

# DUTERTE AND DONOR WITHDRAWAL

**Jonas Bagas**

- *Populist politicians and funding cuts in South East Asia* •  
*require immediate action*

## ABSTRACT

*Duterte's war on drugs is representative of the wider crackdown on civil society, especially against marginalised communities and the political opposition in Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand. It points to the fragility of democratic spaces in the region, which risk being further weakened by international donor transition and withdrawal. This paper explores the reasons behind the withdrawals before setting out how civil society and donors must respond in order to help build resilient community groups and push back against the decline in democratic spaces.*

## KEYWORDS

Duterte | Donor withdrawal | War on drugs | South East Asia | LGBT

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte won the presidency in 2016 through a platform of fear and violence. As presidential candidate, he ignored official government data on drug use and conveniently exaggerated the number of drug addicts to a fictional 3-4 million.<sup>1</sup> He insisted that drug users have addled brains, and that they rape babies, openly promising that once he became president he would kill thousands of drug criminals.<sup>2</sup> A promise his government is delivering: a year into his administration, thousands have been killed extrajudicially, either in anti-drug police operations or by vigilante killings, with estimates ranging from 7,000 to 13,000.<sup>3</sup> Duterte's war on drugs is plunging the Philippines into an unprecedented human rights crisis, the impact of which goes beyond the drug issue. His presidency can be seen as part of the wider crackdown on civil society.

Reported killings under Duterte are taking place mostly in urban poor communities, already exceeding the number of extrajudicial killings during the brutal Marcos dictatorship.<sup>4</sup> In addition, police impunity is rampant, as seen in its role in drug-related killings, including those involving infants and minors. The Duterte government has also openly targeted political institutions to impair constitutional check-and-balance mechanisms. In one year, his "supermajority" in Congress has undermined legislative inquiries on the war on drugs, junked an impeachment complaint, and put a staunch opposition senator in jail on trumped up drug charges. He has dismissed the importance of due process and human rights, of United Nations (UN) institutions and the international community, and his allies attempted to defund<sup>5</sup> the national Commission on Human Rights (CHR). Duterte's government officials and political allies work closely with rabid online "Duterte Die-hard Supporters", or DDS, a play on his reported Davao Death Squad, which operates in the city of Davao where he was mayor.<sup>6</sup> They spread fake stories against the opposition and independent media, tagging journalists and political leaders alike who are critical of the war on drugs as suspected drug criminals or coddlers of druglords, creating a chilling effect on those who are raising legitimate concerns about government abuses.<sup>7</sup>

State-led abuses are not new to the Philippines, a country that suffered from authoritarian rule under the Marcos dictatorship. But while human rights abuses persisted even in the succeeding regimes, the post-Marcos political norms on democratisation, transparency, and on sustaining a vibrant civil society have always made it difficult for large-scale violations to take place.

But Duterte's war on drugs can easily reverse gains from decades-long efforts from social movements to build public institutions that are democratic and accountable to human rights standards. As an HIV and LGBT rights advocate, I have witnessed police impunity in the form of police raids in gay establishments that result in physical abuse, extortion and stigmatisation. While documenting those instances and while trying to facilitate legal aid to those arrested, it was normal to encounter the police restricting access to those arrested, profiling human rights advocates for surveillance purposes, or knowingly committing illegal detention. Unbridled and illegitimate use of

power, even when exercised on a limited scale, can already demonstrate its layered but straightforward effects: how powerlessness leads to dehumanisation, and how the use of fear and the threat of violence enable other abuses.

Previously perceived to be a bastion of human rights and democracy in Southeast Asia because of its bloodless “1986 People Power revolution” and the extensive incorporation of human rights in its Constitution,<sup>8</sup> the Philippines is now in a competitive race to the bottom with its neighbours in terms of human rights violations. It is therefore critical to examine the broader implications of the Philippines’ state-led attacks on civil society, including Duterte’s “war on drugs”, its immediate effects on the fragile democracies of Southeast Asia – and how civil society can survive in this deteriorating landscape.

