The Global War on Drugs as Authoritarian Statecraft and Its Human Rights Costs

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The global war on drugs is sold as a common-sense protection of public order (Pansters 2018; Pozen 2024; Regilme 2020). In practice, however, it has functioned as a transnational mode of governance that concentrates coercive power, militarizes everyday life, and corrodes democratic oversight across state-society relations (Andreas 2019; Regilme 2025a; Robinson 2020; Regilme 2025b). From Colombia to the Philippines, prohibition through militarized punishment has been exported and institutionalized through security assistance, training, and conditional aid, with donor states prioritizing "order" over rights while recipient elites consolidate authoritarian control (Regilme 2018; Lindsay-Poland 2018; Regilme 2021; Koram 2022a). The result is not safer societies but increasingly unaccountable security bureaucracies and widespread state-led violations of human dignity (Bartilow 2014; Simangan 2018; Sandvik and Hoelscher 2017).

This punitive regime persists because it pays political and economic dividends. It converts social anxiety into obedient consent, reframes poverty as criminality, and delivers budgets, careers, and patronage to police and military institutions (Regilme 2025b; Alexander 2010; Bartilow 2019; Koram 2022b). It also works as a smokescreen, shifting blame away from oligarchic inequality, dispossession, and transnational financial interests by recoding structural crises as pathologies of "deviant" individuals (Cruz 2017; Pansters 2018; Franko and Goyes 2023). For donor states, the drug war creates durable leverage over client governments; for authoritarian incumbents, it disciplines racialized and impoverished groups through dehumanization and moralizing narratives that narrow citizenship and normalize a punitive common sense.

My core argument states that the drug war is not a domestic policy misstep but a global authoritarian project sustained by unequal political economies and external complicity (Amnesty International 2017; Pozen 2024; Regilme 2025b). The empirical record underscores this claim. Global indicators underscore the policy failure. After a decade of intensified enforcement, global illegal drug use still rose by roughly 31% from 2009 to 2016 (International Drug Policy Consortium 2018), while punitive laws continue to crowd prisons, with an estimated 2.2 million people incarcerated for drug offenses worldwide and about 470,000 detained for simple possession (Penal Reform International 2022). In the United States alone, drug-related overdose deaths reached over 106,000 in 2021(National Institute on Drug Abuse 2023). These figures sit uneasily beside official narratives of success and affirm my core claim that prohibition's coercive architecture reproduces harm while rationalizing intensified state power.

The Drug War as Global Export

The war on drugs is often framed as a national security challenge confined within national borders. Yet history shows that it has always been global. Since President Nixon first declared drugs "public enemy number one" in 1971, the United States has internationalized its punitive model, embedding it within foreign aid conditionalities and bilateral agreements (Drug Policy Alliance 2022). The Andean region of South America became the testing ground, with Colombia receiving millions in U.S. aid under Plan Colombia (Isacson 2005). While hailed in Washington as a counterinsurgency and counter narcotics success, the program entrenched paramilitary violence, displaced millions, and exacerbated inequality(Lesley 2016).

The pattern is systemic. U.S. security assistance forged a transferable template that fused counter insurgency, counter narcotics, and state-building (Avilés 2011; Cutrona 2017; Regilme 2018; Regilme and Parthenay 2024; Regilme 2018). Plan Colombia militarized public life, deepened paramilitary violence, and displaced communities even as it was marketed as technocratic reform (Gill 2016). The same template traveled to Mexico through the Mérida Initiative, which increased coercive capacities without dismantling criminal economies (Lessing 2017; Sotomayor and Santa-Cruz 2013; Osuna 2021). These cases demonstrate that internationalized drug control operates as a policy supply chain for authoritarian governance. Scholars have shown how such drug governance militarization projects allowed Colombian elites to consolidate coercive institutions while claiming international legitimacy (Hristov 2009). The logic of militarization became central to Colombia's democratic narrative, even as its social fabric was torn apart.

