



# 2025 Electoral Violence:

Killings Heighten in Northern and Southern Philippines Amidst 2025 Midterm Elections



International Observers Mission  
on the 2025 Philippine Elections  
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# Killings Heighten in Northern and Southern Philippines Amidst 2025 Midterm Elections

The Philippines has long been a hotspot for electoral violence, particularly in rural areas. This remains true in the 2025 midterm elections, with a heightened number of cases of election-related killings in the northern province of Abra and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in southern Philippines.

The Philippine National Police Public Information Office reported a troubling total of 62 incidents from January 12 to April 28, 2025. Of these, a staggering 35 were confirmed as election-related, highlighting significant concerns about the safety and integrity of the electoral process during this critical period. Of the 35 incidents, 11 occurred in the Cordillera region, eight in BARMM, five in the southern Luzon region of Calabarzon, three in the Zamboanga Peninsula, two incidents each in Western Visayas and Davao, and one case each in the regions of Ilocos, Central Luzon, Eastern Visayas, and Soccsksargen in Mindanao.<sup>1</sup>

This is supported by data gathered by the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR), which recorded 13 cases of electoral killings and attacks from February 18 to April 10, 2025. Nine of the 13 cases were recorded in Abra, a province in northern Philippines, notoriously known for its feuding political families,

each backed by their own private armies and goons. The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) has placed three towns in Abra in the “orange” category, signifying areas facing serious armed threats. Six other towns are classified in the “yellow” category, which means areas with a history of election violence.<sup>2</sup>

In BARMM, the municipalities of Buluan and Maguindanao del Sur, along with Datu Odin Sinsuat in Maguindanao del Norte, have all been placed under COMELEC control. The COMELEC decision came after several killings in the region in the past months. On March 28, newly appointed COMELEC officer Maceda Abo was ambushed in broad daylight in the municipality of Odin Sinsuat. Abo and her husband were killed in the attack.<sup>3</sup>

On April 14, just two weeks later, provincial board member candidate Baba Omar survived an ambush in the town of Datu Anggal Midtimbang in Maguindanao del Sur. Five days later, a resident of Barangay Mangudadatu was wounded after three hand grenades were thrown near the municipal hall of Buluan in the same province.<sup>4</sup>

All these attacks happened despite the nationwide implementation of a gun ban by the Philippine government on January 12, which marked the



beginning of the election period. Violence continues to mount in the BARMM region despite the polls happening later this year. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed Republic Act 12123 last February,<sup>5</sup> officially postponing the BARMM elections to October 2025, a move opposed by different groups, citing concerns about regional peace and security.<sup>6</sup>

Journalists are not spared from the killings. On April 29, veteran publisher Juan Dayang was watching TV inside his home in the Aklan province when he was shot three times by an unknown assailant, resulting in his death.<sup>7</sup> This adds to the rising number of attacks against the media under the current administration. From July 1, 2022, to April 30, 2025, the CMFR has documented 184 cases of attacks and threats against media workers since Marcos Jr. became president.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the Philippines climbing to 116th rank out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom ranking of Reporters Without Borders (RSF),<sup>9</sup> the case of Dayang and the continuing attacks against journalists during and beyond elections remains troubling for press freedom in the country.

But electoral violence had already begun before the campaign period. From October 2024, when candidacy certificates were filed until February 17, 2025, the CMFR counted 29 attacks reported in the media.

Out of 29 targeted victims, 24 have lost their lives, an alarming indicator of escalating violence. This trend is not coincidental; it is fueled by the chilling remarks made by former President Rodrigo Duterte, who brazenly declared during a rally that 15 opposition senators ought to be "killed" to clear the way for his party's candidates.<sup>10</sup>

According to Peter Kreuzer of the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, targeted killings of politicians have been an innate part of Philippine democratic processes since independence in 1946, but have significantly increased since 2016.

Targeted killings may occur because of revenge or to eliminate an opponent, as well as economic motives, which are made worse by the connection between politics and illegal businesses. Political dynasties are also a factor, causing conflict between political families or even within families.<sup>11</sup> However, the public may not know the full scale of the killings at election time, as killings of high-profile politicians and election officers often receive more widespread attention, while killings of local and grassroots political figures are often underreported.<sup>12</sup>

However, the killings are not limited solely to those who are running for a seat in government. At the press conference launching for the 2025

International Observer Mission (IOM), local electoral watchdog Kontra Daya convenor Prof. Danilo Arao reported that, “Activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens are being harassed, attacked, and in many cases, killed, often by state forces such as the military and police.”<sup>13</sup>

The 2022 IOM similarly documented election-related human rights violations, including political killings, shootings, abductions, death threats, political arrests and detention, harassment and surveillance of candidates and supporters, large-scale red tagging, widespread vote-buying, media manipulation and repression, fake news and harassment of journalists.

