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Southeast Asian Studies, 1-25 (in press).

How to Cite:
Lasco, Gideon. Antecedents to Rodrigo Duterte's Drug War: The Anti-Drug Campaigns of Joseph Estrada (2000) and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2003). *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2026, 1-25 (in press). DOI: 10.20495/seas.26007.

Link to this article:
https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2026/03/earlyview-gideon-lasco/

Advance Publication
DOI: 10.20495/seas.26007

Antecedents to Rodrigo Duterte's Drug War: The Anti-Drug Campaigns of Joseph Estrada (2000) and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2003)

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This essay recounts and critically examines the anti-drug campaigns in the Philippines during the presidencies of Joseph Estrada (1998–2001) and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–10). In January 2000 Estrada's secretary of the interior, Alfredo Lim, embarked on a spray-painting campaign that was short-lived but nonetheless galvanized public awareness of the "drug menace." Three years later Estrada's successor, Arroyo, would launch a "drug war" that mobilized various sectors of society. Rooted in a long-standing moral panic around drugs since the 1970s and the emergence of a "methamphetamine epidemic" in the 1990s, these campaigns were characterized by a willingness to resort to extrajudicial measures, the institutionalization of a (more) punitive drug regime, the politicization of drugs, and a discourse that constructed young people simultaneously as victims and criminals. Such approaches and the paradigm behind them foreshadowed Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs more than a decade later and underscore the enduring valence of drugs and drug issues in contemporary Philippine society.

Keywords: drug wars, drug policy, drugs, populism, vigilantism, history of public health, Philippines

1 Introduction

"I do not promise you hell. I will bring you there . . . they [drug traffickers] will have to crawl out of their holes. When they do, the law will prevail and we will get them."

"In this war with the drug trade there will be no compromise and no quarter, not for fear or favor."

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Accepted: July 3, 2025 Advanced published online on J-STAGE: March 23, 2026
Southeast Asian Studies

The above quotes come from Philippine presidents but not, as some present-day readers might expect, from Rodrigo Duterte, who embarked on a bloody drug war during his six-year term (2016–22). They come from two of his predecessors: Joseph Estrada (1998–2001) and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–10), both of whom ran anti-drug campaigns that likewise won strong public support but elicited condemnation from human rights groups.

Those campaigns have been largely glossed over by works, both scholarly and journalistic, that have sought to make sense of Duterte's drug war and situate it within contemporary Philippine history. David Johnson and Jon Fernquest (2018), for instance, mentioned extrajudicial killings during the Arroyo presidency but not how many of them were closely linked to Arroyo's anti-drug campaign. Calling Duterte "the first mayor and president to have actively targeted criminals," Danilo Reyes (2016, 111) downplayed the resort to extrajudicial means by Estrada and his Department of Interior and Local Government secretary, Alfredo Lim. He stated that they acted "largely within the law and did not encourage the killings of criminals," notwithstanding reports of drug-related vigilante killings during the latter's mayoralty of Manila (1992–98) (*Asiaweek* 1994; Tadiar 1994).[1)] Patricia Evangelista (2023) traces Duterte's drug war to his long mayoralty in Davao City but makes no reference to drug-related vigilante killings elsewhere in the country prior to 2016, nor to the two anti-drug campaigns that are the subject of this paper, despite mentioning Estrada and Arroyo as antecedents to Duterte in terms of political style. Using online media databases, Peter Kreuzer (2016) provides quantitative evidence demonstrating the dramatic difference in police killings between 2016 and previous years—for instance, that there were 3.17 police killings annually from 2006 to 2015 as compared to 26.4 in 2016. Although the data does not include the two anti-drug campaigns that are the subject of the current paper, it establishes the crucial fact that there have long been drug-related police killings in the country, just not on the scale of Oplan Tokhang (the component of Duterte's war on drugs that had police visiting the homes of suspected users or dealers, ostensibly to persuade them to stop their activities and undergo rehabilitation). Indeed, the "extra-legal executions" of the 1990s (Tadiar 1994) were the same as the "extrajudicial killings" of the 2000s onward.

Some works link Duterte and his drug war to some key antecedents, albeit in more general terms. For instance, Kusaka Wataru (2017) frames the appeal of Duterte within the context of a publicly legible, popular banditry that harks back to Estrada; Mark Thompson (2022) likewise acknowledges Estrada as a precursor to what he calls "violent populism." Other scholars (see Lasco and Yu 2023) have identified the Marcos dictatorship as a period when public anxiety over drugs was crystallized, ref-

erencing Marcos's speeches that used the "drug menace" as justification for martial law as well as the dramatic execution of the Chinese drug lord Lim Seng in January 1973. Michael Tan (1995) describes how this "moral panic" continued in the 1990s, perpetuated by various sectors of society, including the media. Others have gone farther back to recognize the role of American colonialism and particularly the Reverend Charles Brent in national and global drug control regimes (Tyrrell 2008; Wertz 2013), but there is an apparent historiographic gap in the contemporary history of the politics of drugs before Oplan Tokhang.

