

# **The National Democratic Mass Organization (NDMO) Student Activists' Experiences of Political Intolerance in Manila City**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Philippines has recently earned low index scores in civil and political liberties. The rise of populism and contentious issues have polarized the body politic. These have been visible particularly for the National Democratic Mass Organizations (NDMOs). Political intolerance as a part of polarization and illiberal values thus becomes a challenge to the quality of democracy. The paper seeks to understand how political intolerance is experienced by NDMO student activists, how it is navigated to communicate political agenda, how democracy is interpreted vis-a-vis their experiences, and how political intolerance could be addressed according to the participants. This endeavor is guided by Holmes' marketplace of ideas theory, Kusaka's moral politics, and Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy. Through interviews under interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), political intolerance is understood to have been experienced in varying intensities and environments. It is also embedded in power relations. Labelling, attacks of character, and repression that evoke psychological and social difficulties to participants appear throughout the themes. In communicating their advocacies, the activists persisted in reaching out to the intolerant masses as core to their agenda. Furthermore, they see democracy to be not truly democratic. Potential interventions raised include fostering education as well as open and constructive discourse in schools and the family.

**Keywords:** Political intolerance, student activists, national democratic mass organizations, deliberative democracy

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In the 2024 Freedom House Index, the Philippines scored a low 33/60 in Civil Liberties and 25/40 in Political Liberties. From among its components, it earned 1/4 in having an independent media, 3/4 in freedom of assembly, and 2/4 in freedom to engage in human rights work.<sup>1</sup> In reflection, the Marcos administration has demonstrably sustained the program of red-tagging and other tangible harms to critical voices within the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> This situates educational institutions under unprecedented attacks, stifling academic freedom.<sup>3</sup> Extending into civil society, illiberal values as such, particularly anti-pluralism or intolerance, have been absorbed by Filipino citizens in support of social harmony by doing away with different groups and ways of thinking that represent chaos.<sup>4</sup> Within the context of a polarized society, some of these values have also been espoused by the left who seek to be intolerant of intolerance, often targeting those with conservative dispositions.<sup>5</sup> This context of polarization becomes a rich backdrop on which to understand political intolerance as a phenomenon among student activists who are advocating for ‘National Democracy.’

The activists of National Democratic Mass Organizations (NDMOs) are greatly vulnerable given a left militant orientation. Vernacularized rhetoric developed against their perceived disorderly role, with harmful categories such as “*pasaway*,” “*walang disiplina*,” “*terorista*” or “*komunista*” that are politically bagged.<sup>6</sup> Even more vulnerable are student NDMOs specific to the youth: the Kabataan Partylist (KPL), League of Filipino Students (LFS), Sandigan para sa Mag-aaral at Sambayanan (SAMASA), and Anakbayan.<sup>7</sup> Specific incidents demonstrate these: in 2022, 10 of Anakbayan members’ Facebook accounts were deleted alongside its page after mass reports, while in 2020, the League of Parents of the Philippines protested the NDMOs in front of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines claiming it to be a center of communist recruitment..

These showcases of intolerance run contrary to the liberal democratic ideals often attributed to the 1st EDSA People Power. As Fukuyama asserted against his own ‘end of

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House. “Philippines: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report,” 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/freedom-world/2024>.

<sup>2</sup> “Philippines: Authorities Increasingly Using Facebook to Stifle Young Activists’ Right to Freedom of Expression and Protest,” Amnesty International, October 14, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/philippines-authorities-using-facebook-to-red-tag-young-activists/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ramon Guillermo, “‘Bringing University to Heel’? An Unprecedented Attack on Academic Freedom in the Philippines,” FORSEA, February 2021, <https://forsea.co/an-unprecedented-attach-on-academic-freedom-in-the-philippines/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald A Pernia, “Authoritarian Values and Institutional Trust: Theoretical Considerations and Evidence from the Philippines,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 2 (February 23, 2021): 204–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891121992118>.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Peffley and Robert Rohrschneider, “Political Tolerance in an Age of Liberal Democratic Backsliding,” in *Handbook on Politics and Public Opinion*, ed. Thomas J. Rudolph (Elgar Publishing, 2022) 330, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800379619.00037>.

