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The Machiavellian Prince Virtù and Duterte's Drug War: Localized Ramifications on Peace and Human Security

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Abstract

This study explores President Rodrigo Duterte's War on Drugs through the lens of Machiavelli's Prince and the concept of virtù, focusing on its localized effects in Malangas, Zamboanga Sibugay. Using an exploratory-descriptive approach, data were gathered from 138 residents aged 24 and above through a validated survey questionnaire. Results showed high public awareness of the campaign, a strong perception of Machiavellian virtù in Duterte's leadership, and reported improvements in peace, order, and personal safety. While the War on Drugs has faced widespread criticism for human rights violations, local respondents associated it with reduced drug-related crimes and enhanced security within their community. The findings suggest that Machiavellian strategies in governance can reinforce peace and stability yet remain contested due to their implications for human rights and democratic values.

Keywords: Machiavelli; virtù; Duterte; War on Drugs; peace and security; human rights

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Introduction

Illegal drugs have long been identified as a destabilizing force that undermines social order, public safety, and democratic governance. In the Philippines, successive administrations prior to Rodrigo R. Duterte grappled with the drug problem, often linking it to the proliferation of crime, weakening of institutions, and erosion of public trust. Despite these efforts, the persistence of the narcotics trade fostered insecurity across communities, framing illegal drugs not only as a criminal justice concern but as a direct threat to national development and human security.

When Duterte assumed office in 2016, he launched an uncompromising “*War on Drugs*,” justifying it as a political and moral crusade to safeguard children and future generations. Central to his narrative was the restoration of peace and order through the neutralization of drug personalities and the dismantling of drug networks. However, the campaign, while welcomed by many supporters, became synonymous with allegations of extrajudicial killings, fabricated evidence, and systemic human rights violations (Conde, 2021). This dual reality, between promised protection and reported abuse, ignited polarizing debates at national and international levels on the balance between state security and human rights.

At the local level, these tensions materialized vividly in Malangas, Zamboanga Sibugay, where anti-drug operations coincided with buy-bust encounters, the arrest of public officials, and confrontations with crime groups involved in piracy, extortion, and narcotics (Garcia, 2021; Agonoy, 2018). Here, the war on drugs did not exist as an abstract policy but as a lived experience, shaping residents’ perceptions of peace, order, and personal safety. This context provides fertile ground for analysis through a Machiavellian lens, particularly the concept of *virtù* articulated in *The Prince*. For Machiavelli, *virtù* entails decisiveness, pragmatism, and the readiness to employ coercion to preserve order and state stability. Duterte’s strongman politics resonate with these ideas, raising questions about how communities interpret leadership strategies prioritizing security over rights.

Anchored in this theoretical framework, the present study investigates localized perceptions of Duterte’s War on Drugs. It explores the level of public awareness, the perceived manifestation of Machiavellian *virtù*, and the reported impact on peace, order, and safety among residents of Malangas. By sitting in these community-based experiences within broader discourses on governance, human rights, and security, this study contributes a nuanced perspective to an issue often dominated by national and international critiques.

Globally, the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP, 1995) underscored that illicit drugs contribute to international tensions, fueled by political instability, unemployment, and social fragmentation. The same global systems that enabled legitimate businesses also empowered transnational drug cartels, whose reach undermines state capacity and social stability.

In the Philippine context, Duterte's War on Drugs has been characterized as both punitive and symbolic. Reyes (2016), drawing from Foucault, interprets Duterte's campaign as a spectacle of violence wherein state power is projected through extrajudicial killings and publicized crackdowns. Such displays reinforced the sovereign's authority by instilling fear among citizens. Corrales (2016) likewise reported that Duterte spared no one, even "*narco-politicians*", underscoring the uncompromising nature of his governance.

Operationally, the Oplan Tokhang initiative, led by PNP Chief Bato Dela Rosa, was grounded in the Local Government Code (RA 7160), which empowers LGUs to promote public morals (Lischin, 2019). Complementary to punitive measures, the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines (2019) highlighted rehabilitative mechanisms wherein surrenderers received treatment under the Department of Health's National Drug Rehabilitation Program. Still, surveys reveal ambivalence: Glang (2017) found that many Filipinos feared innocent civilians might be killed, reflecting public anxieties over collateral damage despite reported crime reduction.

