one region, Central Luzon, in the past decades from 1979 to 2014 shows a conviction rate of approx. 4.2 percent. Added to this are those cases where the officials pleaded guilty (7.5 percent). Taken together this results in a conviction rate of less than 12 percent. National statistics for more recent years, 2015 to 2020, show a somewhat higher proportion of convictions (including cases with respondents pleading guilty), which, however, still languishes at 20.5 percent (Sandiganbayan, n.d.).

Taken together, this means that for politicians, crime pays, both with respect to corruption and the use of violence to advance their interests, as the chances of getting caught are small and the risk of being convicted even smaller. In the Philippines, the expected costs of commissioning a killing hardly go beyond the price paid in Philippine pesos. The general worst-case scenario to be assumed is an expensive and drawn-out legal battle that ends with a Supreme Court ruling that in turn ends with an acquittal for lack of evidence. The only factor that can sharply drive up costs is the risk of vigilante action by the victim's family, something that cannot be dismissed per se, at least in rural areas. Such feuds are widespread in the Muslim region in the south, but are also found in other regions.

Targeted killings can follow one another with long intervals in between and, as is usually the case, the principals are generally not identified. Despite these favorable odds due to almost complete impunity, a less than trifling number of cases could be identified in which politicians were at least charged with ordering the killing of their political opponents or local government officials who had become dangerous to the official's interests. They provide the basis for the following discussion of the evidence identifying the political elite on all levels as principals in the majority of killings of their fellow politicians.

4.2.2 POLITICAL ELITES AS PRINCIPALS IN TARGETED KILLINGS: THE EVIDENCE

> "In this country, political power and its perks are such that people are willing to kill, or risk being killed, over political rivalries. In certain areas, politics has become the main family business, so the rivalries are complicated by clan feuds. And murder has become the favored tool for eliminating rivals, especially with the approach of elections." (Philippine Star 2021)

In an earlier report, I used a number of examples to show that politicians are not infrequently perpetrators. This is most evident in the firefights between politicians and rivals that have accompanied local politics for decades, although they have always been rather rare compared with other forms of deadly violence targeting politicians (Kreuzer 2021). One historical example of such open, "duel-like" violence is the famous prolonged quarrel between two lines of the same family, the Singson-Crisologo feud in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that saw a shootout between the politicians and their armed companions on a town square, the subsequent murder of the campaign manager of one party to the conflict, the targeted killing of a congressman and the burning down of two barangays. In 2004, the two main contenders agreed on peaceful terms, setting aside "the politics of hate" (Molina 2004). Along similar lines was the rift between two lines of the Espinosa family in Iloilo, which first came to a head in a shooting in 1993 that left five family members dead and four injured. The early 2000s saw further shootings in which several other family members became victims, two of them fatally. This feud for political and economic control over Iloilo City and the highly lucrative legal and illegal trade in Iloilo harbor was brought under control by the good offices of neutral family members during the following years (Kreuzer 2021: 13).

Less clear than public or semi-public shootouts but much more frequent are sequences of targeted killings, where politicians, the police and media identify political competition as the motive with high levels of plausibility, even though the cases are never resolved in court.

A preliminary dataset established by me lists 87 cases in which politicians were at least arrested or charged for ordering the killing of other persons and where a purely private motivation can be excluded for the years 2000 to 2021. In 35 of these cases the victim(s) were other politicians or candidates. While in the majority of cases only one principal was charged by the police, there are also cases in which two or more politicians were suspected of having cooperated in the killings. Even though a total of 45 officials became suspects of the police, with 39 reportedly charged, reports could only be found on five convictions and four acquittals, suggesting that the vast majority of the already trivial number of cases that enter the justice system does not progress beyond the initial stages.

Because of their almost complete impunity, it is impossible to determine the role of politicians as principals in the murders of politicians by means of a quantitative analysis of court rulings. The following sketches of cases provide a second-best solution to investigating the role of politicians as perpetrators. They aim at identifying plausible general pattern by describing a series of sequences of killings in different regions of the Philippines, each of which has great temporal depth and seemingly similar action-reaction patterns. The sketches embed individual killings in a temporal logic of violent feuding competition among political families for local political control. Further, in all of these cases politicians were named as probable principals by the media and at least temporarily arrested or charged by the police.