<sup>6</sup> Noreen H Sapalo, “The Pasaway and Duterte’s Pandemic Blame Game,” FORSEA, April 26, 2020, <https://forsea.co/the-pasaway-and-dutertes-pandemic-blame-game/>.

<sup>7</sup> Melissa Manlulu Harris, “Filipino American National Democratic Activism: A Lens to Seek Historical Justice for U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines,” *Oberlin College* (2018), Honors Papers, <https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/157>

history,' this is a global phenomenon following the Cold War faulted on the failure of trickle down economics' neoliberal benefit to the working masses.

Using the 'Marketplace of Ideas' framework, Kusaka's moral politics, and Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy, the paper focuses on the lived experiences of NDMO student activists. The paper demarcates from extant literature by focusing its study on the activists' experience and navigation of intolerance side-by-side with their ideological perception of the system in which they are located, and the sought interventions that could be elicited from them who are at the receiving end of intolerance.

## **SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS**

The study narrows down studying the lived experiences of political intolerance of college-level student activists who are members of NDMOs — mainly KPL, LFS, SAMASA, and Anakbayan — that are based or operating in Manila City. These organizations carry the ideals of National Democracy and are primarily student and youth-oriented.<sup>8</sup> This aligns with the research interest on the lived experiences of student activists as a class that is vulnerable, malleable, and highly embedded in socializing institutions that experience heightened attacks — constitutive of intolerance<sup>9</sup> — in the Philippines.<sup>10</sup> As part of their experiences, their navigation as activists, their perception of the democratic system they act within, and their position on how to address political intolerance are variables that the study problematizes.

This study does not include activists who are members of non-youth sectoral NDMOs or underground movement organizations. While the study adopts the framework of Habermas in an integrated theoretical analysis, it does not delve into his linguistic and philosophical thought or critical theory. Instead, it primarily uses his theory of deliberative democracy integrated among others to be aligned with the necessities of a political science study.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Student activists in NDMOs aim to emancipate citizens under the ideals of National Democracy. In participating in the public sphere, they may experience political intolerance prompting cautious navigation and interpretation of the playing field to effectively communicate their ideals. This paper advances into these problems by sourcing theories from literature to uncover political intolerance in the context of the study, from the standpoint of deliberative democracy and Filipino political culture.

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<sup>8</sup> Harris, "Filipino American National Democratic Activism: A Lens to Seek Historical Justice for U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines."

<sup>9</sup> Berntzen, Kelsall, and Harteveld, "Consequences of Affective Polarization: Avoidance, Intolerance and Support for Violence in the United Kingdom and Norway."

<sup>10</sup> Guillermo, "'Bringing University to Heel'? An Unprecedented Attack on Academic Freedom in the Philippines."

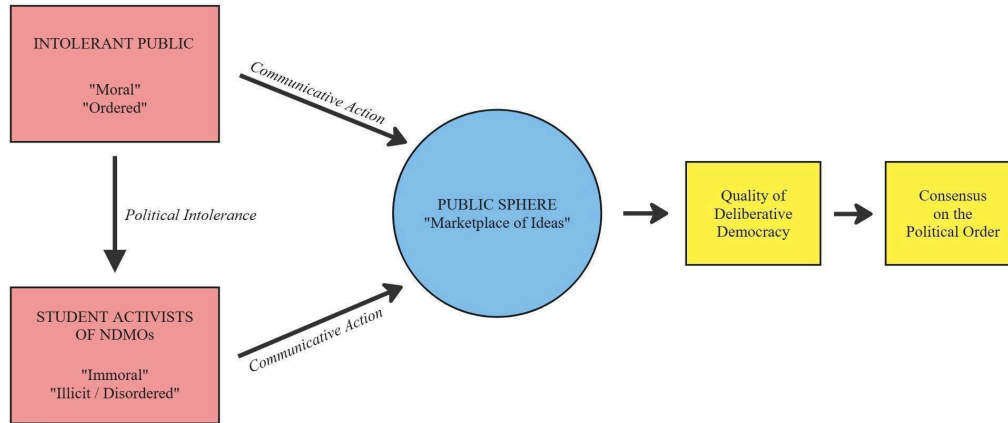


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

The theory of the ‘Marketplace of Ideas’ in understanding free speech principles in the Philippines takes root from US jurisprudence and political traditions. US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, inspired by John Stuart Mill, defined ‘free trade in ideas’ as people’s free access to engage, express, and seek the truth in the public sphere through debate and persuasion.<sup>11</sup> Participants are in competition to convince others of their ideas. This can only happen in a system of universal free access to speech as a political act.<sup>12</sup> Communication must therefore be deregulated and fair.