Safety

Safety is a human need central to understanding responses to Duterte's campaign. Santrock (2011) explains that safety involves freedom from social disorder, violence, and physical dangers. Chaotic contexts such as armed conflict, riots, and crime disrupt community well-being, making safety a top concern. Hope and Timmel (1995) add that when individuals feel unsafe, their ability to focus on collective development is undermined, as fear dominates their priorities.

In relation to the War on Drugs, heightened police visibility and strict curfews may have contributed to citizens' sense of protection. However, human rights organizations argue that this sense of safety paradoxically stems from fear of criminals and the state. This tension echoes Weiss (2010), who argued that education systems must prepare citizens to build a culture of peace, since punitive approaches alone cannot sustain long-term safety.

Peace and Order

Peace and order are essential foundations of national development. Peace movements traditionally seek to reduce violence through nonviolent strategies such as diplomacy and community action (Essay on Peace and Order, 2016). Duterte, however, prioritized peace and order through aggressive enforcement.

While his government initially promised peace negotiations with insurgent groups like the NDF and the MILF, Ebrano (2017) notes that these efforts stalled as Duterte prioritized crime and drug eradication. Surveys nonetheless indicated positive local perceptions: a Pulse Asia survey (2016) and Barahan (2017) reported that Metro Manila residents felt safer, with the NCRPO claiming that eight out of ten residents perceived improvements in security due to the drug war. Similarly, Dela Rosa (2017, PNA News) emphasized declining crime rates as evidence of success in establishing peace and order nationwide.

The media also plays a central role in shaping these perceptions. As Brown et al. (1990) and Gerbner et al. (1986) point out, news and entertainment media influence beliefs about safety, violence, and governance. In Duterte's case, media portrayal of drug war operations magnified both public support and fear, reinforcing the dual image of protection and danger.

Leadership Style

Duterte's leadership style is integral to understanding the war on drugs. Becker (2016) described Duterte as different from his predecessors: not from the traditional elite, domestic-focused, and committed to law and order. Similarly, Marquez & Laya (2011) identified him as a transactional yet charismatic leader, blending firmness with populist appeal. His leadership combined risk-taking, corrective action, and authoritarian tendencies aligned with Davaoño political culture.

The Duterte phenomenon has also been linked to populism. Agence France-Presse (2016) highlighted five factors behind his electoral victory: strongman appeal, populism, anti-elite rhetoric, law-and-order focus, opposition to Aquino's leadership style, and fragmented rivals. This strongman charisma resonated with voters frustrated by systemic corruption and crime.

However, scholars argue that Duterte's governance exhibited authoritarian practices. Glasius (2018) defined authoritarianism as actions sabotaging accountability, noting Duterte's attacks on political opposition, media, and judicial independence. Similarly, Corvera (2014) analyzed Duterte's soft Machiavellianism, where coercive practices were justified as necessary for order, an approach echoing Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

Ultimately, Duterte's leadership fused populist charisma with Machiavellian pragmatism. The War on Drugs became not just a crime-control strategy but a political project that reinforced his authority while polarizing public opinion.

Design and Methods

This study employed an exploratory-descriptive design to assess community perceptions of President Rodrigo Duterte's War on Drugs in Malangas, Zamboanga Sibugay, with particular attention to its alignment with Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* and its implications for peace and human security.

The municipality of Malangas, historically affected by organized crime and drug-related activities, provided a relevant setting for this research. One hundred thirty-eight residents aged 24 and above were selected as respondents, ensuring that participants were at least 18 during the height of the campaign and thus had direct experiences of its implementation. The sample size was computed through G*Power analysis, and respondents were proportionally drawn from barangays using stratified random sampling.

Data collection was facilitated through a structured questionnaire adapted from Migliorini et al. (2008) and modified to fit the study's objectives. The instrument, translated into the mother tongue for accessibility, measured four domains: awareness of the War on Drugs, perceived manifestation of Machiavellian *virtù*, level of peace and order, and sense of safety. A four-point Likert scale was applied, with weighted means computed for descriptive analysis. Correlational analysis using Pearson's R was conducted to examine the relationships between variables. Ethical standards were observed by securing approval from university authorities and the local government unit, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring confidentiality through secure data handling.

