

Populism and the War on Drugs in Southeast Asia

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RODRIGO DUTERTE PROMISED IN HIS campaign for the Philippine presidency that he would dump the corpses of the country's drug dealers and addicts into Manila Bay and "fatten all the fish there."¹ He boasted of pushing criminals out of helicopters. He promised death on the scale of Hitler.² "God will weep if I become president," he said.³

Duterte's anti-drug war may be the most notorious in Southeast Asia, but it is not the only one in recent memory. In the early 2000s, Thaksin Shinawatra, prime minister of Thailand, launched a bloody campaign of his own, which claimed just under 3,000 victims in the operation's first three months.⁴ Just prior to Duterte's election victory, across the Sulawesi Sea, Indonesian President Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") began a tactically similar, albeit less intense, anti-drug campaign that has produced over a hundred fatalities so far with many more convicts still on death row.⁵

There is little evidence that these and other hardline campaigns have done much to reduce the sale or consumption of illicit drugs.⁶ What politics lie beneath these so-called "wars on drugs"? Duterte, Thaksin, and Jokowi all share something other than their drug policies: each is also a populist. In other words, they are all charismatic leaders who seek to electorally mobilize the masses to gain and retain power.⁷

A large body of scholarship has noted that populists look to construct the political space in terms of a conflict between the "good" people and an impure "other."⁸ Populists in different contexts focus their hostility on a range of specific

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targets (e.g., immigrants, minorities, or the rich). The demonization of drug dealers and addicts as divisive elements that undermine the social order fits comfortably within the populist mobilization paradigm. However, there is potentially

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a deeper link between populism and anti-drug policies that has thus far remained relatively unexplored. Even though charismatic leaders regularly flout the law, sup-

port for these leaders is deeply bound up with the popular desire for *order* in times of crisis.⁹ Populists thrive where threats to social order, such as those posed by drug addiction and drug-related criminality, are salient. Populists, as we will see, may look to increase the salience of criminality, addiction, and disorder more broadly, but the success of this strategy depends—at least in part—on correspondence with the people’s actual experiences.

THE DRUG CRISIS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Southeast Asia is no stranger to drug addiction or drug-related violence. The Golden Triangle—the forested upland region that covers the border areas of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand—has long been one of the world’s major heroin-producing regions.¹⁰ This region was the largest source of heroin for the United States prior to the collapse of the Afghan state in the late 1990s, and Myanmar continues to be one of the major sources of supply to international markets across Asia and beyond.¹¹ The cultivation of opiates in the region has declined in recent years in favor of the production of amphetamines, benzodiazepines, and other new psychoactive substances (NPS). The Golden Triangle is now the largest producer of methamphetamines in the world and is poised to become a major source of synthetic opioids, including the now notorious drug, fentanyl.¹²

Proximity to the region’s rich supply lines means that drugs like crystal meth (sometimes called “ice” or “shabu”) and various locally popular combinations like “yaba” in Thailand (a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine) and “fly high” in the Philippines—a combination of MDMA, methamphetamine, and Cialis (the erectile dysfunction medication)—are both cheap and readily available. A dose of yaba sells for as little as US\$2 in Thailand (with the price rising to US\$7 in Singapore).¹³ Highly potent opioids, including fentanyl and carfentanyl, have also begun to penetrate the region’s underground markets,



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while cannabis remains widely produced and used. A 2015 report revealed that Indonesia was home to Southeast Asia's largest outdoor cannabis plantation—a whopping 122 hectares.¹⁴

Addiction in the region is entrenched and growing. Prior to Duterte's successful run at the presidency, the Philippines had an estimated 1.8 million drug users (1.8 percent of the population).¹⁵ According to data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Philippines is second only to the United States in the estimated number of methamphetamine users. Thailand and Laos are in the top 10 as well. Opiate use is also high in mainland Southeast Asia, again especially in Thailand and Laos. Many in the region use a natural opiate called *kratom*. In some southern Thai provinces, as many as 70 percent of men use the drug regularly.¹⁶ Indonesia has the ignominious status as the largest drug market in Asia, with an estimated six million drug users as of 2017 (out of a population of 261 million). If accurate, this would represent a staggering increase in the number of users of approximately 50 percent since 2014, when the figure was just 4.1 million.¹⁷

