

School shootings in the Philippines: The violence of the state comes home

John Malvar
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Within the span of two months the Philippines has been shaken by two school shootings, events without real precedent in the country. On the morning of June 22, two students opened fire inside San Jose National High School in Tacloban City, killing three of their classmates and wounding 20 others. Eight weeks later, on the morning of August 18, a Grade 8 student walked into his junior high school at Ateneo de Zamboanga University with two pistols, killed a schoolmate, and shot himself while livestreaming the attack on Facebook.

Six children are dead. To divert widespread public shock and concern, the government offered thoughts and prayers, denounced foreign online cults and video games, and legislators demanded to lower the age at which the state can imprison children.

However, the essential question was not even posed, let alone answered: What social order produced these boys and made these shootings possible?

At approximately 9:20 in the morning June 22, two boys aged 14 and 15, referred to in the press as “Nash” and “Rod,” walked the corridors of San Jose National High School and entered classrooms, firing on their classmates. Three students were killed: Chris Lorenz Fabian, 15, who died pressing himself against a classroom door to hold the gunmen back; Joyancee Separa, 15; and Ayessa Nicole Dazo, 14. Twenty others were wounded.

The attack was not impulsive. It had been planned since at least 1 May. Nash carried a Glock 17 taken from the home of his aunt, a police staff sergeant who had taken her nephew to a firing range and taught him to shoot. Rod carried a .38 revolver registered to a Cebu security agency where his grandfather had worked as a guard.

The Philippine National Police’s own initial investigation established, and the boys themselves confirmed, that the two had been bullied together at San Jose since Grade 7. They were mocked for their size, their haircuts, for being awkward and socially withdrawn, and

for failing classes and repeating a grade. On the day of the shooting, the two entered the school looking for the specific students they believed had tormented them, could not find them, and fired on other children instead.

At roughly 7:50 in the morning of 18 August, Mohammad Mael Jalani, an honour student in the eighth grade at Ateneo de Zamboanga University Junior High School, entered the campus through the basement in his father’s car to bypass frisking. He carried a Glock 22 .40-caliber pistol and a 9mm pistol with a conversion kit. He wore a body camera and livestreamed the attack to Facebook.

On the fourth floor he fired at a seated teacher; the gun jammed and he cleared the malfunction. He then opened fire into a classroom, killing 15-year-old Patrick Dylan Wee. He climbed to the fifth floor, held the camera up to his face, and shot himself as he ended the livestream.

Both weapons belonged to his father, Lt. Lars Jalani II, district commander of the Bureau of Customs Enforcement and Security Service at the Port of Zamboanga—that is, the head of the armed customs police at one of the most militarized ports in the southern Philippines. Both were sitting in the family car when a driver dropped the boy off at school.

The mayor of Zamboanga, Khymer Adan Olaso, initially stated that Jalani’s grades had slipped, that his target was his teacher, and that his motive was revenge. Jalani was a Muslim boy in an elite Jesuit school whose calendar is organized around noon masses Monday through Friday and mandatory spiritual retreats as conditions of graduation. Muslim students are formally accommodated with a separate “spiritual program” and a segregated prayer room, but they are conspicuous by their difference in every register of school life. An honor student, chasing grades at one of the most elite institutions in the country, from a position of social and religious isolation must have been under extraordinary levels of

pressure.

Bullying is the social crisis distilled through the behavior of children—it is a learned social practice, the pedagogy of everyday life, the violence of capitalist society, experienced but not understood, insinuating itself into the schoolyard.

The authorities presiding over the schools often compound this bullying with their own. The “terror teacher” is a fixture of Philippine schooling, the instructor whose authority is founded on humiliation, ridicule, and, until very recently, corporal punishment. The Anti-Corporal Punishment Act has been pending in one form or another since 2013; it is still not law.

The Department of Education’s Child Protection Policy formally forbids humiliating discipline, but a study by Ateneo de Manila psychologists, drawing on UNICEF data, found that up to a third of Filipino students had experienced harsh teacher discipline—pinching, cursing, ridicule, objects thrown at them—within a six-month window.

Ateneo de Zamboanga has since scrambled to deny any bullying or academic pressure. Education Secretary Sonny Angara and Interior Secretary Jonvic Remulla publicly repeated the school’s denial and blamed the influence of online gaming.

The state’s response to Tacloban was of the same kind. Remulla’s own first characterization of that shooting, on 24 June, was that it was “bullying gone wrong.” Within a week that framing was quietly abandoned. By early July, Senator Risa Hontiveros had introduced a new one: the shooters had been groomed by “764,” an online network of exploitation and violence founded by a Texan teenager and designated a terror organization by the FBI. The children became the victims of a foreign contagion. The conditions of their lives, of their schools, of the violence that surrounded them from birth, receded from view.

In both shootings the firearms belonged to relatives who worked as officers of the coercive apparatus of the Philippine state—a customs enforcement commander, a police staff sergeant, a former security guard whose employer’s registered revolver he still possessed.

Zamboanga, the seat of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)’s Western Mindanao Command, has long been the site of military violence. In September 2013, claiming to be targetting secessionists, the AFP fired rockets from helicopters into the Muslim coastal communities of Rio Hondo, Mariki, Sta. Barbara, Sta. Catalina, and Kasanyangan, killing more than 200 people, burning 10,000 homes, and driving 118,000 mostly

Muslim residents into evacuation centers where many remained for years.

Jalani was less three years old when his city burned. His city is subject to routine military checkpoints and mass deployments. He grew up in the smoke of war, and his father is an officer of the state that made it.

President Rodrigo Duterte took office in June 2016; Nash was three years old, Rod, four, and Jalani, five. Duterte launched a campaign of state murder, calling it a “war on drugs,” without precedent in modern Philippine history. The police and paramilitary groups killed over 30,000 people; the bodies of the victims were left in the streets, draped with hand-scrawled cardboard signs justifying their murder. Duterte publicly mocked the anguish of the bereaved, and referred to the victims as animals.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has not ended the drug war. The University of the Philippines’ Dahas Project recorded 362 drug-related killings in his second year in office, higher than his first. An entire generation of Filipino children has grown up in a society of unstinting, publicly celebrated murder.

It is against this background that the state’s explanation, the boys were radicalized by violent games and online networks, if that is indeed the case, must be measured. No child is instinctively drawn to the imagery of dismemberment and livestreamed murder. Children are, on the contrary, averse to cruelty. That such material could find a receptive audience in these boys speaks not to the power of the networks, but to the prior psychological damage done by a diseased social order.



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