This essay addresses the gap by documenting the above-mentioned campaigns during the Estrada and Arroyo presidencies, thus situating these campaigns within contemporary Philippine politics as well as the broader history of drugs in the country. To reconstruct these episodes, I reviewed contemporaneous news coverage, commentaries, political analyses, as well as official documents referenced in those reports and in the secondary literature (e.g., memoranda, circulars, executive orders, and ordinances). This archival research primarily involved close, manual reading of digitized and online versions of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Philippine Star* English-language newspapers, starting from the emergence of the two events in question (i.e., Estrada's spray-painting and Arroyo's anti-drug campaign) and continuing through subsequent issues until the coverage on those two events diminished.

Scholars have described Duterte's violent campaign as a spectacle that was "distinct, even among tough talking politicians" (Reyes 2016, 120), and its exceptional nature elicited invocations of Giorgio Agamben (e.g., Reyes 2016; Rafael 2020). There is no denying that Duterte's scale of violence was exceptional not just in terms of its death toll but in its moral and political consequences (see Warburg and Jensen 2020; Holden 2023). My modest argument, however, hopes to complicate this claim: that Duterte's drug war was neither an exception nor an isolated recurrence in contemporary Philippine history. Rather, it was a continuation—and certainly an escalation—of the ways in which drugs were used as populist tropes in the country, that is, the ways in which the "drug menace" served to dramatize a sense of national crisis and present simplistic solutions while forging divisions between the public and "dangerous others" (see Kenny 2019; Lasco and Curato 2019; Lasco 2020). Similarly, and as is presented through the empirical material, it was a continuation of pre-existing technologies of violence, from "riding-in-tandem" motorcycle crimes (snatch thievery and other crimes committed by pillion riders) to the spectacle of "cardboard justice" (i.e., cardboard signs placed beside murdered drug-war victims declaring their purported crimes).

In the process of making the above argument, I hope to also offer a glimpse of soci-

etal attitudes toward drugs at the turn of the twenty-first century in the Philippines, and to reflect on what has changed between then and now. Since the start of the Duterte administration and in response to Duterte's drug war, there has been a proliferation of local scholarship on drug issues, but a significant portion of this corpus has been focused on current drug policies and politics. Far less examined have been attitudes toward drugs and the people who use them from different sectors, even as notable exceptions (e.g., Soriano *et al.* 2021) have underscored the importance of this exercise. This may be attributed to a general lack of attention to drug matters in the country: despite a few key works (see Santos 1984; Tan 1995; Zarco 1995; Baello and Zarco 1999; Porio and Crisol 2004; Estacio 2009), a tradition of critical drug studies did not take root in the country until recent years, probably due to the risks and challenges of studying such a controversial and stigmatized subject (see Lasco 2018).

Finally, I hope to contribute to efforts to historicize drug wars and punitive drug regimes[2)] in Southeast Asia, given that the relative omission of drugs in broader social and political histories in the Philippines may be mirrored in neighboring countries. This is in contrast to the more thorough documentation of the war on drugs in the United States (e.g., Farber 2021) and to a lesser extent Latin America (Labate *et al.* 2016; Avilés 2017), as well as global histories of prohibition (e.g., Collins 2021). Within this historiography, Asia figures most prominently as the site of the opium trade and the Opium Wars (e.g., Trocki 2005; 2012). However, more recent developments and public responses have received less scholarly attention, including the adoption of a drug-free paradigm not just by individual countries but by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations since its inception in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Equally significant has been the increase of methamphetamine (also known as shabu or yaba) from the late 1990s and the ways in which public fears over this have shaped drug policies, and, conversely, how these policies and political performances around drugs have shaped public sentiment. Relevantly for this paper, the period of interest for our case studies (i.e., the late 1990s to the 2000s) was also a period of heightened political and public attention on drugs in other countries in the region, from Thailand (Nishizaki 2007) to Singapore (Abdullah 2005), amid a "methamphetamine epidemic" (Ahmad 2003; McKetin *et al.* 2008). What were the conditions during this period that led to the use of drugs as a populist trope on top of a long-standing "moral panic" (Tan 1995)? Who—aside from national leaders—were involved in these political performances? Beyond facilitating a fuller, more faithful historicization of political constructions of drugs and official drug narratives, furnishing national accounts can allow for comparative analyses on the place of drugs in Southeast Asian societies today (see Dupont 1999; Kenny 2019; Raffle 2021).

2 Joseph Estrada and Alfredo Lim's Spray-painting Campaign (2000)

Joseph Estrada was elected president in 1998 with the largest vote margin at the time, with his "populist appeal" drawing on his fame as a decades-long star of action and comedy films, including having played the lead role in *Kill the Pushers* (1972), the award-winning movie that coincided with Marcos Sr.'s anti-drug campaign leading to his dictatorship. Estrada—a longtime mayor of San Juan City—also drew on his political experience, which was almost as long as his showbiz career. Elected vice president in 1992, he was appointed by President Fidel Ramos as the chairman of the Presidential Anti-Crime Commission, which allowed him to further burnish his anti-drugs and anti-crime credentials (Hedman 2001).