A similar trajectory unfolded in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs, marked by widespread extrajudicial killings, was tacitly supported by U.S. security assistance and legitimized by global counter terrorism frameworks. American aid played a vital role in strengthening coercive state institutions in the Philippines, even as those very institutions became complicit in systematic rights abuses. The militarized nature of Philippine governance is not an aberration but an extension of decades of U.S.-sponsored security programs that empowered the military and police over civilian democratic institutions (Regilme 2021). Yet, the Philippines is hardly unique. From Mexico's militarized policing to Thailand's 2003 drug war that left thousands dead, the punitive drug war template has been adopted across the Global South with consistent patterns of violence and repression (Bewley-Taylor 2012; S. Regilme 2018; Dabhoiwala 2003; Regilme 2023). Remarkably, the Philippines and Thailand show repetition with variation. Duterte's campaign relied on police impunity and public stigmatization of the urban poor (Eadie et al. 2025; Atun et al. 2019; Raffle 2021). Thailand's 2003 campaign produced over 2,800 killings in roughly three months, many unrelated to narcotics (Mydans 2003; Dabhoiwala 2003; Mutebi 2004). Across both cases, prohibitionist discourse provided the moral permission structure for mass violence, while foreign assistance, training, and intelligence sharing sustained the coercive apparatus behind the scenes.

Militarism and the Erosion of Democracy

What makes the drug war so enduring, despite its failures, is its political utility for ruling political and economic elites and their allies. By framing narcotics as existential threats, governments justify extraordinary measures: deploying the military domestically, expanding surveillance, and bypassing judicial safeguards. These powers rarely remain confined to counternarcotics; they bleed into broader governance practices and entrench authoritarian rule.

In Colombia, militarized counternarcotics campaigns legitimized state alliances with paramilitary groups, creating a climate of impunity that persists today (Hristov 2014). In Mexico, militarization has led to spiraling violence that corrodes state legitimacy while expanding the discretionary powers of the armed forces (Trevino-Rangel et al. 2022; Paley 2015). In the Philippines, Duterte cultivated a culture of fear where the police operated with near-total impunity, systematically undermining democratic accountability (Regilme 2025a; 2025; Regilme 2025b). The weaponization of fear was not confined to drug suspects; it extended to journalists, human rights defenders, and political opposition figures who were labeled as obstacles to security. Militarism under the guise of drug control thus allows governments to delegitimize dissent, portraying critics as sympathetic to criminals or complicit in narco-politics (Regilme 2025a; Flores-Macías 2018).

The democratic costs are measurable in institutions and discourse. Militarized policing widens arbitrary executive discretion, normalizes exceptionalist violent measures, and reframes any form of nonviolent dissent as complicity with "criminals" (Kraska 2007; Fassin 2019; Regilme 2018). Colombia's "false positives" scandal exposed how performance metrics and war logics incentivized civilian killings, later reclassified as combat deaths (Gordon 2017). In the Philippines, critics, journalists, and human rights defenders were recoded as threats to public order, which legitimized surveillance and harassment (Regilme 2025). Militarism travels from street-level enforcement to the constitutional order, hollowing checks and balances while cultivating a punitive political common sense.

The erosion of democracy through the drug war is not merely about expanded state repression. It also concerns the reconfiguration of political legitimacy. Leaders like Duterte and Uribe in Colombia presented themselves as

strongmen capable of restoring order, even as their policies worsened insecurity. In these contexts, democratic institutions become hollowed out while militarized populism flourishes. As I argued elsewhere, such dynamics illustrate how militarism intertwines with neoliberal governance, producing fragile democracies where repression coexists with market reforms.

Human Rights in Retreat

The human rights ledger is grim. Extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, mass incarceration, and systemic due-process violations are now routine features of drug wars. Mexico counts tens of thousands of disappeared amid interactions between state forces, cartels, and paramilitaries (Espindola 2023; Trevino-Rangel et al. 2022). Thailand's 2003 campaign killed more than 2,500 people in three months, many with no verified narcotics links (Ilchmann 2003). In the Philippines, thousands of deaths were directly tied to police operations, concentrated in poor urban communities (Ravanilla, Sexton, and Haim 2022).

