Populist Violence and Social Resistance: The Catholic Church and the Philippine Drug War

Ms. AJPS-42924 (v. March 18, 2021)

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Abstract

Populists often demonize outgroups while undermining institutions that protect citizens against the abuse of state power. Under these conditions, how can vulnerable communities protect themselves? We argue that actors coupling a normative commitment to human rights with the local organizational capacity to intervene can systematically reduce victimization. Focusing on the Philippine Catholic Church in the country's ongoing "Drug War," we identify five potential mechanisms producing protection. Directly, these actors can raise attention, offer sanctuary, or disrupt enforcement, while indirectly they can shrink vulnerable populations and build local solidarity. We evaluate this argument with a mixed-method research design. A new dataset of over 2,000 Drug War killings throughout Metro Manila shows that neighborhoods with a Catholic parish experience approximately 30% fewer killings than those without. Original interviews with clergy and laity in these parishes supports both direct and indirect mechanisms, with strongest evidence for attention raising and building community solidarity.

9,980 words.

Acknowledgements

Authors listed alphabetically. Bryce Kleinstuber provided helpful research assistance, and we appreciate comments and suggestions from Mike Denly, Nadia Doytch, Chris Hale, Sabrina Karim, Neil Ketchley, Sasha Klyachkina, Luis Felipe Mantilla, Dan McCormack, Sarah Parkinson, Nico Ravanilla, Amy Erica Smith, Michael Weintraub, and Kurt Weyland, as well as participants at the 2019 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association as well as the Comparative Politics Workshop at the University of Texas at Austin. The victims dataset reflects extensive research effort from a variety of individuals, including Jenna Mae Atun, Radxeanel Cosid, Jayvy Gamboa, and Renner Paul Refani from the Ateneo de Manila University Drug Archive Project. Interviews took place with essential collaboration of colleagues at the Institute for Philippine Culture and an unnamed diocese in the National Capital Region. We appreciate financial support from the Program on Governance and Local Development at the University of Gothenburg. We thank the Ang Pangako initiative for generously sharing research. We also acknowledge the Philippines Statistical Authority for providing the raw census data and Eric Alvia of the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections for furnishing the electoral results.

Introduction

Shortly after taking office in 2016, populist president Rodrigo Duterte told an audience of police officers that, under his term, drug users would be "no longer viable as human beings."[1] Since then, tens of thousands of Filipinos have been killed in both officially-acknowledged police operations as well as killings by unidentified vigilantes (Human Rights Watch 2019, Amnesty International 2017).[2] Yet even in the National Capital Region (NCR), the part of the country most impacted by these killings, there is considerable neighborhood-by-neighborhood variation in civilian victimization (Mendoza, Yusingco and Gamboa 2018).

Theories of political violence drawn from civil war, insurgency, or genocide only partially explain civilian exposure to more "ordinary" forms of state coercion (Balcells and Stanton 2021, Kaplan 2017, Kalyvas 2006, Braun 2016). Research into criminal violence offers important insights, yet provides less guidance when perpetrators are backed by the force of law and encouraged by popular political incumbents (Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco and Melo 2020, Durán-Martínez 2015). Indeed, the ongoing "Drug War" is intertwined with populist politics, both in Duterte's framing of drug users as symbolic enemies of the body politic, and in how his personalism has undermined formal institutions, including those designed to protect citizens from state predation (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, Weyland 2017).

[1] `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjmeFYckW08`.

[2] Philippine National Police (PNP) Command Memorandum Circular 16-2016 established "Project Double Barrel," which included *Oplan Tokhang,* a portmanteau of the Visayan terms *toktok* ("plead") and *hangyo* ("knock"). The strategy, as set out on paper, involved knocking at doors of suspected drug users, who were then gathered and assisted to voluntarily surrender to local police officials. However, it was hounded by implementation challenges (Gacayan 2020) and prone to abuse by some portion of officers. Official statistics from the PNP are available at: `http://pdea.gov.ph/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&layout=edit&id=279`.

When populists turn the state's coercive apparatus against vulnerable populations, what provides community protection? We argue that institutions that couple a normative commitment to defending human rights with an organizational capacity to intervene can protect local communities in spite of populism's exclusion and personalism. In the Philippines, these two features combine most obviously in the Roman Catholic Church. The church possesses a network of grassroots-to-elites organizational infrastructure and moral commitment to the defense of human rights, a pattern of beliefs and organization tied to liberation theology (Nadeau 2002, Moreno 2008, Smith 1991, Levine 1988). These characteristics combine to constrain populist violence through distinct, observable mechanisms operating directly on agents of violence and by indirectly altering the nature of local communities.

We evaluate the argument with a multi-method research design resting on original quantitative and qualitative data from the Philippines (Tusalem 2019, Ravanilla, Sexton and Haim Forthcoming). Matching the locations of Catholic infrastructure against newly-compiled data on 2,198 drug killings in nearly 1700 neighborhoods throughout the National Capital Region shows that the presence of a parish correlates with approximately 30% fewer predicted killings. Original interviews with clergy and lay leaders in a sample of these parishes allows us to trace the particular mechanisms at work.

Our findings regarding locally-rooted religious institutions and community protection may apply to other cases where populists have turned state power against symbolic enemies. They also furnish broader theoretical implications for understanding protection from state violence as well as how religion and populism interact (Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016). Our emphasis on religious influence even amidst institutional fragility particularly highlights the operations of localized, less formal patterns of religious access to state power (Grzymała-Busse 2015).

The paper is structured in five sections. After discussing characteristics of populist violence, we specify the conditions under which and mechanisms through which local institutions can protect vulnerable communities. After introducing the Philippines case, we then

describe a new dataset of civilian deaths in the Drug War, encompassing killings in official police operations as well as unattributed vigilante-style killings. Cross-sectional analysis shows a systematic correlation between Catholic parishes and fewer Drug War killings. A final substantive section uses original qualitative interview-based evidence to trace how both direct and indirect religious mechanisms influence the distribution of violence.

Populism and State Violence

While local dynamics of political conflict are central to comparative politics, violence associated with populist regimes presents new opportunities for theory development and testing. Patterns of victimization in insurgencies, civil war, and criminal violence are often linked to lower state capacity (Englehart 2009, Durán-Martínez 2015). Yet in other cases it is not state weakness that drives violence, but rather conscious decisions by state elites to train the state's coercive apparatus against, or indirectly encourage the targeting of, civilian populations (Campbell 2000).

