



Peace Review
A Journal of Social Justice

ISSN: 1040-2659 (Print) 1469-9982 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cper20

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To cite this article: Dakila Kim P. Yee (2018) Violence and Disaster Capitalism in Post-Haiyan Philippines, *Peace Review*, 30:2, 160-167, DOI: [10.1080/10402659.2018.1458943](https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2018.1458943)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2018.1458943>



Published online: 31 May 2018.



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Violence and Disaster Capitalism in Post-Haiyan Philippines

DAKILA KIM P. YEE

On the morning of August 23, 2014, a young man in his mid-20s, Jefferson Custodio, was delivering farm implements to farmer beneficiaries in Barangay Punong, Carigara, Leyte. A survivor of super Typhoon Haiyan (locally known as Yolanda), Jefferson was involved in numerous relief activities intended to alleviate the conditions of farmers who had lost seeds, farming implements, and capital when the winds and rain of Haiyan destroyed their crops. Little did Jefferson know that this fateful day would be his last as he was gunned down by two unknown assailants riding a motorcycle, killing him on the spot. Reports and testimonies from family, friends, and associates would later reveal that Jefferson has been hounded by the Philippine military as he was accused of being a member of the New People's Army (NPA). This claim has been denied repeatedly by his family members as well as various human rights groups in the country, stating that Jefferson was a member of a local farmers group, the Municipal Farmers Association of Carigara and People Surge, a local social movement organization demanding disaster justice.

Members of People Surge believe the attack on Jefferson was aimed at silencing the organization as it has become increasingly vocal over the post-disaster rehabilitation policies implemented by the administration of former Philippine President Benigno Aquino III. According to the organization, rehabilitation, and reconstruction policies for rebuilding after Typhoon Haiyan tended to favor big, domestic, and international capitalists, to the detriment of the local communities in rural and urban areas. It's important to examine the intersection of disaster capitalism implementation, the emergence of justice movements opposing disaster capitalism, and the imposition of state-sponsored violence against dissent. While the aftermath of disasters and catastrophes leave people under an initial state of shock, which then becomes the backdrop for implementing disaster capitalism, the threat and actual exercise of violence are what dampen and restrain popular opposition against these policies.

The following focuses on the post-disaster reconstruction of Tacloban City, the city that was devastated the most by Typhoon Haiyan, and the center of People Surge's protests against disaster injustice. Tacloban City, considered as "ground zero" of Typhoon Haiyan, is susceptible to the occurrence of natural disasters. The city is in the island of Leyte, in the Eastern Visayas group of islands, which is frequently hit by typhoons. The city is also near two major active faults that have generated serious earthquakes in recent years: the Philippine Fault Zone that runs along the middle of Leyte Island and the Philippine Trench that lies beneath the Philippine Sea, off the coast of Samar Island. On November 8, 2013 Tacloban was devastated by Typhoon Haiyan, as storm surges measuring up to seven meters in some places pummeled its coastlines, leaving behind a trail of death and destruction. According to the National Disaster Risk Reduction Council, the government agency responsible for coordinating disaster response and relief efforts, the city accounted for at least 2,600 out of the 6,300 casualties attributed to Typhoon Haiyan.

As noted by Naomi Klein in her book *Shock Doctrine*, the aftermath of disasters provides an enticing opportunity for states, corporations, and multilateral institutions—the disaster capitalism complex—in exploiting the reconstruction process to push for a free-market agenda to the detriment of the people. These policies aim to implement a neoliberal economic regime buttressed by privatization, trade liberalization, and structural adjustment aimed at increasing the profit of corporations and big businesses, while the general public is still reeling from the effects of the disaster. The origin of disaster capitalism stretches back at least into the early 1970s when neoliberal economic policies were implemented in Chile during the wake of the installment of Pinochet's dictatorship. It is notable that these policies continue to be promoted and implemented in the aftermath of major disaster events in recent years such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2010 Haiti earthquake, among others.

The Philippines is a perfect candidate for the implementation of disaster capitalism. The country ranked third all over the world in the World Risk Index 2016, which ranks countries all over the world for its susceptibility to natural disasters. This is usually attributed to the Philippines' geographical location. The country lies at the edges of the Western Pacific Basin, in an area that is frequented by an average of 20 typhoons a year. The area is also exposed to geological risks such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis due to the amount of active fault lines and volcanoes in the country. The exposure to natural hazards is also compounded by high rates of poverty in the Philippines, which affects the ability of people to implement adaptation measures against climate change.

Economically, the Philippines has also been exposed to the ravages of structural adjustment programs implemented in the late 1980s–early 1990s in various areas of the economy. These adjustment programs saw the withdrawal of the state from the management of critical economic sectors in order to pave the way for the privatization of state-owned corporations, trade liberalization, and the opening of strategic sectors such as mining, to foreign investments. The implementation of neoliberalism has resulted in widespread displacement of farmers and indigenous peoples, as well as to the stagnation of wages and growing insecurity of the urban workers. As neoliberalism has gained a foothold in the country, it has become a central policy measure, especially in the wake of disasters.