Whether the marketplace is a viable place to discover the truth through open speech, or ensure good government depends on its criteria as an arena of the public sphere. This criteria was determined by Morrow and Wihbey: (1) ‘Instrumental’ or whether it properly orients people in the public sphere to access it freely, determined by the individuals’ eventual ability to access, understand, and utilize them; (2) ‘Epistemic’ or the capacity for the marketplace to debate, test, and arrive at truth even if it surrounds itself with wrong ideas; and (3) ‘Normative’ or the rights of the sources, seekers, and subjects of information to be protected to allow fair access to the market without censorship, trolling, and other exclusionary means.<sup>13</sup>

Political intolerance challenges the democratic principle of the ‘marketplace of ideas.’ Considering the cultural undertones of Filipino political behavior tied to morals, Wataru Kusaka’s ‘Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor’ gives a scholarly basis to antagonism and intolerance between opposing groups who see themselves as either ‘good’ or ‘evil.’ Kusaka observes that moral politics dominate the Philippine landscape, putting aside common views on interest politics owing to the lack of ideologies.<sup>14</sup> This divides society into two groups – the civic sphere and the mass sphere; one is middle-class, the other is

<sup>11</sup> Garrett Morrow and John Wihbey, “Marketplace of Ideas 3.0? A Framework for the Era of Algorithms Marketplace of Ideas 3.0? A Framework for the Era of Algorithms,” *Technology Richmond Journal of Law & Technology* 29: 54, accessed January 31, 2025, <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1520&context=jolt#:~:text=The%20modern%20Marketplace%20of%20Ideas,ideas%20can%20be%20productively%20exchanged.>

<sup>12</sup> Morrow and Wihbey, “Marketplace of Ideas 3.0” 54.

<sup>13</sup> Morrow and Wihbey, “Marketplace of Ideas 3.0” 66-86.

<sup>14</sup> Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines* (NUS Press in association with Kyoto University Press, 2017), 6.

impoverished class.<sup>15</sup> Between these two spheres is a hegemonic struggle that results in “civic exclusivism,” “populism,” or the “moral solidarity of the nation.” For this paper’s purposes, civil exclusivism illustrates a separation between ‘good’ citizens and ‘bad’ masses.<sup>16</sup>

These moral postures, aided by Political Economist Luc Dioneda’s observation, can be sourced from traditional values of respect and obedience observed in the utterances “sumunod ka nalang,” “pasaway,” and “laban sa gobyerno.” For Kusaka, this threatens democracy by intensifying antagonisms between a moral ‘us’ and an immoral ‘them’ to the point of calling for excluding or intolerating ‘them’ from the political arena who are branded as ‘enemies.’ “Contact zones” become necessary as a place for discourse between the two spheres. Its expansion is advocated by Kusaka to enable softer interactions, diversity, and avoidance of quick conclusions on ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. These contact zones see a richer analysis in the explanatory framework on the ‘public sphere’ offered by Habermas.

This paper as a political science research adopts specifically the ‘Theory of Deliberative Democracy’ of Habermas where the author can find and operationalize the activists’ experiences of political intolerance. Democracy is emphasized to be a means for conflict resolution and negotiation.<sup>17</sup> Habermas follows a radical democratic tradition that emphasizes tolerance of differences and reciprocity between mutually respectful participants to put communicated speech acts into rational discourse so that their validity claims — its truth, rightness, and sincerity — could be disputed and provide opportunities for people to defend, reaffirm, renew, reject, or replace it with a new consensus especially when it concerns political authority or a political order.<sup>18</sup> Democratic procedure therefore aims to unleash the communicative liberties of people. Consequently, it must observe two features: (1) inclusion, and (2) deliberation.<sup>19</sup>

Discourse forms a main theme of deliberative democracy. It does not denote all speech. It refers to those oriented to renew or replace a consensus under question. It is formally a political relationship rather than a social one because of its negotiations amidst conflict and disruption.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, it finds itself within the public sphere. Habermas posits essential rules for discourse:

1. *Deliberative participants have to presuppose that anyone can take part in discourse and anyone can introduce and challenge claims that are made there;*
2. *They must also see one another as equals, reciprocally granting one another equal status in deliberation; and,*
3. *They must assume that others are under no compulsion while they are participating, by either the direct or implied force of others.*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> Mark E. Warren, “The Self in Discursive Democracy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. Stephen K. White (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 169.