When populists capture the state the risk of this violence is heightened. Populists often mobilize support by identifying threats to the "pure people" of the nation (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). At the same time, populists' personalist, crisis-driven political strategy undermines formal institutions (Weyland 2017), including civil rights and accountability mechanisms, designed to protect citizens from state predation. These two characteristics can set the conditions under which the state's coercive arms mobilize against perceived "enemies."

While ethnic or religious identity often denotes populist out-groups, in other cases purported "criminal" behaviors become the salient dimension. For example, Pratt (2007) and others identify "penal populism," a style of politics emphasizing tough, law-and-order policies designed to bolster political support rather than ameliorate crime (Curato 2016, Johnson and Fernquest 2018). Latin Americanists have focused on *mano dura* ("iron fist") politicians promising the suppression of criminality over legal protections or international human rights

obligations (Fuentes 2005, Krause 2014). Commenting on the recent rise of populism in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Pepinsky calls a similar dynamic "voting against disorder" (2017).

Identifying "enemies of the people" while degrading institutional protections distinguishes populist forms of state violence. However, while populists can use their control over instruments of coercion to transform rhetorical attacks into violence, certain locales still manage some degree of protection. In the following section, we lay out a "meso-level" theory for why this might be so (Finkel and Straus 2012).

Constraining Populist Violence

We expect protection where local actors can contest the creation of symbolic enemies and the weakening of institutional protections. First, out-group construction is a deliberate strategy of exclusion, open to challenge from actors with authority and normative *commitment*. Second, the degradation of formal procedures increases bureaucrats' discretionary power, opening opportunities for organizations with grassroots *capacity* to intervene in the localized deployment of state coercion. While not necessarily tied to religion, we argue that organized religious movements often possess the raw material, that, if mobilized, can blunt populist violence.

Religion's Constraint on Populist Violence

While religion's effect on violence will be contingent (Philpott 2007), it does offer considerable organizational resources that can be deployed both within and without formal political institutions (McAdam 1982). It also boasts a reservoir of language, symbols, and repertoires that promote commitment to action, whether via a "transformation of political consciousness" (Mainwaring 1987, 8) or an enhanced "sense of internal efficacy" (McClendon and Riedl 2015, 1045). As Trejo (2009, 323) summarizes, "Religion facilitates collective action

because it can create ideological frames, collective identities, and mobilizing structures on which social movements thrive." The impact of these factors may well be maximized in weak and unstable institutional environments, when informal connections, social sanction, and moral suasion could exercise outsized influence on those state agents responsible for violence.

Prior research around Catholic communities in Latin America, in particular the influence of liberation theology, highlights how religious institutions can resist state violence. As an "insurgent" movement within the Catholic Church (Smith 1991), liberation theology's normative emphasis on the concrete plight of the poor channeled religious institutions into vulnerable communities. This activism was sustained even under conditions of considerable risk and repression (Mejía and Villalobos 2019, 209). While religious institutions did not break with authoritarian regimes everywhere, in settings from Chile (Smith 2014) to Poland (Borowik 2002) they were eventually crucial actors in not only elite politics but grassroots protection, one stage in what Carozza (2012, 16) terms "the long rapprochement between the Church and modern norms of human rights." Today, drawing on similar theological resources and organizational networks, Catholic actors in some settings criticize populist movements, whether Pope Francis contesting right wing populist parties in Europe (2016) or Brazilian bishops critiquing President Jair Bolsonaro.

The aforementioned influence of liberation theology suggests one condition under which activism occurs. Whether operationalized as "political theology" (Philpott 2007) or "doctrine" (Grzymala-Busse 2012) the idea of a higher-order moral obligation can provide powerful motivation for action, even in the face of risk (Smith 1991, Krause 2018). This would be particularly important in the context of resistance to state-supported or sanctioned violence, where consequences of visible opposition are self-evident (Longman 2009, Spenkuch and Tillmann 2018).

Normative commitment alone is insufficient to constrain populist violence. To borrow from Froehle's (1994, 146) analysis of Venezuela, "It is one thing to be religious, and another

to be organized." This applies from national elites to local activists: "Even when national elites consistently protest genocidal policies," Braun (2016, 129) writes, "the actual willingness and capacity of constituents to actively resist mass killing depends on subnational networks and norms."

This directs our attention to the role of local religious infrastructure; as Gamm tells us "no institution is so successful in coordinating neighborhood action as the Catholic parish" (2009, 58). The resultant networks, often anchored in these local institutions, can more effectively protect themselves and credibly threaten transgressors (Bohara, Mitchell and Nepal 2006). Yet the grassroots must also "scale up" (Mattiace, Ley and Trejo 2019) to interface with political processes, connect with elites, and convey credible information to outsiders (Hale 2018). This is access, a form of influence in which religious elites "share sovereignty with secular politicians," through informal control of policy formation, vetoing, and vetting (Grzymała-Busse 2015, 48). This gives religious elites a degree of influence over discretionary decision-making (Stepan 2012), explaining how relatively "powerless" religious networks influence political elites even in periods of weakened formal institutions (Rudbeck, Mukherjee and Nelson 2016).

Particularly where populists demonize outgroups and degrade institutional protections, organized religion's ability to leverage moral authority in defense of human rights, and organizational avenues to intervene even while formal institutions decay, can protect communities. To paraphrase Lowden's analysis of the Vicariate of Solidarity, a Catholic initiative to shield citizens from the depredations of Chilean military rule, only when moral opposition is institutionalized can it realize systematic protection (1995, 129). But while both normative commitment and organizational capacity are necessary, neither are fixed. Religious actors can be co-opted, cowed, make tactical decisions (or mistakes), and face contexts that activate or sap their moral authority or organizational reach (Grzymała-Busse 2015, Buckley 2016, Trejo 2009). As Wald, Silverman, and Fridy (2005, 140) write, "there is no necessary linkage between religious communities and political action. . . Religious groups must come to consider

political action as a sacred obligation, draw on various internal resources to prosecute that action, and confront a political environment that may hinder such efforts."

