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Drugs and State Vigilantism as a Strategy of Political Activity: The Example of Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia

Abstract: The problem of distribution and consumption of intoxicating substances is considered a socially harmful phenomenon and Southeast Asia is a region particularly affected by drugs. In the face of this challenge, the heads of many states undertake radical actions, going beyond the legal framework, referred to as state vigilantism. Based on the example of three selected political leaders (Thaksin Shinawatra, Rodrigo Duterte and Joko Widodo), the author points out how radical strategies for fighting the drug problem contribute to increasing popularity, even though the problem has not been resolved since the early 1970s. Cross-comparison analysis of the three mentioned cases aims at identifying sources of effectiveness and attractiveness of populist methods that have not changed significantly for fifty years. Among them the author argues that vigilantism grows out of populism and takes the form of a spectacle containing such elements as dehumanising discourse, extrajudicial killings and the theme of the nation's morality at risk.

Keywords: *Southeast Asia, drugs, state vigilantism, political strategy, populism*

Introduction and Conceptualisation

The radical anti-drug policy also known as the “war on drugs” has been a phenomenon in political and scientific discourse since 1971. The “zero tolerance” attitude initiated by the United States has led not only to the lack of visible positive effects in state-led policies, but also to systemic consequences such as the marginalisation of the poorest (and the most vulnerable to the destructive effects of drug businesses), violation of human rights, as well as serious damage to public health (Sombatpoonsiri & Arugay, 2016; *Global Commission on Drug Policy*, 2016).

This issue also applies to the countries of Southeast Asia. Today, illicit drug production, distribution and consumption constitute a vital challenge for the ASEAN countries. Extensive and difficult-to-reach peripheral areas (e.g., the so-called Golden Triangle area) remaining outside the complete control of the states are the place of opium and synthetic substances production at least since the middle of the 20th century. Proximity to the drug production source made it one of the most important pillars of the political agendas of many leaders in Southeast Asia. Conscious use (and thus discursive creation) of the drug problem tracks back to the early 1970s by Ferdinand Marcos who was responsible for the intensification and arousal of so-called “moral panic” in the Philippines.

The author agrees with scholars mentioned in this paper that Southeast Asian leaders resort directly to populism as a style of policymaking. However, the subject of analysis here is vigilantism treated as a dangerous development of populist techniques crossing a certain rhetorical boundary, beyond which dehumanising discourse and extrajudicial executions become a spectacle. A spectacle – importantly – approved by the audience. As pointed out by Johnson and Fernquest (2018), this category is still insufficiently researched and theorised, especially in implementing policies based on violence.

Based on a framework outlined in such a manner, the category of state vigilantism manifests through:

- a) intensive periods of extrajudicial executions,
- b) dehumanising the target group and assigning it a label of a social threat,
- c) active organisation of self-proclaimed violence, which means encouraging citizens to adopt a proactive attitude in fighting the indicated threat,
- d) negation, meaning a discursive denial of the state’s participation in extrajudicial executions – these are presented as a result of clashes with the police, resistance, or gang wars,
- e) visibility, meaning the possible media coverage of fighting the phenomenon to strengthen its disciplinary and deterrent function (Raffle, 2021).

The aim is to compare a strategy of state vigilantism adopted by three chosen leaders: the Prime Minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra; the President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte and the President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo. By taking into account the historical, political and social contexts, the author tries to get an answer to two questions: first, what are the sources of undoubted political successes based on the strategy of vigilantism and second, given the existing contexts, what motivations do these leaders have for pursuing strategies involving vigilantism.

