

## Authoritarianism and Violence: An Arendtian Critique of the Philippine War on Illegal Drugs

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### ABSTRACT

The Philippine War on Drugs, initiated under President Rodrigo Duterte's administration, has been marked by authoritarian governance and widespread violence, particularly through extrajudicial killings (EJKs). This paper critically examines the authoritarian dimensions of the drug war through the lens of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy, particularly her analyses of power, violence, and the "banality of evil." Arendt warns that authoritarianism thrives on coercion and the erosion of public discourse, often justifying state violence as a means to maintain order. The normalization of EJKs in the Philippines exemplifies how authoritarian tendencies undermine democratic institutions and the rule of law. Applying Arendt's critique, this study explores how the drug war fosters a culture of unthinking obedience among state actors and desensitization among the public. Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" suggests that perpetrators of state-sponsored violence do not necessarily act out of malice but rather from an uncritical acceptance of authority and policy. By examining the mechanisms through which authoritarian rule legitimizes violence, this paper argues that the Philippine War on Drugs reflects a dangerous collapse of political deliberation, wherein fear replaces reasoned debate. Ultimately, this paper calls for a reinvigoration of public discourse and critical thinking as a means of resisting authoritarian violence. An Arendtian critique highlights the necessity of political engagement, moral responsibility, and institutional accountability in preserving democratic values against the excesses of authoritarian rule.

## INTRODUCTION

Since President Rodrigo Duterte assumed office in July 2016, extrajudicial killings have become a matter of grave concern, not only for government officials and law enforcement agencies but also for ordinary citizens who witness their widespread occurrence. During his presidential campaign, Duterte made a bold and powerful declaration, stating, *“In 3 to 6 months, I will eradicate criminality, corruption, and drugs.”* This promise resonated strongly with the electorate and significantly shaped public perception of his leadership even before he formally took office. However, a crucial and pressing question emerged: *What specific measures would he implement to fulfill this pledge?* Even before Duterte’s administration formally began, reports of summary killings—often targeting suspected drug offenders—had already surfaced across various regions of the Philippines. However, immediately after assuming the presidency, his administration officially launched the controversial and highly aggressive campaign known as the “war on drugs.” This state-led initiative disproportionately affected individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, particularly those living in urban slums, where many residents became the primary targets of a police operation known as *Oplan Tokhang*. From that moment onward, major television networks and national newspapers in the Philippines consistently reported on cases of extrajudicial killings and summary executions, further intensifying national and international scrutiny.

Extrajudicial killings, by definition, refer to unlawful executions carried out by government authorities without the sanction of judicial or legal proceedings. These killings, which violate fundamental human rights, often involve the state’s direct or indirect participation in the elimination of individuals suspected of criminal activity. Summary executions, on the other hand, are acts of violence perpetrated by private individuals or vigilante groups, also carried out without legal due process. Despite their unofficial nature, summary executions are frequently dismissed as “crimes under investigation,” creating a legal gray area that allows perpetrators to act with impunity. Under both domestic and international legal frameworks, extrajudicial killings are categorized as politically motivated assassinations, systematic and targeted acts of violence, or killings that occur with the tacit approval or silent acquiescence of state authorities. International legal instruments further define extrajudicial killings as acts of violence carried out without adherence to the due process of law, meaning that victims are denied their legal right to a defense, a fair trial, or any form of judicial review before being executed.

Every time law enforcement officers take the life of an individual without following due process, the government itself undermines the very laws it is duty-bound to uphold, thereby reducing itself to the same level as the criminals it seeks to apprehend and punish. While it is undeniable that the Duterte administration’s campaign against illegal drugs has contributed to a significant decrease in drug-related crimes, this decline has come at the enormous cost of thousands of human lives, many of whom were killed in

circumstances that remain legally questionable. Each instance of extrajudicial killing represents a conscious and deliberate decision by state authorities to bypass legal proceedings, effectively weakening the integrity of the country's justice system and eroding public trust in its institutions. When law enforcement agencies are granted unchecked authority to summarily execute suspects without legal oversight, the government itself becomes complicit in lawlessness, fostering a culture where violence is normalized as an acceptable means of maintaining order. As this pattern of state-sanctioned violence continues, the government increasingly loses its moral legitimacy and, in the eyes of many, forfeits its right to govern justly and democratically.