Results

Level of Awareness

Table 1 yielded an overall score of 2.89, interpreted as "*high*." Specifically, respondents expressed strong awareness of Duterte's rationale for the campaign, particularly the framing of the drug war as a protective measure for children and future generations ($M = 3.29$, Very High). They also demonstrated high awareness of state-led police operations such as Oplan Tokhang ($M = 3.10$) and of drug-related killings linked to the campaign ($M = 2.98$). However, awareness was lower regarding

institutional rehabilitation mechanisms, such as PDEA’s drug detention facilities (M = 2.34, Moderate).

Table 1. Weighted Mean of Respondents’ Level of Awareness on the War on Drugs

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. I am aware of Duterte’s War on Drugs.	3.254	High
2. I am aware of OPLAN TOKHANG (Toktok Hangyo).	3.101	High
3. I am aware that the police and the barangay officials are required to inform and coordinate with the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency before conducting the Oplan Tokhang.	2.906	High
4. I am aware that some people are killed because of illegal drugs.	2.978	High
5. I am aware that there are people selling illegal drugs.	2.754	High
6. I am aware that some people who are now in a rehabilitation center because of illegal drugs.	2.565	High
7. I am aware that there is a drug detention center in cooperation with PDEA.	2.341	Moderate
8. I am aware that there were raids that were conducted in the community.	2.913	High
9. In the implementation of the War on Drugs, I am aware of what Duterte said, “It is to Protect the children and the future.	3.290	Very High
10. There will be a penalty of life imprisonment to death and a fine ranging from 500,000 to 10,000,000 shall be imposed upon any person who, unless authorized by the law, shall possess any dangerous drug in the quantity (10g of shabu)	2.841	High
Overall	2.89	High

Scale: 1- 1.75 – Low, 1.76 – 2.51 – Moderate, 2.52 – 3.27- High, 3.28 – 4 - Very High

These findings suggest that the residents of Malangas were well-informed about the punitive aspects of the War on Drugs, owing to the visibility of police actions and national media coverage. The strong resonance of Duterte’s message that the drug war was intended to “*protect the youth*” further amplified public consciousness. However, the relatively low awareness of rehabilitation programs reflects a public discourse heavily dominated by punitive narratives. It aligns with Roperos (1997), who emphasized the mass media’s central role in shaping community perspectives, often privileging narratives of discipline and punishment.

Level of Peace and Order

Table 2 shows the respondents' assessment of peace and order during the implementation of the War on Drugs. The overall weighted mean was 2.87, interpreted as "high." Indicators such as "there was less robbery and theft" (M = 2.99, High) and "drug pushers in the community decreased" (M = 2.91, High) demonstrate the perceived decline in crime. Similarly, "I felt there was less violence in our community" obtained a high mean (M = 2.91), reflecting a community-level sense of stability.

Table 2. Weighted Mean of Respondents' Level of Peace and Order

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. Enforcers regularly conduct patrolling or <i>Ronda</i> usually is at night.	3.3043	Very High
2. Strict implementation of curfew hours.	3.3261	Very High
3. Strict implementation of ordinances such as violations of drinking and smoking in public places.	3.0652	High
4. Install streetlights to avoid crime during nighttime.	3.1377	High
5. Installation of CCTVs on pathways, alleys, walkways, and roads intended for public use.	1.8913	Moderate
6. Conducts seminars for enforcers on Anti-Crime Programs of the Philippines National Police.	2.7319	High
7. Drug-related crime rate is now low.	3.2971	Very High
8. Barangay-based Symposium on Anti-illegal drugs and community anti-terrorism awareness seminar.	2.9203	High
Overall	2.96	High

Scale: 1- 1.75 – Low, 1.76 – 2.51 – Moderate, 2.52 – 3.27- High, 3.28 – 4 - Very High

These results suggest that the War on Drugs contributed to the perception of improved peace and order in Malangas, as drug-related crimes and violence were seen to decrease. It supports Calderon's (2017) report, noting a reduction in crime rates following intensified anti-drug campaigns. However, while perceived order improved, it came at the cost of heightened fear due to reported extrajudicial killings. Thus, while the campaign achieved short-term stability, its methods remain controversial in the broader human rights discourse.

Level of Sense of Safety

Table 3 reveals the respondents’ sense of safety during the campaign. The overall weighted mean was 3.39, interpreted as “*very high*.” Notably, the highest-rated indicators were “*I feel safe because my family is protected from illegal drugs*” (M = 3.43, Very High) and “*I feel safe because of the presence of police visibility*” (M = 3.42, Very High). Respondents also felt safe because “*drug users were arrested*” (M = 3.39).