The Allure of Populism and Vigilantism

Populism (treated here as a pre-stage to vigilantism) is characterised by a focus on satisfying the emotional needs of the electorate. Populist narratives reject or ignore scientific explanations and those based on international legal standards, describing them as biased

or violating national sovereignty (Girelli, 2021; Pratt, 2007). In political practice it manifests through, for example, strong approval for capital punishment. Among 35 countries where various drug-related crimes are punishable by death, as many as 16 are located in Asia, including China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (Sander et al., 2020). It can be noticed that the mechanism of capital punishment in these countries is so widespread and different from the global abolitionist trend that this punishment constitutes a manifestation of exceptional “Asian values” (Bae, 2008). The former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew particularly justified the maintaining of mandatory capital punishment, stating that the “fundamental difference in our approach results from our traditional Asian value system, which puts the interests of the community above the interests of an individual” (Girelli, 2021, p. 2).

The narrative of governments in favour of the death penalty is based on the claim that the public either supports such solutions or is not ready to abolish them. It is pointed out that such postulates constitute a characteristic feature of penal populism. It is an idea “that public support for stricter criminal justice policies (...) has become a major driving force in policymaking as well as in political electoral cycles, resulting in increasingly severe penalties, irrespective of their ability to reduce the scale of crime” (Miller, 2014).

It seems important because, in historical terms, abolitionism, be it the death penalty or slavery, was not subject to one or the other social mood but depended primarily on political leadership. In other words, the abolition did not result from a general demand but from the reformist nature of the political elites. Only such political decisions are followed by a change in public opinion (Girelli, 2021). Therefore, it is important to note the creative character of the implemented policies: it is often the leaders – strong individuals with high social authority – who can create specific social attitudes. However, the cases we are interested in choose the path of reinforcing existing attitudes, and do not take society beyond its “comfort zone”.

Ray Abrahms (2008, p. 3), on the other hand, notes that the attractiveness of vigilantism is largely based on the fact that “decent, law-abiding citizens want to live and work in peace”, and additionally, as a result of fatigue and frustration over an ineffective state, they take the initiative to implement the expected order. Importantly, this sense of frustration becomes an element used by the state, because politicians implementing strategies of vigilantism seem to indicate the faults and neglect of their predecessors. That is how they justify taking radical measures that go beyond legal solutions. It is a message being sent to the electorate, that here and now is the last chance to take action, because some elusive enemy is close to achieving his goals. Extrajudicial actions are often supported by narratives based on differentiation, stigmatisation and feeling of concern about the nation, youth or future.

Socio-Political Contexts and Discursive Moral Crisis Creation

The current “debate” on the drug problem in Southeast Asia draws from the 1970s. At the beginning of 1972, President Ferdinand Marcos indicated that drugs were an existential threat to the Filipino nation. People struggling with the drug problem were aligned with communist insurgents and pornography “because they pose a threat to the fabric of morality necessary for the preservation of public order” (Lasco, 2020). While public concern about drugs had existed before, the discursive demonisation allowed a “moral panic” to fester. The culmination of such a political strategy was the identification of a scapegoat: a stranger, the Other, who evokes unfavourable emotions not only because of his connection to the drug problem, but also because of his origin. Such a person was Lim Seng, a Chinese-origin drug baron executed on January 15, 1973. Underpinning the execution, McCoy (2017) writes, was Marcos’ “simultaneous appeal to the moral crisis over drug abuse and his use of Manila Chinese as a unifying populist enemy” (Lasco, 2020).

In the case of Thailand, patterns for Thaksin Shinawatra’s actions could be observed as early as the 1950s. The anti-rebellion campaign introduced at that time against mountain tribes in the north of the country was characterised by a narrative depicting these tribes as a threat to national security due to their involvement in the opium trade and (allegedly) support for communist groups (Morton & Baird, 2019, p. 12). The concern about incoming drugs from Myanmar resonated with a strong sense of belonging, of Thainess. Incoming narcotics were rhetorically associated with non-Thai incomers, foreignness, and danger. Drugs were thus the domain of poor, non-Thai foreigners and corrupt politicians (Lasco, 2020; Tun, 2001; Sunpowan & Niyomsilpa, 2012). Similarly, at the beginning of the 21st century, government rhetoric blamed southern Muslim rebel groups for the drug problem. However, these allegations did not coincide with reality. On the contrary, in social perception, numerous outposts and checkpoints prevent the effective distribution of drugs by rebels (BBC, 2017).