Mechanisms of Protection

Capacity to respond and preferences over responses to state violence jointly matter, yet provide less guidance over precisely how such protection might operate. Here we distinguish between *direct* and *indirect* channels of influnce. Direct effects intervene in the production of state violence, largely by changing the incentives facing the agents or managers of that violence. Indirect effects change the character of communities, passively increasing their resistance to violence.

Three "direct" mechanisms may be at work. First, religious institutions may *raise attention* by highlighting victims and perpetrators of violence. As centers of moral authority and sites of mobilization, local religious institutions can contest populists' exclusionary framing while raising the prospect of accountability. Examining Colombia's civil war, Kaplan argues "communities can protest and 'go public' to denounce aggression and abuses and shame armed actors...communities may engage in marches or other symbolic acts and link with external NGOs and IGOs to help magnify wrongdoings" (2017, 50). In Latin American cases, the Catholic Church liaised with media outlets, human rights lawyers, diplomats, and international Catholic institutions, using their reputation to document abuses, increase awareness, and deter security forces (Klaiber 2009).

Second, religious institutions can *offer sanctuary* for persecuted individuals through safe houses and escape networks (Braun 2016). Cavendish (1994, 187) uses the apt metaphor of "protected spaces under the Church's umbrella of safety" to describe this mechanism's operation in Brazil. Such informal protection may be particularly important in the context of populism's weakening on formal institutional checks on violence. In these cases, moral imperatives motivate clergy and laity to thwart the state despite high risks, including retaliatory violence. Costs of retribution may increase for the state, but risks to religious actors

do not disappear, a fact discussed at more length in the qualitative portion of the research design.

Third, religious actors may *disrupt enforcement*, convincing state agents to avoid deploying discretionary violence, redirecting their interest, or accepting substitute punishments. In conditions of civil war, citizen groups and community elites "engag[e] armed groups for negotiations and the gathering and dissemination of information" (Krause 2018, 78). In other cases, religious elites have served as "brokers" (Harpviken and Røislien 2008) or an "information bridge" (Cao et al. 2018) between local citizens and official actors. The unique access granted to some religious actors may be particularly able to "demystify the state's organization of power" in ways particularly useful for impoverished communities (Smith 1994, 124). The personalistic roots of this access may increase its efficacy in the context of populism's degredation of formal institutions.

Religious congregations may also "indirectly" influence populist violence by altering the nature of communities. Indirect effects include *shrinking vulnerable populations* through social welfare activism that can attenuate the production of eventual victims. For example, we may expect that congregation-based drug treatment and rehabilitation programs drive down local levels of drug activity, reducing opportunities for agents of state violence to carry out operations in the community. This is consistent with the "pastoral accompaniment" that Wilde (2015) finds important in explaining religious responses to violence in Latin America.

Finally, religious institutions could *build local solidarity* to reduce opportunities external actors use to exploit conflicts (Kalyvas 2006). This could take the form of religious mediation to prevent low-level community disagreements from escalating to involve state agents (Krischke 1991, De Juan, Pierskalla and Vüllers 2015). More diffusely, community involvement in church activities lessens "isolation, passivity, and fear" (Donoso 1991, 191) while building social capital that reduces or diffuses petty disputes. Even "conventionally religious" activities without political content may promote this effect by strengthening social capital and a sense of empowerment (Mainwaring 1987, 6).

These distinct mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, and we do not set out in the research design that follows to falsify one in favor of the other. However, they point to distinct causal pathways and discrete observable implications, consistent with the normative exclusion and anti-institutional structure of rule that characterized populist violence.

Religion, Drugs, and Populist Violence in the Philippines

While religious authority in the Philippines has pluralized (Cornelio 2016), the Roman Catholic Church represents the likeliest intersection of capacity and commitment discussed above. Grzymala-Busse and Slater (2018) argue that the Philippines is a paradigmatic case of capacity for institutional access for the Catholic Church, with clergy able to shape incentives facing political elites even without explicit partisan campaigning. The Church has a longer-term history of social organizing that extends capacity from national to local elites enmeshed in the very neighborhoods at risk of Drug War violence (Moreno 2008). A variety of grassroots Catholic networks were active in poor communities stretching back to the authoritarian Marcos regime (Youngblood 1990, Shirley 2004). At the same time, the Philippine church's commitment to "becoming a church of the poor" (Dionisio 2011) has carried this work into the post-authoritarian period through a focus on "everyday injustice" (Cornelio 2014, 485).

Rodrigo Duterte's pledge to make violent anti-narcotic policy a centerpiece of his administration has challenged these commitments (Lamchek 2017). Before his election, Duterte boasted of his personal involvement with drug-related killings as mayor of Davao City. Upon election, Duterte continued to dehumanize drug users, telling a crowd in Manila "If you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself as getting their parents to do it would be too painful."[3]

[3] "Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte Urges People to Kill Drug Addicts," *The Guardian*, June 30, 2016.

Drug-related killings spread rapidly as Duterte empowered the Philippines National Police, with its 160,000 members and extensive policing infrastructure in local neighborhoods (barangays), to lead the Drug War. As Coronel notes, "Station commanders no longer needed the district chief's nod to go after drug offenders... [they] are required to conduct drug operations and go after those on the watch list" (2017, 172). At the same time, Duterte brushed away calls for accountability, telling the police "as long as it is done in the performance of the duty by the police and soldiers, *akin 'yan* (that is my responsibility), that is my official and personal guarantee."[4] Duterte's election also coincided with a surge in killings of drug suspects by unknown vigilantes. While the precise relationship remains unclear, investigative reports and documentation from human rights groups allege cooperation between law enforcement and vigilantes.[5]

Catholic elites criticized Duterte's violent approach to addressing illegal drugs. Referring to Duterte's record as mayor, Archbishop Socrates Villegas, then-President of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), publicly counseled voters prior to the election to avoid choosing a candidate whose judgements were "morally reprehensible."[6] In February 2017 the Church circulated a pastoral letter to be read during Sunday masses criticizing the Drug War for establishing a "reign of terror," particularly in poor communities.[7]

[4]Nestor Corrales, "Duterte, Palace Defend Shoot To Kill Order," *Philippines Inquirer*, August 5, 2016.

[5]Patricia Evangelista, Carlo Gabuco, and Alex Evangelista, "'Some People Need Killing:' Murder in Manila," *Rappler*, October 4, 2018. Manuel Mogato and Clare Baldwin, "Special Report: Police Describe Kill Rewards, Staged Crime Scenes in Duterte's Drug War," *Reuters*, April 18, 2017.