<sup>18</sup> Warren, “The Self in Discursive Democracy,” 170-172

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Introductions: Five Approaches to Communicative Reason* (Polity Press, 2018), 122-145.

<sup>20</sup> Warren, “The Self in Discursive Democracy,” 171.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Olson, “Deliberative Democracy,” in *Part II – Moral and Political Theory*, ed. Barbara Fultner (Acumen Publishing, 2011), 140-155.

The public sphere must likewise observe these conditions. The public sphere, which excludes the state and economy, refers to the realm where individuals assemble into discursive relations to bring issues and their validity claims to rational discourse which also has both a (1) formal segment of regulated discourse between elected officials and parliaments, and an (2) informal segment of unregulated communication beyond the given. People must have autonomy as they participate and this can be ascertained by subjecting their culture, tradition, and present consensus to discourse where communicative action arises, defined as the “process of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization.” It is grounded on communicative reason that assumes all claims to be argued and contested while allowing others to have freedom to accept or reject these positions – it is imbued with communicative freedom.

In order, then, to reach proper consensus, legitimacy is required, defined as the condition where through good arguments and open contestation, claims for the present or a proposed political order are recognized and accepted. This can only happen through evidence-based and pluralistic public debate without antagonisms amounting to ‘us’ versus ‘them’ nor exclusion and intolerance of political participants by fellow citizens, or worse, by state or market influence. Otherwise, consensus is untenable and the public sphere is compromised.

The paper’s theoretical framework (see Figure 1) combines the explanatory power of (1) the Marketplace of Ideas of Holmes and extended by Morrow and Wihbey, with (2) Kusaka’s moral politics and exclusivism, and (3) Habermas’s deliberative democracy to comprehend the political processes that student activists of NDMOs find themselves in as they advance their political ideals. Similar to Kusaka, student activists are separated from a public that views themselves as the moral citizenry that affirms order, compliance, and propriety. The NDMO student activists or the “immoral them” are illicit, disordered, or “pasaway,” that contrast government efforts and social harmony valued by a public displaying political intolerance.

Moreover, particular acts of intolerance by the public are incited by government influence, especially in ‘red-tagging’ that had intensified during the previous administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. This continues to present timespearheaded by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and even media bodies such as the Sunshine Media Network International (SMNI).<sup>22</sup>

Different spaces of the public sphere act as contact zones between these two wherein political intolerance, discourse, meaning-making, and power struggles are experienced in relation to the consensus of the political order under question. Interactions like these can inform the participants on the quality of deliberative democracy that is meant to provide an open place for the testing of validity claims with the principle of being a ‘marketplace of ideas’ that builds on mutual recognition and the pursuit of truth, fairness, and justice. This would be consequential for how the student activists construct the reality of their experiences. Lastly, the consensus taken on the political order built upon the quality of deliberative democracy, whether tenable, depends entirely on the efficacy of communicative action and communicative freedom in the public sphere.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Commission on Human Rights, “Statement of the Commission on Human Rights against the Red-Tagging of the NUJP-Affiliated Journalists in an SMNI Program,” [Chr.gov.ph](https://chr.gov.ph/statement-of-the-commission-on-human-rights-against-the-red-tagging-of-the-nujp-affiliated-journalists-in-an-smni-program/), May 12, 2023, <https://chr.gov.ph/statement-of-the-commission-on-human-rights-against-the-red-tagging-of-the-nujp-affiliated-journalists-in-an-smni-program/>.

<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Introductions*, 122-145.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The research objective is to study the experiences of political intolerance by NDMO student activists. The form of data and the manner in which it is to be obtained is through a qualitative phenomenology research design that provides a study of reality and its meaning as constructed and subjectively derived from people, being unique and ungeneralizable from one another.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the paper uses Smith et al's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the qualitative methodology to investigate the participants who experience political intolerance.