In the case of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte’s victory in the 2016 presidential election came as a surprise. For more than two decades, this politician held the position of mayor of Davao in the southern Philippines. This undoubted success is due to Duterte’s uncompromising methods of physically eliminating criminals, drug dealers, and drug users. Having received the nickname “Duterte Harry” (Parameswaran, 2016; Miller, 2018) (referring to the Dirty Harry movies), he entered the national political arena as a ruthless enemy of crime and drug addiction. As Kusaka (2017a; 2017b) notes, Filipino politics is heavily based on “good we” versus an “evil they” antagonism, which perfectly manifests in Duterte’s speeches.

It has proved to be Duterte’s advantage in the face of social disappointment with democracy, its accompanying extended and ineffective legislative processes and a high level of corruption. Direct, often vulgar, statements reinforced the image of a political outsider representing social rage. In one of his speeches, he said: “If I get to the presidential palace, I will do exactly what I did as mayor (...) All of you who are dealing with drugs, motherfuck-

ers, I'm really going to kill you. I have no patience, I have no compromise, either you kill me or I kill you". The explicit threat directed at a specific (as indicated by practice, the poorest) social segment aroused the hopes of the Filipino middle class (Jenkins, 2016).

However, the case of the Philippine strategy in the drug war is interesting because a certain selectivity can be seen in the political discourse. It is not about drugs in general, but their specific type. Duterte acted primarily against *shabu*, meaning crystallised methamphetamine: "cocaine and heroin are not as destructive as *shabu*, because they are produced from poppy derivatives, they are planted like marijuana. Therefore, they are not as destructive to the mind as methamphetamine, which is simply (...) a deadly mixture of chemicals" (Macas, 2016). Duterte considers *shabu* to be a destructive substance, pushing users into acts of extreme violence: "under the influence of the drug, they seem to be possessed by a force over which they have no control. Unable to restrain their desire, they will stop at nothing to satisfy their desire. They have no qualms about raping children and killing innocent people. For this reason, they cannot be regarded as people, let alone demand any rights for them". Duterte pointed to the lack of alternatives for *shabu* users. He compared them to zombies that can't be helped by rehab. He has also created an economic stigma by linking this drug to low-income communities: "Ask any policeman or expert, they will tell you that the market for *shabu* consists of poor people. *Shabu* cannot be bought in exclusive districts (...) What you can buy there is cocaine or heroin or marijuana, which does not quickly destroy the brain (...) Look at celebrities, from here or abroad, who were using cocaine – they could still function. But with *shabu*, you're doomed. Now the market for *shabu* is the poor. (...) That is why more poor people died than rich people" (Lasco & Yu, 2021, p. 3). The dehumanisation of a selected group is expressed here extremely directly: *shabu* users are considered inhumane, and their presence in social life poses an existential threat to the Filipino people. Duterte implies that the only solution to this problem is physical extermination (Lasco & Yu, 2021, p. 2).

Both leaders discursively or realistically implemented their strategies in the face of a justified social problem. Both, aware of their widespread support for radical actions aimed at pathology, decided to implement a drug policy fitting the framework of state vigilantism that – as we know it now – did not help combat the drug distribution/addiction problem.

Indonesia is also characterised by a draconian drug law with the death penalty for smuggling and distributing drugs. Indonesia's radical anti-drug activities also reach back to practices established during General Suharto's New Order. Between 1983 and 1985, armed forces and paramilitary organisations covertly identified and extrajudicially executed people associated with criminal activities. The extrajudicial killings began in Yogyakarta and gradually spread to other regions of Indonesia. The bodies of the victims, most often the so-called *premans* (as well as people with tattoos, which somehow indicated their criminal past), were exposed to public view, just as confiscated drugs were publicly destroyed. The physical and arbitrary removal of individuals associated with crime allowed for creating an impression of social order. The operation created a sense of fear in Indonesian society as no

one could be sure if was on a potential blacklist. Since the list remained unpublished and kept secret, citizens had to ask themselves if they were nominated as “criminals” and thus included on the list (Barker, 1998, p. 18; Van der Kroef, 1985, p. 748).