[6]Socrates Villegas,"Prophets of Truth, Servants of Unity," *CBCP News*, May 1, 2016.

[7]"Duterte's War on Drugs a 'Reign of Terror,' Church Says," *al-Jazeera*, February 5, 2017.

And one outspoken Bishop, Pablo Virgilio David, offered masses for those killed, during which he called vigilantes "Judases" and "Termites" while telling them "God knows who you are."[8]

As local and national Catholic elites intensified their criticism, they also came under attack. In 2018 Duterte complained, "These bishops, kill them...all they do is criticize."[9] A few months later he directly threatened the aforementioned Bishop David, telling him, "David! I'm having my suspicions because you keep going around at night. I have suspicions, son of a bitch, that you're into drugs." As at least four priests have been killed, other Catholic elites have asked Duterte to cease threatening clergy.[10]

Amidst such risk, the Philippine Catholic Church's moral commitment and local organizational capacity motivate our expectation that its presence may constrain state-driven populist violence. We do not claim that the relationship is deterministic; state agents well-provisioned for and committed to violence will be nigh undeterrable. Nevertheless, we expect Catholic religious institutions to demonstrate a localized pacific effect through some combination of the aforementioned mechanisms.

Research Design

We adopt a mixed-method research design to evaluate our theory. We particularly focus on the barangay— effectively the neighborhood— to identify correlates of state violence and to study the organizational responses of the Catholic Church. This is a reasonable

[8]Paterno R. Esmaquel II, "Bishop Slams Vigilantes as 'Termites,' 'new Judases," *Rappler*, July 2, 2017.

[9]"Kill Bishops, all they do is criticize, says Duterte," *Rappler.com*, December 6, 2018.

[10]Paterno R. Esmaquel II, "Duterte Said Kill the Bishops- And His Word became Flesh," *Rappler*, February 28, 2019.

unit of analysis because, as discussed above, local and national government ordinances give barangay officials significant discretion in prosecution of the Drug War, from implementing social programs, to compiling and vetting watch lists, to liaising with the police (Mendoza, Yusingco and Gamboa 2018).[11] As Amnesty International described, the barangay is "the linchpin of the administration's anti-drug operations" (2017, 19).

Our research design is "nested" (Lieberman 2005) in that while the first stage uses cross-sectional analysis to identify ecological correlates of drug killings, interviews from Catholic parishes trace the mechanisms linking Catholic parishes to lessened state violence. This mixed-method design helps provide both a general correlation, as well as "empirically substantiated assertions about both the causal effects of independent variables and causal mechanisms that lead to outcomes" (George and Bennett 2005, 208).

We confine data collection to cases within the NCR for four reasons. First, the NCR is substantively large, containing over 13 million residents (over 10% of the total population of the Philippines) living in over 1,700 barangays. Second, even in the NCR a barangay-level analysis reveals considerable variation in drug killings, as well as in religious institutions and other covariates. Third, limiting the analysis to the NCR helps maximize the number of drug killings that we capture. Currently, no official, up-to-date list of victims exists, meaning that any documentary record of the campaign must be tracked and compiled by triangulating across multiple sources. Given that major media outlets, as well as the myriad citizen journalists at work capturing the killings, are densest in the urban NCR, we have confidence that missingness is minimized. Finally, confining attention to the NCR helps minimize variation in state capacity. While state control across the Philippine archipelago is uneven, few areas within the NCR are out-of-reach to the state's coercive apparatus.

Qualitative data collection included a series of approximately 30 individual interviews

[11] Andrew Marshall and John Chalmers, "In Duterte's Drug War, Local Power Brokers Draw Up the Hit Lists," *Reuters*, October 7, 2016.

between trained enumerators and clergy and lay leadership from a set of effectively randomly selected Catholic parishes across the NCR.[12] In these interviews, subjects answered a series of questions designed to assess the direct and indirect mechanisms through which parishes might impact Drug War violence. The interviews contained both closed- and open-ended items, a design intended to permit some comparability across parishes while allowing unique attributes of parish experiences to refine our theoretical approach. We supplement these interviews where appropriate with additional detail drawn from reporting and advocacy organizations. Throughout, our aim is not to comprehensively adjudicate among or falsify mechanisms, but rather to trace evidence of their operation that remains unobservable in the cross-sectional analysis.