Those case studies involve events in the provinces of Samar, Abra and Negros Occidental. In the language of criminalized electoral politics, the three Philippine cases detailed here belong to the types “neopatrimonial” or “fusion.” Neither in the cases presented below nor in the reports on the approximate 1,000 killings is there any mention of criminal actors putting pressure on the politicians. When the killers are tracked, they either belong to the political principal’s innermost circle or are loners or members of small groups specializing in contract killing, with whom the politicians do not otherwise cooperate. In one case below, the NPA plays a role as probable perpetrator, supposedly in collusion with one party to the dispute.

Samar: widening circles of fatal violence

One such case is the killing of the mother of an aspiring politician, who himself survived two assassination attempts, while the family of his ultimately victorious opponents survived grenade attacks on several of their houses and an ambush of the opponent’s wife in the years 2016 and 2017. The sequence (see timeline below) began with the killing of a barangay captain, Romulo Barcoma, of San Jorge in the province of Samar on February 13, 2016. A few days later, the police identified then vice-mayor, Joseph Grey, whose wife held the position of mayor, and two of his sons, as well as a

bodyguard as suspects in the killing (Rutor 2016). After murder charges had been filed,[4] at least one son reportedly participated in an assassination attempt on Lester Bisnar, who stood as candidate for mayor against the Grey family patriarch, on election day (May 9, 2016). Given the mayoral advantage, Grey and his wife unsurprisingly won the 2016 elections for mayor and vice-mayor, which however, did not end the violence. A second attack on Lester Bisnar followed on January 28, 2017 that left him seriously injured. Three days later, in what seems like an effort at retaliation, several grenades were hurled at the houses of the Grey family, and a week later, on February 6, the car carrying the mayor's wife (and vice-mayor) Nancy Grey was ambushed, injuring the driver. Two weeks later the 80-year-old mother of Lester Bisnar was killed by assassins outside the church after Mass (Descada 2017). Thus, it seemed that the Grey family had won out over its opponents.

However, in this case, the police eventually charged the mayor's son Francis with the 2016 murder of barangay captain Romulo Barcoma and arrested him in his hideout in December 2018. Then, what seemed to have been a simple local competition for power was reframed with the suspect admitting to killing the barangay captain, albeit not on his father's orders, but on the orders of the mayor of Calbayog, the political and economic center of the province, Ronald Aquino, and Emil Zosa, a candidate for governor of Samar. As could be expected both Aquino and Zosa denied all accusations as "politically motivated" as did Francis's father and town mayor Joseph Grey, who argued that his sons' confessions "were extracted under duress" (Abella and Allegado 2018). Paradoxically the charged killer's relatives argued that his testimony only served to protect the political interests of the Tan family dominating Samar politics (Lim 2018; Lim 2019a).[5] The same line was taken by Francis's son, then provincial chairman of the Liberal party youth, who argued that his father must have been threatened and that his statements must have been dictated to him by someone else (Lim 2019b).

4 These were not the first murder charges against the mayor Joseph and his son Francis Grey. Already in 2006 murder charges had been filed in connection with the death of an employee of the City government of San Jorge. The process dragged on for years before they were finally acquitted (Rutor 2006).

5 The matriarch of the Tan family, Milagros Tan, who eventually won the 2019 gubernatorial elections against Emil Zosa, had only a few months earlier been convicted of graft and misappropriation of public funds during her first years as governor of Samar in the early 2000s and sentenced to a maximum of 115 years in prison by the *Sandiganbayan* (Sandiganbayan Fourth Division 2019), a ruling she appealed in the Supreme Court.