The plans for implementing disaster capitalism were mobilized immediately even as the residents of Tacloban were still reeling from the destruction caused by Haiyan. As survivors of deadly storm surges scoured through their flattened communities searching for missing relatives and retrieving dead bodies, the national government declared the imposition of a 40-meter “no-build zone” policy. According to former President Benigno Aquino III, delineating “no-build zones” were intended to protect the lives of the residents of coastal areas by preventing them from building in areas that were deemed “unsafe.” Residents were barred from rebuilding their homes in coastal areas, and instead, were transferred to transitional resettlement sites where they are concentrated until their transfer to permanent housing sites located in the northern section of the city. Some of the residents cried foul over this policy, especially the fishing folks and the vendors in the informal street economy as they would be displaced from their sources of living, thereby being exposed to future risks associated with livelihood displacement. In the words of an urban poor community organizer, relocation is an “everyday disaster.”

Residents who insisted on staying within the no build zones were barred with being provided cash assistance such as the emergency shelter assistance and temporary shelter kits as several officials argued that this would serve as incentive for residents to continue staying in coastal areas. Business establishments, however, are spared from eviction as the Office of the Presidential Assistant for Reconstruction and Recovery (OPARR) devised a separate policy guideline, the delineation of “no-dwelling zones” wherein the construction and operation of infrastructure within the 40-meter zones are allowed if these are for commercial purposes such as industry infrastructure, hotels, and resorts. Some hotel establishments in the city and in surrounding towns have already been able to recover and expand their operations within these no-build zones, while local plans envision these sites as future areas where tourism and hospitality infrastructures can be built.

The 40-meter no-build zone policy has been criticized for its similarity to the creation of 100-meter buffer zones in tsunami-hit areas in Sri Lanka during aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. In the case of the latter, survivors of fishing communities in tsunami-hit areas were displaced and were also transferred to temporary resettlement sites while real estate interests in the hotel industry land grabbed these areas to build luxury hotels catering to international tourists.

Another project that will displace households and communities located in coastal areas is the Tide Embankment Project proposed by the Department of Public Works and Highways as infrastructural mitigation against future risks of storm surge. The 4-meter high project worth 7.9 billion Philippine Pesos (approx. \$157 million) will run through Tacloban City and two other coastal municipalities most devastated by Typhoon Haiyan: Palo and Tanauan, located south of the city. This project has already started and has seen many coastal communities demolished to pave way for its construction. The project, however, will skirt around major economic infrastructures in the area such as bottling factories and hotels and restaurants along the beach. Critics argue that the project is biased against small households, while giving leeway for business establishments along the proposed route of the project. These two projects will displace an estimate of at least 14,000 families in Tacloban City alone, roughly one third of its population. The local rehabilitation and reconstruction plan of Tacloban City envision the construction of coastal cafes, restaurants, and hotels as well as parks once the areas are cleared of inhabited dwellings.

The increasing role of corporate and private sector interests was facilitated when the now-defunct Office of the Presidential Assistant for Rehabilitation and Recovery introduced the “adopt-a-town” scheme that was intended to draw corporate and private sector investments into the rebuilding and reconstruction of towns hit by Typhoon Haiyan. According to the former head of OPARR, now Senator Panfilo Lacson Jr., the thrust of the OPARR was to design policies that intended to draw greater participation and investment from the private sector.

Different national corporations became involved in the reconstruction process; in the case of Tacloban, International Container Services Inc. was the major corporate partner of the city. Activists on the ground interpreted this partnership as a strategy to develop Tacloban into a major regional port for international trade and investment. The other side of the coin is that the International Container Terminal Services Inc. (ICTSI) chairman, Mr. Enrique Razon Jr., is also the chairman of Bloomberry Resorts and Hotels Inc., stoking suspicion that Tacloban will likewise be redesigned to accommodate the entry of investments in hotel and casino construction in the region.

The local government of Tacloban City promoted the imaginaries of disaster capitalism as envisioned in the different development plans that they designed for rebuilding Tacloban City. In the Tacloban Recovery and Rehabilitation plan, the local government and the planners re-envisioned Tacloban City as a site for private sector investment and a port entry for international trade. The plan constructs the city as a site for international exports through the reconstruction of the agricultural sector into one defined by commodity exports to identified international markets. The plan, however, was silent on the plight of the urban poor and fishing communities, rendering the spaces of Tacloban as *tabula rasa*, a blank canvas for painting the broad strokes of disaster capitalism in the region. It is in the face of mounting pressures of gentrification and disaster capitalism that the survivors of Haiyan galvanized to struggle for their rights.

The threat of disaster-induced evictions, corporate land grabbing, and gentrification strategies intended to increase business investments in the disaster-stricken city of Tacloban has induced resistance from the survivors of Typhoon Haiyan. On January 24, 2014, an estimated 12,000 disaster survivors from Leyte and the neighboring islands of Samar and Biliran converged in Tacloban City to protest the management of the disaster response phase. Protesters demanded the release of cash assistance worth 40,000 pesos to enable survivors to rebuild their homes as well as to prevent the eviction of houses under the no-build zone policy. The protesters would go on to form People Surge, a social movement organization that would push the collective interests of the poor communities that were hit by Typhoon Haiyan. The organization is composed of various sectors such as farmers, urban poor, and fishermen, but at the same time, they also included middle-class professionals and student activists in the city.