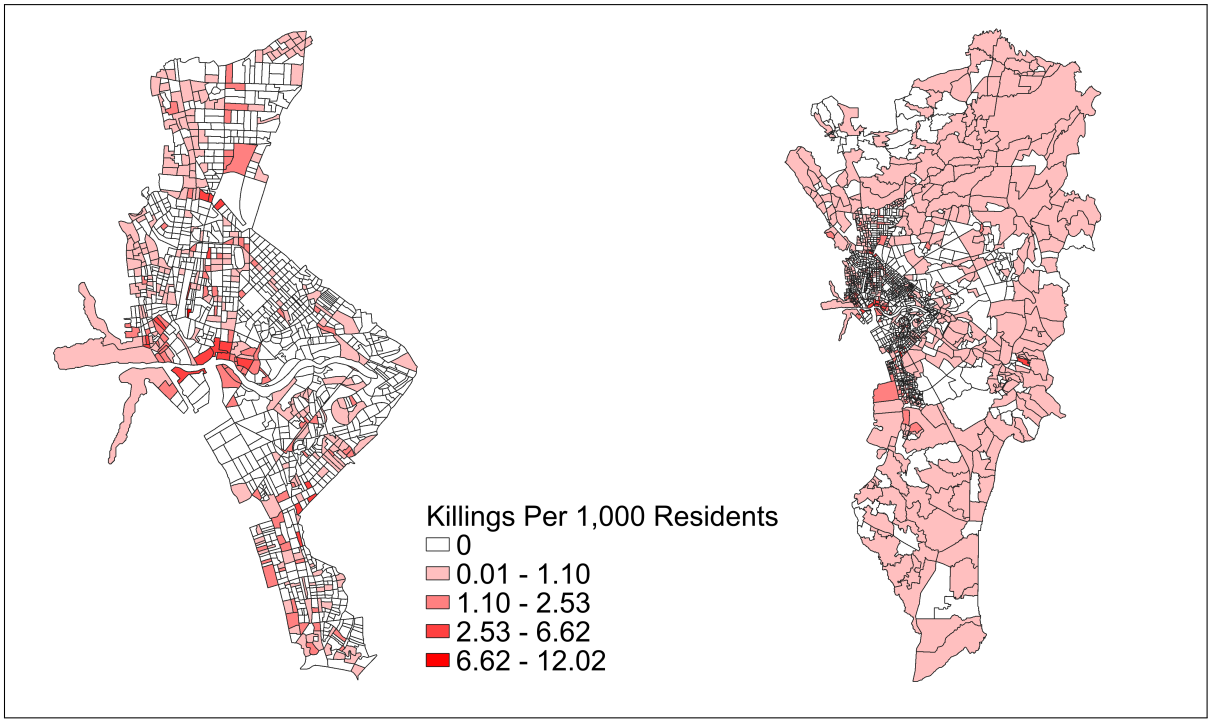
Cross-Sectional Analysis

Dependent Variable: Drug Killings Per Barangay

The dependent variable comes from a list of 2,198 victims of drug-related killings— including official police operations and vigilante-style killings by unknown assailants — occurring in the NCR from May 26, 2016 to December 28, 2018. This dataset was compiled and verified by a team of independent researchers affiliated to a major Filipino university via open source records and subsequent internal research. In terms of coverage and assignability to barangay, this dataset considerably improves widely available alternatives (see Appendix). Figure 1 shows the approximate extent of Drug War violence across the NCR.

[12]The particular names of each parish and numbers of parish sites remain undisclosed to minimize risks to human subjects. See appendix for further discussion on selection.

Figure 1: Killings Per 1,000 Residents, National Capital Region



Independent Variables

Independent variables come from official 2015 census data, electoral returns from 2016, and comprehensive listings of religious and police infrastructure across the NCR.[13]

- Catholic Parish: We assign to barangay all 494 Roman Catholic parishes across the NCR, drawn from the websites of the Archdiocese of Manila and dioceses of Antipolo, Cubao, Malolos, Novaliches, Parañaque, and Pasig. We then construct a dummy variable for whether or not a Catholic parish exists in a particular barangay.

- Percent Catholic: We construct for each barangay a share of Catholics from census data.

- Percent High School Graduate: We expect simple economic deprivation to correlate

[13]See appendix for the descriptive statistics, correlation matrix and further details on quantitative data collection.

with Drug War violence (Amnesty International 2017). We proxy this through the percentage of barangay residents who hold a high school diploma.

- At-Risk Population: Official barangay-level data on drug usage and crime rates is not available.[14] We roughly proxy for local exposure to petty criminality and drug use by assembling from census data the percentage of a barangay population composed of unmarried men aged 15-24, a population assumed to be most at-risk for petty criminality.

- Police Presence: We assign to barangay the district offices, police stations, sub-stations, and police community precincts listed in an official directory of 343 police installations in Metro Manila. We then construct a dummy variable for whether or not a police station exists in the barangay.[15]

- Partisanship: The conduct of the Drug War is indelibly written into the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte (Tusalem 2019, Kreuzer 2018, Lamchek 2017). We measure Rodrigo Duterte's barangay voteshare in the 2016 elections.

- Electoral Competition: Violence and electoral competition are often linked (Wilkinson 2006, Trejo and Ley 2018). In the Philippines, family "dynasties" strongly influence all levels of politics (Sidel 1999, Hicken, Aspinall and Weiss 2019). Our expectation is that strong and consolidated local dynasties will reduce Drug War violence, while weak or fractured dynasties will feature more violence (Ravanilla, Sexton and Haim Forthcoming). While we lack a systematic measure of local dynastic strength, we proxy for it by producing an "Effective Number of Candidates" measure of competition from

[14]See the listing of failed requests here: `https://www.foi.gov.ph/requests?agency=PNP&status=SUCCESSFUL`.

[15]Available at: `http://ncrpo.pnp.gov.ph/index.php/home.`. We could not find and/or confidently assign to a barangay seven of these installations.

the 2016 Senate election (Laakso and Taagepera 1979). In this election, voters selected up to 12 candidates from a list of 50 candidates for a single (nationwide) constituency, wherein the top 12 were elected. We construct this measure for each barangay, on the assumption that fewer "effective" candidates indicates the presence of stronger local dynasties, and vice-versa.

Estimation and Results

The dependent variable is a count of barangay-level killings and predictably skewed; in our dataset 1,086 of 1,696 total barangays did not register a killing.[16] We therefore fit a negative binomial regression to estimate the coefficients of our variable of interest. Our exposure term is the natural log of the number of residents in each barangay.

Some unmeasured variable common to all places with a house of worship may confound any observed relationship identified between Catholic parishes and killings. As an initial check, we conceptualized a placebo test based on whether a United Methodist Church exists in the barangay. This is a useful (although imperfect) placebo because, although its physical infrastructure is clearly catalogued in the NCR, the Methodist church does not posses the grassroots-to-elite organizational network of the Catholic Church, nor have Protestant religious figures taken a unified stance towards the Drug War (Cornelio and Medina 2019).[17] Our assumption is that this variable should perform differently than the Catholic parish variable; if it behaves similarly, this could indicate that an unmeasured characteristic of places likely to host religious institutions, rather than any inherent characteristic of Catholic parishes, could be at work.

[16]Due to an inability to reliably match across at least one of the census, elections, and drug killings datasets, we drop 9 barangays from the analysis (0.5 percent).

[17]See Appendix for a further discussion of possible alternative denominations, particularly the *Iglesia Ni Cristo*, and associated tests.