Estrada's ascent to the presidency coincided with the peak of a "methamphetamine scare" in Southeast Asia, which some scholars attribute to the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Chouvy and Meissonier 2004; McKetin *et al.* 2008).[3)] Drugs were also a prominent issue in civil society discourses, and at least two NGOs received regular media coverage: Citizens' Drug Watch Foundation, a Marcos-era NGO led by the former senator Ernesto Herrera; and Mamamayang Ayaw sa Droga (MAD) (literally, "citizens who don't like drugs"), which was established by Estrada's fellow actor Richard Gomez shortly after his appointment as presidential adviser on youth and sports in 1999 (Teehankee 2002).

Early in Estrada's presidency, legislators filed bills mandating more punitive measures than the Marcos-era Dangerous Drugs Act of 1972. One of those legislators was Robert Barbers, elected to the Senate in 1998 also on the strength of his anti-drugs and -crime credentials, including, as his Senate profile boasted, "the arrest of drug lord Don Jose Pepe Oyson" (Senate of the Philippines, n.d.). Barbers, who in the same profile called illegal drugs the "No. 1 enemy of the Filipino people," filed Senate Bill 1858, which called for the creation of a Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency and stiffer penalties for drug-related crimes, including the death penalty for major offenses.

Such a political milieu notwithstanding, it was only at the beginning of 2000, just days after the new millennium, that Estrada actually engaged in an intensified anti-drug campaign. At that time, observers described him as "politically wounded," having failed to deliver on his anti-poverty campaign promises (Doronilla 2000); his approval rating in December 1999 was at an all-time low of 5 percent, from a high of 50 percent at the start of his presidency.

An immediate antecedent to this anti-drug campaign was the appointment of Alfredo Lim as secretary of the Department of Interior and Local Government.

Known as "Dirty Harry" for his ruthless anti-crime stance as mayor of Manila from 1992 to 1998 and implicated, as mentioned earlier, in drug-related vigilante killings, Lim was sufficiently popular to run for president in the same election as Estrada, garnering 8.7 percent of the vote and keeping his reputation intact. Lim's appointment raised concerns about his human rights record as Manila mayor, including in connection with the above-mentioned vigilante killings as well as his controversial campaign to spray-paint the houses of suspected drug pushers in 1997 (Javellana and Yasmuan 2000).

Within days of his appointment, Lim was already pledging to revive his spray-painting campaign and bring it to a national scale, prompting some human rights groups and political commentators to decry it as a witch hunt and publicity stunt. However, others, like the Catholic bishop Orlando Quevedo, took a "'wait-and-see' position" (Burgonio and Lee-Brago 2000). Mayors and police officers around the country vowed to emulate Lim; Estrada himself endorsed the plan, saying, "we really have to do everything we can to stop drug addiction" (Bordadora *et al.* 2000).

The spray-painting began in the afternoon on January 17, 2000, with Lim himself taking the lead, accompanied by police chief Panfilo Lacson. In at least one house, the plastered text read as follows: "Pursuant to City Ordinance No. 7926 and so that the public may know and may be guided Richard and Julius Mamucod have been arrested or charged at the prosecutor' office . . . and is a known drug pusher" (Bordadora *et al.* 2000).

News reports the following day spoke of "cheering and applauding crowds" welcoming the party, which met "no resistance," with a bystander quoted as saying, "Good for them. They really are drug pushers" (Bordadora *et al.* 2000).

Lawyers sued to block the campaign, comparing it to Nazi Germany's persecution of Jews (Pazzibugan and Yasmuan 2000). The Commission on Human Rights declared it to be unconstitutional, even as it acknowledged the "laudable motive to eradicate the growing drug menace" (Marfil and Trinidad 2000). A newspaper editorial referenced Lim's past record: "Unless Lim and the PNP are stopped, they could very well move from spray-painting houses to spraying suspects with bullets" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2000). Some governors and senators also expressed disapproval over the campaign, calling it a publicity stunt and untenable. The medical anthropologist and columnist Michael Tan—who had previously researched the "moral panic" around drug use in the country (see Tan 1995)—took issue with the underlying notion that "the Filipino is undisciplined and needs to be terrorized into behaving by being beaten up, put under surveillance, or better still, by having—as a politician once suggested—weekly public executions" (Tan 2000).

Many others, however, were supportive of the campaign, including newspaper columnists like Art Borjal, who wrote that "the brouhaha over the alleged violation of human rights . . . is over-shadowing the bigger issue of brazen lawlessness and appalling criminality spawned by the proliferation of drugs" and declared that "Gloves made of steel and cement, plus draconian measures, are needed to exterminate the drug pushers" (Borjal 2000). Arthur Lim, president of the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP), cast drugs as an exceptional and existential threat to the nation that justified the campaign: "Our country will not be destroyed by the New People's Army, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, or even any outside force over the Spratlys, but our society can be destroyed by the drug problem" (Trinidad 2000). Inspired by Lim, various municipalities and cities around the country initiated similar measures; the national mayors' association proposed posting the names and pictures of suspected drug pushers in town plazas (Fuertes 2000).

Lim's campaign proved to be short-lived, with the Court of Appeals declaring the campaign (and the Manila ordinance it invoked) unconstitutional on January 27, just ten days after its launch (Porcalla 2000). Justice Bernardo Abesamis noted the "good intentions" behind the campaign but ruled that it "oversteps the bounds of police power, and amounts to invasion and encroachment of the rights of the people without due process" (Porcalla 2000).