The prevalence of extrajudicial killings and summary executions remains one of the most urgent and alarming challenges facing the Philippines today. These acts of state and vigilante violence represent a modern manifestation of systemic evil, one that demands serious and immediate attention from policymakers, legal experts, human rights advocates, and civil society as a whole. The German-Jewish philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt offers a valuable lens through which to analyze this phenomenon, as her work provides critical insights into the dangers of uncritical obedience and bureaucratic complicity in state-sponsored violence. While covering the trial of Adolf Eichmann for *The New Yorker*, Arendt coined the term "*the banality of evil*"—a concept she later explored in depth in her seminal work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt's theory challenges the conventional notion that acts of extreme violence are always perpetrated by individuals who are inherently malicious or malevolent. Instead, she argues that evil often emerges through the thoughtless compliance of ordinary individuals who, by failing to engage in moral reflection, become complicit in systems of oppression and violence. Her framework offers a crucial perspective for understanding how authoritarian rule in the Philippines has facilitated the normalization of extrajudicial killings, allowing state violence to persist under the guise of law enforcement and public safety.

In this paper, I aim to elucidate and critically analyze four key aspects: (1) the phenomenon of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, (2) Hannah Arendt's concept of the *banality of evil*, (3) the role of thinking as an essential human faculty, and (4) an Arendtian perspective on extrajudicial killings, particularly in relation to the War on Drugs. This study seeks to examine how the capacity for independent and critical thinking can serve as a safeguard against moral and political complicity in acts of violence. By incorporating Arendt's insights into the *banality of evil* and societal obliviousness, this paper aims to shed light on the mechanisms through which state-led violence, such as the extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, becomes normalized and accepted by the public.

One of Arendt's most pressing concerns regarding the faculty of thinking is the alarming ease with which entire societies can undergo a radical transformation of moral values, often without individuals actively questioning or resisting these changes. She warns that when citizens fail to engage in reflective thought, they become susceptible to the dangers of authoritarian rule,

as demonstrated in historical and contemporary contexts of state violence. This paper, therefore, takes as its central question Arendt's own inquiry: "*Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, be of such a nature that it 'conditions' men against evildoing?*"

Furthermore, this paper will provide a critical examination of the Philippine government's War on Drugs through an Arendtian framework, arguing that the normalization of extrajudicial killings reflects a broader failure of political judgment and ethical responsibility. By engaging with Arendt's philosophy, I will critique how authoritarian policies, when left unchallenged, erode democratic values and diminish the collective ability of individuals to think critically about justice, morality, and the rule of law. Ultimately, this study aims to highlight the urgent need for moral reflection and active political engagement in resisting the ongoing crisis of state-sanctioned violence in the Philippines.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Philippine War on Illegal Drugs*

A fundamental characteristic that distinguishes a civilized society from an uncivilized one is the presence of a legal system that governs its people, ensuring that all actions are bound by the rule of law. In contrast, an uncivilized society operates without such legal constraints, allowing authority and power to function arbitrarily. One of the core principles underpinning a just and lawful society is the idea that *no one is above the law*, meaning that every individual—regardless of status, power, or social position—is subject to the same legal standards. From the highest-ranking officials to the most marginalized members of society, the law must apply equally and impartially.

In a modern democratic state, the authority to impose the ultimate punishment—the taking of human life—has been entrusted solely to the judiciary. Unlike the executive or other state institutions, only the judicial branch has been granted this extraordinary power, and even then, it is exercised under extremely rare and carefully regulated circumstances. The legal system imposes strict preconditions and procedural safeguards before capital punishment can be carried out. These requirements exist because life is regarded as the most sacred gift bestowed upon humankind, and the *Right to Life* is recognized as one of the most fundamental and universally acknowledged human rights. Once a life is taken, it can never be restored, which is why judicial proceedings must adhere to the highest standards of due process before such a decision is made.

Extrajudicial killing, however, directly violates this principle, as it involves the unlawful execution of individuals by government authorities without any judicial sanction or legal process. Unlike judicial executions that are carried out following thorough legal proceedings, extrajudicial killings bypass all established legal safeguards, effectively reducing the justice system to a tool of arbitrary violence. Similarly, summary executions involve the immediate killing of individuals accused of crimes without affording them the

right to a fair trial. These acts undermine the foundations of the rule of law and erode public trust in legal institutions.

The Philippine Constitution upholds the inherent dignity of every individual and enshrines procedural and substantive due process as fundamental rights of all citizens (AHRC, 2017). It guarantees that every accused person has the right to a fair trial, which includes the opportunity to present a defense and be heard before an impartial court. Additionally, it safeguards individuals against unreasonable searches and seizures, ensuring that their rights to life, liberty, and security are protected under the law. The constitutional commitment to upholding human rights and due process underscores the illegitimacy of extrajudicial killings, as they directly contravene the core legal and ethical principles that govern a just society.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) defines extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions as “*the deprivation of life without full legal and legitimate process, and with the association, complicity, or acquiescence of the government or its officials*” (ICJ, 2015). These terms also encompass “*deaths resulting from the excessive use of force by police or security forces.*” More specifically, extrajudicial executions refer to deliberate killings carried out by state security forces, paramilitary groups, death squads, or other private actors operating in collaboration with or with the tacit approval of the state.