Weak law enforcement and state complicity have allowed massive underground economies to thrive in the region. Insurgent, criminal, and even state forces compete for control of the drug trade, often with bloody consequences. Moreover, the human impact of drugs in Southeast Asia goes well beyond the violent competition for market share. Presidents and prime ministers across the region may not be wrong in calling this an “emergency”: manufacturers are corrupting government agencies; addicts are stealing to feed their habits; and, perhaps most importantly, users are dying of overdoses and other side effects.¹⁸

Like drug use, drug control in the region is hardly new. In the mid-1800s, the British East India Company was all too happy to ship its Indian-made opium to China, but still sought to curb its use in Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia that it directly ruled because it recognized the drug's potentially deleterious social effects. With independence and the onset of the Cold War, the canting paternalism of the British yielded to the hard realism of U.S. supremacy. In their quest for local allies in the war against Communist enemies, real and imagined, the United States turned a blind eye, if not a helping hand, to state-sanctioned drug production in the region.¹⁹ The decline of Communism abroad and the rise of opioid and opiate addiction back home forced legislators in the United States into a major reevaluation of U.S. drug policy; the United States now turned to sponsoring eradication programs across both Southeast Asia and Latin America, the world's two leading production hubs. In spite of this, however, even as some governments—most notably Mexico—embraced militarized anti-drug

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campaigns, corrupt regimes and traffickers alike proved adept at profiting from prohibition.²⁰ The flow of drugs hardly slowed.

Indeed, with the relaxation of state control of the drug trade following democratization, drug production, trade, and use expanded in Southeast Asia.²¹ Rapid economic growth and privatization both fueled greater domestic demand within Southeast Asia and loosened restrictions on supply. If opiate cultivation declined in response to U.S. and UN sponsorship, drug syndicates across the region turned to synthetics that could easily be produced in a sub-region sitting at the intersection of gigantic chemical production hubs in China, India, and East Asia. Produced at low marginal cost, synthetic methamphetamines and opioids are highly profitable.²²

Although we lack historical public opinion data, especially in the likes of Myanmar and Laos, for much of the 1990s—and beyond in some cases—it seems that drugs were not a salient political issue. Those living in authoritarian regimes were more concerned with gaining basic rights, while in democratizing states, voters were much more concerned with inflation, employment, public health, and corruption. Thaksin Shinawatra was elected prime minister of Thailand in 2001 in large part due to his status as a successful businessman. Thaksin's initial concerns were in the area of economic reform, especially privatization and deregulation.²³ He also introduced a highly popular 30-baht healthcare program, which allowed all Thais access to medical treatment for about US\$1.²⁴ Thaksin's popularity among newly assertive, poorer rural voters was accompanied by a corresponding resentment in the more established urban middle classes, especially in Bangkok.

It was in this context that Thaksin launched his war on drugs in February 2003. In the first three months of the campaign, there were approximately 2,800 killings. Thousands more were coerced into “treatment” programs. The campaign's lack of impact on the prevalence of narcotics is hardly disputed. In fact, about half of the campaign's victims are believed to have had nothing whatsoever to do with the drug trade.²⁵ Yet in spite of widespread recognition that the campaign was unlikely to be successful, polls revealed that it was extremely popular: nearly three quarters of Thais supported it, with over 60 percent of respondents wanting to see it continued as of early 2005.²⁶ The popularity of the anti-drug campaign may also explain its spectacular qualities. Killings were a signal of the government's extreme resolve, often taking the form of public assassinations even in high-end suburbs.

The Thai government consistently portrayed drug users and dealers as a threat to the rest of society. Those who advocated leniency were also suspect. As

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one official commented, “For those of you from the opposition party, I will say you care more about human rights than drug problems in Thailand.”²⁷ Thaksin also used the issue to assert his and Thailand’s autonomy, saying in response to the prospect of a UN investigation into the program: “The United Nations is not my father. I am not worried about any UN visit to Thailand.”²⁸ Thaksin’s campaign may have artificially increased the saliency of drugs, but he also seems to have tapped into pre-established concerns shared across the Thai political spectrum. Poor Thais were concerned about the social decay caused by drug addition, while middle and upper class Thais feared the impact of drug-related crime on public safety and the security of property.