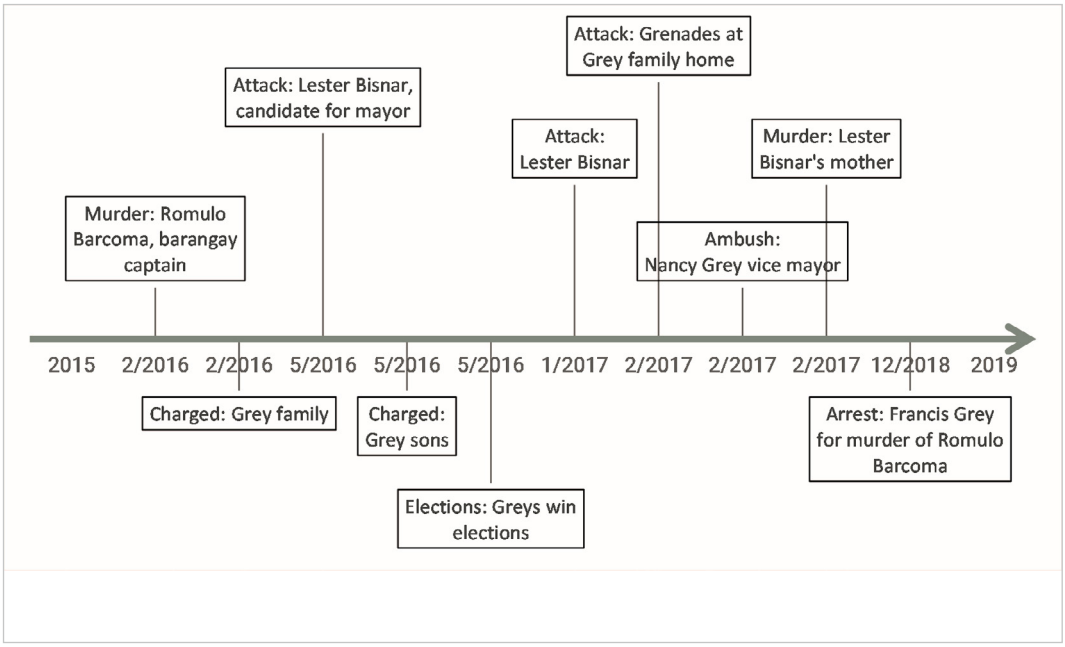


Figure 4: Timeline of violence in San Jorge, Samar

While they were not charged or harassed by the judiciary in connection with the claims advanced by his son, the Grey tandem was eventually voted out of office in the 2019 elections and replaced by a team including one member of the Bisnar family. In the same year Francis Grey was shot and severely injured in jail, after he had requested transfer to another jail "for fear [of] alleged threats on his life by his father and his political allies" (Siytangco 2019; Manila Bulletin online 2019). In October 2021, finally, a court ordered the arrest of gubernatorial candidate Emil Zosa, although not in connection with the killing of the barangay captain in 2016, but as the mastermind behind the killing in 2017 of a supporter of a political enemy of his wife Gemma, the mayor of Sta. Margarita municipality. In 2021 Calbayog mayor Ronald Aquino, who had been accused by Francis Grey of ordering the killing of a barangay captain in 2006 and being involved in the provincial drug business, was shot and killed by police forces in what seemed initially to be a firefight between two heavily armed parties. However, an investigation by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) revealed that this most probably was an armed ambush by the police on the convoy of the mayor (Macasero 2021). A police officer disclosed that the instigator of this assassination by police in a "legitimate encounter" was Raymundo Uy, a city councilor, who had stood and lost against Aquino for the position of Calbayog mayor in the 2019 elections (Gonzales 2021). While Uy denied involvement, it should be noted that the run-up to the elections saw several violent incidents targeting political supporters of Aquino, with at least four killed in what seem to have been targeted killings (Bonifacio 2019).

None of the killings has been resolved in a legal way. Neither principals nor perpetrators have been brought to justice. Despite this, it is clear that the only reasonable interpretation is the one focusing on the nexus of politics and crime and a political class largely devoid of non-criminal actors, a class of politicians who use any form of crime, as long as it serves their interests. This is also the

interpretation advanced by all actors and observers alike in this and the following cases. At no time did any of the actors or observers assume that the attacks did not originate from politicians. Accordingly, the patterns of action were interpreted as attack and retaliation.