Creswell described Phenomenology to be commonly used in social (political) science qualitative research which investigates a phenomenon and its meaning for individuals who have experienced it.<sup>25</sup> Smith further described IPA as where the researcher assumes a dual position: the participants, characterized as interpretive beings, first make meaning of their experiences before the researchers make sense of the participant's reports and its underlying dynamics, aided by everyday human resources alongside data from the participants themselves.<sup>26</sup> Researchers thus become responsible in mediating between the various meanings.<sup>27</sup> Essentially, experiences are understood by the researchers through the participants' unique perspectives; meanings attached to their experiences are therefore personal.

IPA is a synthesis of the descriptive and interpretive approaches of phenomenology and investigates how lived experiences appear to be and are interpreted by the participants and the researcher throughout the research process.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, the researcher must ensure that the data obtained is free from his own prejudices and bias, requiring him to first 'bracket' or exclude his personal experience from that of the participants and then to ensure an environment for participants without persecution and whose privacy is intact.<sup>29</sup> This does not necessarily eliminate the interpretation of the researcher but puts to fore his perspectives and biases and takes them out of the research process to directly focus on the participants' worldview.<sup>30</sup> Giorgi affirms that with this in mind, the philosophical assumption of bracketing remains unviolated given that interpretation is used by humans in all his activities.<sup>31</sup> Through this design, the researcher could appropriately address the research problem, identify its participants, and

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<sup>24</sup> David E. McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science* (Routledge, 2020) 241-242, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003103141>.

<sup>25</sup> John W. Creswell, "Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry" in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, ed. John W. Creswell (Sage Publications, 2007) 57-58, [http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Creswell\\_2007.pdf](http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Creswell_2007.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Abayomi Alase, "The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A Guide to a Good Qualitative Research Approach," *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies* 5, no. 2 (April 30, 2017): 9–19, <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9>.

<sup>27</sup> Creswell, "Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry" in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Igor Pietkiewicz, and Jonathan A. Smith, "A Practical Guide to Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Qualitative Research Psychology," *Czasopismo Psychologiczne Psychological Journal* 20, no. 1 (August 1, 2014) 8, <https://doi.org/10.14691/cppj.20.1.7>.

<sup>29</sup> Joakim Öhlén and Febe Friberg, "Empirical Phenomenological Inquiry: Guidance in Choosing between Different Methodologies," *Global Qualitative Nursing Research* 10 (January 2023) 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23333936231173566>.

<sup>30</sup> Joakim Öhlén and Febe Friberg, "Empirical Phenomenological Inquiry" 1-14.

<sup>31</sup> Joakim Öhlén and Febe Friberg, "Empirical Phenomenological Inquiry" 1-14.

proceed with flexibly investigating their experiences with the phenomena that they consciously reconstruct.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Studying the experiences of political intolerance by student activists who are members of NDMOs, the participants are purposively chosen from the members of recognized student-led NDMOs that include the Kabataan Partylist (KPL) which is considered an NDMO, Anakbayan or AB, the League of Filipino Students or LFS, and Sandigan para sa Mag-aaral at Sambayanan or SAMASA, as student or youth-oriented NDMOs operating in Manila City. They must meet the criteria of being both an active member of one of the organizations who have experienced political intolerance, and a currently enrolled student in any school, college, or university in Manila City.

The consideration of the homogeneity of the participants sample ensures a better appraisal of their lived experiences which is already underlined by either their common membership and involvement in the aforementioned NDMOs. Following Alase's recommendation for IPA, six (6) participants from the mentioned political groups are ideal for the study.<sup>32</sup>

## **DATA COLLECTION METHOD**

The paper heeds Creswell in that phenomenological studies must adopt the appropriate data collection technique in the form of in-depth interviews that can explore and examine the comparative experiences of political intolerance of the participants.<sup>33</sup> Interview is a method that involves asking participants to obtain their narratives, reflections, knowledge, and perceptions regarding their individually unique experiences.<sup>34</sup> Pertinent to addressing the research problems, the interview is conducted in a semi-structured manner, giving way to open-ended questions while ensuring the bracketed position of the researcher in order to prevent undue bias and prejudice affecting the quality of the data.