Dehumanization drives these outcomes. Experiments show that blatant dehumanization increases support for instrumental violence (Kteily and Landry 2022; Rai, Valdesolo, and Graham 2017), while moral exclusion erodes constraints on cruelty (Opotow 1990; Opotow, Gerson, and Woodside 2005). Prohibition recodes poverty, race, disability, and addiction as a criminal threat, rendering targets "killable" (Alexander 2010; Pitts 2019). This is institutional design, not collateral excess, routinized through policing metrics and prosecutorial incentives. These patterns are the predictable effects of policies that militarize social problems. Militarism thrives on dehumanization, converting stigmatized lives into expendable bodies under a security script (Regilme 2025b). Colombia's "false positives" scandal, where civilians were executed and reported as combatants, exposes how war logics blur civilian–combatant boundaries (Gill 2016). In the Philippines, the demonization of the poor as "addicts" normalized killings that would otherwise be politically unthinkable.

International arenas mirror the retreat. UN agencies increasingly acknowledge harms yet hesitate to confront donor complicity, revealing a broader governance crisis in which security routinely trumps rights (Regilme 2020). Mexico's deployment of the National Guard at the U.S. border shows the securitized drift that fuses migration control with drug war logics (Janetsky 2025). In Colombia, U.S. aid under Plan Colombia intensified fumigation and militarized rural life with mass displacement (Lindsay-Poland 2018). Across Southeast Asia, UN bodies have warned against extrajudicial killings and capital punishment for drug offenses, highlighting the widening gap between human rights norms and prohibitionist enforcement (Jensema and Sandwell 2018). These are not aberrations but patterned outcomes of a global enforcement regime.

Authoritarian Internationalism

The global war on drugs extends beyond national policies through an international order rewarding authoritarian practices. U.S. foreign assistance prioritizes security over human rights, providing military aid to abusive regimes. Plan Colombia and Philippines aid exemplify this: support continues despite violations because it serves U.S. geopolitical interests. This reflects authoritarian internationalism: powerful states enable coercive governance abroad under the pretext of drug control. International aid entrenches militarism while undermining local reform efforts. Authoritarian internationalism sustains inequality through aid systems that privilege order over rights, while donor states shield themselves from the consequences of their prohibition policies. This creates a global police state where surveillance and counterinsurgency merge under drug control (Robinson 2020). Though the International Narcotics Control Board and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime warn against abuses, many states still treat drug users as threats rather than rights-bearing subjects. Beyond U.S. policy, China supports harsh measures in Myanmar and Cambodia, while in Latin America, security aid reinforces militarized responses over structural reforms. Authoritarian internationalism thus operates globally through aid and security governance structures.

Toward a Post-Drug War Future

If the global war on drugs has deepened authoritarianism, what alternatives exist? First, international policy must shift from punitive, militarized approaches to public health–centered models. Decriminalization and harm-reduction

strategies have reduced drug-related harms without systemic violence (Global Commission on Drug Policy 2016; Greenwald 2009; Drug Policy Alliance 2023). Harm reduction reframes drug users as rights-holders, not enemies. Housing First programs with harm reduction have shown decreases in overdoses and improved housing stability (Watson et al. 2017). Redirecting assistance from militarized enforcement to community health, socioeconomic welfare protection, and oversight aligns policy with harm reduction rather than militarized punishment. Moreover, foreign aid should shift from funding militarized institutions to strengthening democratic accountability and equitable socioeconomic development in communities affected by narcotics-dominated economies. Without addressing structural socioeconomic inequalities, dismantling the drug violence will remain superficial. International human rights institutions must confront their complicity, whereas many institutions have often legitimized authoritarian practices through punitive rhetoric. A rights-based approach requires dismantling authoritarian internationalism and centering affected communities' dignity.

From Bogotá to Manila, the war on drugs has left broken lives, weakened democracies, and empowered authoritarian regimes. These outcomes repeat across regions by design, as the drug war consolidates coercive power rather than alleviating social harms. Reimagining drug policy requires confronting the political economies of militarism and inequality underpinning the drug war, not just technocratic reforms. Only then can we envision a future where justice, human rights, and democracy survive prohibition. The lesson is clear: prohibition's coercive approach enables authoritarian statecraft, consequently undermining democratic governance that is necessary for human rights. Reversing course demands political courage to end a failed punitive system that has destroyed human dignity.

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