Negros Occidental: the unstoppable rise of a violent strongman from a rural municipality

Much greater historical depth is shown by the case of political violence in Pulupandan, a small municipality in Negros Occidental with a population of approximately 30,000. Here, the current political violence seems to have commenced with the 1987 killing of Joaquin O. Fernandez, who had been municipal mayor from 1971 to 1986. Twenty one years later the communist NPA claimed responsibility for an assassination attempt on Pulupandan's then mayor-elect Magdaleno Peña, arguing that Peña had been guilty of land grabbing, terror against peasants, murder of farm workers and political organizers since the 1980s, as well as killing the former mayor Fernandez, a municipal police director and others (GMA News online 2007).[6] Despite the NPA claiming responsibility for the assassination that killed two of Peña's bodyguards, Peña claimed that his opponent Luis Mondia and his brother Samson, who had just lost in the mayoral elections against Peña, were the masterminds behind the attack.[7]

Shortly afterwards, the National Bureau of Investigation filed murder complaints against former mayor Mondia, "five members of his family, and two barangay captains" (Gomez 2007b). The police argued that the Mondias cooperated with the communist NPA in the assassination attempt. Less than one year later the provincial prosecutor dismissed all charges for lack of probable cause (Gomez 2008). Two years later, a few months before the 2010 elections, Luis Mondia, who tried to make a comeback as mayor, was killed by an unidentified assassin (Philippine Star 2010). Thus, as is noted in one article, mayor Peña was "now seeking a reelection unopposed after the murder of his political enemy" (ABS-CBN News 2010). Three years later, before the 2013 elections, the mayor had first to ward off allegations that he maintained a private army. A few weeks later, in a raid on the mayor's house, the police seized 90 high-powered firearms, among them six AK-47, two M16 and two sniper rifles, as well as ammunition and explosives (Inquirer 2013; Rappler 2013a; ABS-CBN News 2013). Later it was ascertained that this war-like arsenal of weapons was legally owned by the mayor and several extractive industry corporations in which the mayor held a majority share (Sunstar 2013).

After having enabled his son and former barangay captain Miguel Antonio Peña to take over as mayor of Pulupandan in 2013, Magdaleno Peña shifted his political focus to the municipality of Moises Padilla. With his son re-elected in Pulupandan in 2016, Magdaleno ran and won as mayor in Moises Padilla in the same election. His niece and former mayor, Ella Garcia-Yulo took over the position of vice-mayor as his running mate, while one of the mayor's political campaigners, Magdaleno Grande

6 By 2007 Peña already had a long history of infighting against his mother and brother for control over the family assets, most importantly huge tracts of land. By 2007 he was on the verge of evicting more than 160 locals from their houses and dwellings on account of questionable court rulings and with the aid of his private armed guards (Gomez 2007c). During the 2007 election campaign even his own family turned publicly against him, supporting the election of his opponent Samson Mondia (Gomez 2007d).

7 In 1992, together with his relatives Samson, Manny, Rufino and Rodrigo, Mondia had at least one earlier complaint for murder filed against him for killing a civilian (Supreme Court 1997).

was killed by the NPA. In Moises Padilla violence continued, with the NPA killing a second of Peña's trusted personnel in 2018 (Panay News 2018). Then the "family alliance" between the mayor and vice-mayor fell apart, when it became clear that Peña and Garcia-Yulo would compete for the mayoral office in the 2019 elections. The rift was already visible in 2018, when Peña's right-hand man and municipal councilor Agustin Grande III filed murder charges against vice-mayor Garcia-Yulo for the still unresolved killing of his brother Magdaleno in 2016 (Panay News 2019). In April 2019 an ambush of the convoy of the vice-mayor took place, killing her brother Marc Garcia and nephew Michael Garcia, both local politicians (Guadalquiver 2020). The surviving vice-mayor accused Peña of ordering her assassination. This came after one of Peña's allies, municipal councilor Jolomar Hilario was killed by suspected NPA rebels in late March 2019. Eventually Garcia-Yulo won by a large margin, but not before the president himself had intervened on her side in the ongoing killings (Kreuzer 2021: 19).