For purposes of data analysis, the interview is recorded and transcribed word per word to produce raw descriptive data on the student activists' experiences which is then subjected to annotation and coding from which emergent themes are organized into main themes and subthemes following the method of data analysis. In doing this, the researcher also ensures that student activists, accounting for their youth, are carefully interviewed in an environment that is free from persecution and other forms of hazard. Additionally, the decision for the venue or platform, time, and date of interview is premised on the availability of the participants.

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<sup>32</sup> Alase, "The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis" 13.

<sup>33</sup> Creswell, "Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry," 61.

<sup>34</sup> Eleanor Knott et al., "Interviews in the Social Sciences," *Nature Reviews Methods Primers* 2, no. 1 (September 15, 2022) 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-022-00150-6>.

## METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

In obtaining raw data from the interview, the necessary step is to analyze it which requires a meticulous method to examine data pertinent to the research objectives and the design. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis uses primarily the method provided by Moustakas that is characteristic of a thematic analysis method and is recommended for researchers undertaking the foregoing research methodology. This allows the paper to arrive at the ‘textural’ and then the ‘structural’ description whose synthesis becomes the ‘essence’ of the phenomenological study.<sup>35</sup>

Moustakas’s method is systemic and procedural which can easily guide the research to properly account for the experiences of political intolerance. Following his method, (1) the researcher transcribed verbatim the recording of the interviews into a hard copy where the researcher closely and repeatedly read and studied the result. Through a process called “*horizontalization*,” the transcript was annotated with comments and notes. These annotations made in Google documents were also highlighted, and as such, allowed the researcher to easily list the “*significant statements*” relative to the phenomenon. These statements were reorganized in a separate document for coding and to identify emergent themes.<sup>36</sup> (2) Following this, “*clusters of meaning*” are developed from emergent themes. These clusters were organized into main themes and subthemes.<sup>37</sup> (3) These clusters and themes are then turned into a “*textural description*” wherein it discusses ‘what’ the experiences of the phenomenon were for the participants. This included providing a quotation from the participants and explaining below the analysis of the phenomenon made by the researcher to interpret it according to the objectives and theoretical framework of the paper.<sup>38</sup> (4) The researcher proceeded by writing the context in which the experience of the phenomenon occurred. This informs ‘how’ participants were able to experience it and what the underlying dynamics were that are able to influence their experiences and how they make sense of it. These primarily came from the interview responses to questions covered by the second and third subproblems. This is called the “*structural description*.”<sup>39</sup> (5) Finally, the researcher described the phenomenon that synthesized both the textural and structural descriptions in a contextual form to arrive at the “*essence*” of the phenomenon.<sup>40</sup> This was integrated in the discussion of the themes and the overall discussion at the end of chapter 4. This allows the reader to understand in the shoes of the participant how a phenomenon has been experienced alongside its underlying structures that is common to the experiences of the participants.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### A. How political intolerance is experienced

The experiences of political intolerance were acknowledged or indicated by some as a mutually experienced and occurring situation. Kusaka points to the divide of society between the

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<sup>35</sup>Alase, “The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A Guide to a Good Qualitative Research Approach,” 10-11.

<sup>36</sup> Creswell, “Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry,” 61.

<sup>37</sup> Creswell, “Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry,” 61.

<sup>38</sup> Creswell, “Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry,” 61.

<sup>39</sup> Creswell, “Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry,” 61-62.

<sup>40</sup> Creswell, “Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry,” 62.

civic sphere and the mass sphere in which one labels the other as evil.<sup>41</sup> However, the findings present a different picture – labelling and moralistic perceptions are not only experienced by but also performed by NDMO student activists. NDMOs see the ‘other’ as stubborn or not critically thinking and themselves as having the imperative to organize them. They also present a great challenge to those in control of current democracy because of their agenda and manner of communication. It is expected, then, why state-sponsored intolerance was experienced by some of them.

These also show the prevalence of political intolerance in Filipino society, present not only at the national level, but also down to each political conversation one may have with friends, peers, or family members. It occurs within the public sphere mostly through its informal segment or the space outside elected officials and parliaments as defined by Habermas.<sup>42</sup> Its effect on the mental and social well-being of people presents implications for the efficacy of a deliberative democracy. Since it is built on participation and free speech, such is vitiated in the present case because of political intolerance.