Table 1: Correlates of Drug War Killings

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Catholic Parish	0.699***	0.698***	0.672***	0.697**
	(0.0728)	(0.0749)	(0.0752)	(0.0868)
Pct. Catholic		0.985*	0.991	0.991
		(0.00718)	(0.00839)	(0.00826)
Pct. HS Grad		0.953***	0.950***	0.950***
		(0.00678)	(0.00817)	(0.00743)
Pct. Young Single Men		1.066**	1.067**	1.066**
		(0.0211)	(0.0250)	(0.0242)
Duterte Voteshare			0.997	0.997
			(0.0197)	(0.0185)
Political Competition			1.125	1.128
			(0.109)	(0.108)
Police Station				0.926
				(0.111)
Pct. NCCP				0.819**
				(0.0582)
Methodist Church				1.290
				(0.183)
Observations	1696	1696	1696	1696
AIC	4044.4	3969.4	3965.1	3964.2

Cluster robust SE in parenthesis, $*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001$

Table 1 presents models estimating the number of drug killings in each barangay. In each, coefficients are exponentiated as incidence rate ratios. Cluster robust standard errors are applied at the municipality (Cruz, LaBonne and Querubín 2020). Model one includes only the parish dummy and the exposure term. Model two adjusts for demographic factors. Model three includes factors related to political competition. Model four includes police infrastructure as well as the variables related to the placebo test, including Methodist congregations and the percentage of barangay residents identifying as members of the National Council of Churches of the Philippines, a Protestant umbrella organization tracked in the census that includes the country's Methodists.

Across all models, the variable charting whether or not a given barangay has a Catholic

parish correlates with fewer killings.[18] In the full model (four), the incidence rate ratio of 0.697 is interpretable as the expected count of killings in barangay with a Catholic parish is 0.697 times the expected count of killings in a barangay without a parish. More concretely, the presence of a Catholic parish is associated with a lower predicted count of killings in a given barangay, from 1.87 to 1.31, holding all other variables at their means.

One important concern is that the number of municipalities (17) in the NCR is downwardly-biasing the standard errors, risking an over-rejection of the null hypothesis. A score test (Roodman et al. 2019) correcting for "few" clusters indicates that this is not the case.[19] Another concern is that unobserved municipality-by-municipality heterogeneity is driving the observed correlation. Appendix model 12 applies fixed effects to absorb differences at this level, showing only modest weakening of the effect of a Catholic parish (.840 [.724, .973], $p = .02$).

An equality of coefficients test rejects the null hypothesis that $\beta_{CatholicParish} = \beta_{MethodistChurch}$ (p = .0009 in model four). This is consistent with the placebo logic outlined above. This result should not completely allay omitted variable concerns, but it does suggest that something more than a mechanical association driven by a characteristic of places likely to host houses of worship is responsible for the observed correlation.

There are additional limitations. First, our unit of analysis is highly disaggregated yet still ecological: instead of predicting the characteristics that make an individual more or less likely to fall victim to populist violence, our approach estimates why neighborhoods are the site of such violence. Second, the original dataset we use is the best available for the intensity of research devoted to documenting each killing, but a truly comprehensive

[18]A hurdle model (Appendix models 12 and 13) shows that Catholic parishes are significantly associated with both a lower likelihood of having a single killing, as well as having multiple killings (Hilbe and Hardin 2005).

[19]See Appendix for further discussion.

record— including expanding beyond the NCR and/or exactly identifying the site of each killing— may result in different findings. And finally, we still worry that some unmeasured variable is confounding the observed correlation. Despite these weaknesses, however, our analysis does have the benefit of suggesting new conditions under which communities avoid populist violence. In the remainder of this paper we turn to qualitative data to examine mechanisms which may produce the correlation observed in Table 1.

Tracing Mechanisms of Protection

Catholic parishes may protect communities through two types of mechanisms: Directly, they may *raise attention*, *offer sanctuary*, and/or *disrupt enforcement*. Indirectly, they may *shrink vulnerable populations* and/or *build local solidarity*. Overall, we find strong evidence that parishes raise attention, as well as trigger both indirect pathways of constraint. Riskier direct interventions occurred in multiple parishes and could exercise a strong effect despite their rarity. Evidence of enforcement disruption, for instance, is very proximal to the production of violence, while the causal chain connecting community dispute resolution to particular incidents of violence is less easily observed.

Direct Effects: Raising Attention

In addition to a reservoir of symbols and language, homilies, funerals, and processions provide Catholic elites pre-made social "focal points" to leverage their moral authority against the Drug War (Chwe 2013). One leader in reported "very vocal condemning of killings" from the pulpit,[20] while another reported similar rhetoric "so [parish members] know exactly where [the priest] stands."[21] Priests used these opportunities to directly challenge dominant

[20]Parish D2

[21]Parish R1

narratives of drug users as a reviled out-group, with one analogizing Drug War victims to biblical innocents killed by Herod and the "good thief" crucified with Christ.[22] Parishes also emerged as centers of local mobilizational capacity, with 75% reporting clerical support for protests of human rights violations associated with the Drug War. These events featured religious contestations of the government's framing; one account described a march of cross-bearing women where "prominently posted at the top of the largest cross, featuring a bound man representing the crucified Christ...was not the usual derisive 'INRI- Jesus, King of the Jews,' but '*nanlaban*,' or 'he fought back'- the common excuse given by the police for deaths of suspects in anti-drug operations" (Racelis 2020, 4).

Parish volunteers unexpectedly referenced services to bereaved families as a way of challenging Drug War framing of victims as outcasts. A lay leader described "visiting wakes of victims of the campaign" as a way "to create greater awareness about the violence."[23] Another parish publicly exhibited photographs of victims and their families at crime scenes. As the rector explained, "The power of images is something that I think can be harnessed if we as a Church want to engage people to think deeply about what's happening."[24]

Clergy and laity in multiple parishes also linked attention raising to accountability, primarily through speaking to outside authorities, both human rights lawyers[25] and church authorities[26]. Reportage from journalists and human rights groups is also consistent on this point, with one dispatch describing how a local nun has forwarded to judicial authorities

[22]Parish M6

[23]Parish R1.

[24]Brennan Weiss, "A Catholic Church is Running an Unconventional Resistance to Duterte's War on Drugs," *Quartz*, February 27, 2017.

[25]Parish J3

[26]Parish R1

her detailed diary of victims, police claims, and alternative accounts from neighbors and family members.[27] One bishop directed priests in his diocese to attend a three-day workshop on monitoring and documenting human rights abuses, while other parishes organized civil society networks to support anti-Drug War activism.[28] These efforts have traveled up the Catholic hierarchy, with Pope Francis telling one prominent bishop and Drug War critic, "I know what you are going through...please continue."[29]

Direct Effects: Offering Sanctuary

Recalling church shelter for political dissidents under Marcos, Catholic actors operate an "underground sanctuary network" (Willis 2019) to physically shelter, as one bishop put it, "people who feel that their lives are in danger."[30] One profile of Jun Santiago, a Catholic brother, noted how "Just as Jun has done for countless families of drug-war victims, he began sheltering [potential victim] Santiago—at Baclaran Church, his parish in southern Manila, at various safe houses in the provinces surrounding the capital" (Willis 2019). Potentially overlapping with the first mechanism, other bishops have offered sanctuary to police officers who have spoken out against the Drug War.[31]

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[27]Ma. Ceres Doyo,"Nun wrote diary on drug killings," *Philippine Inquirer*, October 26, 2017.