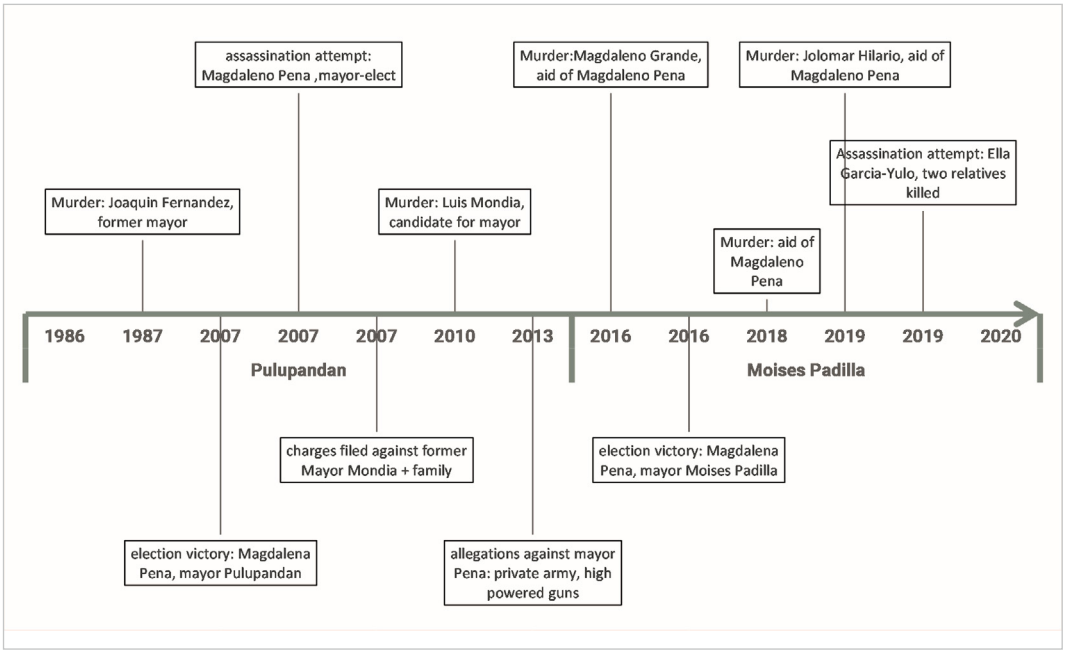


Figure 5: Timeline of Violence in Pulupandan and Moises Padilla, Negros Occident

However, Garcia-Yulo also seems to have instigated her share of political violence. One example is the murder charges for the 2016 killing of Magdaleno Grande which, however, came to nothing after her election victory in 2019 (Rappler 2019). This result occurred even though one former NPA rebel claimed that Garcia-Yulo had good connections to the NPA and the two parties actually cooperated in the 2016 killing. In a second example, the police claimed in 2017 to have found several weapons, explosives, and drugs in her car when it was searched at a checkpoint, which led to her and her husband being jailed for more than six months (Rappler 2018). Given that the car was searched without a warrant, all charges were dropped, and the police officers were dismissed instead (Espina 2021). In March 2020 relatives of several locals killed during the past few years filed new murder charges against Garcia-Yulo as being responsible for the violent deaths of their relatives. Those charges were dismissed by November 2020 (Yasa 2020). Finally, in early 2021 her ally, nephew and vice-mayor, and

a number of allied barangay officials were charged with the killing of Jolomar Hilario in early May 2019 (Gomez 2021). Most of the accused officials had surrendered by late August 2021.

Abra: multiple families in perennial conflict

A further case illustrating competition at the municipal and provincial level that includes the option of killing on all sides is the case of Abra, already mentioned above. Abra is a small province of fewer than 250,000 inhabitants where at least 75 local politicians and candidates have been killed since 2001 or an average of 3.6 per year. The only case solved was the 2007 killing of congressman Luis Bersamin, for which Abra Governor Vicente Valera was sentenced to 40 years in prison. However, all dominant families, including the Valera family, lost members in assassinations, so that it can be assumed that all share responsibility for the killings.

In October 2002, the mayor of the municipality of Tineg, Clarence Benwaren, was killed during a wedding ceremony after having survived another assassination attempt earlier in the year. His family "accused Tineg Vice-Mayor Edwin Crisologo of being behind" the mayor's assassination, arguing "Nobody could have done it but the one with whom we are in conflict" (Alviar et al. 2002). Vice-mayor Crisologo in turn pointed out that several of his supporters had been killed in 2002, most probably by supporters of the mayor.

