



The Unfreedom Monitor

A Methodology for Tracking Digital Authoritarianism Around the World

THE PHILIPPINES
COUNTRY REPORT

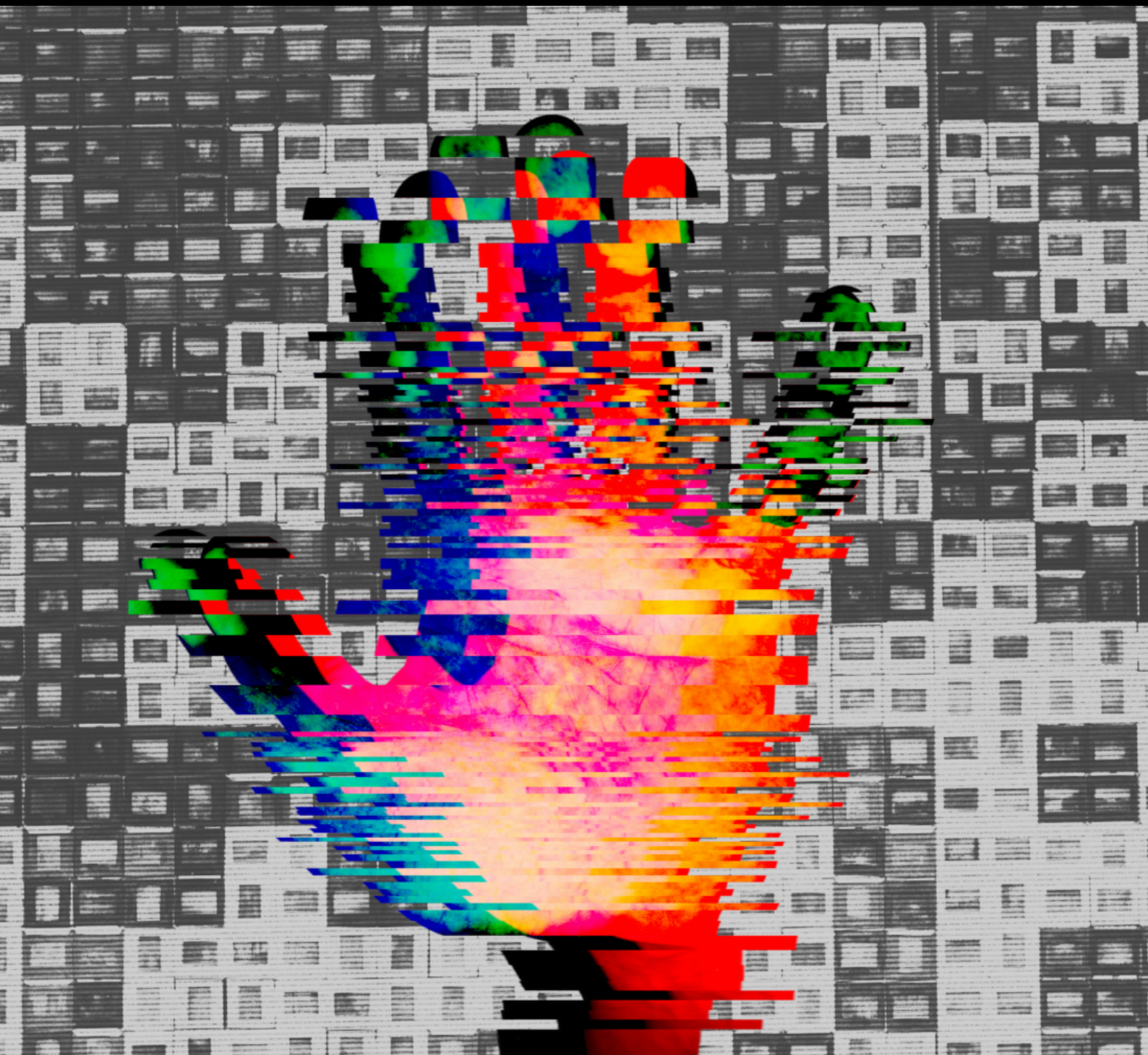


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After the ouster of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, democratic institutions were restored in the Philippines. This did not mean, however, that the Filipino people have been able to exercise basic rights and freedoms since then.

In May 2022, Marcos's son and namesake won the presidential elections (clouded by allegations of electoral fraud) through massive disinformation campaigns, vote buying and electoral fraud. Like his father, Marcos Jr. resorts to authoritarianism, albeit digital and more insidious as it is coupled with a well-funded and well-oiled disinformation drive.

Over the past six years, the civic space in the Philippines has been shrinking as the Duterte and Marcos Jr. administrations enacted laws that threaten hard-won freedoms. Among these are the Anti-Terror Act, which contains provisions on digital surveillance, and punishes "inciting to terrorism," and the SIM Registration Act, which requires all mobile phone users to register their personal information.

Removing the need for martial law, these two laws create a chilling effect among the populace, and stifle all forms of dissent.