Lim vowed to continue the campaign and consider appealing the decision in the Supreme Court, insisting that "what we are fighting for here is the benefit of our youth"; Estrada was also defiant, stating that "when the government dons a mailed fist against crime, the bleeding hearts among you object and suggest a limp wrist instead (Cueto *et al.* 2000). The IBP president also offered support, saying that "the spray-painting campaign . . . is an act of self-preservation on the part of the state, hence, totally justifiable under the police power clause" (Cueto 2000). Some police officers proposed alternatives to circumvent the ruling, such as announcing the names of suspected drug pushers by loudspeaker in Central Luzon (PDI Northern Luzon Bureau 2000) or spray-painting houses with "This is a drug-free house" in Zamboanga City (Fuertes 2000). In Antipolo City, the mayor announced a campaign to distribute stickers in "houses that have been certified drug-free by barangay officials" that would read: "Mahal naman ang aming pamilya . . . Walang gumagamit at nagtutulak sa amin ng droga [We love our family . . . nobody uses or pushes drugs among us]. This is a drug-free home!" (Tubeza and Del Rosario 2000).

Other local government units followed suit in modifying their campaigns. "Since our stickers will contain friendly and encouraging words, the residents will surely be motivated to continue a drug-free life and carry on a healthy and love-oriented rela-

tionship with members of their family and community," said Muntinlupa City Mayor Jaime Fresnedi while announcing the distribution of yellow stickers that read "This is a drug-free home" (Aning 2000).

Soon after, however, such initiatives were overtaken by other events, including an "all-out war" against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and, and later in 2000, a corruption scandal that would ultimately lead to Estrada's impeachment and ouster (see Coronel 2007; Claudio 2014). Drugs, however, would remain a prominent issue, including concern over the rise of the party drug ecstasy (Burgonio 2000; Lee-Brago 2000) and police corruption associated with drug enforcement (e.g., Frialde and Molina 2000).

3 Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's War on Drugs (2003)

Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's ascent to the presidency in January 2001, while hailed at the time as another success of "People Power" (Labrador 2002; Silvestre 2001), was tumultuous and marred by questions of legitimacy that would persist throughout her term, especially in the first few years. Alongside the political threat posed by her predecessor, Joseph Estrada, her presidency was marred by armed insurgency, high-profile kidnappings, and allegations of corruption (Thompson 2007).

Amid—and despite—this plethora of public concerns, drugs remained in the political and public consciousness. In the May 2001 national elections, Richard Gomez's MAD ran as a party-list group and won the second-highest number of votes —1.4 million—although the Supreme Court disqualified it on the grounds that it did not represent a marginalized group (Teehankee 2002). "We are in agreement with the objectives of MAD, but we do not believe it is a marginalized sector," a newspaper editorial declared at the time (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2001). In July 2001 Arroyo issued a letter of instruction for the government to pursue an "all-out and sustained anti-drug campaign nationwide towards the attainment of a drug-free Philippines in 2010," noting that "the drugs menace has become the Public Enemy No. 1 of the entire Filipino people as well as the No. 1 threat to the national security of our country" (Villanueva 2001).

Drugs figured also in political melees, particularly in allegations that Lacson—Estrada's police chief-turned-senator—was himself involved in the drug trade (Herrera and Avendaño 2001). In the Senate committee hearings that ensued, a witness, Mary "Rosebud" Ong, implicated Lacson and his men, essentially accusing the entire police force of being engaged in drug trafficking (Avendaño 2001). Citizens'

Drug Watch Foundation, a civil society group led by former Senator Ernesto Herrera, commended Ong in a letter to the editor and used the occasion to promote "demand reduction" through education:

> Our office has received a lot of calls, mostly from frustrated parents, harping on the futility of the government's anti-drug effort, especially considering the police's involvement in the drug trade. And we always tell them that our best defense is education. We have to continue being aggressive in educating our children about the dangers of illegal drugs and the effects of drug abuse on families and the nation.
>
> We believe that reducing the demand for drugs is just as much a solution as the prosecution and execution of drug traffickers. The movement for demand reduction starts in our homes, communities, schools and workplaces. (Herrera 2001)

Likely informed by such prevailing concerns over drugs, lawmakers of the 12th Congress pushed for a law that would have tougher provisions than the Marcos-era Dangerous Drugs Act of 1972. The proposed law—consolidated from Senate Bill No. 1858 and House Bill No. 4433—called on government to "pursue an intensive and unrelenting campaign against the trafficking and use of dangerous drugs and other similar substances through an integrated system of planning, implementation and enforcement of anti-drug abuse policies, programs, and projects" as well as to "provide effective mechanisms or measures to re-integrate into society individuals who have fallen victims to drug abuse or dangerous drug dependence through sustainable programs of treatment and rehabilitation." Announcing her support for the new law—which would become known as Republic Act 9165 or the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002—Arroyo referenced the "drug menace now elevated to the level of a national security problem" in her second State of the Nation Address (*Official Gazette* 2002) and undertook various measures, including appointing Rodrigo Duterte as an anti-crime adviser in July 2002 (Avendaño and Mellejor 2002).