[28]Bong Sarmiento, "Drug killings bring rights drive in Philippine diocese," *UCA News*, November 26, 2018; Evelyn Macairan,"'Huwang Kang Papatay' (Thou Shall Not Kill) Campaign Launched," *Philippines Star*, July 26, 2016.

[29]"Pope offers support to Bishop David," *Sun Star (Philippines)*, May 25, 2019.

[30]`https://www.facebook.com/pablovirgilio.david/posts/10214126453852407`.

[31]Paterno Esmaquel II, "More bishops to protect cops testifying on EJKs," *Rappler.com*, October 6, 2017.

This direct opposition has triggered threats of obstruction of justice charges and even violence against church officials and priests.[32] Moral commitment helps explain assumption of this risk: as Cornelio and Medina summarized the attitude of a Catholic priest in a particularly violence-stricken neighborhood, "helping the victims of War on Drugs is obeying God's mandate even if it might cost him his life" (2019, 9).

Despite the risk, 25% of parishes reported offering sanctuary. Leaders related identifying an individual at risk for violence and helping them leave the area. It is difficult to ascertain the extent of these efforts beyond our parish interviews, but they may be substantial: one priest claimed "at least 20" potential victims were offered protection or spirited away, while other church sources placed the number in the "hundreds."[33]

Direct Effects: Enforcement Disruption

Qualitative evidence clarified the importance of *informal* rather than *formal* interactions with police and political officials. This is in keeping with the personalist, anti-institutional nature of populism. We not that formal institutional channels to contest Drug War violence do exist: the "Barangay Anti-Drug Action Committees" (BADAC) includes religious representation, and the "MASA MASID" program, designed to "promote community involvement" in combatting drugs similarly includes faith-based organizations.[34] However

[32]Sean Williams, "Gov't to offer witness protection," *Rappler.com*, September 11, 2017.

[33]Poppy McPherson, "Open the doors: The Catholic Churches hiding targets of Duterte's drug war," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2017. Jake Maxwell Watts, "Catholic Church opens sanctuaries to the hunted in Philippines drug war," *Wall Street Journal*, July 5, 2018.

[34]The BADAC regulation is available here: `https://www.ddb.gov.ph/images/Board_Regulation/2017/BR3_2017.pdf`; The MASA MASID guidelines are available here: `https://ulap.net.ph/ulap-news/advisories/368-dilg-mc-no-2017-112-revised-guidelines-on-the-implementation-of-mamamayang-ayaw-sa-anomalya-mamamayang-`

interviewees universally downplayed these formal initiatives. Multiple interviewees were either entirely unaware of the MASA MASID program, or reported that it was not actively implemented in their barangay. A leader in one complained that despite the parish's interest in drug rehabilitation services, the barangay was not referring anyone to them.[35] And a lay leader in a different parish noted that the area's anti-drug abuse council had not signed a formal Memorandum of Agreement with [the diocese], a requirement for the establishment of parish-based programs.[36] Beyond procedural issues, others eschewed participation because they viewed these programs as ploys to get the parish to inform on its members, which one priest described as "traitorous."[37]

While formal institutional channels were not prominent, there was regular evidence of the type of personalistic interaction characteristic of populist rule. Clergy emerged as key interlocutors with local government and reported speaking informally to political officials and police about drug cases involving community members (50% parishes), meeting "monthly or more often" with police officials (over 60% of parishes), and having local politicians visit their congregations to campaign (with or without invitations, all parishes). Evidence of direct disruption was much rarer, although one priest described appointing a parishioner to accompany the police going house to house in anti-narcotic operations "to know if the police are doing things right...not to cooperate with them."[38]

`ayaw-sa-iligal-na-droga-masa-masid.html`.

[35]Parish R1

[36]Parish B9

[37]Parish M6

[38]Parish M6

Indirect Effects: Shrinking Vulnerable Populations

Parishes may ameliorate underlying social ills that increase exposure to "Drug War" violence. All sampled parishes feature a social development ministry, while half have dedicated resources to drug rehabilitation programs. One has hosted scripture study for current and former drug users,[39] while another features a "restorative justice" program that helps former drug users find jobs.[40] Many predate the current Drug War; one parish's restorative justice ministry was over 20 years old. The current leader of that ministry described it as "a personal commitment to God" and particularly focused on the "CDE [lower socio-economic status] population," which is most vulnerable to drug violence.[41] This ethical commitment resonates with the summary of three Catholic priests in Metro Manila, who believe "drug dependents are the Church's 'public'. It is therefore imperative to also address their social and material conditions to help them with their drug addiction" (Cornelio and Medina 2019, 13).

As described above, there may be roadblocks to operating these types of programs in conjunction with local government. One parish reported that a rehab initiative "did not prosper" because users worried that they would be targeted by the state for participating.[42] A priest at another parish described the need for "[the church's] own rehab center, which is really rehabilitation, not just crime [like the government]."[43] These tensions would not preclude the operation of the indirect mechanism, as reducing drug use in a neighborhood could shape police interactions with that neighborhood even if the program took place outside

[39]Parish D2

[40]Parish K4

[41]Parish B9

[42]Parish D2

[43]Parish M6

of formal governmental partnership.