Even though it seems that the drug problem in this country is characterised by much lower visibility (this may be due to the principles of Islam), President Joko Widodo stated on July 21, 2017 that Indonesia is in a state of emergency due to the widespread use of drugs. At that time, he instructed law enforcement officers to shoot every person suspected of possessing drugs in a situation where the person expresses even the slightest resistance (Natalegawa, 2018, p. 11).

Joko Widodo, as well as Marcos, Shinawatra, and Duterte refer to the fate of the nation, as Subandi quotes the president of Indonesia: “This mistake is difficult to forgive because they are generally big bookies who for their personal and group gains have damaged the future of the nation’s next generation. I received a report that at least 4.5 million Indonesians have become drug users. Of that number, 1.2 million cannot be rehabilitated because it is very severe, and between 30–40 people die every day because of drugs. The rejection of clemency requests is significant to become a shock therapy for dealers, dealers, and users” (Subandi et al., 2022, p. 293).

From Discourse to Action

Throughout the war on drugs, Thaksin Shinawatra and other government representatives gave the green light to violence against suspected drug traffickers on numerous occasions. He explained, “In this war, drug dealers must die (...) But we don’t kill them. It’s about bad people killing bad people.” Thaksin made his intentions even clearer in August 2003 when he said that the Thai security forces will shoot to kill if they come across Burmese drug traffickers. Whereas, the regional police chief, Pichai Sunthornsajjabu, commented on numerous cases of extrajudicial killings in the following manner: “a normal person lives eighty years, but a bad person should not live that long” (Human Rights Watch, 2004).

Even though the initial actions of the state apparatus of coercion and violence were undertaken *ad hoc*, it is possible to notice long-term strategies from a broader time perspective. As a result of an investigation, Reuters’ journalists found evidence of financial rewards for drug killings in the Philippines (Mogato & Baldwin, 2017). Also, during one of the thanksgiving parties in Davao, Duterte said he would pay \$2.999 million for a drug dealer captured alive, and \$3 million for a dead one (Mangahas & Ilagan, 2016). It was a clear suggestion that the government was not interested in whether the suspect would be captured alive or dead. Carrying out any lawsuits was not being considered.

In Thailand, similar solutions could be seen. The financial rewards for apprehending drug suspects included, for example, the right to part of the confiscated property, including in the event of the suspect’s death. Thaksin Shinawatra was keen to expose such incentives to the public agencies involved in his campaign, presenting cash prizes during public ceremonies.

Prizes of THB 50,000 and THB 100,000 were also offered to those injured in the campaign and to the children of those killed (Raffle, 2021, p. 5).

This way, cooperation between the government, representatives of local authorities, and the police was developed. It was also manifested by preparing “blacklists”, which mostly included the names of people insignificant in the grey zone. These lists mostly lacked the names of great drug barons. However, from a political point of view, every death in the statistics brought the government closer to declaring victory in the war. However, the scale of accidental casualties was significant: according to an investigation launched in 2006 after the military coup that took over Thaksin, it was shown that out of 2,500 killed, as many as 1,400 people had nothing to do with the drug business. Likewise, the main transport routes remained intact (Human Rights Watch, 2004).

Thaksin Shinawatra’s war on drugs in the first months of 2003 (February–April) resulted in the death of 2873 people – entire families, children, and the elderly. A journalistic investigation by Sunday Times revealed that the police and local authorities possessed mentioned before “blacklists” containing the names of drug suspects. The obtained government instructions for local authorities indicated three possible ways of removing a name from the list: arrest, extrajudicial execution, or loss of life because of other reasons (Choonhavan, 2013).