The libel laws in the Philippines are weaponised against critical and independent media practitioners. Attacks on journalists and media organisations have been documented under the new Marcos Jr. administration, in a continuation of the situation under previous president, Rodrigo Duterte. Between June 30, 2022, the day that Ferdinand Marcos Jr. assumed the presidency, and December 31, 2022, the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) has recorded 38 incidents of press freedom violations.

Other forms of digital authoritarianism include persistent hate speech in the form of red-tagging (the practice of labelling individuals and groups as allied with the communists), of the government's perceived enemies, and cyber attacks such as distributed denial of service (DDoS) and website blocking.

These tactics are used alongside a systematic and well-oiled disinformation campaign. The country has been considered as the "patient zero" of digital disinformation, according to a 2018 study by academics Jonathan Ong and Jason Vincent Cabañes ([Ong and Cabañes](#)). The study revealed that politicians spend millions of pesos to hire trolls for their propaganda. ([Ong and Cabañes](#)).

During his campaign for the presidency, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. heavily relied on social media platforms, particularly Tiktok, YouTube and Facebook, to distort facts about his father, the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and his family's ill-gotten wealth. His trolls, on the other hand, attacked his opponents, and anyone who dared set the record straight on his father's dictatorial rule from 1972 until the family was ousted from power in 1986. This well-funded disinformation drive proved to be one of the factors why Marcos Jr. won the presidency, according to analysts ([Ratcliffe](#)).

Now in power, Marcos Jr. practises digital authoritarianism to suppress dissent. Human rights defenders are pushing back against these threats and attacks.

BACKGROUND

The Philippines has signed major international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was ratified after the ouster of dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution, born out of the anti-dictatorship movement, guarantees basic civil and political rights such as freedom of thought, freedom of speech and of the press.

Ferdinand Marcos placed the country under absolute military dictatorship on September 21, 1972 so that he could prolong his stay in power. He would have ended his second four-year term by 1973 had he not declared martial law. Freedom of the press was suppressed, with the closure of independent media outlets; he only allowed newspapers run by his cronies to continue operations. This paved the way for the flourishing of the underground press and consequently, aboveground anti-Marcos newspapers such as the WE Forum and Ang Pahayagang Malaya.

Thousands of activists and other civilians were arrested, detained and tortured. They filed and won a class suit against the Marcoses filed in Hawaii, but members of the Marcos family have not yet been punished.

After the ouster of Marcos in 1986, democratic institutions were restored in the Philippines. This does not mean, however, that the Filipino people have been able to exercise basic rights and freedoms. Many of the repressive decrees signed by Marcos have not been repealed, for example, the Batas Pambansa 880 (BP 880) that restricts and controls the right to peaceful assembly, and General Orders 66 and 67 authorising checkpoints and warrantless searches.

The administrations that followed Marcos implemented brutal campaigns supposedly meant to end the armed insurgency in the country. Most of the victims of these operations were civilians, as documented by various human rights organisations.

Those who had the worst human rights records were Corazon Aquino (1986-1992), Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2001-2010) and Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022).

During the Cory Aquino administration, human rights group Task Force Detainees of the Philippines recorded more than 1.2 million victims of dislocations due to military operations, 135 cases of massacres, 1,064 victims of summary executions, and 20,523 victims of illegal arrest and detention ([Olea](#), 2009).

During the term of Macapagal-Arroyo, on the other hand, human rights group Karapatan recorded 1,190 victims of extrajudicial killings, 205 victims of enforced disappearances, 1,028 victims of torture, and hundreds of thousands were forcibly displaced in rural areas as a result of military operations ([Olea](#), 2011).

Duterte, meanwhile, implemented a bloody campaign against illegal drugs. Based on government data, 8,663 were killed — but a 2017 government report revealed that 16,355 were slain by unidentified vigilantes ([United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#)). Under Duterte, Karapatan also documented 427 civilians killed, 19 victims of enforced disappearances, 226 victims of torture and over 470,000 victims of forced evacuation due to military operations ([Karapatan](#)).

In May 2022, Marcos's son and namesake was perceived to have won the presidential elections through a massive disinformation campaign, vote buying and electoral fraud. Critics pointed out that, like his father, Marcos Jr. resorts to authoritarianism, albeit digital and more insidious as it is coupled with a well-funded and well-oiled disinformation drive ([Palatino, 2022](#)).

COUNTRY POLITICAL HISTORY

The Philippines was a colony of Spain for more than 300 years. On December 10, 1898, Spain sold the Philippines to the United States for USD 20 million (roughly USD 715.17 million today) in an agreement called the Treaty of Paris. The United States then colonised the Philippines but Filipinos fought the new invaders, with the Filipino-American War ensuing from 1899 until 1902 (Zeeshan).

Sporadic uprisings by Filipino freedom fighters continued even as some of the leaders surrendered to the Americans until Japanese forces invaded the country in December 1941. The joint Filipino and American forces fought the Japanese but General Douglas MacArthur who led the US forces withdrew to Australia. Farmers established the armed resistance group Hukbo ng Bayan laban sa mga Hapon (Hukbalahap), which led the guerrilla warfare against the Japanese soldiers. The Philippines declared freedom from Japan on July 4, 1945.