In the Philippines, the term *extrajudicial killing* lacks a precise and universally accepted legal definition. In *Secretary v. Manalo*, the Supreme Court, citing the Rule on the Writ of Amparo, described extrajudicial killings as “*killings committed without due process of law, without legal judicial proceedings*” (ICJ, 2015). However, in *Razon Jr. v. Tagitis*, the Court noted that the drafters of the Amparo Rule deliberately omitted a specific textual definition of extrajudicial killings. Despite this omission, the Court in *Razon Jr.* acknowledged that “*extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, by their nature and purpose, constitute violations of individuals' constitutional rights to life, liberty, and security, whether perpetrated by state actors or private groups*” (ICJ, 2015).

A more restrictive definition was later provided by Administrative Order No. 35, issued in 2013, which classified extrajudicial or extra-legal killings as those involving victims who were: (i) *members of or affiliated with organizations advocating political, environmental, agrarian, labor, or similar causes;* (ii) *advocates of such causes;* (iii) *media practitioners;* or (iv) *individuals mistakenly identified as belonging to any of these categories* (DOJ, 2013). Additionally, the order specified that the killings must have been carried out by state or non-state actors who targeted victims based on their real or perceived affiliations, advocacy work, or profession, and that the circumstances of the killings must indicate a deliberate intent to kill (DOJ, 2013).

One of the primary failings of the previous administration in addressing human rights concerns was its lack of political will to dismantle the entrenched culture of impunity within the police and military. This inaction was compounded by a dysfunctional criminal justice system and resistance from the military to being held accountable for human rights violations (AHRC, 2017).

Under the Duterte administration, however, the approach to human rights took a drastic turn. President Rodrigo Duterte publicly expressed his disregard for human rights concerns, signaling a shift toward a more aggressive and repressive campaign against crime, particularly in relation to his controversial War on Drugs. His administration released the so-called *Duterte List*, which contained the names of government officials allegedly involved in illegal drug operations (AHRC, 2017). Some of these individuals were publicly named on national television, fostering a perception of guilt even in the absence of formal investigations or legal proceedings. This practice not only undermined the principles of due process and the presumption of innocence but also contributed to a broader climate of fear and extrajudicial violence, further eroding democratic institutions and the rule of law in the country.

Extrajudicial killing refers to the execution of an individual by government personnel without the authorization of any judicial proceeding or legal process, such as a formal court hearing. In such cases, state authorities carry out killings without due process, effectively bypassing the legal safeguards designed to ensure justice and accountability. Moreover, the perpetrators—often members of law enforcement or government security forces—are rarely subjected to appropriate legal consequences for their actions, thereby perpetuating a culture of impunity. This issue has been a longstanding problem in the Philippines and continues to be a pressing concern today.

Currently, the Philippines is considered one of the countries where extrajudicial killings are alarmingly prevalent, particularly in connection with the government's aggressive campaign against illegal drugs. Since the launch of this campaign, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of deaths, many of which involve individuals who were not given a fair opportunity to defend themselves before being executed. As a result, public outcry has intensified, with human rights groups, activists, and concerned citizens staging protests and condemning the administration's methods. Despite the government's assertion that it is taking concrete steps to address the issue, extrajudicial killings remain a major human rights concern, raising serious questions about due process, state accountability, and the rule of law in the country.

Rodrigo R. Duterte, the long-time mayor of Davao City, won the Philippine presidential election on May 9, 2016, defeating four other highly qualified candidates. Duterte campaigned on a platform of radical change, emphasizing a hardline stance against crime. Even before officially assuming office, he had already begun laying the groundwork for his aggressive campaign against illegal drugs (Bueza, 2016). This campaign, formally known as the Philippine Drug War, is also referred to as *Oplan Tokhang* or *Oplan Double Barrel Alpha*. It aims to eradicate the illegal drug trade in the country, but its implementation has been marred by allegations of human rights violations. The campaign has resulted in the deaths of suspected drug users and traffickers, often at the hands of law enforcement or vigilante groups.