## 1 • A regional trend

Duterte’s brutal war on drugs has gained traction among political leaders in the region. Cambodia started its anti-drug campaign early 2017,<sup>9</sup> stoking fears that the new campaign will also lead to human rights abuses. In Vietnam, where community-based interventions on drug use have been established by civil society organisations, advocates have noted an increase in arrest and detention of people who use drugs. The most worrisome of all is Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s new stance on drugs, which mimics Duterte’s violent rhetoric. “Kill them, show no mercy,” Jokowi reportedly ordered law enforcers.<sup>10</sup>

Sexual and gender minorities have also been facing new threats from Indonesian authorities and conservative groups. An increase in anti-LGBT pronouncements from politicians aligned with conservative Islamic groups in 2016 was followed by attacks against gay men in 2017 – a caning incident involving two men in Aceh, the only place in Indonesia that has an anti-sodomy policy, and a highly sensationalised raid of a gay sauna in Jakarta.<sup>11</sup> The raid led to the detention of dozens, the majority of whom were eventually released precisely due to the absence of any law prohibiting gay sex; the few who remained in detention were charged with drug-related offenses. The situation in Indonesia is still unraveling, with conservative groups petitioning the Constitutional Court to criminalise gay sex, among other so-called un-Islamic sexual behaviors.<sup>12</sup>

Equally concerning is that governments across the region are cherry-picking human rights issues that do not challenge their power base and champion them in order to improve their human rights credentials. Thailand, for example, is promoting a harm reduction approach to drugs, even decriminalisation. Such drug policy reform, while welcome, must also be read in the context of Thailand’s short-lived but bloody war on drugs in 2003, which led to “some 2,800 extrajudicial killings”.<sup>13</sup> The military-appointed legislative body has also approved a gender equality law which, according to the government, provides protection to transgender people against discrimination. There is also a pending proposal from the Justice Ministry that aims to grant domestic

partnership for LGBT people.<sup>14</sup> However, these reforms are happening without any broad engagement with the Thai LGBT community and wider civil society, fueling questions that the military government is “pinkwashing” its dismal human rights credentials. As one activist points out, the suppression of democracy by the military junta is a “stain” on Thailand’s rainbow flag.<sup>15</sup>

The Duterte government is no different. He has managed to build a reputation for being pro-women and pro-LGBT after championing local laws in his city that protect the rights of these groups.<sup>16</sup> His allies in Congress also recently filed a bill to introduce a SOGIE-inclusive civil union bill. This agenda, however, is moving forward without any consultation with civil society.

These developments show the volatility of the human rights situation in Southeast Asia. Populist politicians are using hysteria – over drugs, or sex, or both – to shore up support for undemocratic regimes, leading to curtailment of civil rights and constricting of civic spaces. They are also employing a strategy where they promote the rights of particular communities to cover up their dismal human rights violations.

## 2 • Donor funding: Critical but under threat

Threats against vulnerable communities including LGBT people and people who use drugs, whether in conjunction with declining democratic spaces or not, are not new. However, for countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, these communities have previously been able to organise and respond to these threats with the help of development aid, especially international grants on health, HIV, and reproductive rights.

Donors, development partners and international financing institutions, such as UN agencies<sup>17</sup> and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (the Global Fund),<sup>18</sup> have restructured norms on how countries receiving development aid should implement programmes that aim to reach vulnerable communities.<sup>19</sup> Conditions attached to grants often require the implementation of safe spaces for criminalised communities<sup>20</sup> and space for community engagements, such as governance and oversight roles or financing community groups directly as programme implementers.