It was only in mid-2003, however, that Arroyo would engage in what she called a war on drugs. Earlier that year, her approval rating had sunk to -14 percent according to the polling firm Social Weather Stations—making her the least popular president since surveys started (Villanueva 2003a). Following revelations by Senator Robert Barbers that there were "3.4 million drug users" in a country which had a population of around 80 million at the time (Tubeza, Ubac, and Esguerra 2003), Arroyo stated that "the future of the nation is at stake in this campaign" (Labog-Javellana and Cabacungan 2003). Mirroring and drawing explicit inspiration from Thaksin Shinawatra's drug war earlier that year (e.g., vowing "to do a Thaksin"; Labog-Javellana and

Cabacungan 2003; Villanueva 2003b), she gave her subordinates three months to arrest 62 drug lords and dismantle fifty marijuana plantations, noting that the P1 billion (around USD 18 million) that she had earmarked was more than what Thaksin had allocated for his own campaign that claimed the lives of over 2,200 in three months (Labog-Javellana and Cabacungan 2003).

Days later, Arroyo appointed "Four Aces" to lead the campaign, all of whom had played prominent roles in drug enforcement in previous administrations: Alfredo Lim, Robert Barbers, Rey Jaylo, and Lucio Margallo (Ubac and Labog-Javellana 2003). In a dramatic launch of her campaign, Arroyo gathered fifteen thousand children, aged 6–12, in Luneta Grandstand in Manila and called on them to join the "concerted fight" against drugs (Labog-Javellana 2003). The country's "17 million texters" (as people who used mobile phone messaging were referred to at the time) were also later implored by the president's allies to join the campaign and report "addicts" (Balana 2003).

The police lost no time in implementing the commander-in-chief's orders, arresting hundreds all over the country within days, rounding up "illegal drug users and pushers" and presenting them before the media (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2003d). Some local officials participated in the spectacle, like Laguna Governor Teresita Lazaro, who "led the presentation of 190 suspected drug dependents" in the town of Sta. Cruz (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2003e). The Department of Justice called for the implementation of the death penalty, finding support from civic groups like the Volunteers Against Crime and Corruption (Tubeza, Labog-Javellana, and Aning 2003).

Acting on the view that students were particularly vulnerable as potential victims, police were deployed in Manila's University Belt, prompting students to protest the conversion of their vicinities to a "police zone" and "acceptable only in a police state" (Aning 2003). For their part, police justified their presence by saying, "We are just protecting and helping the students fight the drug menace" (Aning 2003). One newspaper infographic depicted "areas under tight watch" in Metro Manila with skulls (Papa and Ortiz 2003). Newspaper reports on the negative impacts of drugs emerged alongside the campaign, with headlines such as "Drug Addict's Tale from the Dark Side" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2003b) and "Garment Workers Drugged to Keep Awake for Three Straight Days" (Del Puerto and Lalata 2003).

Vigilante killings soon followed. In response to Arroyo's announcement of an anti-drug campaign, Mayor Duterte announced a "special project" in Davao City, and within days several people were killed by "motorcycle-riding gunmen believed to be members of the Davao Death Squad" (Allada and Badilla 2003). Many more shootings were reported in the coming days and weeks, including "just a few meters away from the police station" (Allada 2003b). In Quezon City there were reports of "suspected

pushers found dead," some of whom had cardboard signs beside their bodies bearing messages such as "Kung gusto mo pang mabuhay, itigil pagbenta ng shabu" (If you want to live, stop selling shabu) (Papa 2003). In Nueva Ecija, a vigilante group announced "21 pushers planned for liquidation"; hours later, a man was shot by "one of two men riding on a motorcycle" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2003c).

Some mayors went above and beyond the national government's campaign and pursued their own anti-drug measures. Reminiscent of Lim's 2000 anti-drug campaign, police in Davao City, with the blessings of Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, marked houses with "Alsa[4] Drug Supporters" in bold red letters (Allada 2003a). In Legazpi City, Mayor Noel Rosa took the lead in spray-painting twenty houses in Brgy. Sabang with the words "drug-free house" (Majillano and Magsino 2003). In Marikina City, local officials placed entire areas under "quarantine," which involved deploying "watchers" in the "hotspots" and requiring everyone entering or leaving to write their names in a logbook (Del Puerto and Salaverria 2003).

It was also around this time that drug testing—a requirement under RA 9165—became implemented en masse, including in schools, in workplaces, and when applying for or renewing driver's licenses (Pazzibugan 2003). Incidents of police officers failing drug tests received considerable coverage. Proposals for elected officials to undergo drug testing gained traction, even as the Commission on Elections expressed concerns that requiring candidates to be tested may be unconstitutional (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2003a). Some health experts also questioned the efficacy of drug tests, raising concerns about false positives, especially with the government itself acknowledging that most of the testing centers were "substandard" (Rivera and Marfil 2003; Villanueva 2003b). There were also concerns about the cost of the tests, with the police office in Metro Manila asking for five million pesos to test seventeen thousand policemen (Tandoc 2003a).[5]

As during the time of Estrada, there were some protests against the anti-drug campaign, including from political observers. Michael Tan, who had also criticized Lim's spray-painting, took issue with the numbers used to justify the anti-drug campaign, dismissing them as "numerology" (Tan 2003). Another columnist, Conrado de Quiros, saw the beginnings of a police state, and his concluding warning is worth quoting at length:

> If our history has anything to teach, it is that the real terrorists in this country are not to be found in the gullies of the Mountain Province or the forests of Basilan but in the corridors of government. If our history has anything to teach, it is that the real peddlers of dangerous substances in this country are not to be found among the urban poor of Payatas or the lumpen prole-

> tariat of Sampaloc, but among those who propose to screw civil liberties to give us peace and order.
>
> There is a drug that addles the brain more surely and swiftly than shabu, as I know from seeing my friends who have gotten into government. That is unbridled power. (De Quiros 2003)

Newspaper reports also aired concerns from various individuals, including Father Amado Picardal, a longtime critic of Duterte's methods in Davao, as well as a Swiss-Filipino businessman who warned that the campaign "could be used by the authorities and unscrupulous individuals against their enemies" and that the country was turning into a "police state" (Esguerra 2003). A news story reported how a judge felt that the law she had applied to a "drug pusher" was "too severe": a life sentence for 0.1 grams of shabu (Tandoc 2003b).

The general public, however, was generally supportive of the campaign, even of the vigilantism and the violence, as shown by sentiments aired in various letters to the editor during the weeks of intensified anti-drug action and consequent reportage:

> Nothing's wrong with vigilantism. If one can't take the garbage out, the people have to do it. We do it here, we call it "drive-by-shooting." (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2003e)

> Vigilantism is the fastest and easiest way to solve it [the drug problem]. Won't even cost much. . . . With vigilantes, before you know it, it's a closed case. That's why I support the campaign of Rodrigo Duterte. (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2003b)

Others accepted the gravity of the "drug menace" but supported rehabilitation as a preferred measure. One retired lawyer mused, "it will take 327 years to cure the 3.4 million drug addicts. But how about new addicts?" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2003f).

As in the case of Estrada's campaign three years earlier, political events overtook Arroyo's anti-drug campaign, including the Oakwood mutiny in July 27, 2003, just weeks after her announcement. However, Arroyo saw a rise in popularity after the campaign, giving her political capital that allowed her to break her vow not to run for re-election. As far as drug policy is concerned, the rest of her presidency was characterized by more attention to education campaigns such as the Barkada Kontra Droga (Peer group against drugs) program, but drugs would no longer figure prominently in her policies or rhetoric after she secured her second term in May 2004. Nonetheless, Arroyo left a lasting legacy in drug policy in the form of Republic Act 9165, which institutionalized many of the anti-drug measures that had been implemented during her term (see Yarcia 2021; Lasco and Yarcia 2022). Some of the politicians associated

with the anti-drug campaign—including Lim and Duterte—maintained, if not improved, their political profile; indeed, Arroyo's anti-drug drive foreshadowed the drug war launched by her anti-crime adviser 13 years later as well as the popularity that it garnered.

4 Drugs: Spectacle, Simplification, and Division

If the use of drugs as a populist trope involves the "spectacularization" of a crisis, offering simplistic explanations and solutions as well as forging divisions between a "virtuous public" and "dangerous others" (Lasco 2020), such elements can definitely be gleaned from the two episodes surveyed in this essay, in ways that align with the "particular affinity between populism and drug wars that has played out on a large scale across Southeast Asia" (Kenny 2019, 131). The spray-painting carried out by Lim, for instance, was a spectacle in itself: one that catered to both headline news and popular opinion, mirroring the dramaturgical qualities of the execution of Lim Seng in 1973 (McCoy 2017). Similarly, the vigilante killings in Arroyo's anti-drug campaign were eerily similar to the way placards were found beside the dead bodies during Duterte's Oplan Tokhang, perhaps the only difference being the widespread distribution of photos in the latter thanks to social media. Overall, the resort to exceptional (read: extrajudicial) measures, even the willingness to take them, had a spectacular effect, as Duterte would manifest years later in what Reyes (2016) called a "spectacle of violence" (see also Haanstad 2022). Still, these dramatic moments were enacted not purely through extralegal means but also through executive and legislative measures (e.g., Executive Order 61 promulgated by Estrada and Republic Act 9165 signed by Arroyo) that institutionalized, or at least enabled, such responses. In this sense, then, the spectacle of killing is not unrelated to the "theater of punishment" via the death penalty in Singapore and Indonesia (Druzin and Wan 2015).

Simplification, meanwhile, was achieved by discursively portraying drugs as an exceptional evil that was destroying the country, especially the youth, and the holding up of the figure of the "addict," the drug-crazed criminal, as the chief villain of society. The anti-drug campaign posters that were rife during the time reflected some of these simplifications (e.g., "Get High on God, not on Drugs"), but even the preamble of RA 9165 is reflective of this rhetoric:

> It is the policy of the State to safeguard the integrity of its territory and the well-being of its citizenry, particularly the youth, from the harmful effects of dangerous drugs on their physical

> and mental well-being, and to defend the same against acts or omissions detrimental to their development and preservation.

Politicians routinely cited the risk of "becoming the next Colombia"—that is, a country under existential threat—as grounds for a drug war, again foreshadowing Duterte's rhetoric that "drugs are destroying the country." The prescription of rehabilitation as an alternative to detention or death was likewise an oversimplification of drug treatment across Southeast Asia, one that became translated into compulsory drug treatment centers that were—and are—themselves characterized by human rights violations but receive little criticality even from health professionals (see Vuong *et al.* 2017; Lasco and Yarcia 2022).