According to the Philippine Dangerous Drugs Board, the government's policymaking body on drug-related issues, approximately 1.8 million Filipinos were reported to have used illegal drugs in 2015—a significant decrease from 6.7 million in 2004 (Bueza, 2016). However, the execution of the anti-drug campaign has led to an alarming number of fatalities. Police records indicate that between July 1, 2016, and January 31, 2017, over 7,000 individuals lost their lives in connection with the drug war. This figure includes 2,555 suspected drug offenders killed during police operations, 3,603 deaths under investigation, and 922 cases categorized as resolved as of January 9, 2017 (Bueza, 2016). Additionally, the Philippine National Police (PNP) reported that 4,146 cases involved murders outside police operations, with 3,271 of these killings still under investigation (Bueza, 2016).

Public sentiment toward the drug war reflects both fear and support. A Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey revealed that 78% of Filipinos feared that they or someone they knew might become a victim of extrajudicial killings. Among the respondents, 45% expressed being "extremely worried," while 38% were "somewhat worried" about falling victim to the surge in killings (De Leon, 2017). Despite these concerns, a significant portion of Filipinos reported satisfaction with the administration's anti-drug campaign, with 85% of survey participants expressing approval (De Leon, 2017). The survey also highlighted a strong public preference for law enforcement operations to preserve the lives of suspected drug offenders, as 94% of respondents believed it was "very" or "somewhat important" that suspects were not arbitrarily killed during police interventions (De Leon, 2017).

International organizations, including the United Nations (UN), have condemned the surge in extrajudicial killings in the Philippines. A UN committee urged the Duterte administration to halt these killings, warning that public statements made by high-ranking officials could be perceived as justifications for violence against drug users (Bueza, 2017). The committee emphasized the need for thorough investigations into all reported cases of extrajudicial executions, the prosecution of those found guilty, and the implementation of measures to prevent discrimination—particularly against the poor and marginalized sectors of society. The continued global scrutiny highlights the urgent need for a just and lawful approach to addressing drug-related crimes in the country.

A recent report by the global human rights organization Front Line Defenders stated that President Rodrigo Duterte has "normalized the act of extrajudicial killing in his war on drugs," a campaign that has already resulted in over 6,200 deaths in the Philippines within the past six months (Geronimo, 2017). The report identifies the Philippines as the most dangerous country in Asia for human rights defenders, attributing this to the large-scale drug-related killings and the administration's rhetoric, which has effectively lowered the political cost of murder. This normalization of violence has heightened the risks faced by activists and human rights advocates, particularly those whose work challenges powerful interests. According to the *Annual Report on Human Rights*

*Defenders at Risk*, at least 31 human rights defenders were killed in 2016 alone (Geronimo, 2017).

Similarly, a report released on March 2, 2017, by the New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) directly implicated the Philippine National Police (PNP) in extrajudicial, vigilante-style killings of suspected drug offenders (Cupin, 2017). Although law enforcement agencies have attributed many of these deaths to unidentified assailants, HRW asserts that the police themselves are responsible for a significant number of these executions. The report further criticizes the Philippine government, arguing that its strained relations with the international community will persist unless the killings are halted. A Human Rights Watch official urged the Duterte administration to acknowledge that the rising death toll in the drug war will have consequences on the country's global standing. The report also highlights troubling allegations that police officers have planted evidence and fabricated post-operation reports to justify the extrajudicial killings of suspected drug offenders (Cupin, 2017).

In legal theory, the presumption of regularity in the performance of a public official's duties is a well-recognized principle. In international law, this presumption is widely accepted, albeit rebuttable (Cupin, 2017). In the Philippines, this principle similarly applies to law enforcement officers, who are generally required to secure a court-issued warrant before making an arrest, except in cases of valid warrantless arrests (AHRC, 2017). During an arrest, police officers are permitted to use reasonable force in cases of resistance. When such resistance presents an imminent threat to the life of an officer or another person, the law allows the use of excessive force as a justifying circumstance (AHRC, 2017). However, this justification cannot be presumed outright—the burden of proof lies with the police officer to demonstrate the necessity of excessive force. In practice, the misuse of this presumption has frequently been employed to legitimize unlawful killings, thereby undermining the fundamental legal principle of the presumption of innocence.

The persistent issue of impunity and the lack of accountability among authorities responsible for extrajudicial killings remains a significant concern across both past and present administrations. Efforts to resolve cases of extrajudicial killings have been slow-moving, with little progress made since the previous administration. Since President Rodrigo Duterte assumed office, the number of killings—particularly those linked to the government's anti-illegal drug operations—has notably increased (GMA News, 2016). Despite the alarming rise in fatalities, the government has largely remained inactive in conducting thorough investigations into these incidents. Furthermore, public perception appears to have shifted towards desensitization, with many individuals becoming indifferent to the potential human rights violations associated with these killings.