On the same day of the following year, the Philippines was declared independent from the United States.

From that year on, the Republic of the Philippines elects its president and vice president every six years. The president appoints heads of various government agencies. The Philippine government has three branches, namely the executive, legislative and the judiciary. The separation of the powers of these three branches was interrupted when then President Ferdinand Marcos placed the country under Martial Law on September 21, 1972. He took absolute control of the country by changing the Constitution, extending his powers and even appointing local leaders ([Martial Law Museum](#)).

Human rights violations were perpetrated by state forces during this period. According to Amnesty International, some 70,000 people were imprisoned and 34,000 were tortured; over 3,200 people were killed between 1972 and 1981 ([AFP Philippines](#)).

“ Like his father, Marcos Jr. resorts to authoritarianism, albeit digital and more insidious as it is coupled with a well-funded and well-oiled disinformation drive

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The Marcos family also amassed an estimated USD 5 to 10 billion (roughly USD 7.86 billion to USD 15.71 billion in today's money), or more than PHP 500 billion in ill-gotten wealth, according to the World Bank and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) Stolen Asset Recovery report ([International Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#)).

Marcos was ousted in a popular uprising in February 1986, following protests in the aftermath of snap elections.

The anti-dictatorship struggle restored democratic institutions and paved the way for the ratification of the 1987 Philippine Constitution, which guarantees basic civil and political rights.

Still, government branches are often run by leaders who come from "a small upper strata minority which is characterised by economic and social prominence" ([Simbulan](#)). Absent meaningful economic change in the country, they continued to have control over vast agricultural lands and key corporate interests.

The political system has continued despite the Philippine government holding national elections once every six years, as it is often dominated by the same economic and social elite, now referred to as political dynasties. These political families adapt to the "changing contours of the social, economic and political terrains" and "extend their dominance by bequeathing power to their next of kin" ([Teehankee](#)).

Moreover, the conduct of the Philippine elections has always been held in doubt despite the system of direct vote introduced by its US colonisers over a century ago ([Teehankee](#)).

In the most recent elections in 2022, a group of human rights workers, church people, and former parliamentarians formed an International Observers' Mission and noted how it was neither free nor fair ([Umil](#)). They noted the impact of the intensified red-tagging (accusing people of communist sympathies) to silence critical voices during the election campaign, vote buying, and the proliferation of false information in social media platforms.

In May 2022, Marcos's son and namesake Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was declared the winner in the presidential elections. His campaign included systematic disinformation attempting to erase the sins of his family.

Activists imprisoned during martial law maintained that one of the important factors for the comeback of the Marcoses is the failure of administrations that succeeded them to hold the Marcos family accountable for its human rights abuses ([Olea](#), 2016).

Human rights group SELDA said that from Cory Aquino, who replaced Marcos Sr. after the people power uprising in 1986, until the term of Rodrigo Duterte, the Marcoses have not been made to pay for their crimes, and so their political clout and a significant portion of their ill-gotten wealth have remained intact ([Lema & Allard](#), 2022).

“ From Cory Aquino, who replaced Marcos Sr. after the people power uprising in 1986, until the term of Rodrigo Duterte, the Marcoses have not been made to pay for their crimes, and so their political clout and a significant portion of their ill-gotten wealth have remained intact ”

Duterte made it easier for the Marcoses to go back to Malacañang palace, as he ordered a hero's burial for the late dictator ([Mogato, Lerma](#)). Like Marcos Sr., Duterte had no qualms in ruling with an iron-fist, albeit without declaring martial law.

Duterte implemented a bloody campaign against illegal drugs, with nearly 30,000 drug suspects killed, according to independent estimates ([Luna](#), 2021).

It was also during Duterte's regime that the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) was enacted. The law's definition of terrorism is vague and too broad, and it contains provisions that violate civil liberties, including electronic surveillance and freezing the assets of suspected terrorists ([Olea](#), 2020).

From Marcos Sr. until today, the country has depended on the World Bank and the IMF for stabilisation loans and structural adjustment program loans, which are conditional on liberalisation and the privatisation of government assets, among other requirements ([Abocejo](#)).

Under the first Marcos administration, the Philippines became the first country in Asia to receive the World Bank's structural adjustment loan that stripped local industries of protection from an influx of competitively priced imported goods. This hit the local sectors of food processing, textile and garments, leather and leather products, pulp and paper, cement, iron and steel, and automotives ([Ibon Foundation](#)).

In a 2014 study, it was noted that the conditions imposed by the IMF had resulted in a decline in government spending on social services such as health and education, making the "poor, whose share in the population pie comprises the largest, suffer the disproportionate cost of adjustments" ([Abocejo](#)).

STATUS OF THE PRESS

The Philippine press traces its roots to its revolutionary tradition. One of the early newspapers in the country, La Solidaridad, served as a platform in voicing the sentiments of the reformist and revolutionary movements in the Philippines, which was then a Spanish colony ([Neumann](#)).