The Global Fund, for example, has one of the most prescriptive approaches on how communities and populations disproportionately affected by HIV, TB, and malaria epidemics are included in its initiatives in each country. It requires the participation of civil society and communities affected by the disease in country coordinating mechanisms (CCMs – the main governance and oversight platforms of Global Fund-eligible countries) to determine priority disease programmes. It also has its own human rights and gender policies to ensure that the country and multi-country programmes that it is financing are human rights-based and gender inclusive.<sup>21</sup>

This approach to development aid is often criticised for being imperialistic and for tying the availability of aid money to the question of human rights.<sup>22</sup> However, these conditions have set standards for participation and engagement for civil society that is otherwise excluded from civic spaces and decision-making processes. Where civil society spaces are suppressed or where certain communities are criminalised, these conditions have given communities a stage to organise and advocate for reforms, or to access financial support to implement their own programmes. For example, in Thailand, following Thaksin's war on drugs that killed thousands of suspected drug criminals, international aid was instrumental in the establishment of community-led harm reduction services. This contributed to community organising for people who use drugs. It also served as a leverage to support policy advocacy to change Thailand's approach on drugs.<sup>23</sup>

But the political and economic landscape that determine the shape of development aid is changing. As democratic spaces constrict in countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand, the role of development aid in providing shelter for vulnerable communities is also being undermined. There are several factors that are affecting these changes.

First, the development priorities of donor countries are shifting. The multiple goals and sub-goals under the new Sustainable Development Goals are providing countries with more opt outs to prioritise a few and ignore other development imperatives. For the Global North, we can see a focus on issues closer to their constituents' priorities, such as climate change and the refugee crisis.<sup>24</sup>

Second, the election of populist, right-wing governments in donor countries has cast uncertainty over the Global North's commitment to finance international development aid, either through bilateral agreements or through multilateral platforms.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, as donor countries like the United States of America and the United Kingdom become more insular, they are also less likely to champion human rights as a prerequisite for international aid or global trade.

Finally, as income levels rise in countries like Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, donor withdrawals or donors transitioning out of developing countries becomes inevitable. The expectation is that countries, as they become richer, are able to fund development programmes that have previously been financed by external donors. It is also assumed that countries will own donor-driven community-inclusive approaches such as the Global Fund's consultative and inclusive processes in the development and oversight of health programmes and integrate them into their own systems, a serious challenge in contexts where structural barriers to human rights and democracy persist.

When implemented haphazardly, donor withdrawal and transition can exacerbate the effects of ongoing crackdowns against civil society, in which vulnerable communities are particularly at risk. Aside from possible funding cuts for inclusive health and development programmes needed by these communities, donor withdrawal could also

lead to the dissolution of mechanisms that have forced government actors to engage with civil society. Furthermore, this process might weaken community-initiated interventions that have been created in response to development gaps that governments refuse to address. Donor withdrawal and transition are inevitable, but this eventuality should not be shaped by income classification and epidemiological or biomedical indicators alone. Amidst growing threats to democracy and human rights, equal consideration should be given to the very survival of civil society post-transition.

### 3 • How must civil society and donors respond?

Firstly, civil society must look towards openings within domestic spaces that can be explored for funding. For example, devolution and decentralisation in Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand has made it easier, in some instances, to receive financing from local governments for grassroots programmes. Local governments often have their own revenue sources and their own mechanisms to finance non-governmental groups that are delivering services for the government. In decentralised settings, local governance engagements can be tedious, as they often entail dealing with “multiple kingdoms” within the country, but they provide spaces that must be explored. This author is aware that in the Philippines, as the national government wages its war on drugs, some local governments are working with civil society groups to implement an alternative approach to counter the killings and to established community-based harm reduction programmes. Similarly, in Indonesia, as sectarian attacks against LGBTs increase, some district governments have opened doors to support HIV and health programmes for gay men and trans people.

The “weak states”<sup>26</sup> of the region also present other opportunities for engagement. The disorganised nature of politics in this region means that national governments should not be seen as monolithic institutions. Civil society groups must periodically scan the national political landscape for potential champions or allies within the government. This can result in new spaces for engagement within national structures. In the Philippines, for example, the Duterte government has allocated a huge amount of funding for drug rehabilitation programmes to national government agencies.<sup>27</sup> However, they have no clear ideas on what interventions they should develop. Some have resorted to organising zumba sessions for suspected drug criminals, fun runs, or bible studies.<sup>28</sup> This presents opportunities for partnerships for better approaches to the drug issue.