As for the forging of divisions, the drug war rested on both vertical and horizontal divisions. The Marcos dictatorship tried to link drugs with foreign others, such as Lim Seng typifying the "Chinese drug lord," as well as Communist insurgents, at least one of whom was injected with needles to make it appear that she was an addict (Lasco and Yu 2023). This resonates with the observation that "the demonization of drug dealers and addicts as divisive elements that undermine the social order fits comfortably within the populist mobilization paradigm" (Kenny 2019, 122). In the cases of Estrada and Arroyo, opposition politicians such as Lacson were accused of drug-related crimes, but the brunt of the campaigns was borne by urban poor neighborhoods in Metro Manila, Davao, Cebu, and elsewhere: the same sites of Duterte' drug war. As Michelle Miao (2017) has argued, the idea of "Asian values" (e.g., discipline, collectivism) has allowed countries in the region to justify punitive anti-drug campaigns, as opposed to human rights discourses that are cast as "Western." While Miao observed this more prominently in China, Singapore, and Malaysia, it likewise figured prominently in Duterte's populist performances and could well be an enduring ideology for ASEAN's drug-free paradigm (Prayuda *et al.* 2019; Lai and Stoicescu 2020).

5 Concluding Reflections

In terms of drug ideology, one running thread throughout the past half-century is the dual framing of drugs as both a criminal and a medical problem and the casting of people who use drugs as illiberal subjects. This attitude is by no means unique to the Philippines: Maitena Milhet *et al.* (2016) have noted that "pathologization and criminalization" are the dominant perspectives on drugs; the "drug-free paradigm" has been the overall approach in the region for decades (Lai and Stoicescu 2020). Indeed,

Arroyo's explicit invocation of Thaksin's drug war is an example of how ideas travel across the region—a point of particular relevance in drug policy given how Southeast Asian nations have closely coordinated on drug issues since the 1970s and continue to affirm a drug-free vision (Pardo *et al.* 2019; Pascoe 2025). Duterte—Arroyo's protege—also likened his approach to that of the Indonesian strongman Suharto (Lim 2018), and he in turn was invoked by various leaders in the region—from Sri Lanka to Indonesia—as inspiration for their own punitive anti-drug campaigns (see Coca 2019; Lasco 2020). Like Arroyo and Duterte, Thaksin used his anti-drug campaign as political capital to consolidate power and pursue his broader political agenda (see McCargo 2006; Prajak 2014; Kenny 2019).

This regional drug paradigm, however, takes on a particular form in the Philippines, especially in the way that it has acquired moral and medical sanction from religious and biomedical figures, respectively (see Cornelio and Lasco 2020; Lasco and Yarcia 2022). It would take Duterte's violent actualization of such a paradigm to elicit push-back from the sectors that endorsed the ideology behind it, but as this history makes clear, many of its elements and technologies of violence—from vigilante killings to the use of drugs as a political weapon—in fact predate Oplan Tokhang (Fernquest 2018).

Beyond the two main president-protagonists, the dramatis personae of this history are mostly men whose political careers benefited from their being seen as tough on drugs—from police officers like Barbers to senators like Herrera and mayors like Lim, Duterte, and Estrada himself. This appeal arguably persists today, with lawmakers demanding the death penalty for drug offenses and mayors promoting their jurisdictions as drug free (Garcia 2024). Thus, although the political and scholarly attention on national leaders is rightful and necessary, especially in settings where they have wide powers—as in the Philippines, with its "hyper-presidentialism" (Rose-Ackerman *et al.* 2011)—there is also a need to recognize the role of other politicians, including local officials, in using drugs as populist tropes and shaping drug policies.

If drugs offer so much political capital, why did Benigno Aquino Jr.—the presidential link between Arroyo and Duterte—not pursue drug issues as vigorously as his predecessor and successor? One possible answer is that while drug problems are indeed compelling and resonant tropes, they are not the only ones within the repertoire of populism (see Teehankee and Kasuya 2020), just as the populist style is not the only one that has been met with success in the country. Fidel Ramos, Estrada's predecessor, was an "orthodox innovator" (Teehankee 2016) who campaigned on a development agenda based on science and modernization. Aquino Jr. was likewise a supposed reformist who campaigned on the promise of good governance (Teehankee 2016; Thompson 2016); crucially, he stood against Arroyo and represented a repudia-

tion of her policies, reflecting and reinforcing the civil society zeitgeist that arguably boosted his electoral success (Hedman 2010). It is worth noting that even within the terms of the presidents surveyed in this paper, drugs figured only in moments of political vulnerability. Between Marcos Sr.'s anti-drug campaign (Lasco and Yu 2023) and Duterte's Oplan Tokhang, there may very well have been other anti-drug campaigns that this paper has missed, but what is clear is that these campaigns had a circumscribed temporality. (In this sense, Duterte's presidency, while representing an escalation of how drugs figured in national politics, also featured a departure in one respect: far from being invoked episodically, drugs defined and consumed his entire presidency.)

