The recent rise of right-wing demagogues issuing unsettling challenges to liberal democracies has garnered no shortage of academic commentary. Populists have deployed inflammatory rhetoric and contrarian policies to slaughter more than a few sacred cows. Nevertheless, such figures face structural constraints to enacting their unorthodox agendas. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte’s demagogic warliornism has been contained by an extensive praetorian network. For the past five decades, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have constructed, consolidated, and sustained a power network that exercises influence over local, national, and supranational affairs. Since Marcos’s ouster, civilian politicians hoping to remain in power have had to accommodate these extraconstitutional praetorian interests.

From colonial enforcers to the oligarch’s soldiers

Under Spanish rule, Philippine military forces wielded despotic power over society on behalf of foreign overlords. Armed service overseas served Spanish colonial, rather than domestic proto-national, concerns. The mercenary character of Philippine troops disconnected them from indigenous communities. Subalterns viewed soldiers with deep suspicion, whereas soldiers themselves remained reliant on the privileges granted by alien political elites. American rule developed, but did not fundamentally alter, this coercive structure. Philippine Scout and Constabulary units projected power through society more effectively than their Spanish-era predecessors, yet they remained an internal army geared toward domestic repression.1

American policymakers handed off this revamped security apparatus to their Filipino charges as they indigenized the colonial state. Oligarchic elites directed army units towards external defense during the Commonwealth era (1935–1942), while retaining the Constabulary for internal security. However, social upheavals generated under Japanese occupation precipitated an embedded agrarian insurrection that necessitated a military shift towards counterinsurgency. Special operations coupled with civic action programs aimed at winning hearts and minds made the AFP more visible presence in postwar Philippine society. Soldiers protected oligarchs from leftist movements and derived substantial benefits from continuing American assistance. President Ferdinand Marcos spent his first term in office (1965–1969) cultivating military support for his creeping authoritarian takeover by offering state patronage to key units and senior commanders. Having tasted power, the AFP supported the imposition of martial law in 1972 as a means to expand its prerogatives and influence.

Praetorian politicization and network expansion

As the most autonomous element of the Marcos regime, the Philippine defense establishment derived lasting benefits from authoritarian rule. Increased budgets, weapons procurements, illicit rackets, and the formation of militias enriched and empowered the military to a point where it could no longer be controlled. The AFP maintained separate linkages with the United States, an imperial benefactor that could provide vast quantities of supranational patronage. Marcos managed to endow his kin and cronies with huge wealth while keeping most of them loyal. He could not, however, prevent senior military officials from carving out autonomous means to enrichment. This compelled Marcos to widen the swath of his control. While an officer’s commission expanded praetorian political networks beyond the military, the AFP supported the imposition of martial law in 1972 as a means to expand its prerogatives and influence.

Civilian politicians hoping to remain in power have to accommodate extraconstitutional praetorian interests.
In addition to facilitating predatory enrichment, counterinsurgency campaigns created deep divisions between junior and senior ranks. Recent graduates from the prestigious Philippine Military Academy were horrified to have their education subverted by corruption and force. Violence turned inward. They faced excruciating conditions in combat zones as well-connected commanders siphoned off resources to line their own pockets. Having experienced severe deprivation, junior officers felt entitled to deny it to those below them, so as to safeguard their leadership. Faced with deepening political unrest, the Marcos regime, faced with potential coups as leverage. By early 1988, Ramos had over Aquino, using the threat of RAM-directed weaponry and training, they lost none of their power to declare a revolutionary government. Marcos and focused on electric public order. The AFP-militia linkages deepened further after Marcos and focused on military officers as a counterweight to the military’s growing power. Yet, almost immediately, militiamilitias fell under the influence of local AFP commanders. AFP-militia vigilante groups mobilized a huge portion of the NPA. Several groups were backed by various fragments of left-wing sympathizers who recognized the NPA as a counterweight to Marcos. They subjected suspected dissidents to sexual violence, murder, and mutilation, often disguised as ‘resistance to potential dialogues. In the war against insurgency, the military's mission transformed into more regimented paramilitary formations as needed. Although given more advanced weaponry, they lost none of their brutality in standard usages, such as giving the AFP plausible deniability for human rights violations, military expansion gave the military access tobulan fugitives, who were eventually killed and buried in Malacanang Park. Ramos' succession to the presidency increased his control, to the point where the military could be discarded and left to recast itself into an external defense force. Ramos' initiatives are characterized by the degree to which they are supported by the United States. In the absence of American military bases and personnel, the militarization of domestic politics is likely to continue. The study concludes that the military's role in Philippine politics has not diminished, but rather intensified, as it remains a powerful force in shaping the country's political landscape. The Philippines remains a complex and dynamic political environment, with the military playing a significant role in shaping its trajectory.