A. Lin Neumann, executive editor of The Standard of Hong Kong and a former program coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists, noted that "American-style journalism" later flourished as "its florid language, tradition of standing apart from government, and use of outspoken columnists became the norm."

This trend emerged despite the libel law being introduced in the Philippines during US colonisation.

In a 2014 dissenting opinion, Supreme Court associate justice Marvic Mario Victor F. Leonen said that "libel law now is used not so much to prosecute but deter speech."

“Journalism is a dangerous profession in the Philippines, with 197 journalists killed since 1986

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Libel laws have been found incompatible with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which the Philippines is a state party. The ICCPR has also recommended the decriminalisation of libel, saying that imprisonment “is never an appropriate penalty,” and that it could have “a chilling effect that may unduly restrict the exercise of freedom of expression of the person concerned and others.”

Instead of decriminalising libel, the Philippine government instead passed the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, which imposed a higher penalty for online libel ([Elloran](#)).

The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines has noted the use of libel and cyber libel to intimidate journalists who are critical of government policies, with at least 56 cases of cyber libel and libel charges filed before Philippine courts since 2017 ([Clarín](#), 2022).

When the Philippine appellate court upheld the libel conviction of Nobel peace prize awardee Maria Ressa, the court also increased the maximum prison sentence by several months, and the prescriptive period for online libel to 15 years instead of 10 years for regular libel ([Carpio](#)).

Journalism is a dangerous profession in the Philippines, with 197 journalists killed since 1986, according to the NUJP ([Conde](#), 2022). Studies point to the vulnerabilities of journalists in the countryside, where democratic institutions are generally weaker and there is less access to the protection that their counterparts in the country’s capital would have ([Loo](#)).

Other forms of attack against journalists include threats, surveillance, and red-tagging. A 2021 report by the Freedom for Media Freedom for All Coalition showed that state agents were linked to half of the recorded 223 cases of attacks against press freedom under former president Rodrigo Duterte ([Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism](#)).

Gender-based attacks against Filipino women journalists have also been reported. A study conducted by the International Association of Women in Radio and Television, Philippines showed that Filipino women journalists face sexual harassment in workplaces and there are no secure reporting mechanisms to seek accountability against perpetrators, who include colleagues and news sources, such as ranking government officials and state security officers ([Ellao et al](#)). This contributes to the “culture of silence,” that has long been observed among women journalists who face gender-based violence as they fear not being taken seriously, appearing weak ([Wolfe](#)), losing assignments, and even their jobs ([Oukhiar](#)).

Under the new Marcos Jr. administration, attacks on journalists and media organisations continue. The NUJP recorded 38 incidents of press freedom violations from the time Marcos Jr. assumed the presidency until December 2022. These include the filing of libel charges, cyber attacks, and red-tagging, among others.

Reporters Without Borders ranked the country 147th out of 180 countries in the 2022 World Press Freedom Index, while the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked the Philippines seventh in its 2022 Global Impunity Index (Dunham).

INTERNET PATTERN AND PENETRATION

The internet in the Philippines is among the slowest and most expensive in the world ([Toledo](#)).

Internet infrastructure is owned and controlled by the country's two biggest telecommunication companies, PLDT and Globe. These include submarine cables, landing stations, and the backhaul network. As such, they can dictate the "cost and quality of Internet and broadband service in the Philippines, both fixed and mobile" ([Santos](#)).

Still, the number of Filipino internet users has grown significantly since it first connected to the World Wide Web back in 1994 ([Labucay](#)), with internet penetration increasing from virtually nothing to 36 percent in 2012.

Computer ownership was earlier the indicator of internet penetration in the country, as, for a time, it used to be the only device that could be used to access the internet ([Labucay](#)). Computer ownership in households located in Metro Manila who belong to the middle to upper classes has always been the highest.

As of 2013, Metro Manila households were recorded to be "at least twice more likely than households in the provincial areas to own a computer" ([Labucay](#)).

From 1990 to 2020, the number of individuals with access to the internet in the Philippines reached only 50 percent of the population. Meanwhile, the same data set revealed that its neighbouring countries like Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and South Korea have much higher penetration, at 70, 78, 90, and 97 percent, respectively ([World Bank](#)). Internet users in the Philippines increased by 2.8 percent between 2021 and 2022 ([Kemp](#)).

Today, internet penetration is high especially in urban areas. At the start of 2022, there were 156.6 million cellular mobile connections, according to GSMA Intelligence, and 97.2 percent of Filipinos access the internet via mobile phones ([Kemp](#)).

However, internet access for people who live in the whole of Visayas and Mindanao, where the economic situation and access to social services are not good, is lower than those in the National Capital Region ([Statistica](#)). These island groups, Visayas and Mindanao, have penetration rates of 22 and 37 percentage points less than the Philippine capital, respectively.

According to We are Social, the top reasons Filipinos use the internet include:

1. finding information (83.7 percent),
2. staying in touch with friends and family (81.9 percent),
3. researching how to do things (78.5 percent),
4. watching videos, TV shows and movies (74 percent), and
5. finding new ideas and inspiration ([Llamas](#)).