On the other hand, even though Aquino Jr. did not campaign on drug issues, he did not change or challenge the pre-existing paradigm, which was reflected in the National Anti-Drug Plan of Action that was enacted during his term (Dangerous Drugs Board 2015). As Kreuzer (2016) noted, there were police killings—including drug-related ones—throughout the years before Duterte. And while Marcos Jr. has signaled a "slightly different approach" to drugs (Galvez 2022) and his allies have initiated efforts to hold Duterte accountable for the drug war, the president has not taken concrete steps to repeal Republic Act 9165 and decriminalize drugs or undertake any major drug policy reform. In contrast, neighboring countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia have long embraced harm reduction programs, and Malaysian officials even announced plans to decriminalize drug use (*Malay Mail* 2024) while maintaining some of the shared features of regional drug policy (e.g., compulsory rehabilitation). It is also worth emphasizing that specific drugs have elicited specific policy responses in the region: though de facto legal in Thailand (see Kalayasiri and Boonthae 2023), cannabis has been viewed less negatively in the Philippines, with Duterte even "joking" about using it at the height of his anti-drug campaign (Corrales 2018) and Arroyo—now a congresswoman and still an active politician after all these years—filing a bill to legalize medical marijuana in 2023 (Porcalla 2023). In contrast, a "methamphetamine exceptionalism" has prevailed across the region, with politicians singling it out as a drug that merits exceptionally harsh responses (Lasco and Yu 2021), in echoes of Thaksin's focus on yaba (Sombatpoonsiri and Arugay 2016).

Nonetheless, as the case studies in this paper show, the Philippines' punitive drug regime has largely remained unchanged over the past decades, and so have the prevailing political and popular constructions of drugs in the country (Lasco 2023). Duterte was greeted with applause when he made a defiant appearance in a Senate hearing investigating his drug war, suggesting the enduring popularity of his campaign and what it represents (Mateo and Cayabyab 2024). The remarkable continuity in

drug policies and ideologies in the Philippines, as well as their episodic escalations, should lead to a redoubling of efforts to interrogate the socioeconomic, political, and cultural milieux that enable anti-drug campaigns in the country and the region—especially given what is at stake for health, human rights, democracy, and social justice.

Acknowledgments

This paper was originally a term paper for the "Historiography of the History of Science" course in the Department of the History of Science, Harvard University. I am deeply grateful to Victor Seow and Rebecca Lemov for their wisdom and support. I benefited greatly from conversations with Inez Feria, Lee Yarcia, Kusaka Wataru, Caroline Hau, and Karl Ian Cheng Chua, whose insights enriched my thinking. I am also thankful to the anonymous peer reviewers for their thoughtful and generous feedback.

Notes

1) A United States human rights report from February 1994 contained the following account: "Another wave of extrajudicial killings occurred after Manila mayor Alfredo Lim vowed in November to rid the city of its drug problem in six months or resign. During the next several weeks, about 20 alleged drug pushers were found murdered, many with signs beside their bodies reading, 'Don't push drugs, you'll end up like me.' While no suspects were charged, attention focused on drug gangs or police elements acting without official sanction" (Department of State 1994, 717).
2) When referring to "punitive drug regimes," I follow the drug policy scholarship to mean countries where there are serious punishments for drug offenses (e.g., long prison sentences and/or the death penalty) and where any form of drug use or possession is criminalized, in contrast to "permissive regimes" like Portugal which favor harm reduction and emphasize public health interventions (see Frendreis and Tatalovich 2020).
3) Since its emergence in the 1990s, the use and popularity of methamphetamine in the region has been associated with its work-related effects; as Khabir Ahmad (2003, 1878) noted around the time of the anti-drug campaigns of Arroyo and Thaksin, people who used it in the region did so "to improve work performance" (see also Chouvy and Meissonier 2004). This has since been affirmed by subsequent (albeit limited) scholarship, including ethnographic works in the Philippines (Estacio 2009; Lasco 2014). The economic contexts of drug use, however, are largely ignored or glossed over in political discourse and in the "political constructions" of people who use drugs (Lasco 2024).
4) *Alsa* is Tagalog for "uprising" or "revolt."
5) Doctors and public health practitioners were sometimes asked to provide their opinions on technical matters such as drug testing (e.g., Villanueva 2003b), but clinical or public health attention to drugs was not reflected in contemporaneous scholarship (e.g., in local journals like *Acta Medica Philippina* and the *Journal of the Philippine Medical Association*). Drugs were framed mostly as a criminal and moral issue, save for passing references in the emerging HIV/AIDS and sex work literature (Simbulan *et al.* 2001; Amadora-Nolasco *et al.* 2002; Ratliff 2004) or clinical and pharmacological studies of certain drugs (Dayrit and Dumlao 2004; Javier and Calimag 2007). Medical researchers and experts—including toxicologists and psychiatrists—also occasionally figured in the public discourse around drugs, but judging by news reportage and the scholarly output during the period covered by this paper, they mostly abstained on larger questions about

drug policy. Debate within the legal scholarship seems to have been more vigorous: one article in the *Philippine Law Journal* posed constitutional challenges to the drug testing provisions of RA 9165 (Tan 2002), but another piece in the *Ateneo Law Journal* expressed support for drug testing, invoking the legal doctrine of "special needs" (Menguito 2003).

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