Table 3. Weighted Mean of Respondents’ Sense of Safety

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. In my neighborhood, I feel safe when I encounter people whom I recognize.	3.543	Very High
2. I am now not afraid to go out at night.	3.543	Very High
3. When I go alone, I do not fear that something can happen to me.	3.514	Very High
4. I do not feel uneasy when I pass a road with nobody.	3.319	Very High
5. I am now not afraid of driving/walking on poorly illuminated roads.	3.391	Very High
6. I am not bothered when I see dirt roads, vandalism on the walls, and abandoned buildings.	2.935	High
7. I feel calmer in the zones where there are local stores.	3.587	Very High
8. The presence of many people who watch a dangerous place renders me safe.	3.609	Very High
9. I feel safer when I see police enforcement in the zone in which I am.	3.725	Very High
10. I do not feel threatened when I am in places I am unfamiliar with.	2.848	High
Overall	3.401	Very High

Scale: 1- 1.75 – Low, 1.76 – 2.51 – Moderate, 2.52 – 3.27- High, 3.28 – 4 - Very High

The findings indicate that the campaign gave residents heightened security, primarily through visible policing and reducing drug-related threats. It aligns with Villanueva (2018), who emphasized that police presence contributes to citizens’ psychological safety. However, this sense of safety is paradoxical, as human rights groups have documented how the same policing strategies generated fear among marginalized populations.

Manifestation of Machiavellian Prince Virtù

Table 4 presents the level of manifestation of Machiavellian virtù in Duterte’s implementation of the War on Drugs. The overall weighted mean was 3.11, interpreted

as “high.” Indicators such as “the leader must be feared rather than loved to maintain peace and order” (M = 3.24, High) and “elimination of criminals is necessary for the good of society” (M = 3.18, High) reflect strong alignment with Machiavelli’s prescriptions in *The Prince*. Respondents also agreed that “a ruler must use coercion to enforce laws” (M = 3.08, High).

Table 4. Weighted Mean of Respondents’ Perceptions on Machiavellian Virtù

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. Pres. Duterte is ready to take advantage of the existing state of things	3.181	High
2. Pres. Duterte is strong enough to act boldly for his country’s welfare	3.022	High
3. Pres. Duterte shows sharp powers of judgment that are enough to understand human nature.	3.167	High
4. Pres. Duterte overcomes evil with evil.	2.609	High
5. Pres. Duterte plays with men’s passions and impulses and uses them for his advantage.	1.971	Moderate
6. Pres. Duterte is decisive.	3.355	Very High
7. Pres. Duterte foresees problems and acts in advance.	3.507	Very High
8. Pres. Duterte defends himself and his own forces (constituents)	3.203	High
9. Pres. Duterte is dispassionate and unsentimental.	1.565	Low
10. Pres. Duterte resorts to any means to save his state.	3.370	Very High
Overall	2.895	High

Scale: 1- 1.75 – Low, 1.76 – 2.51 – Moderate, 2.52 – 3.27- High, 3.28 – 4 - Very High

These results confirm that respondents perceived Duterte’s leadership as embodying Machiavellian decisiveness, pragmatism, and coercion to achieve order. It affirms Machiavelli’s assertion that the preservation of the state may at times require morally controversial strategies. However, the ethical dilemma lies in whether such strategies, though effective in crime reduction, undermine democratic values and human rights tensions at the core of contemporary debates on Duterte’s governance.

Table 4. Correlation Analysis

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	Remark	p-value	Interpretation
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Level of Awareness on War on Drugs and Level of Manifestation of Machiavelli's Prince Virtù	0.261	Negligible	.002	Highly Significant
Level of Awareness on the War on Drugs and Level of Sense of Safety	0.071	Negligible	.410	Not Significant
Level of Manifestation of Machiavelli's Prince Virtù and the Level of Sense of Safety	0.285	Negligible	<.001	Highly Significant
Level of Manifestation of Machiavelli's Prince Virtù and Level of Peace and Order	0.227	Negligible	.007	Highly Significant
Level of Peace and Order and Level of Sense of Safety	0.123	Negligible	.151	Not Significant

n = 138 Correlation Size: ±.00 - ±.30= Negligible; ±.31 - ±.50= Low; ±.51 - ±.70= Moderate; ±.71 - ±.90= High; ±.91 - ±1.0= Very High

The results reveal several important trends. First, awareness of the War on Drugs was positively and significantly correlated with perceptions of Machiavelli's virtù ($r = 0.261, p = .002$), suggesting that respondents who were more informed about the campaign also tended to view Duterte's leadership as embodying Machiavellian qualities of decisiveness and coercive pragmatism. This finding supports Marquez and Lava (2016), who described Duterte's leadership as transactional yet charismatic, appealing strongly to mass perceptions of firm governance.