As of February 2022, there are 92.05 million social media users in the Philippines, accounting for 82.4 percent of the population. Filipinos spend an average of 10 hours and 27 minutes using the internet each day.

According to the same survey, Facebook and Facebook Messenger are the top social media platforms, with 96.2 percent of Filipinos having Facebook accounts. Instagram (75.9 percent of the population), Tiktok (67.9 percent) and Twitter (59.2 percent) are the other popular platforms among Filipinos.

ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN THE MEDIA SPACE

Internet and social media play a big part of the media space in the Philippines as they have persistently ranked among the top sources of news in the country. This was also reflected in a recent study by the Ateneo School of Government, which showed that 78.8 percent of respondents get their news from incidental news exposure from their Facebook feed ([Mateo](#)).

The internet has also heralded “the rise of new media” that provide real-time information on issues affecting the people. This has allowed the audience not only to have a broader choice of where to get their news but also the time and space to do so ([Franco](#)).

Dominant media organisations also use their online presence to earn revenues through advertising and to engage their audience. The internet became a platform for cause oriented groups to disseminate information ([Media Landscapes](#)). The Media Landscape report noted that the internet provided an affordable platform to post reports that are “mostly guided by news values different from those that guide mainstream news.”

Globally, disinformation has been described as a “global silencer.” With the decline in the trust in media in the past decade, Liz Corbin, editor of BBC’s fact-checking team, said “seeds of doubt are being sown and that is incredibly dangerous for the future of the free press” ([Lees](#)).

The Philippines has been considered the “patient zero” of digital disinformation, according to a 2018 study ([Luna](#), 2019).

The spread of disinformation online is also attributed to the rise of professional trolls, with a 2019 study revealing that politicians spend millions of pesos to hire them ([Luna](#), 2019).

Even as early as the 1990s, there have been studies that looked into how political strategists have been weaponising the media to favour their agenda. Online political trolling nowadays includes both professional and real individuals who “happen to believe in and, consequently, participate in propagating the concerted messages laid out by the professional trolls, who reportedly can earn up to \$55 a day, which is five times bigger than the minimum wage in the Philippine capital” ([Cabañes and Cornelio](#)).

“ A cursory review of Marcos Jr.’s vlogs during the election period shows that the content primarily aims to whitewash the human rights record during the years of his father’s dictatorial rule

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For one, during his campaign for the presidency, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. also used social media platforms, particularly Tiktok, YouTube and Facebook, to distort facts about his father, the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and his family's ill-gotten wealth ([Beltran](#)). Freedom House's 2022 Freedom on the Net noted that during the May 2022 elections, candidates and campaigns, particularly Marcos Jr.'s campaign, hired disinformation firms and microinfluencers, and coordinated harassment campaigns against critics and the media ([Freedom House](#)).

A cursory review of Marcos Jr.'s vlogs during the election period shows that the content primarily aims to whitewash the human rights record during the years of his father's dictatorial rule and to paint a rosy picture of the economic and political situation back then ([Peña](#)).

METHODOLOGY

The Unfreedom Monitor combines the methodology used in Global Voices' previous work on media observatories with an in-depth analysis of the contextual issues around digital authoritarianism. The Civic Media Observatory (CMO) approach is primarily qualitative and looks beyond socio-technical causes to consider power analysis, offer a way to discuss effects, and emphasise what works as well as what is negative. It is a framework that can be consistently applied across a range of settings, in order to identify and contextualise both positive and disruptive developments, to explain the forces and motives underlying them, as well as the narrative framing devices that often require local knowledge to interpret and weigh. This method is particularly helpful in the case of countries, like the Philippines, where authoritarian trends are less direct and require contextual information.

This method allows us to compare, draw lessons, and consolidate learning about the trends, systems and rules that influence what we know, and how we know it. The observatory includes datasets of media items, structured analysis of context and subtext, and a civic impact score that rates media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse.

This study on the Philippines focused on two incidents of digital authoritarianism in the last two years. The first incident was backed by 18 items and the second by 10 items. The two incidents are connected with each other. The red-tagging of journalists and media outlets preceded the order to block the websites of the two media outlets. Items included in the study are from publications, international watchdogs and social media posts, particularly from Facebook and YouTube. Narratives and counter-narratives were analysed for the study.

The first incident is the government order to block 27 websites, including two media outlets. The National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) issued a memorandum dated June 8, 2022, ordering internet service providers in the Philippines to implement DNS blocking against 27 websites for allegedly being "terrorist friendly." Two of these websites are media organisations and several others are websites of NGOs critical of government policies.

The NTC attached a letter from then National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr., citing Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) resolutions designating several organisations and individuals as terrorists. Many of the blocked websites, however, are not designated as terrorists by the ATC. No due process was observed and no evidence has been presented to support the claims.

The NTC order is just the most recent form of state censorship against independent media and critical voices in the Philippines.

The second incident is the practice of red-tagging as part of a disinformation campaign. The National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and other government officials have been routinely labelling journalists, political dissenters and human rights advocates as "communists" or "communist sympathisers" via social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Its former spokesperson, Lorraine Badoy, also a former communications undersecretary, continues her red-tagging via social media and SMNI, a TV network linked to a close ally of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

Red-tagging often translates to other forms of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, trumped-up charges, surveillance, among others, to the point that the UN human rights office expressed alarm over the incidents ([United Nations](#)).