Indirect Effects: Building Community Solidarity

A parish's physical and social embeddedness in a community conceivably mitigates neighborhood disputes that may otherwise attract state violence. Describing how the Drug War's notorious "kill lists" are constructed, Amnesty International noted how "local officials' reliance on community members in compiling 'watch lists' has, at best, encouraged a practice of spying on neighbors and, at worst, given people a way to get rid of personal or political rivals" (2017, 20). Reportage offers numerous examples of this dynamic: "The night before the murder, Raymart and a neighbor had a heated argument that ended with the latter going to the barangay hall to accuse Raymart of many things, like selling marijuana."[44]

Seventy-five percent of parishes reported "assisting the community in peaceful dispute resolution." These included mediation over myriad locally contentious issues, including land titles for informal communities, labor negotiations, and construction permits. Election violence has been a persistent problem in the Philippines, and USAID-sponsored analysis identified church-based monitoring networks as a key "countervailing force" able to constrain the violent influence of local political clans (Creative Associates International 2012). Indeed, almost 90% of parishes mobilize domestic citizen election monitors in local barangays, with a leader from one parish describing a pre-election "Peace Mass" at which local candidates gathered to sign a peace covenant for their followers on Election Day.[45]

Over 90% of parishes report having a "Basic Ecclesial Community" (BEC) that organizes parish members for devotional activities, for instance Marian processions or weekly rosary sessions in poor areas. While BEC activity may appear "conventionally religious," scholars

[44]Aie Balagtas See, "Drug War Sends OFW Rushing Home for Son Who 'Couldn't Run'," *Philippines Daily Inquirer*, April 9, 2017.

[45]Parish M6

have demonstrated it has broad effects through "reinforc[ing] ideas of egalitarianism" and promoting "solidarities" that can counteract "mutual suspicion" (Levine 1988, 252). On this point, a BEC leader described how these activities built community because they were "more than a ministry...[the BEC] is a relationship, a system of living."[46] A leader of another parish's BEC described promoting community cohesion through tracking the welfare of BEC "victims" of forced relocation among informal settlers.[47]

Qualitative Summary

Two themes emerged inductively from the interview evidence and merit brief discussion. First, moral commitments' ability to motivate risky action should not be overstated: multiple leaders referenced fear as a deterrent to activism. One leader claimed that people "fear for their safety,"[48] while a priest referenced sedition investigations against prominent clergy for their anti-Drug War activism.[49] Another leader mentioned how an active parish member was killed, but expressed hesitation that vocal opposition would produce any effect.[50] Second, respondents generally did not raise the issue of grassroots religious competition or conflicts as an influence on Drug War responses. However, one parish leader traced difficulties coordinating efforts with the barangay captain to the fact that this individual was not Catholic.[51] Highlighting the importance of informal channels of religious influence on politics may raise alternative mechanisms through which religious competition and diversity

[46]Parish J3

[47]Parish B9

[48]Parish G6

[49]Parish M6

[50]Parish K4

[51]Parish D2.

impacts the parish-based responses we document.

Qualitative evidence, including original interviews, illustrates operation of the direct attention-raising mechanism, as well as indirect mechanisms of reducing vulnerable populations and building local solidarity. Enforcement interactions appear to occur informally and personally, rather than through dedicated institutional channels. While not quantifiable, this evidence is consistent with the local protective role of Catholic parishes as identified in the cross-sectional analysis. It suggests that, without completely eliminating costs to resistance, congregations may remain central to community protection, drawing on accumulated moral authority even in the face of a populist determined to exclude drug users from "the people" and override formal institutional protections.

Conclusion

Tens of thousands of Filipinos have been killed during populist President Rodrigo Duterte's Drug War, but community exposure to this violence varies. By combining organizational capacity with moral commitment, we find that the presence of a Catholic parish correlates with less Drug War violence. Five mechanisms appear to be at work: directly, parishes raise attention, offer sanctuary, and disrupt enforcement, while indirectly they shrink vulnerable populations and build local solidarity. While qualitative evidence supporting all of these mechanisms exists, it is strongest for activities associated with raising attention, reducing vulnerable populations, and increasing solidarity. While neither the sole factor influencing violence nor an ironclad guarantee of safety, Catholic parishes can influence the local distribution of populist violence.

There are a variety of ways our research may be improved. First, we cannot observe how these mechanisms influence the behaviors of either police or vigilantes. We do not know if they simply avoid Catholic parish areas in general, or frequent them as usual yet demonstrate more restraint in their conduct. State agents are also not homogenous, and their variance in motivation and compliance with formal policy may condition the effect of the mechanisms

we trace (Mendoza et al. 2020). Second, our research design potentially highlights "easy" cases where the institutional power of the Catholic Church is most concentrated. If more precise data on Drug War victims and better measures of parish capacity become available, it may allow different measures of apparent protective effects. Finally, the juxtaposition of Duterte's seemingly enduring popularity, even among Catholics, with the Church's moral opposition to his signature policy is inescapable. When religious actors so directly contest a populist with widespread appeal, whose authority, if any, suffers?

Our findings may generalize to another prominent case of populist violence. As *The New Yorker* summarized the Brazilian case, "in some speeches, [President Jair Bolsonaro] has made Duterte-like statements, seeming to endorse the summary execution of criminals by the police."[52] And while police killings in Rio have increased, the Catholic hierarchy has also showed signs of countermobilization (Smith 2019).[53]

From a different angle, should we expect that religious institutions lay unique claim to community protection? In our view, religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, is neither necessary nor sufficient for resisting populist violence. While religious institutions have constrained state violence at times, from Catholics guided by liberation theology in Latin America to local minorities during the Holocaust (Braun 2016), in other settings populists have adeptly incorporated religious identity, including Catholicism, into their appeal (Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016). Religious institutions may at times possess compelling normative commitment and organizational capacity, but our mechanisms could operate among similarly motivated and organized labor groups, indigenous communities, or other sectors of civil society. Further research could highlight the unique contributions of var-

[52]Jon Lee Anderson, "Meet Brazil's Presidential Front Runner Jair Bolsonaro: Part Donald Trump, Part Rodrigo Duterte," *The New Yorker*, October 26, 2018.

[53]Eduardo Campos Lima, "Police are Killing Poor Civilians in Brazil's Favelas. The Church Offers Protection," *America*, December 23, 2019.

ious social sectors to resisting populist violence, as well as potential coordination dynamics among such diverse actors.

The generalizable implications of this argument could be posed in a third way: to what extent does the "populist" nature of populist violence impact the operation of these mechanisms? We anticipate that our mechanisms operate in non-populist settings of state violence, and would encourage future research there. However, populism's combination of out-group exclusion and personalistic strategy may make our mechanisms particularly potent. The informal process disruption we document, for instance, should be especially important under populists who degrade formal checks on state violence, such as the judiciary. Further research could specify distinctly populist responses to religion in politics, as well as document the involvement of religious institutions in post-populist politics to trace how strategies for influence differ once a populist leaves the scene.

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