Legal remedies are available to victims of human rights abuses, yet they remain largely inaccessible due to a lack of public awareness and institutional inefficiencies. One such remedy is the *writ of amparo*, which is issued when an individual's right to life, liberty, or security is violated or threatened by an unlawful act or omission (Corrales, 2016). This writ is particularly applicable in

cases of extralegal killings and enforced disappearances. Similarly, the *writ of habeas data* provides legal recourse to individuals whose right to privacy, life, liberty, or security is violated or threatened by the unlawful gathering, collection, or storage of personal data. However, despite the availability of these legal mechanisms, numerous challenges hinder their effective implementation.

One of the major barriers to accessing these legal remedies is the general lack of public awareness regarding their existence. For instance, government-issued materials distributed as part of *Oplan Tokhang* outline guidelines for safeguarding constitutional rights, such as the right to privacy and the presumption of innocence. However, these materials fail to provide adequate information on legal remedies available to individuals in cases of human rights violations. This absence of accessible legal education further exacerbates the problem, leaving many victims and their families without the necessary knowledge or resources to seek justice.

## METHODOLOGY

With reference to method, this critical essay on the Philippines' war on illegal drugs utilizes the Arendtian concepts of the 'banality of evil' and 'thinking' as its methodological framework.

## RESEARCH RESULT

### *Hannah Arendt's Banality of Evil*

The term "banality of evil" was coined by Hannah Arendt when she covered the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel. Eichmann, a high-ranking Nazi official, was accused of crimes against humanity and war crimes for his role in orchestrating the Holocaust. During the trial, the judges and much of the public perceived Eichmann as a figure of pure evil, a "devil in the flesh." However, Arendt challenged this perception. She argued that Eichmann was not a monstrous, demonic individual but rather an ordinary, unremarkable bureaucrat who carried out his duties without deep reflection on the consequences. As Arendt famously stated, "The deeds were monstrous, but the doer ... was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" (Arendt, 1978).

Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann underscores her central argument: his evil stemmed not from deep-seated hatred or cruelty but from a profound lack of critical thinking and moral judgment. She described Eichmann as neither unintelligent nor ideologically fervent but rather as someone whose thoughtlessness enabled him to participate in the Nazi regime's atrocities. As she put it, "... the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think" (Arendt, 1970).

Eichmann, in Arendt's view, became the embodiment of an individual incapable of independent moral reasoning, blindly following orders and adhering to bureaucratic procedures without questioning their ethical implications. She observed that his reliance on clichés, standardized language,

and bureaucratic norms served as a psychological shield, allowing him to evade confronting the reality of his actions. As Arendt noted, "When confronted with situations for which such routine procedures did not exist, he [Eichmann] was helpless, and his cliché-ridden language produced on the stand, as it had evidently done in his official life, a kind of macabre comedy. Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence" (Arendt, 1970).

Through her analysis, Arendt fundamentally redefined our understanding of evil, illustrating that great atrocities can be committed not only by fanatics or psychopaths but also by ordinary individuals who fail to think critically about their actions. The concept of the banality of evil remains a powerful and widely debated framework for analyzing systemic violence, authoritarianism, and moral responsibility in modern society.

The Arendtian representation of a banal Eichmann has evolved beyond a mere example; it has become a significant conceptual framework for understanding the nature of evil. Although some critics interpreted the banality of evil as a broad theorization of the phenomenon of evil, Arendt insisted that it was a specific observation regarding Eichmann's character and actions (Arendt, 1970). Nevertheless, her insights have deeply influenced philosophical discourse, particularly concerning the relationship between thinking, moral judgment, and the ability to distinguish between right and wrong – themes that have been central to Arendt's work since her early writings on totalitarianism in the late 1940s.

The concept of evil itself was not new, as traditional theological and philosophical perspectives often linked evil deeds to strong will and passion directed toward a particular goal. However, Arendt argued that in the modern era, evil had become a collective enterprise, particularly exemplified in the bureaucratic mass killings of the Nazi regime, which led to the extermination of six million Jews. As she wrote, "the modern world ... has made evil, like other things, a collective enterprise" (Arendt, 1977).

Eichmann's mediocrity and incapacity for critical thinking led Arendt to introduce the term "banality of evil" to describe how ordinary individuals could commit extraordinary crimes without deliberate malice, ideological fervor, or pathological intent. Reflecting on Eichmann's execution, she noted, "It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-denying banality of evil" (Arendt, 1977).

Nearly a decade after publishing *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt reaffirmed her perspective in *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, emphasizing that evil acts committed on a massive scale could not necessarily be attributed to inherent wickedness or ideological conviction but rather to an extraordinary shallowness of thought (Arendt, 1970). Eichmann was not a fanatical ideologue but rather a thoughtless bureaucrat, blindly following orders without deep moral reflection.