In the Philippines in 2020, the number of killings in the war on drugs increased by 50%. It means that, in the face of a lockdown, four years after Duterte’s victory, approximately 8,000 drug suspects were killed during police operations, while NGOs estimate that over 12,000 people were executed by unofficially functioning death squads. Moreover, teams observing the humanitarian situation in the Philippines indicated that more than 160 political activists, labelled as pro-communist activists, lost their lives during these four years (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The scale of social fear in the Philippines was so high that drug users personally reported themselves to the police, contributing to the overcrowding of local prisons (Sombatpoonsiri & Arugay, 2016). This unprecedented strategy has resulted in President Duterte’s “war on drugs” exceeding the number of collective executions carried out during President Marcos’ 14-year dictatorship in less than two years (Bonner, 2018).

In the case of Joko Widodo’s strategy, his methods seem to be less intensive and appeal more to existing law. Widodo argued that overcoming the drug crisis requires a strong and decisive response from the government, including the highest level of punishment for convicted drug traffickers (Marwati, 2014; Marszałek-Kawa, 2015; 2017). In order to justify the repressive actions of the justice system, Widodo referred to two main claims: the alleged deterrent effect and the strong public support for the death penalty for drug offenders. These claims intertwined with populist discourses promoting the death penalty as Indonesia’s only option in combating the perceived threat that drugs pose to national security (Lasco, 2020). The claim that the majority of Indonesian citizens were in favour of the death penalty in drug cases served two functions for the Widodo administration: it confirmed Indonesia’s

sovereign right to execute the death penalty in the face of an external existential threat, while at the same time protecting the government from international criticism (Kramer & Stoicescu, 2021, p. 2).

At that time, it constituted a certain confirmation of Widodo's political strategy. Since he took office in 2014, 18 people convicted of drug trafficking have been executed within three years. Although Widodo was perceived as a hope for the development of Indonesian democracy at the beginning of his term, he was even more embedded in the radical attitude than his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). In the years of SBY's ruling, 2003–2013, of the 21 conducted executions, only 3 were related to drug trafficking. Equally importantly, Yudhoyono's second term (2008–2013) was marked by an unofficial moratorium on implementing the death penalty (Natalegawa, 2018, p. 11).

However, executions ordered under the letter of the law constitute only a fragment of the anti-drug strategy. It is pointed out that 79 people lost their lives in 2017 due to extrajudicial executions in Indonesia. It was a rapid increase compared to 2016 (14 deaths) and 2015 (10 deaths). These statistics were characteristically commented on by the head of the National Drug Agency (BNN), Budo Waseso, who, reporting on the great number of arrests (approx. 58 thousand), joked: "we hoped that they would resist so that we could shoot them" (Natalegawa, 2018, p. 12). It is difficult not to associate such a drastic growth and humorous attitude of a public official with the mentioned statement of President Joko Widodo.

Summary

The widespread drug usage in Southeast Asia seems to be a permanent phenomenon, despite government attempts to suppress it. Observations of practices implemented in Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia suggest that state vigilantism, treated as a kind of political strategy, brings significant political capital and creates an impression of real and effective actions. However, the cases of Thailand and the Philippines indicate that the "war on drugs" strategy known since the 1970s is ineffective. Using war rhetoric in terms of a social problem has an emotional and mobilising dimension, but does not significantly contribute to overcoming the challenge at its sources in a systematic manner supported by research.

A separate question should be asked about the path that Indonesia will take. Knowing the historical background, some borrowings used by Joko Widodo are noticeable, but the case of this country does not fully fit the model of state vigilantism yet (as it was during the New Order era with its Petrus, for instance). Even though it certainly bears its hallmarks. The second and last term of President Widodo would allow for a conclusion that without the need to continue the electoral struggle, his actions would be eased. However, this statement may remain premature due to the administration's movements towards extending the presidency of Joko Widodo (Strangio, 2022).