Civil society must challenge donors to improve their transition policies and to look beyond economic and disease-focused metrics that trigger transition and donor withdrawal. First, the availability of democratic spaces that can sustain participation of stigmatised communities need to be part of transition preparedness assessment, as they are key to help stigmatised communities engage in country processes, secure domestic funding, and ultimately, build community responses to structural problems that lead to their exclusion. Responding to challenges posed by constricting civic spaces should be part of a country’s transition plan.

Donors should closely monitor transition processes to ensure the inclusion of communities and civil society. Some communities are deeply stigmatised and criminalised, and increasingly so in context of shrinking civic space. Donors need to be prescriptive to guarantee the inclusion of these marginalised groups in transition processes and to provide safe spaces for their participation. This should also include ensuring that countries do not have restrictive policies that bar funding for civil society.

Transitions should not be done haphazardly that result in additional harm to communities that are already stigmatised and criminalised, most of whom rely heavily on donors to sustain their organisations and to maintain community responses on health and human rights. Thus, even after a country has been determined to be ineligible for donor support, donors should still have mechanisms to fund on-the-ground community groups that could be harmed by transition, in terms of debilitating funding cuts or sudden hostile country situations.

#### 4 • Beyond funding: Resilience and movement-building

As threats to democratic spaces continue to escalate in South East Asia, and with the changing financing landscape for development aid, strategies for resilience, solidarity, and movement-building also need to undergo rethinking to guarantee the survival of civil society.

Attacks against specific communities are intractably linked to a democratic deficit common in many Southeast Asian countries. There is an absence of resilient, representative and accountable public institutions that can defend and promote human rights and civic spaces despite pressure from populist, authoritarian, or sectarian tendencies. So-called “representative democracies” in the region continue to operate at the exclusion of vulnerable groups, with politicians easily subverting existing constitutional protective mechanisms to consolidate their power by fanning fear and hysteria, by persecuting minorities or their political foes, and by restricting civic spaces.

To address this democratic deficit, civil society must develop coalitions that respond to the emergencies faced by the communities that are directly being attacked but that also maintain medium-term and long-term democratisation objectives. Single-issue objectives are inadequate and unsustainable in light of the complex roots of the current human rights crises in these countries. For community groups that have relied on donor support, such as people who use drugs or the LGBT community, this means stepping outside the silos created by international development aid. They must collaborate with other “excluded” movements and communities to push for broader democratic reforms. This means framing their struggles from a political perspective.

Inter-movement collaborations will be beneficial for different stakeholders that are directly and indirectly affected by the human rights crises in the region. In the Philippines, where the war on drugs remains popular,<sup>29</sup> these collaborations will enable the creation of a broader

front that can tackle different problems linked to the war on drugs – from highlighting the misinformation being spread to sustaining its support against police abuses. HIV and harm reduction advocates, who have the expertise to develop a health and human rights-based alternative to the war on drugs, can work with urban poor communities that are now terrorised by extrajudicial killings but who also have access to constituencies that can mobilise demand for change. The latter can also facilitate the organising of people who use drugs, necessary to sustain initiatives on harm reduction, legal redress and strategic litigation in relation to police abuses, and long-term policy reforms.

The ties between pro-democratisation movements and stigmatised communities such as LGBT people and people who use drugs also need to be strengthened. Broad coalitions can provide political shelter to persecuted community groups and give them space to organise and push back when state forces use them to rationalise repressive actions. Similarly, political engagements can provide stigmatised communities with political legitimacy, an important tool to secure reforms that will endure regime changes.

## 5 • Conclusion

The war on drugs in the Philippines provides a glimpse on the fragility of democratic spaces in many Southeast Asian countries. State-led assaults against specific populations, from people who use drugs and the LGBT community to the political opposition, reflect the wider trend of the undermining of democratic political institutions and the closing of civic space in the region.