In the Philippines, Duterte has run the Thaksin playbook to its logical extreme. While the Thai administration scaled back its campaign of extrajudicial assassinations after several months, the war on drugs in the Philippines is now more than two and half years old. As with the Thai campaign, it is indelibly associated with its populist leader. Duterte worked as a public prosecutor in Davao City before becoming vice mayor in 1986 and mayor in 1988. He held the latter position for more than 20 years, repeatedly rejecting calls for him to run for the Philippine presidency before he formally filed as a substitute for a party-mate in late November 2016. However, it was only in the months before the election that Duterte aggressively campaigned on the issue of drug-related criminality. Duterte drew on his reputation as the strongman mayor of Davao City, vowing to rid the country of illegal drugs within six months of his confirmation. He was known for saying, “If you are not prepared to kill and be killed, you have no business being president of this country.”²⁹

Although relatively unknown outside of Mindanao just months before the 2016 presidential election, Duterte quickly became the most popular candidate and won the election convincingly, assuming control of the presidency at the end of June 2016. Duterte quickly made good on his promises to aggressively pursue those involved in the illegal drug trade. Duterte’s war on drugs was housed under a program known as Oplan Double Barrel. The two barrels refer to the two main components of the program—Project Tokhang and Project HVT. These two components essentially replicate the often violent anti-illegal drug war waged by Duterte when he was mayor of Davao City.³⁰ To ensure that his campaign would be zealously pursued, Duterte appointed the former police chief of Davao City, Ronald “Bato” (The Rock) de la Rosa, as head of the Philippine National Police (PNP). De la Rosa warned criminals: “[Not only will we] crush [you], we will bury you. I will bury you all.”³¹

Within the first month of its implementation, Tokhang resulted in over

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9,000 arrests, 664 deaths, and around 330,000 suspected drug users and dealers surrendering.³² In its most recent report, the PNP acknowledged that there were 4,279 deaths related to the government's war on drugs between 2 July 2016 and 21 May 2018.³³ Other organizations estimate that state security forces and non-state groups working with implicit sanction from the authorities may have killed up to 12,000 people between July 2016 and January 2018.³⁴ An earlier report indicated that most of the recorded fatalities were from the National Capital Region, Central Luzon, Southern Tagalog, and Central Visayas—densely populated areas where Tokhang operations were more intense from the start. This was purportedly because these regions have the highest levels of drug addiction.

Although by far the best-known instances of the war on drugs, the policy does not stop at Thailand and the Philippines. On becoming president of Indonesia in 2014, Jokowi declared drugs “the number one problem facing Indonesia.”³⁵ Like Duterte in the Philippines, Jokowi promised action: “I believe, given drugs’ destructive power, there is no other choice for us but to declare war against drugs.”³⁶ He quickly lifted Yudhoyono’s moratorium on capital punishment for drug dealers.³⁷ Indonesian authorities were given “shoot on sight” orders and Jokowi even encouraged vigilantism, saying that people should “chase them [drug traffickers], beat them, hit them.”³⁸ Jokowi installed Budi Waseso as the chief architect of the anti-drug war. Waseso, an admirer of Duterte, has said, “We should not keep our guns in a safe, we must use them—but only for law enforcement.”³⁹ Extra-judicial killings, although not as widespread in Indonesia as in the Philippines, appear to be on the rise.⁴⁰

WILDLY POPULAR

Duterte, Thaksin, and Jokowi share something other than their drug policies. Each is also a populist (although, as will be explained, Jokowi is somewhat *less* populist—and less popular—than the other two). The battle to define populism itself remains alive and well. While conceptual debates are important, they sometimes have a tendency to become unhelpfully politicized.⁴¹ Some scholars and pundits equate populism with illiberalism; others instead point to its emancipatory potential.⁴² I have argued that a less ideologically charged approach, in which populism is simply understood as a distinctive strategy for gaining and maintaining power, is preferable.⁴³ Populists differ from other types of political leaders in that they lack a deeply institutionalized base of support.⁴⁴ They thus seek low-cost strategies to mobilize voters directly. In practice, this means reliance on mainstream and social media and on mass rallies rather than

on dense political party organizations or networks of patronage that might in turn constrain their behavior.⁴⁵

A populist, like any good marketer, needs a message. Rarely do we see populists come out with detailed policy proposals, especially regarding the economy. The kinds of nuanced and wonkish policy proposals that Hillary Clinton developed for all sorts of issues are precisely the kinds of fine details that populists often avoid.⁴⁶ This, however, is not because populists or populist voters do not care about policy. Rather, it is because populists' lack of an institutionalized interest-group base means that they have less incentive to commit themselves to policy measures favored by narrow interest groups (e.g., unions' right to strike). Rather, populists look to deploy a grander vision. They typically seek to draw a large boundary around their potential support base, excluding a small and undesirable minority. In this sense, populists have found opposition to crime, especially anti-social crime like drug dealing and drug use, extremely useful in drawing together otherwise diverse coalitions.