People Surge drew its mobilizing capacity not just from community based cadres and activists, but also from leftist organizations in the country that support them, such as Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN), Anakbayan, and Gabriela (a leftist women's organization) to name a few. The organization continues to hold protests and rallies every November (coinciding with the date of Haiyan's landfall) to denounce the "criminal negligence" of the national government, which they believe led to the deaths of thousands of people in the region. The protests are usually held in Tacloban City and draw around 3,000 people. During these annual protests, People Surge denounces the different forms of negligence of the state, such as substandard housing for the poor in designated relocation areas, corruption of funds allocated for disaster victims, and the continued implementation of schemes that evict the urban poor, such as the no-build zones and the Tide Embankment Project. People Surge has also functioned as a mutual aid group, as it aided

farming communities that were neglected by the government's infrastructure-centered rehabilitation approach. The vocal opposition and critical stance of People Surge has earned the ire of the State.

The aftermath of Haiyan also saw a massive militarization of the disaster relief and reconstruction phase. The Philippine military was mobilized immediately after Haiyan to restore communication, as well as to clear the roads of obstacles caused by electric posts and trees that were felled by Haiyan. As disaster survivors looted business establishments for food, water, and other items that they could sell, there was growing clamor from the businessmen of Tacloban to impose martial law in the city. While there was no formal declaration of martial law, the military and the police oversaw the installation and the management of curfew in Tacloban City. The militarization of disaster response constrained the movement of people's organizations that were engaged in disaster response as they were castigated for providing relief assistance in hinterlands without the assistance of the military.

The militarized nature of disaster response and reconstruction is evident in how the state handles pressures from social movements in disaster-stricken areas. As response to the growing criticism made by People Surge over the disaster rehabilitation process, former head of the OPARR, Senator Panfilo Lacson Jr., accused the organization, as well as its allied organizations such as BAYAN of being legal fronts of the Communist Party of the Philippines—New People's Army whose aim was to “destabilize” the government's post-disaster programs. Lacson claimed that the typhoon damaged the infrastructure of the communist network in the Leyte-Samar-Biliran group of islands and that the communists are tapping into the disaster survivors to rebuild this network. This accusation has been slammed by BAYAN and People Surge, accusing Lacson of red-tagging to evade addressing the criticisms of the rehabilitation process. BAYAN Secretary General Renato Reyes Jr. stated that accusing People Surge as communist fronts will invite state repression against activists associated with the organization.

According to the data by local human rights organization Katungod Sini-rangan Bisayas, at least 13 community organizers and volunteers were killed by suspected military elements. In addition to the killings, other incidents of harassments were reported, such as encampment by the military in rural villages that resulted in evacuations by villagers in some towns of nearby Samar Island. Urban-based activists meanwhile report surveillance by suspected military intelligence agents of the movement and activities of known activist personalities in the region. The military meanwhile maintains that these killed activists are known supporters or are members of the NPA. What is clear in these situations is that these individuals are members of organizations that are opposed to the imposition of disaster capitalism in the region. Local human

rights activists suspect that these policies are part of the counterinsurgency program of the government. The counterinsurgency program of the Philippine government resembles the Phoenix program in Vietnam, wherein leaders and activists of legal activist organizations are attacked to weaken the support infrastructure of rebels in the countryside. Local activists, however, deny any links to communist rebels, insisting that they are legally asserting their rights through protests and mobilization. Despite this denial from activists from People Surge and other leftist organizations in the region, they are still continuously suspected of links with rebels in the region.

The militarized response to the political actions of People Surge demonstrates the role of violence in supporting the implementation of disaster capitalism. It prolongs the immediate “shock” of a disaster through immobilization of social movements opposed to disaster capitalism. While the shock of the immediate aftermath of Haiyan provided an opportunity for planners, technocrats, state agents, and capitalists to mobilize their plans to support their interests, this was met by grassroots opposition led by People Surge. As disaster survivors assert their collective rights to state protection and protest the encroachment of disaster capitalism, they are met with repressive force and stealthy surveillance. The spaces of civic resistance are constricted, thereby denying the meaningful participation of grassroots communities in influencing the direction of the disaster reconstruction process. Denying avenues for grassroots participation concentrates decision making in the hands of state and business elites, paving the way for disaster capitalism.

The deployment of physical and symbolic violence is a vital component in the production and reproduction of neoliberalism, particularly in developing countries across the globe. I argue that there is a need to extend this insight in foregrounding how violence is integrated in the production of disaster capitalism. Focusing on the link between violence and disaster capitalism also allows us to analyze the role of the military in post-disaster situations. This allows us to capture the dynamics surrounding actors who are legitimated by society to inflict violence. Future research can address critical questions on the role of the military in creating an enabling environment for disaster capitalism, as well as questions on their response to social movement opposition. Addressing these questions will enable us to re-center the role of violence in disaster capitalism.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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