

Duterte's Counterinsurgency Program: There Is More Than Meets the Eye

By [Jezile Torculas](#)

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You'll find no freer democracy than the Republic of the Philippines under former President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022). Well, at least that's what former National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) Spokesperson Lorraine Badoy [said](#).

The Birth of NTF-ELCAC

Since the founding of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in 1968 and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA) in 1969, the country has been rife with terrorist activities and armed insurgencies. With a view to ending "[50 years of deceit, lies and atrocities committed by communist terrorists against the Filipino people](#)," former President Rodrigo Duterte signed [Executive Order 70](#) (EO 70) in 2018. It institutionalized a whole-of-nation approach that subsequently created the NTF-ELCAC. This task-force is composed of [12 operational clusters](#), each consisting of relevant government agencies. It is headed by the President as commander and chairman; the National Security Adviser as vice-chairman; and an appointed executive director.

Established to dismantle local insurgencies and to spur the development of former guerilla fronts of the CPP-NPA, the NTF-ELCAC initiated the Barangay Development Program (BDP) which allocates funds for sustainable rehabilitation projects. Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU), Secretary Carlito G. Galvez, Jr. [commended the Localized Peace Engagements](#) (LPE) cluster as the "*most effective way of dealing with the communist insurgency*" by "*allowing local leaders to touch base with [community-level] insurgents who have expressed their willingness to lay down their arms and return to the folds of law*".

Everything sounds about right, doesn't it? But there is more than meets the eye.

Relentless Red-tagging

The NTF-ELCAC, primarily designed as a democratic institution aimed towards lasting peace and inclusive development, is on the frontline of [relentless red-tagging of](#) human rights activists, journalists, political opposition, labor leaders, and religious groups as communists, terrorists or advocates of the communist cause.

Red-tagging, [according to a Supreme Court justice](#), refers to the “‘phenomenon of implicating progressive civil group leaders to heinous crime,’ or the ‘vilification, labelling... of,’ or ‘ascribing guilt by association’ to, organizations in which said individuals and organizations are depicted as communists or communist supporters, ‘making them easy targets of government military or paramilitary units’.” Targets — determined without substantial proof — are usually subject to harassment and even extrajudicial killing.

While red-tagging has a long history in Philippine democracy, it was during the Duterte administration, particularly upon the institutionalization of the NTF-ELCAC, where the undemocratic practice bore its legitimacy. Apart from official pronouncements, the inter-agency body regularly utilizes the social media to communicate individual names and groups — for public derision.

Domestic human rights defenders and state universities and their constituents are often the object of violence, arbitrary and unlawful killings.

Karapatan, an “[alliance](#) of human rights organizations and programs, human rights’ desks and committees of people’s organizations, and individual advocates committed to the defense of people’s rights and civil liberties,” has always been in the crosshairs of the NTF. Named members of the said group struggled through the ordeal of [online threats](#) and [physical assault](#). The group also [compiled records from 2020](#) of at least 78 people being killed “either from red-tagging or anti-terrorism police operations” and 136 arrests.

In another incident in December 2018, human rights lawyer [Angelo Karlo Guillen](#) had his face plastered around Iloilo City, accusing him of membership of the NPA. He was a legal representative of the *Tumandok* Indigenous People. In 2021, he survived multiple stab wounds but lost his “laptop and a few documents”.

In yet another case in December 2020, [Dr. Mary Rose Sancelan](#), a red-tagged community doctor, and her husband were shot in Guihulngan City. She was reportedly linked to the NPA.

Journalists also join the list of red-tagged individuals. [Frenchiemae Cumpio of Eastern Vista](#), a local independent news website, has been detained for alleged illegal possession of firearms and involvement with the NPA — both of which have been dismissed by her colleagues and advocacy groups as charges intended to silence her reporting on the military’s human rights abuses.

Only recently was a regional trial court judge publicly accused to be sleeping with the enemy for dismissing a government petition to tag the CPP-NPA (and the National Democratic Front) as terrorists. [Judge Marlo Malagar and her husband](#), University of the Philippines-Cebu Chancellor Atty. Leo Malagar, received threats arising from a Facebook post by former NTF-ELCAC spokesperson Badoy.

Implications to Philippine Democracy: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

The implementation of the whole-of-nation approach spearheaded by the NTF-ELCAC is arguably a landmark decision in the Philippine history of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. [Executive Order 70](#) is constitutionally and legally binding. Its provisions adhere to democratic principles and processes. Simply put, EO 70 is an express measure to safeguard Philippine democracy.

However, as argued by Varol (2015) and Huq and Ginsburg (2018), democratic institutions — irrespective of quality — are easily susceptible to abuse by malicious political leaders who manipulate them for their anti-democratic practices. Against this premise, EO 70 through the NTF-ELCAC constitutes a means to an end.

The unsystematic practice of red-tagging is tantamount to crackdown on dissent. It has serious repercussion on civil liberties, particularly on freedom of expression and media freedom. By openly targeting progressive groups and individuals who are critical of the government and its programs, the Duterte administration through the NTF-ELCAC was pushing the nation towards a trajectory of “stealth authoritarianism”. Introduced by Varol, this modern concept of authoritarianism is reminiscent of a wolf in sheep’s clothing — *using subtle mechanisms of authoritarian control that relies on the same legal rules that exist in regimes with favorable democratic credentials* (p. 1678).

The Duterte administration used a façade of democratic institution to silence critics and oppositions. Such institution invites threats or self-censorship, with the latter only reinforcing an echo chamber that is bereft of objective reporting.

Further, Badoy’s attack against Judge Malagar oversteps the bounds of democracy by challenging autonomous judicial processes.

The red list is essentially a hit list, a death sentence of some sort. And this is not characteristic of a democracy.

The Philippines under the Duterte administration was never a free democracy, as opposed to Badoy’s remark; but a soft tyranny or stealth authoritarianism.

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Jezile Torculas has a bachelor’s degree in Political Science. She is an Assistant Editor at the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).

Sources

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Featured image: Protest in front of DILG, Quezon City against NTF-ELCAC on its second anniversary, December 4, 2020. (Photo by [Ryomaandres](#), licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

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