In a 1963 correspondence with Grafton, Arendt further clarified an important distinction between "banal" and "commonplace" in relation to evil. She stated, "For me, there is a very important difference: 'commonplace' is what frequently, commonly happens, but something can be banal even if it is not common" (Arendt, 1970). This distinction reinforces that the banality of evil does not mean evil is ordinary or universally present; rather, it highlights how bureaucratic structures, social norms, and uncritical obedience can facilitate moral blindness, leading individuals to participate in atrocities without perceiving the moral weight of their actions.

Arendt's exploration of the banality of evil remains a critical lens for analyzing modern instances of systemic violence, authoritarianism, and moral irresponsibility. Her work challenges us to reflect on the dangers of thoughtlessness, the role of bureaucracy in enabling large-scale injustice, and the ethical responsibility of individuals within political systems.

In the introduction of *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt explicitly refutes the idea that the banality of evil was intended as a doctrinal thesis. She states, "Behind that phrase [banality of evil], I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware of the fact that it went counter to our tradition of thought—literary, theological, or philosophic—about the phenomenon of Evil" (Arendt, 1978). Her assertion underscores that she was not offering a new theory of evil, but rather an observation based on her study of Adolf Eichmann's trial and behavior.

A key misconception about the banality of evil is the idea that evil is commonplace or inherent in every individual. Arendt explicitly rejects this interpretation, clarifying that banality does not mean that evil is trivial or universal. She argues that while evil can become banal, this does not imply that it is intrinsically present in everyone. She states, "...you say that I said there is an Eichmann in each one of us. Oh no! There is none in you and none in me! This doesn't mean that there are not quite a number of Eichmanns. But they look really quite different. I always hated this notion of 'Eichmann in each one of us'. This is simply not true. This would be as untrue as the opposite that Eichmann is in nobody" (Arendt, 1978).

This distinction is crucial because it challenges both extremes: the idea that everyone is capable of becoming an Eichmann and the idea that Eichmann was uniquely monstrous and inhuman. Instead, Arendt's analysis of Eichmann highlights that evil can emerge through thoughtlessness, bureaucratic obedience, and a failure to critically reflect on one's actions. Eichmann was not a demonic figure driven by ideological fanaticism but rather an individual who unquestioningly followed orders, relying on clichés and bureaucratic justifications rather than moral reasoning.

Thus, the banality of evil does not suggest that evil is common or inherent in human nature. Instead, it emphasizes that evil can manifest when individuals fail to think critically and morally about their actions, particularly within systems that normalize violence and dehumanization. Arendt's clarification serves as an important counterpoint to oversimplified readings of her work. Rather than implying that "Eichmann exists in all of us," she

highlights how specific conditions—such as bureaucratic structures, ideology, and the erosion of moral responsibility—can enable ordinary individuals to commit horrific acts.

### *Thinking in Arendtian Perspective*

The banality of evil, which arises from the absence of thought, does not conform to conventional notions of evil—such as self-interest, ambition, ideological conviction, or rigid beliefs that compel individuals to commit wrongdoing. Hannah Arendt argues that evil is not a metaphysical force but rather something ordinary, common, and banal. It manifests when individuals refuse to think critically. In Arendt's analysis, Adolf Eichmann exemplifies the banality of evil because, during his trial, he consistently maintained that he was merely following orders and obeying the law. As a result, he demonstrated an inability to exercise moral judgment.

Arendt asserts that "thinking is the only activity that needs nothing but itself for its exercise" (Arendt, 1978). This leads us to an essential question: How does the faculty of thinking function to prevent evil? Arendt contends that moral standards rooted in customs and habits can be easily dismantled and replaced by new norms dictated by those in power. She explains, "It was as though morality, at the very moment of its collapse within an old, highly civilized nation, stood revealed in its original meaning, as a set of mores, of customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with no more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of a whole people" (Arendt, 1970).

Arendt clearly attributes to the faculty of thinking the essential groundwork for judgment, particularly in times of moral collapse—what she describes as moments "when the chips are down." She asserts:

*Since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking being engaged in that intent dialogue between me and myself. In refusing to be a person, Eichmann utterly surrendered that single most defining human quality, that of being able to think. And consequently, he was no longer capable of making moral judgments. This inability to think created the possibility for many ordinary men to commit evil deeds on a gigantic scale the likes of which one had never seen before. It is true I have considered these questions in a philosophical way. The manifestation of the wind thought is not knowledge, but the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And I hope that thinking gives people the strengths to prevent catastrophes in these rare moments when the chips are down (Arendt, 1978).*

Arendt establishes three fundamental propositions regarding the faculty of thinking and its relationship to the problem of evil. First, she asserts that the capacity to think is accessible to everyone—it is not the exclusive domain of "professional thinkers." Second, she warns that thinking does not lead to fixed moral axioms or commandments; rather, it has an unsettling effect on rigid beliefs. Finally, she emphasizes that thinking operates in the realm of the invisible and does not directly manifest in the world of appearances.