As much as domestic and international critics may complain about the rights violations entailed in the judicial and extrajudicial killings of drug dealers and addicts in Southeast Asia, the programs are highly popular. A March 2005 poll recorded that 74 percent of Thais supported Thaksin's violent anti-drug campaign.⁴⁷ Drugs and drug

crime remain salient topics in Thailand. According to more recent survey data, more than 80 percent of those in rural Thailand feel that

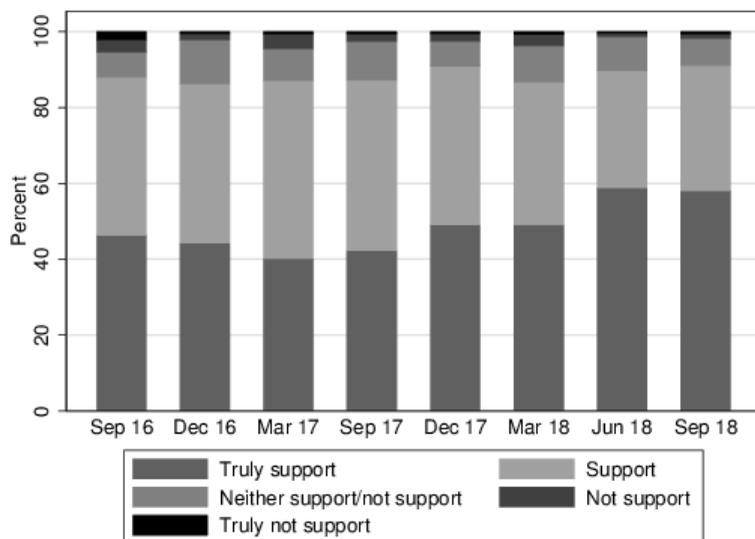
Drug dealers are behind only the corrupt and terrorists (and ahead of murderers) in respondents' views of who most deserves the death penalty.

the sale and use of illegal drugs is the most pressing issue facing the country.⁴⁸ In Indonesia, about 60 percent of the population supports the death penalty for drug dealers. Drug dealers are behind only the corrupt and terrorists (and ahead of murderers) in respondents' views of who most deserves the death penalty.⁴⁹ In the Philippines, where there is rich survey data on support for the anti-drug war since the beginning of Duterte's administration in mid-2016, we find widespread support across class, gender, and regional groups. Figure 1 shows that support for Duterte's campaign against illegal drugs (i.e., the number of people who "support" or "truly support" the campaign) has remained consistently high at around 85 percent. If anything, the intensity of support for the campaign has increased. The proportion who "truly support" rather than merely "support" the campaign rose from just over 40 percent in its early days in September 2016

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to nearly 60 percent two years later. Journalist Rishi Iyengar quotes one Cebu resident as saying “The people killed are the dirt of society. What Duterte’s doing, his war on illegal drugs, is right. It’s good.”⁵⁰

Figure 1: Support for the Duterte Government’s Campaign Against Illegal Drugs in the Philippines



In the Philippine case, there is evidence that Duterte himself has driven some of this support. To estimate whether support for the campaign was due to the overall popularity of Duterte, as opposed to the policy per se, my co-author, Ronald Holmes, embedded what is known as an “endorsement experiment” in a September 2016 Pulse Asia Research survey.⁵¹ We randomly assigned our nationally representative sample of 1,200 Filipino respondents into two groups, asking one group how much they supported the “anti-drug campaign,” and the other half how much they supported “the anti-drug campaign of the Duterte administration.” We found that the Duterte endorsement had a small but significant positive effect on support for the campaign.⁵² That noted, the evidence also indicates that Duterte was responding to popular concerns. Philippines National Police data show an increase in crime rates in the latter period of Duterte’s predecessor, Benigno Aquino. Polling data also shows a marked and sustained decrease in approval of how the Aquino administration was perceived to be handling crime from early 2012 until the presidential election of 2016. In other words, there was a pent-up demand among Filipinos for more robust

crime fighting prior to Duterte's arrival on the national stage. Anti-drug rhetoric and policy made good political sense for Duterte as it has often done for other populists.⁵³