Five years later, Edwin Crisologo's wife, Brenda, who stood for mayor of the provincial capital Bangued, was assassinated. Immediately, locals pointed to the mayor of Bangued Ryan Luna as the principal. An arrest warrant for him took six years to be carried out (Rappler 2013b). In the meantime, he survived an assassination attempt in 2010. In 2014 his case was transferred to Quezon City to prevent the family from being able to pressure the judges. In 2016, Luna was granted bail, allowing him to run for vice-governor of Abra. In this case he lost against another member of the Valera family, Dominic Valera (Abrenian 2016). In 2019 he ran for his old position as mayor of Bangued but lost again to Dominic Valera, whose wife took the position of vice-mayor while his daughter Maria Jocelyn was re-elected governor of the province of Abra. Her son Joaquin Enrico was elected as councilor of Bangued, introducing the next generation into Abra politics. Tineg is still Crisologo territory, where Corinthia Crisologo has served as mayor and Edwin Crisologo, Sr., as vice-mayor since 2013 and Brethen Jireeh Crisologo as municipal councilor since 2016. For the 2022 elections mayor and vice-mayor switch positions due to term-limit rules. However, both run unopposed.

Another case involving members of the prominent families in Abra is the assassination in 2006 of Marc Ysrael Bernos, the son-in-law of then provincial governor Vicente Valera and mayor of La Paz. The year 2007 saw an assassination attempt against then Lagayan mayor and candidate for Congress, Cecilia Seares Luna, who escaped unhurt, while her three sons, one of them a municipal mayor, another a barangay captain and eight others were wounded. The run-up to the 2019 elections saw the wounding of Abra representative Joseph Bernos and his wife and La Paz Mayor Menchie in a bombing at a local town plaza (Peralta-Malonzo 2018). In this latter case, the police charged several members of a local gun-for-hire group, claiming that the group was linked "to former Lagayan Mayor Jendrix Searez Luna" (Quitasol 2020). Jendrix is the only son of Cecilia Seares Luna, and was

wounded in the 2007 assassination targeting his mother. His brother Ryan is campaigning again for the position of Bangued mayor in the 2022 elections, while Jendrix is a candidate for the position of governor. In both cases they will stand against members of the Valera family, continuing political feuding into the next generation.