Given these three premises, Arendt raises a crucial question: how can the faculty of thinking be relevant not only to understanding evil but also to avoiding participation in it? Her response lies in the exercise of thinking itself – what she calls the experience of thought. She explains:

*Inability to think is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and wickedness is hardly its cause, if only because thoughtlessness as well as stupidity are much more frequent phenomena, is necessary to cause great evil... Hence, in Kantian terms, one would need philosophy, the exercise of reason as the faculty of thought, to prevent evil (Arendt, 1970).*

For Arendt, the experience of totalitarianism shattered the illusion of firm moral ground. In its wake, individuals are left to engage in an ongoing, self-reflective dialogue—a necessity that underscores the importance of continuous thought. As Assy (2006) interprets Arendt, we are now "condemned to the continuous examination of events through our activity of thinking." This vigilance, Arendt argues, is the only safeguard against the banality of evil, which arises when individuals abandon critical reflection and simply conform.

## DISCUSSION

### *Arendtian Critique on the Philippine War on Drugs*

Throughout her life, the idea of thinking remained a central theme in Hannah Arendt's philosophy. The Arendtian notion of thinking is closely tied to the search for meaning through reason. The faculty of thinking, according to Arendt, is aimed at the conception of meaning and the necessity of understanding. One of her primary concerns about the faculty of thinking is that an entire society can succumb to a radical transformation of its moral standards without its citizens exercising independent judgment about what has happened.

This concern is particularly relevant to the contemporary Philippine situation, where many have seemingly abandoned the power to think critically and have instead succumbed to the government's aggressive campaign against illegal drugs. The nation has once again become divided, with political factions such as the "Red" and "Yellow" camps emerging, largely due to the people's incapacity or refusal to think critically. The words of the president are often treated as absolute truth, and his reputation seems to overshadow any critical scrutiny of his policies. The 16 million people who voted for him appear to be blinded by his promises of eradicating illegal drugs, leading his supporters to tolerate drastic changes in governance, even at the expense of the moral integrity of Philippine society.

Extrajudicial killings (EJKs) occur across the globe, regardless of whether a country is industrialized or developing. They remain a significant concern, not only for governments but also for the general populace. Extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions are defined as the deprivation of life without full legal and legitimate process, often with the involvement, complicity, or tolerance of state actors. These terms also encompass deaths resulting from excessive use of force by police or security forces. Specifically, extrajudicial

executions refer to killings that are deliberately orchestrated by state security forces, paramilitary groups, death squads, or other private entities acting in coordination with or with the tacit approval of the government.

At present, the Philippines is considered one of the nations where extrajudicial killings are most prevalent. Due to President Duterte's campaign to eliminate illegal drugs, there has been a significant increase in the number of deaths, many of which involve victims who were not given a proper chance to defend themselves. As a result, widespread protests have occurred, with citizens expressing their concerns over the administration's methods. While the government claims to be taking decisive action to address the issue of drugs, its approach remains controversial. The Philippine Constitution upholds the principle that governance is based on the rule of law rather than the rule of men.

This principle is fundamental in ensuring that no individual is above the law. Regardless of social status or political position, every citizen is entitled to the same legal rights and protections. Those who advocate for human rights and due process have been criticized for allegedly failing to address public concerns about crime control. However, supporting law enforcement does not mean disregarding human rights. While the fight against illegal drugs and crime is a legitimate concern, it cannot be achieved by trampling on fundamental rights and freedoms. No individual or government has the right to take a person's life outside the bounds of the law. The right to life is a fundamental human right that the state must uphold and protect for all its citizens.

Hannah Arendt's concept of the *banality of evil* provides a critical lens through which we can analyze the Philippine War on Drugs, particularly the normalization of extrajudicial killings and the public's desensitization to violence. Arendt argues that great evils are often committed not by fanatics or inherently wicked individuals but by ordinary people who fail to think critically about their actions and simply follow orders. In the Philippines, the police and vigilantes who carry out drug-related executions operate under the justification of obedience to authority and the supposed greater good of society. They act mechanically, without moral reflection, treating human lives as disposable in the pursuit of state-sponsored objectives. This uncritical acceptance of directives, coupled with public indifference, echoes Arendt's warning about how systemic evil can flourish when individuals surrender their capacity for independent thought and moral judgment.