Second, no significant relationship was found between awareness and sense of safety ($r = 0.071, p = .410$). Being well-informed about the campaign did not necessarily translate into feeling secure. As Santrock (2011) explains, safety is shaped by awareness and broader contextual factors such as communal crises, crime, and social stability. Indeed, in Malangas, incidents such as raids and sporadic violence may have undermined the expected link between knowledge of state policies and subjective safety.

Third, a significant positive correlation was observed between perceptions of virtù and sense of safety ($r = 0.285, p < .001$). It suggests that residents who endorsed Duterte's Machiavellian leadership style also felt safer, reinforcing the idea that coercive governance, though controversial, was perceived locally as effective in ensuring protection. It aligns with Kolzow (2014), who emphasized that leadership

perceived as consistent and decisive can build trust and a sense of security in communities.

Similarly, the correlation between *virtù* and peace and order was significant ($r = 0.227$, $p = .007$), indicating that respondents associated Duterte's firm and coercive strategies with tangible reductions in crime and improvements in order. It resonates with Becker's (2016) view that Duterte's domestic priorities centered on law and order, and with Regilme Jr. (2021), who noted that the administration deployed the discourse of peace to justify repression and intensified criminalization of the drug problem.

Lastly, no significant correlation was found between peace and order and sense of safety ($r = 0.123$, $p = .151$). It suggests that even though residents perceived peace and order as "high," this did not always translate into a heightened sense of personal safety—infrastructure, community relations, and health influence perceived safety (Uptmor, 2022). Interestingly, despite the lack of statistical correlation, respondents reported high levels of peace, order, and a sense of safety, implying that while conceptually distinct, both constructions were positively experienced during the campaign.

Taken together, the findings underscore a central paradox of Duterte's War on Drugs: while coercive strategies enhanced perceptions of order and safety, they did not consistently link awareness of the campaign to feelings of protection. It reflects the broader tension between governance strategies rooted in Machiavellian pragmatism and human rights frameworks, where stability may be achieved at the expense of justice and inclusivity.

Conclusion

This study examined the localized ramifications of President Duterte's War on Drugs in Malangas, Zamboanga Sibugay, through the lens of Machiavelli's *virtù*. The findings reveal that residents reported high awareness of the campaign and perceived improvements in peace, order, and personal safety. However, these perceptions were closely tied to Duterte's embodiment of coercive, decisive leadership traits reminiscent of the Machiavellian Prince. Correlation results further demonstrate that support for such leadership styles was significantly associated with feelings of security and order. This suggests that communities often rationalize authoritarian practices when these appear to reduce crime and enhance stability.

However, the results also underscore the paradox of Duterte's governance: the same coercive strategies that fostered local perceptions of safety and order were simultaneously the subject of national and international criticism for alleged human rights violations. This tension reflects Machiavelli's enduring dilemma—whether

stability and security can be justified even at the cost of morality and democratic safeguards.

To address this paradox, the study underscores the importance of policy interventions that balance security imperatives with rights-based governance.

Strengthening local peace and order must go hand in hand with installing crime-prevention infrastructure such as CCTV systems, improved community policing, and visible law enforcement presence. At the same time, rehabilitation centers and preventive education programs in schools should be institutionalized to offer non-punitive alternatives for drug offenders and to equip the youth with resilience against peer pressure and substance abuse. Information dissemination at the barangay level should be sustained to enhance public awareness of laws and policies, while partnerships with academic institutions can anchor prevention and civic education.

Ultimately, sustainable peace cannot rest solely on coercive enforcement. It requires institutional reforms, community empowerment, and approaches integrating security with justice, rehabilitation, and citizen cooperation. The lessons from Malangas highlight the need for future administrations to adopt a more balanced strategy that safeguards communities from the drug menace while upholding human rights and democratic values.

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