These violations began in January 2022, with the first election-related killings taking place in Sorsogon, Bicol Region. The mission concluded that the 2022 elections failed to meet the international standard of a free, honest, and fair election. The prevailing conditions, including killings and the threat of killings, “robbed the voters of access to reliable information, access to the voting places without intimidation, and a credible vote counting system.”<sup>14</sup>

The 2022 elections also saw then-presidential candidate Ferdinand Marcos Jr. whitewashing the human rights violations of his father’s rule, insisting falsely that the martial law era

was the “golden years” of Philippine history.<sup>15</sup>

Electoral violence in the Philippines has its roots in its history of colonialism under Spain and the United States, with political leaders like Marcos Jr. still “bearing the marks of colonial collaboration” and oligarchy.<sup>16</sup> Chris Magno, an associate professor at Gannon University, argues that long-standing, systemic factors perpetuate electoral violence, with the historical role of warlords and private militias continuing to influence the political process and contribute to the cycle of violence and impunity.<sup>17</sup>

The threat of violence and ongoing killings are realities in the 2025 election cycle in the Philippines. This deserves attention from journalists, the COMELEC, political leaders, and the international community. Elections cannot be truly free, honest, nor fair while voters are intimidated by the threat of violence during the political process.

# Highlighted Incidents

## **Kerwin Espinosa shot on campaign trail in Albueria**

On April 10, 2025, Kerwin Espinosa, mayoral candidate for Albueria, Leyte, was shot at a campaign event. A suspect has been arrested but the police have not shared any details as of April 11. Also wounded were vice-mayoral candidate Mariel Espinosa and a minor. Espinosa accuses 7 police officers of Ormoc City as being behind the frustrated killing. Espinosa has previously been entangled in drug trade charges. He came to prominence when he testified in 2016 against Senator Leila De Lima, linking her to the illicit drug trade. In 2022, he retracted his statements, saying he was forced to lie by the police after the killing of his father, former mayor of Albueria, Leyte, Rolando Espinosa.

## **Maguindanao poll exec, husband killed in ambush**

On April 10, 2025, municipal election officer Bai Maceda Lidasan-Abo of Datu Odin Sinsuat town in Maguindanao del Norte province was killed in an ambush along with her husband. She was on her way to the office in Datu Odin Sinsuat's Barangay Dalican when armed men fired at her vehicle, resulting in their deaths.

## **Cagayan town mayor shot dead during campaign sortie**

On April 23, 2025, Incumbent Rizal, Cagayan Mayor Joel Ruma was shot dead during a campaign rally. Based on a police report from Police Regional Office 2, Ruma and another civilian — a certain Merson Abiguel — were shot while they were attending a campaign rally in Barangay Illuru Sur in Rizal, Cagayan at around 9:30 p.m. According to police, the suspected shooter, who remains at large, managed to escape after the incident.

## **Veteran journo, ex-Kalibo Mayor Dayang, 89, slain at Aklan home**

Juan "Johnny" Dayang, an 89-year-old veteran journalist based in Aklan province, was watching television Tuesday night when three bullets were fired through the window of his living room at Barangay Andagao in the province's capital town of Kalibo. Provincial police said they had yet to establish the motive behind the murder but assured that all angles were being considered, including politics and his background as a journalist.



#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup><https://www.sunstar.com.ph/manila/62-violent-incidents-recorded-amid-election-period-with-13-fatalities>.

<sup>2</sup><https://cmfr-phil.org/in-context/for-the-record-in-context/blood-on-the-ballots-political-violence-and-the-philippine-vote/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.inquirer.net/433885/maguindanao-poll-exec-husband-slain-in-ambush/>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/regions/943225/man-hurt-in-explosion-at-town-hall-in-maguindanao-del-sur/story/>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.philstar.com/nation/2025/02/21/2423198/marcos-approves-postponement-barmm-elections>

<sup>6</sup> <https://tribune.net.ph/2024/11/12/delaying-barmm-polls-could-lead-to-violence>

<sup>7</sup> <https://cpj.org/2025/05/veteran-publisher-juan-dayang-shot-and-killed-in-the-philippines/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://pcij.org/2025/05/03/cmfr-state-of-media-freedom-in-the-philippines-2025/>

<sup>9</sup><https://rsf.org/en/rsf-world-press-freedom-index-2025-economic-fragility-leading-threat-press-freedom>

<sup>10</sup><https://apnews.com/article/philippines-duterte-police-complaint-rally-comment-88d511405f256af4ac83839b89b19ee9>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/75567>

<sup>12</sup><https://cmfr-phil.org/in-context/for-the-record-in-context/blood-on-the-ballots-political-violence-and-the-philippine-vote/>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.bulatlat.com/2025/04/24/international-observers-to-monitor-2025-midterm-elections-raise-concerns-on-electoral-violence/>

<sup>14</sup><https://ichrp.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-06-28-IOM-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>15</sup><https://www.karapatan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Duterte-Term-Ender-and-Marcos-Jr-6mos.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://ichrp.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-06-28-IOM-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-guns-ballots-deadly-race-for-political-power/>