Furthermore, Arendt highlights how totalitarian regimes replace established moral standards with new rules that serve the state's agenda, making previously unthinkable actions acceptable. In the case of the Philippine drug war, the government has reshaped the public's perception of justice, equating due process with inefficiency and justifying killings as a necessary means to eradicate crime. As a result, society has largely accepted, or even supported, a campaign that disregards fundamental human rights. This mirrors Arendt's concern that morality, when reduced to a set of malleable customs, can be easily manipulated by those in power. The erosion of critical thinking and

ethical reasoning in Philippine society, as seen in the blind allegiance to authority and the dehumanization of drug suspects, illustrates the dangerous consequences of thoughtlessness—an essential condition for the *banality of evil* to persist.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The entire world has been shocked by what is known as “cardboard justice.” This term refers to the practice of executing individuals without due process, leaving a piece of cardboard with a note such as “Drug pusher ako. Huwag tularan” (I am a drug peddler. Do not emulate me) or “Holdaper ako. Huwag tularan” (I am a robber. Do not emulate me) beside the body. This form of justice is not justice at all; rather, it is a crime that undermines the rule of law and human rights.

In any society, governance must balance the enforcement of laws with respect for human dignity. However, there are times when the methods used by a government to implement its policies become inhumane. The Philippine government's approach to its war on drugs has resulted in widespread violence and extrajudicial killings. The killing of individuals in broad daylight and the apparent normalization of these acts within law enforcement have contributed to a culture of impunity. While the fight against illegal drugs is a legitimate concern, the means by which it has been conducted raises serious ethical and legal questions.

Since President Rodrigo Duterte assumed office, the issue of extrajudicial killings has intensified, dominating national discourse and media headlines. His administration's aggressive campaign against illegal drugs has led to a surge in deaths, with bodies found on the streets as a grim testament to the campaign's brutality. While the intention to eradicate drug-related crimes may be genuine, the lack of due process and accountability has allowed certain individuals and groups to exploit the situation for their own interests. Many of those killed in police operations are alleged drug offenders who never had the opportunity to defend themselves in court. The violence has not only affected the accused but has also left deep scars on families who have lost loved ones without the benefit of a fair trial.

The consequences of this approach extend beyond individual lives. The war on drugs has had far-reaching effects on the socio-political and economic aspects of the country. Fear and distrust of law enforcement have grown, and many communities feel powerless in the face of these unchecked killings. Furthermore, the normalization of extrajudicial killings erodes the very foundation of democracy and the rule of law, creating a dangerous precedent for future governance.

Justice must always be upheld within the framework of legal and moral principles. No individual, regardless of their alleged crimes, should be deprived of their right to due process. The law must serve as a safeguard against the arbitrary taking of life, ensuring that justice is dispensed fairly and equitably. To allow otherwise is to erode the fundamental human rights that form the bedrock of a just society.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" provides a critical lens through which to analyze this issue. Arendt coined this term during her coverage of Adolf Eichmann's trial, arguing that the most horrific acts of evil are often committed not by monstrous individuals but by ordinary people who fail to engage in critical thought. Eichmann was not an inherently evil man; rather, he was a bureaucrat following orders without question, incapable of independent moral judgment. In the context of the Philippines' war on drugs, this notion becomes disturbingly relevant. Many of those involved in extrajudicial killings may not perceive themselves as doing wrong; they are merely following directives, enforcing policies without critically assessing the ethical implications of their actions. This failure to think critically and morally about one's actions enables systemic injustices to persist.

Arendt's insights warn us of the dangers of blind obedience and the normalization of inhumanity. She states, "The deeds were monstrous, but the doer... was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" (Arendt, 1978). This characterization applies to those who carry out extrajudicial killings under the guise of law enforcement. Their actions, while horrific, are often carried out under bureaucratic and political mandates, stripping them of individual moral responsibility.

The fight against illegal drugs should not come at the cost of human dignity and the principles of justice. The government must be held accountable for the deaths that have resulted from its policies. There must be independent investigations, legal remedies for the victims, and a commitment to upholding human rights. The public, too, must resist becoming desensitized to violence and demand transparency and accountability from those in power.

At the heart of this issue lies a fundamental question: How much of our humanity are we willing to sacrifice in the name of security? As Arendt warned, thoughtlessness and blind compliance can lead societies down a dangerous path. It is our responsibility to think critically, to challenge injustices, and to ensure that the rule of law prevails. In her words, "and I hope that thinking gives people the strength to prevent catastrophes in these rare moments when the chips are down" (Arendt, 1978). If we fail to uphold justice now, we risk allowing impunity to become the norm, with devastating consequences for future generations.

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