POPULISM AND THE PURSUIT OF ORDER

There is, however, a further but often neglected link between populism and the war on drugs: pursuit of order. While populism as an ideology may refer to a belief that the people's will should prevail over that of the elite, in practice this ideology often coalesces into the form of a charismatically-led mass movement. A great deal of disagreement and confusion arises with respect to the use of charisma as a political science concept. In common language, charisma is often thought of as a personality trait—some quality that an individual may possess. Indeed, even the German sociologist Max Weber, with whom the concept is most closely associated, implied as much when he stated that charisma refers to “a certain quality of an individual personality by which he is set apart and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or...exceptional powers or qualities.”⁵⁴

However, reading Weber more carefully, it becomes clear that charisma describes a relationship, rather than a personal characteristic. An individual is charismatic only to the extent that his followers treat him as such. As Weber argues: “It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma.”⁵⁵ A charismatic leader is made so by popular acclaim rather than by rules, tradition, or personal favor. At the same time, a charismatic leader is not merely a vessel for the popular will. According to Weber, a charismatic leader “does not derive his claims from the will of his followers, in the manner of an election; rather, it is their duty to recognize his charisma.”⁵⁶ Charismatic leadership, in other words, is a form of leadership in which popular support is crucial, but in which a leader drives—rather than merely responds to—public opinion on specific policies.

For our purposes, what is critical about charismatic authority in the Weberian sense is that it is distinct from a traditional or bureaucratic rules-based

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order. Charismatic leaders thus often feel and act as if they are unconstrained by formal law or informal convention.⁵⁷ People who believe that a leader is endowed with charisma have less of an attachment to laws and procedures per se. Indeed, the leader stands above the law; whatever the leader does is legitimate because *he* does it. Populist ideology itself may have a backward-looking (nostalgia) or forward-looking (revolutionary) bent, but either way, it remains based on the idea that the present moment is one of disorder, of chaos, or of crisis. As political theorist Carl Schmitt argued, it is under such emergency or extraordinary conditions that the true sovereign, the one who is prior to and above the law, is revealed.⁵⁸ Indeed, although the inclination toward charismatic leadership betrays a deep suspicion of institutional and legal processes, as Edward Shils argues, it is in sympathy with a desire for order. Shils writes: “The need for order and the fascination of disorder persist, and the charismatic propensity is a function of the need for order.”⁵⁹ In other words, the same individuals who desire order (but not the law) are precisely those individuals who respond to charismatic leadership.

Again, we found evidence for this proposition in the Philippines. We asked survey respondents to describe Duterte in a word or phrase and then coded whether or not these responses indicated that Duterte was perceived as a charismatic (rather than traditional or bureaucratic) leader.⁶⁰ We found a robust positive relationship between the attribution of charisma to Duterte, support for the war on illegal drugs, and approval of the government’s record on fighting criminality.

POPULISM AND VIOLENCE

Anti-drug wars are hardly the exclusive provenance of populist leaders. In the United States, the notion of a war on drugs had its beginnings as far back as the 1930s when Prohibition was lifted.⁶¹ Non-populists are perfectly capable of exploiting fears of crime and disorder to win political support. But there is something peculiar about populism that makes its association with anti-drug campaigns so nefarious.

Because populist leaders are unconstrained by informal institutions like political parties, they have relatively free reign to engage in actions that enhance their own chances of maintaining power in the here and now, regardless of the long-term consequences. Political parties are typically long-lived institutions. They have parliamentary representatives, local councilors, and regular members. The latter all want to see the party survive beyond the lifespan of an individual leader. They will thus try to constrain a leader’s most autocratic tendencies—

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because once he or she is out of power, they will expect restraint from any successor. Populists, because they do not care about the survival of a party beyond their own term in office, share none of these qualms about reputational damage to a party brand. Populists will do whatever it takes to retain power. Cross-national research shows that populists in power systematically erode judicial autonomy, press freedom, and other constraints on their authority.⁶² Illiberalism is a consequence of populism.