This situation is aggravated by the eventual withdrawal of international funds. Many community groups rely on international donors as their financial lifeline. This donor support has, to a certain extent, given stigmatised or criminalised communities a platform to organise, resist and engage government actors because of the various conditions tied to aid. However, this platform is slowly disappearing.

Consequently, donor-reliant community groups must develop new strategies to respond to this reality. To address the immediate threats and the long-term survival of stigmatised and criminalised communities (such as LGBT people and people who use drugs), they must avoid framing their struggles in a single issue way and facilitate broader coalitional engagements that can provide the space for robust organising and the political legitimacy needed to sustain deeper democratic reforms. Community groups also need to be agile in their engagements with the government to find funding opportunities at the national and local levels.

Meanwhile, donors must reexamine their framework for transition and withdrawal to ensure this process does not inflict additional harm on already marginalised communities. Transition should lead to sustaining communities and their contribution to civil society. Donors should therefore expand their tools to determine the triggers and the pace of donor withdrawal to include threats to democratic spaces. They should also develop mechanisms

to continue supporting stigmatised and criminalised communities even after a country has already transitioned out of eligibility for donor support due to existing structural barriers to inclusion within existing country processes.

The combination of populist politicians like Duterte and the challenge of donor withdrawal from middle income countries where severe human rights abuses are taking place presents a complex set of challenges for civil society, especially marginalised community groups. But this also presents opportunities to ensure the resilience of communities that are under attack and to remedy the deficits in Southeast Asian democracies.

## NOTES

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1 • This is contrary to existing government data, which pegs the number of one-time drug users – not drug addicts – to 1.2 million. Read more here: “PCIJ Findings: What’s Flawed, Fuzzy With Drug War Numbers?,” Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, June 8, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://pcij.org/stories/pcij-findings-whats-flawed-fuzzy-with-drug-war-numbers/>.

2 • See: Marlon Ramos, “Junkies Are Not Humans.” *Inquirer*, August 28, 2016, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/810395/junkies-are-not-humans>.

3 • There are no definitive estimates on the total number of people killed under the war on drugs, and the police has recently barred media to access police reports on drug-related killings.

4 • See: “Philippines: Duterte’s Bloody and Lawless Year in Power,” Amnesty International, June 29, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/philippines-dutertes-bloody-and-lawless-year-in-power/>.

5 • Duterte’s allies in the House of Representatives overwhelmingly voted to reduce the 2018 budget of CHR to US\$20 but it later restored to the

proposed amount after it sparked widespread condemnation; Maila Ager, “CHR Budget Restored: ‘People Power in Age of Social Media’.” *Inquirer*, September 21, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/932255/news-liberal-party-chr-people-power-social-media-house-of-representatives-chito-gascon-budget>.

6 • See for example: Diehard Duterte Supporters, YouTube channel, [n.d.], <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjuClbuwmMbvH8e8U04hT8g>. Philip Alston, former UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, reported on Duterte’s Davao death squad in his 2008 mission report to the UN Human Right Council. “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston,” OHCHR, 2014, accessed December 11, 2017, [http://www.hr-dp.org/files/2014/06/27/Mission\\_to\\_Philippines\\_2008.pdf](http://www.hr-dp.org/files/2014/06/27/Mission_to_Philippines_2008.pdf).

7 • Opposition senator Risa Hontiveros has been repeatedly subjected to these fake stories, and in one of them, she was falsely depicted to support the rights of the Maute Group, a terrorist group in Southern Philippines: “Hontiveros on Fake News

of Her Backing Maute Group: Nothing is Farther from Truth," GMA News, June 8, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/613694/hontiveros-on-fake-news-of-her-supporting-maute-group-nothing-is-farther-from-truth/story/>. One of the pro-Duterte personalities who routinely promote fake stories is Mocha Uson, a former singer and sex guru who campaigned for Duterte and was recently appointed by the government as part of the presidential communications team; Kate Lamble and Megha Mohan, "Trolls and Triumph: A Digital Battle in the Philippines." BBC, December 7, 2016, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-38173842>.