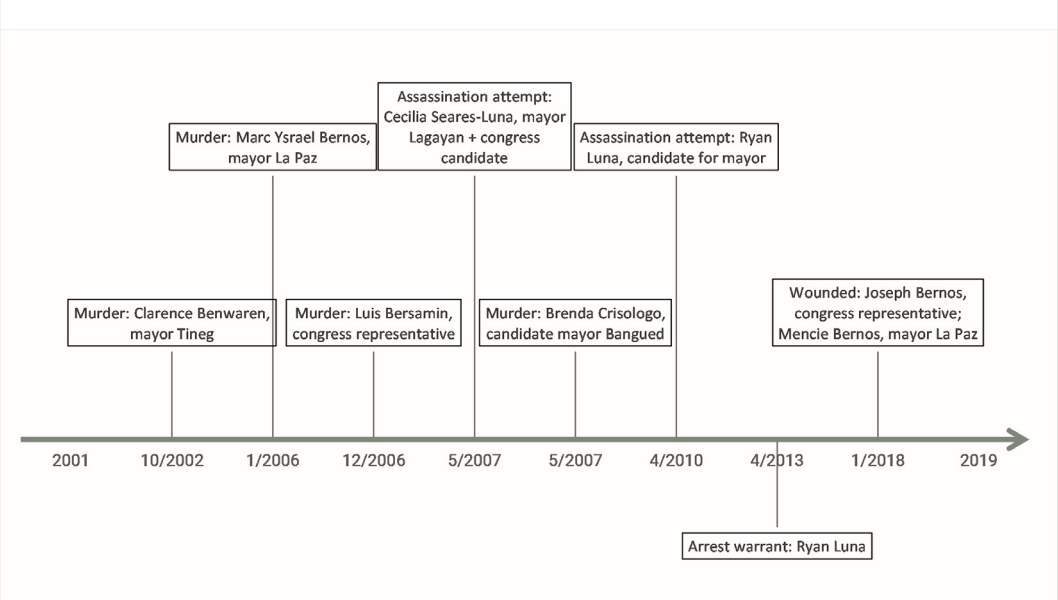


Figure. 6: Timeline for selected instances of violence in Abra

Given that during the last two decades there have been more than 100 victims of assassination attempts, of whom 75 died, these few cases can only illustrate the complex local feuding dynamics that pit families against each other in a permanent quest for domination and control.[8]

4.3 TARGETED KILLING AS A FINAL MEANS OF CONDUCTING POLITICS

Summing up, two characteristics stand out: 1) almost complete impunity, with the proceedings against defendants in all cases “solved” by the police dropped by the prosecutors or the courts; 2) a

8 Ordering a killing becomes everyday practice of which the killing of politicians is only the tip of the iceberg of killings that in the final analysis go unpunished, as in the case of two mayors from the Bernos family, who were charged with ordering their “security aide and hitman” Jacobo Badua, a member of their innermost circle, (Sunstar 2013) to kill two people in 2002 and 2006 respectively. He claimed to have witnessed mayor Bernos ordering another killing in 2004. In only one of these killings did politics play a role, as the victim was in a dispute with a member of the Bernos family. Several years later, another witness, the former driver of the Bernos mayors, stated that he was initially instructed to carry out one of the killings, but could not do it, as the victim was his godson, so that eventually another hitman took over. Despite this additional testimony, the case had been shelved by 2019 (Abrenian 2013, Baguio Herald Express 2019).

feuding logic that pits families against each other with mutual attacks and retaliation that continue for years.

The cases detailed above suggest that the killings are culturally embedded in a feuding logic that gives them historical depth. While targeted killings seem to be singular events when analyzed within the short time frames of media reporting they become stepping stones in the continuous competition between families for local political power. While blood feuding is still prevalent in the Muslim regions of the Philippine South and has received appropriate attention in the scientific literature, the mainstream literature on Philippine politics ignores instances of killings that demonstrate the existence of a similar cultural frame in the other regions of the country.

As is visible in the depiction of assassinations above, throughout the Philippines the units of political competition are not political parties but individuals and families, that is, comprehensive social institutions transforming the political domain into a sphere governed by the logic of inter-personal and inter-family competition.

Whereas the democratic ideal requires the comprehensive privatization of kinship, Philippine reality has transformed democratic competition into a playground of kinship politics, with kinship as structure and culture providing the backbone of politics: "the concentration of political power along familial lines serving as a natural extension of individuals' tendency to try and pass along wealth and advantages to their offspring" (Gardner 2018: 16). This logic of establishing family-controlled fiefdoms perpetuates violent competition given the inability to obtain complete control, if only because of limits to the personnel that can be mustered by one single family to ensure sufficient control over extended periods of time. Inevitably, either newcomers emerge, or other family branches or allies challenge the dominant power. Thus, "kinship politics" has "violent consequences" (Gardner 2018: 3).

5. DEEPLY INGRAINED PATTERNS OF VIOLENT ELECTORAL COMPETITION – LIMITS TO CHANGE

Summing up the above mapping of the killing of politicians in the Philippines, one assessment suggests itself: This type of violence is deeply ingrained in Philippine politics. It is actually so deeply ingrained that the globally exceptional magnitude of this type of violence is scarcely regarded in the Philippines as an issue that should be problematized. In its ordinariness, the phenomenon has become a natural, taken-for-granted part of politics, hardly worthy of special attention, except when too many politicians die violent deaths in too short a period of time. Even then, politics returns to business as usual after a short while.

Killings are duly recorded, in a few cases the perpetrators are brought to justice, and sometimes a few politicians are charged, but almost never is a politician (or anybody else) convicted for commissioning a killing. While the killings do have their hotspots, they occur in virtually all parts of the country, in rural and urban areas, and in both poor and wealthy regions.