In this context, the *degree* of charismatic authority held by a given populist leader may act as a constraint on his or her behavior. Parties in the Philippines are among the weakest in Southeast Asia.⁶³ About half of Filipinos attribute charismatic leadership traits to Duterte.⁶⁴ This has lent Duterte extraordinary leeway in pursuing his war on drugs. As a true populist, Duterte is unconstrained by a party that exists independently of himself. Duterte can thus afford to work with shorter time horizons than the leader of a better-institutionalized party. The same could be said for Thaksin in Thailand, who virtually *was* the Thai Rak Thai party.⁶⁵ Jokowi, in contrast, has been partially restrained by the PDI-P, which remains controlled by Megawati, the daughter of former President Sukarno and a former president of Indonesia herself. It is for this reason—the lack of control over his own party organization—that Jokowi is somewhat less populist than Duterte. As Anwita Basu has commented, “Unlike Duterte, Jokowi does not have his own political party backing him—this means that he will need full support from the electorate and will have to continue to bargain with various parties who don’t necessarily share the same views on drug crimes as he does.”⁶⁶ Jokowi’s legitimacy, unlike Duterte’s, is based both on party and charisma. This may be a critical difference in understanding the different scales of the wars on drugs in the region.

LOOKING FORWARD

There is, in sum, a particular affinity between populism and drug wars that has played out on a large scale across Southeast Asia. There is some evidence that populist mobilizers in the region drive concerns about drug-related crime. It is possible, moreover, that highly militarized wars on drugs only further the state of political and social disorder. However, it is also the case that the tough-on-drugs approach appears to gain most traction when drug-related crime is already politically salient. Support for brutal anti-drug campaigns in the region remains high in spite of widespread knowledge that they are often ineffective. Social responses to disorder are not always, or even usually, rational.⁶⁷ Thus it is far



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from clear that better information would necessarily change public preferences with regard to drug policy. In this sense, populists are both cause and effect: they drive popular concern over social issues like drug crime and addiction, but they also respond to and exploit them.

While conditions of disorder once provided the justification for military coups d'état, today democratic erosion is arguably more likely to be driven by populists with the electoral support of the people.⁶⁸ Thus, to the extent that the production and sale of illicit narcotics remain sufficiently profitable activities, the threat of disorder will continue to hang over weak states in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Where states lack the capacity to provide a more rehabilitative approach to addiction and crime, the conditions continue to be ripe for populist mobilization and the possible erosion of democracy.⁶⁹ As symbolic vehicles through which the people seek to reestablish order, populists are often given free reign to wage violent, and arguably illegal, campaigns against the dealers and ad-

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dicts who threaten social harmony. Charismatic leaders who promise order, and who are willing to wage a bloody war against the criminals and deviants who undermine

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it, have tapped into a deep vein of anxiety in the region. Although populists are not illiberal by definition, the absence of constraints on their leadership normally provided by political parties makes them prone to the concentration of power and the erosion of individual rights and freedoms.

Liberals in Southeast Asia therefore face a challenging paradox. To combat the appeal of populism, they must establish order; in doing so, however, they may undermine the same liberal principles which they argue distinguish them from their populist antagonists. Liberalism is a mixed bag, but most scholars agree that it places autonomy above other ethical priorities.⁷⁰ Liberal governments have tackled those aspects of the drug problem amenable to voluntarist solutions, namely the rehabilitation of addicts and the welfare of their dependents, in innovative ways.⁷¹ The social disorder related to the manufacture, trafficking, and retailing of drugs, however, has posed a more difficult dilemma for liberals.⁷² Legalization is a possibility. By bringing illicit products into the real economy, states rather than private groups can enforce property rights, theoretically mitigating levels of violence. However, where states lack capacity, criminal organizations can establish control even over legal sectors, with the usual



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racketeering and violence that follows.⁷³ If states could economically develop their way to greater capacity, the dilemma facing liberals might be attenuated. We know, however, that security and development are mutually constitutive.⁷⁴ Any liberal resolution to the drug problem in Southeast Asia, and its exploitation for political ends by populist leaders, must address the twin problems of security and development. 

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