In the selection process, the researcher looked for media items by Philippine government officials, public media, journalists and civil society leaders. These items were analysed by the researcher in terms of sources, narrative frames, subtext, context, reactions, popularity, and a civic impact score that categorised the media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse and society at large. The coding process was done on a collaborative and relational database on the platform Airtable, and the coding was revised and discussed with editors of the project, which ensured clarity and consistency among all the researchers.

The crucial research questions were: how does digital authoritarianism in the Philippines work and how are digital technologies being used by the government to advance its political interests while harming citizens' rights, like privacy or freedom of expression? To answer this question, four critical dimensions were considered: data governance, speech, access, and information. Another question was: what are the main contours of digital authoritarianism in the Philippines and what are the pro- and anti-state media narratives? To evaluate this aspect, three important elements were included: motives, methods, and responses to digital authoritarianism.

“Red-tagging often translates to other forms of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, trumped-up charges, surveillance, among others

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The study was limited by a few factors. To begin with, while qualitative case studies have their value, it is not always straightforward to generalise from them to the populace at large. Time frame and capacity issues mean that we did not manage to access all of the narrative frames available.

MAPPING THE COUNTRY CHALLENGE WITH DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Digital authoritarianism in the Philippines takes many forms.

DATA GOVERNANCE

Violations of data privacy and data protection have been committed by state agencies and private corporations, primarily through data leaks. One of the biggest data leaks involves the entire database of the Commission of Elections when its website was hacked in March 2016. The data spill has left 55 million Filipino voters at risk of identity theft and other forms of fraud ([Leyden](#)).

In April 2021, UK company TorgenSec discovered the massive leak of 345,000 documents from the Philippine Office of the Solicitor General due to security lapses ([TorgenSec](#)). The firm said that the data breach is particularly alarming as it could impact ongoing prosecutions and national security.

Mass surveillance is perpetrated using high-definition CCTV cameras and the national ID system. 'Safe Philippines' is a surveillance system project that aims to install high-definition and advanced CCTV cameras in select cities in Metro Manila to supposedly curb crime and improve emergency response time ([Bajo](#)). The PHP 20.31 billion (approximately USD 371 million) project is funded through a soft loan from China Eximbank, and the contractor of the project is the China International Telecommunication Construction Corporation, with some equipment provided by Huawei ([BenarNews](#)).

Recently, the Philippines enacted the SIM Registration Act, requiring all mobile phone users to register their personal information with private telecommunication companies. Mobile phone users must also present government-issued ID upon registration.

The Computer Professionals Union (CPU) said the law does not have a specific provision that prevents private telcos from storing copies of the IDs that are required in the registration process, and, thus, there is no assurance that personal information available is kept private ([Junk SIM Registration Network](#)).

Less than a month after the implementation of the law, government agencies warned that scammers have already used the SIM registration for fraud ([Dela Peña](#), 2023).

For activist group Bagong Alyansang Makabayan, the SIM registration "poses problems for privacy rights as the Philippine government is notorious for illegal surveillance and violations of data privacy." It added, "The SIM registration can become a vast surveillance network used against the people" (Vital).

SPEECH

The rights to freedom of speech, expression and opinion are also threatened in the Philippines.

The shutdown of corporate media outlet ABS-CBN is the biggest blow to press freedom in recent Philippine history ([Gutierrez](#)). The closure of ABS-CBN's regional TV stations has deprived its millions of viewers of free access to vital information, especially during times of disaster ([Mejico and Saguitan](#)).

Powerful politicians also use cyber libel as a weapon to silence and intimidate journalists. The spectre of criminal libel creates a chilling effect among media practitioners, and self-censorship has become the norm for some newsrooms ([Inquirer](#), 2022).

NUJP has raised the alarm with the Court of Appeals' decision upholding the conviction of Rappler CEO Maria Ressa and researcher Reynaldo Santos in a cyber libel case ([Torres-Tupas](#)), as it also extends the prescription period of cyber libel from 12 years to 15 years.

During the lockdown due to COVID-19, the Philippine government enacted a new law called Bayanihan to Heal as One, which contains a provision penalising "fake news." A community radio station in Nueva Ecija was charged with violating the said law, after it aired reports on the local government's slow aid distribution ([Olea](#), 2021).

The lockdown was used as justification to trample upon free speech, with several cases of threats and intimidation against critical netizens recorded ([Clarín](#), 2020).

Government officials resort to red-tagging — the practice of accusing individuals and groups of having communist links — in an attempt to discredit perceived enemies. Red-tagging has been considered one of the worst forms of disinformation used by state actors against government critics. Often, red-tagging leads to grave forms of human rights violations. According to human rights group Karapatan, at least 427 activists were red-tagged before they were killed ([Dela Peña](#), 2022).