Extremely problematic is that not only did the number of killings remain stable in the years before Duterte and increase significantly under him, but the violence, previously more centered on Luzon, has spread to the center and south of the country. Thus, it appears that this form of violence is not a remnant of a non-democratic past, but rather a constitutive part of the established practice of Philippine democracy.

Even if it cannot usually be proven that all violence originates from other politicians, the above analysis shows two things. First, there are only a few cases for which actors beyond the political establishment are clearly responsible. These actors include, on the one hand, the communist NPA, which generally claims ideological motives and, on the other hand, since the beginning of the Duterte presidency, the police, who argue that the politicians they kill are narco politicians who fight back. Even taken together the victims of the police and the NPA are unlikely to account for no more than about 10 percent of the politicians currently killed. Second, for the overwhelming remainder, neither the police nor the media and their local informants even consider principals beyond politics, such as organized crime. Further, competitive political violence becomes visible in the recurrent, if small number of duel-like shootings between competitors for political power. Such cases illustrate how highly loaded political competition actually is in the Philippines, and lend plausibility to the argument that politicians will also be willing to order the killing of competitors when it furthers their interests and the electoral threat emanating from the contender is perceived as "real." Finally, the embedding of individual killings in their local historical context, which has been done above for several cases, reconfigures them as individual cases in a chain of interrelated events. It establishes individual killings as part of an enduring struggle between individuals and families for political and concomitant economic control of certain territories and the people living in them.

Theoretically, change would be easy and would occur as soon as the police identified those behind such crimes through successful investigative work and provided sufficient evidence of their role as principals, the public prosecutors filed charges, and the courts sentenced a sufficient number of principals to long-term prison sentences in appeal-proof judgments in a timely manner. In that case the cost-benefit and risk calculations of the actors could be turned against the use of lethal force.

However, there is no indication that this could succeed in the foreseeable future. To reiterate, in the Philippines extensive impunity is not an exclusive phenomenon in cases where members of the political establishment are suspected of being masterminds or perpetrators. It is a general phenomenon. Thus, targeted killing is a cottage industry in the Philippines and extends far beyond the political elites. In the three years 2011 to 2013, for example, 2,751 persons were assassinated by motorcycle-riding killers. For the years 2016 to 2020 the corresponding number is 7,065 or more than 1,400 per year. Eighty percent of the killings remain unsolved, meaning that not even the killers have been apprehended, much less the principals (PNP n.d., Talabong 2021). Thus, retribution fails to materialize unless it comes from the surviving victims or the relatives of the killed. While a reversal of the destructive dynamics of impunity would be desirable, everything speaks against this being achieved in the foreseeable future. A corresponding empowerment of criminal justice agencies is a Herculean task that has not yet been successfully mastered by any of the world's states affected by high levels of violence and general crime.

It should also not be forgotten that a functioning police and criminal justice system is not necessarily in the interest of political elites. While it could put a stop to violence against members of the political class, the effects of efficient law enforcement and criminal justice cannot be limited to this dimension. Whereas the misappropriation of public funds for personal benefit or for the benefit of henchmen and groups that ensure the principal gets re-elected has been a generally low-risk practice up to now, the risks would increase in the future. Politicians ignoring illegal gambling or drug crime in their bailiwicks in exchange for a share in the profits would also have to recalculate their risks. Put simply, a well-functioning criminal justice system would strike directly at the soft underbelly of clientelism, the illegal provision of financial resources through the plunder of the public purse, and rent seeking from legal and illegal businesses.

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PETER KREUZER

KILLING POLITICIANS IN THE PHILIPPINES: WHO, WHERE, WHEN, AND WHY

In his second report on the targeted killing of politicians in the Philippines, Peter Kreuzer explores a number of core-questions: what types of politicians are victimized, how is the violence distributed in the country, how do the levels of violence change over time, who orders the killings, and what are the motives for the killings. The analysis is based on a new dataset covering the years 2006 to 2021 that records a total of 1500 victims who were either killed or wounded in targeted assassinations or escaped unharmed. The detailed mapping establishes targeted killings of politicians as one deeply ingrained pattern of violent electoral competition.

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

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