8 • Read an account of the 1986 People Power Revolution that toppled the Marcos dictatorship here: "EDSA People Power Revolution," Philippine History, July 30, 2009, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.philippine-history.org/edsa-people-power-revolution.htm>. The features of the post-Marcos constitution are explained here: "Constitutional History of the Philippines," ConstitutionNet, February 11, 2012, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.constitutionnet.org/country/constitutional-history-philippines>.

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12 • *Ibid.*

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on drugs by the International Harm Reduction Association and Human Rights Watch: "Thailand's 'War on Drugs,'" Human Rights Watch, March 12, 2008, accessed December 11, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/03/12/thailands-war-drugs>.

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15 • Paisarn Likhitpreechakul, "IDAHOT or IDA-not? A Blatant Stain on the Rainbow Flag." Prachatai, May 17, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7146>.

16 • See this essay written by a supporter that explains Duterte's track record on women's rights and LGBT issues: Jan Albert Suing, "Why I Am Voting for Rodrigo Duterte." Huffington Post, April 12, 2016, accessed December 11, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jan-albert-suing/why-i-am-voting-for-rodri\\_b\\_9684538.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jan-albert-suing/why-i-am-voting-for-rodri_b_9684538.html).

17 • Several UN agencies provide aid in the form of technical support across different countries in Southeast Asian. Worth noting in here are UNAIDS, which supports community mobilisation in the HIV response; UNDP, currently implementing the Being LGBT in Asia programme; and UNICEF, which implements programmes on young people and HIV and sexual orientation and gender identity.

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19 • In the context of HIV, for instance, UN agencies like UNAIDS and UNDP have developed technical guidance for countries on operationalising human rights into HIV programmes. Read examples of these here: "UNDP's Work on Human Rights, Key Populations and Gender," UNDP, [n.d.], accessed December 11, 2017, <http://undphealthimplementation.org/functional-areas/human-rights-key-populations-and-gender/undp-work-on-human-rights-key-populations-and-gender/>; and here "Human Rights

and the Law," UNAIDS, 2014, accessed December 11, 2017, [http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/2014unaidsguidancenote\\_humanrightsandthelaw\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2014unaidsguidancenote_humanrightsandthelaw_en.pdf)). The Global Fund, meanwhile, has incorporated "community, rights, and gender" or CRG into its strategy and operationalised this in its work. Read about the Global Fund's CRG report here: "Community, Rights and Gender Report 2016," The Global Fund, 2016, accessed December 11, 2017, [https://www.theglobalfund.org/media/4239/bm35\\_15-communityrightsgender\\_report\\_en.pdf](https://www.theglobalfund.org/media/4239/bm35_15-communityrightsgender_report_en.pdf).

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2016, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.healthgap.org/globalfundreplenishment>.

25 • Robbie Gramer, "Proposed U.S. Cuts to AIDS Funding Could Cause Millions of Deaths: Report," *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/01/proposed-u-s-cuts-to-aids-funding-could-cause-millions-of-deaths-report-world-aids-day-hiv-global-health-pepfar-state-department-trump-one-campaign/>; Nick Duffy, "UK Government Defends 22% Cut to Global HIV Prevention Funds," *Pink News*, December 6, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2017/12/06/uk-government-defends-22-cut-to-global-hiv-prevention-funds/>.

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28 • "Philippine Government Prescribes Zumba Classes for Drug Addicts," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 16, 2016, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/hoy-san-diego/sdhoy-philippine-government-prescribes-zumba-classes-2016jul16-story.html>.

29 • Majority of Filipinos, while opposed to the killing of suspected drug criminals, are supportive of the government's overall war on drugs approach. Read here: Nestor Corrales, "88% of Pinoys Support War on Drugs; 73% Say EJKs Happen - Survey," *Inquirer*, October 16, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/938201/breaking-news-pulse-asia-ejks-extrajudicial-killings-war-on-drugs-drugs-survey>.



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Received in September 2017.

Original in English.



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