First, Joko Widodo must have been aware of the political success of Ferdinand Marcos, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and President Rodrigo Duterte. They not only faced

relatively low resistance against hard (and often beyond legal framework) politics, but also efficiently suppressed or redirected possible criticism from society and political opponents.

Secondly, the dramatic events in Jakarta in 2017, which led to the failure of its governor and a close associate of Widodo, Ahok, indicated a significant turn in Indonesian politics (Bielawski, 2018). Religious radicals and populists (e.g., Prabowo Subianto) proved the effectiveness of strong and emotional rhetoric by winning the gubernatorial election in Jakarta by Anies Baswedan. In such a situation, in order to have chances of winning the second term, Joko Widodo was forced to make his policy if not stricter (Darurat Narkoba was announced at the end of 2014 and the government was simply carrying on with policy announcements that were made several years earlier), then at least more visible. Like the Thai and Philippine electorate, the Indonesian electorate values strong and assertive candidates above all else (Natalegawa, 2018, p. 13; Bielawski, 2019; Westcott, 2017). As a consequence, Joko Widodo constantly denied the right of pardon to foreigners sentenced to death, referring to the issue of Indonesian sovereignty.

In 2019, 61% of those awaiting the death penalty in Indonesia were convicted because of drug-related offences. In 2015, the Indonesian government resumed performing executions after the four-year moratorium. Since then, President Widodo has allowed the execution of 19 drug criminals in 2015 and 2016 and rejected a request for pardon for 64 others, making Indonesia one of the countries in Asia that most often carry out executions (Rowe, 2019).

This policy results from the regularity of the electoral cycles: despite widespread criticism from civil society and academia, there is a high level of support for the death penalty in Indonesia (Bayuni, 2015). Polls conducted in 2015 indicated that as many as 87% of Indonesians are in favour of a radical anti-drug policy, and another survey from the same year indicated that 60.5% of respondents considered the death penalty to be necessary because drugs destroy the young generation, and the highest level of punishment serves a deterrent function (Santoso, 2016). At the same time, the Indonesian Government undertakes numerous actions to protect its own citizens against the death penalty abroad. This dualism violates Indonesia's diplomatic capabilities, especially since the country has consistently denied the right of pardon to convicted foreigners (McRae, 2017).

As Kenny (2019) notes: "Populists are both cause and effect: they drive popular concern over social issues like drug crime and addiction, but they also respond to and exploit them". Thaksin Shinawatra and Rodrigo Duterte took these concerns at least one level higher, shaping populist discourse into a dangerous spectacle based on vulgar rhetoric and extrajudicial killings sponsored – unofficially – by the state. The President of Indonesia's noticeable restraint in this aspect seems to result from the initial "patch" of a staunch democrat. In Indonesian political reality, though, to win high-level elections, it is necessary to appeal to democracy backers and more radical voters.

Eventually, the answer to the question about individual leaders' motivations to pursue strategies involving vigilantism appears to be two-fold.

First, a certain political practice has already proven its effectiveness in the past: a dehumanising discourse and use of force and extrajudicial executions translate into considerable political capital. The elimination of the designated “enemy” (whether a criminal or a drug addict) gives at least the impression of an effective and quick achievement of social order, which is appreciated by the electorates in the countries in question.

Second, vigilantism as a type of political strategy is potentially burdened with a lower cost than other drug-related strategies, such as decriminalisation and harm reduction. The use of these two strategies would mean for populists, above all, the loss of an important “enemy” that can be constantly fought (which translates into electorate mobilisation or maintaining the image of a strong and decisive leader). Populists, relying on the emotional reactions of their spectators, would be forced to look for a new “enemy”. Measures included in the harm reduction strategy are primarily long-term projects, they are prevention requiring consistency and patience. Of course, this does not mean that such prevention programs do not exist in the countries in question – they are often implemented by non-governmental organisations, but in the strategies of gaining political capital they are simply on the discursive margin, as they do not have the emotional potential that populists need.

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