“The spectre of criminal libel creates a chilling effect among media practitioners, and self-censorship has become the norm for some newsrooms

”

ACCESS

The state censors people online in various ways, including distributed denial of service attacks (DDoS) and website blocking against media outlets and civil society organisations.

In the case of alternative media outfits Bulatlat and Pinoy Weekly, the DDoS attacks and website blocking had been preceded by red-tagging. A series of DDoS attacks in 2021 against Bulatlat was traced to the Philippine Army and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) ([Qurium](#)). A government agency confirmed that the IP address found in the attack logs was assigned to the Philippine Army ([Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility](#), 2021).

Media outlets doing fact-checks during the campaign period for the May 2022 elections were also targeted by DDoS. The cyber attack against GMA News was done after interviews with the presidential candidates ([Gonzales](#)) while the attack against CNN Philippines was launched as the network held presidential debates ([Philstar.com](#)).

On June 8, 2022, the National Telecommunications Commission issued a memorandum ordering internet service providers to block 27 websites, including two media outlets, and several civil society organisations. The move was prompted by a “request” from then National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr., who claimed that the websites promote terrorism without providing any evidence.

“ Government officials and their supporters portray critics, and truth tellers, including journalists and media outlets, as “communist-terrorists” and “communist-propagandists” to justify their actions

INFORMATION

Politicians use social media to manipulate public opinion. In the 2019 and 2022 elections, several studies revealed how candidates hired troll armies and influencers (vloggers) to prop up their image and attack their rivals.

Marcos Jr., for example, has used the popular app TikTok to spread disinformation, particularly about his family’s tainted past. In the run-up to the May 2022 elections, consumers of TikTok believed what they saw, without verifying the information from history textbooks ([Pierson](#)). In early 2022, TikTok had 35.96 million users aged 18 and above in the Philippines and, by January 2023, the Philippines was [seventh](#) in the list of countries with most TikTok users ([Kemp](#)).

The machinery for disinformation proved to be enormous, involving hundreds of Facebook pages and groups, with each account amplifying and sharing content from social media influencers. According to a 2019 Rappler investigative report, the volume of disinformation unleashed matches the volume of content from mainstream media ([Mendoza](#)).

Meanwhile, the well-oiled government task force for counterinsurgency engages in online vitriol against government critics. According to Amnesty International, government officials and their supporters portray critics, and truth tellers, including journalists and media outlets, as “communist-terrorists” and “communist-propagandists” to justify their actions, however arbitrary and unjust ([Amnesty International](#)). Through the task force against counterinsurgency, all government agencies are mobilised to counter those who dare call out abuses, anomalies and anti-people policies.

MAIN CONTOURS OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Based on the qualitative analysis of items included in this study, government officials peddle the main narrative that anybody critical of the state is the state's enemy. This is used as justification to block the 27 websites, and to portray journalists who criticise the government as enemies of the state.

At the same time, the Philippine government continues to claim that it respects press freedom and other civil and political rights while also declaring that freedom of expression is not an absolute right.

These narratives were consistent in the two main incidents examined in this research.

“Technology is used to attack critical voices, and at least two incidents illustrate that foreign-based firms have been tapped to undertake cyber attacks, according to forensic investigation done by Qurium.”

While the internet has served as a principal arena for many activists in the Southeast Asia region, this is attributed to the “rapid expansion” of internet access that has “left regulators struggling to adapt their existing apparatus of control to the new realities that the internet offered” ([Abbott](#)).

The Philippines has used internet-related legislation that is weaponised against critics.

The Cybercrime Prevention Act, which includes a provision on cyber libel, is used to intimidate the media and civil society organisations. The punishment for online libel is one degree higher than ordinary libel as stated in the Revised Penal Code ([Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility](#), 2013).

The Anti-Terror Act, meanwhile, contains draconian provisions as it provides excessive powers to the Anti-Terror Council. The NUJP, for one, pointed out the dangers of the ATA, which proscribes speech, proclamations, writings, emblems, and banners that fall under the new crime of “inciting to terrorism,” imposing a penalty of 12 years in prison. “As the law fails to provide a clear definition of terrorism and is vague about what constitutes acts of terrorism, Section 9 could make media practitioners vulnerable to wrongful charges and arrests, producing a chilling effect on all media practice,” the group said ([National Union of Journalists of the Philippines](#)).

Furthermore, the ATA allows the surveillance of suspects and interception and recording of communications ([Congress of the Philippines - Republic Act No. 11479](#)).

The latest in the government arsenal for mass surveillance is the SIM Registration Act, the first law signed by Marcos Jr. which requires all mobile phone users to register their SIM along with their personal information.

Technology is used to attack critical voices, and at least two incidents illustrate that foreign-based firms have been tapped to undertake cyber attacks, according to forensic investigation done by Qurium.

Israeli firm Bright Data enabled the DDoS attacks against human rights group Karapatan ([Sharwood](#)) while a Vietnam-based hacking group was found accountable for DDoS attacks against Bulatlat, according to [forensic reports](#) by Qurium Media Foundation, using a bot network inside Facebook ([Elliott](#)).

Karapatan said that the cyber attacks against its website were aimed at suppressing the documentation of human rights violations ([Ocampo](#)). In the same vein, Bulatlat has been known for its human rights reporting, and has earned the ire of state security forces involved in such abuses.

There have also been shutdowns of the Facebook Pages of progressive Filipino groups over their posts paying tribute to the late founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines Jose Maria Sison for his contributions to the mass movement ([Asido](#)). Several Facebook Pages and posts of alternative news organisations and campus journalists were also either “unpublished” or taken down by the social media giant.

Personal accounts of the administrators of the Facebook Pages that were either taken down or flagged were also locked. The Commission on Human Rights described this as a move that diminishes the right to free speech ([Philippine Daily Inquirer](#)).

Sison himself was earlier banned from using Facebook, which advocates of free speech described as a “reminder of how broad social media regulations can be used to stifle dissent” ([Palatino](#)).

Human rights defenders have not been taking these attacks sitting down.

Media organisations have launched protest actions against the killings of journalists and other forms of harassment. The NUJP has been calling for the decriminalisation of libel, a stop to red-tagging and the unblocking of media websites.

Bulatlat has challenged the website blocking order, and it got temporary relief when a local court ordered the unblocking of its website. Non-profit Qurium Media Foundation set up mirror sites for Bulatlat and Pinoy Weekly while Reporters Sans Frontiers also mirrored the websites of Bulatlat and Kodao Productions during the peak of the DDoS attacks in 2019.

DDoS attacks have been documented and mitigated with the help of digital rights advocates.

In 2019, Bulatlat, AlterMidya, Pinoy Weekly and Kodao Productions filed a civil case against two IT firms over DDoS, which resulted in a settlement. The companies pledged that they would not allow their infrastructure to be used to violate the freedom of the press ([Bulatlat](#)).

Various groups have brought advocacy to the United Nations Human Rights Council. Press freedom watchdogs have also issued statements in support of the Philippine media.

The international community has also expressed concern over the worsening press freedom situation in the Philippines.

The United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review in November 2022 noted the "persistent violation of the freedom of expression" in the Philippines, citing as examples the shutdown of television giant ABS-CBN, the attacks against independent media, and journalist killings" ([Clarín](#), 2023).

The UNHRC has since recommended that the Philippine government implement immediate measures that would ensure that freedom of expression is upheld, including calls to stop attacks against journalists and civil society actors, and the decriminalisation of defamation ([Clarín](#), 2023).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Like any authoritarian regime, the Philippine government uses various forms of digital authoritarianism to its advantage. The aim is to win the propaganda war against its perceived enemies so that it can continue implementing policies that are often detrimental to the ordinary folk.

While the two incidents analysed in this research took place during the Duterte administration, the narrative frames asserted by state actors have persisted under the new administration of Marcos Jr.

Marcos Jr. did not reverse Duterte's actions. In fact, the same justifications have been peddled by the new officials in government, and even by online trolls with regard to the blocking of 27 websites and the practice of red-tagging. The same online vitriol against journalists and critics is being spread and amplified online under the new administration. The same pattern of attacks on the media has also been noted.

According to human rights group Karapatan, the current Marcos Jr. administration seems intent on perpetuating different forms of authoritarianism to quell all forms of dissent ([Associated Press](#)).

Amid the high inflation and unemployment, the president's allies in Congress are proposing a wealth fund that is seen to benefit a few elites ([Padilla](#)). With the worsening economic crisis, social unrest will continue and so is repression.

While Marcos Jr. promised to uphold press freedom, for example, his actions prove otherwise ([Geducos](#)). He did not veer away from Duterte's policies, including on counterinsurgency, and even reinstated a military general linked to human rights violations.

Without having to declare martial law like his deposed father, Marcos Jr. can always use the Anti-Terror Act as a weapon against dissenters. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of the said law.

Like Duterte, Marcos Jr. uses a two-pronged approach in his propaganda war: disinformation to peddle the illusion of massive support of his administration, and deliberate attempts to demonise and discredit truth-tellers, including the red-tagging of critics and journalists.

“The current Marcos Jr. administration seems intent on perpetuating different forms of authoritarianism to quell all forms of dissent”

Experts have recommended that newsrooms in the Philippines “reimagine journalism,” particularly in how they deliver information and engage the audience in the light of increasing online vitriol. Among the suggestions is for the media to widen the opportunity for more opinions to be aired or published so that online actors who may fall victim to professional trolls do not find themselves “isolated in their own echo chambers” ([Cabañes and Cornelio](#)).

Judicial harassment of activists also continues. Although the justice secretary assured the international community that domestic remedies are working, several cases illustrate the slow grind of justice and the level of impunity that the Filipino people have to grapple with.

The Philippine Senate and Congress have been dominated by the allies of the administration. Over the years, the organisers of the political opposition in the Lower House have faced severe attacks, including trumped-up charges, arrests and death.

Amid these challenges, civil society organisations are pushing back. Journalists and human rights defenders have not only exposed government narratives as farce but have also taken steps to seek accountability for violations on the right to free expression and free press, and the right to free association.

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