Synthesizing the experiences, agenda, and perception of the participants, it is not merely stigma that drives their reaction to ignore, discredit, or remain polarized from the other side of the aisle. Student activists viewed the intolerant as uncritical thinkers because of emotional and irrational encounters that they had where authority was exploited to their expense. Thus, these views stem from perceptions of power and actual experiences rather than stigma alone.

## **B. How political intolerance is navigated to communicate their political agenda**

Communicative action from experience reveals that it is strategic or selective. It is impossible for any citizen to reach all sides to communicate their agenda simply because of their psychological, social and ideological limits. They measure whether their ideas are meant to be expressed overtly or if it is conveyed only to those willing to dialogue or to like-minded individuals. They also gauge on internal and external considerations – how will this communication affect ‘me,’ and how will this communication affect my target audience? Much of the experiences pertain to the former as they navigated more carefully and selectively out of backlash, attacks, or discrimination, while the latter asks, for instance, how the intolerant masses could be convinced without alienating them.

Focusing on the system rather than the person is an approach of student activists who are influenced by National Democracy as an ideology. In their experience of political intolerance, they maintain an understanding of the interplay of structures of oppression that affect the intolerant. Regardless of who this comes from, this may become a point from which to depart from the moral politics characterizing much of Philippine politics into a moral ‘us’ versus an immoral ‘them.’<sup>43</sup> Rather, politics may now be about focusing on the system rather than the divide between us and them. This can help avoid instances of political intolerance against opponents. In the end, political intolerance remains a labyrinth for all participants and ideologies who must cling to ideological, religious, psychological, and social considerations for them to

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<sup>41</sup> Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Finlayson and Rees, “Jürgen Habermas,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>43</sup> Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 6.

feasibly undertake the demands of their political agenda, whether this is to communicate it to people or otherwise.

### **C. How political intolerance is interpreted under a democratic system**

Democracy remains a concept divided between what is written on paper and what actually exists. For participants, freedom of speech becomes the crucial cornerstone of democracy. Freedom of speech, insofar as the participants can express their ideas freely, constructively, and without being shut down by subtle or violent guises of political intolerance. This can be seen as a reference to Habermas' criteria for public sphere discourse that allows for a democracy that is participatory and deliberative towards a kind of consensus. Habermas notes three criteria: (1) people must be able to introduce and challenge claims made, (2) participants must be seen as equally able to partake in deliberation, and (3) they must not be under force from others to participate or prevented therefrom – political intolerance being one of them.<sup>44</sup>

Power and who holds it in certain spaces determine whether that criterion is met. State forces, professors, policies, or parents were seen to breach these criteria. The strain of not being able to participate fairly has also been psychological, social, and political. In the end, no guarantee exists whether this leads fully to retreating from political activities or resorting to selective and strategic dialogue. This makes prospects of a true deliberative democracy difficult under the current 'democracy' as described by the participants throughout the questions.

### **D. How political intolerance is addressed**

Any manner of addressing intolerance coming from the state only represents the ruling class or may become unnecessary pushbacks to the freedom of speech enjoyed by people. This clear desire to limit the powers and scope of the state is due to the participants' experiences of harassment and repression on one hand, and fear on the other. However, the call is not to completely let the status quo thrive either. Instead, interventions must touch the root of political intolerance that comes from spaces one locates themselves immediately inside of, from childhood to adulthood, which correspondingly includes the family and schools. And so, their calls range from educating people or fostering open debates and disagreements starting in the family. Civil society is also tapped to combat or provide a social support network for those who experience political intolerance. This is in the form of organizing into groups or communities – 'Arouse, Organize, Mobilize (AOM),' which evidently distinguishes the student activists as NDMO members.

Still, political intolerance is seen as part of the current democratic system. Where everyone is discouraged to express and are made to be silent, suggestions for more open-mindedness by fostering debate and discourse even in taboo topics in school and the family may be a more difficult task than is anticipated. In addition, this can become a vicious cycle that challenges the very feasibility of an ideal public sphere, especially when democracy itself is treated negatively because of one's actual experiences within such democratic system.

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<sup>44</sup> Olson, "Deliberative Democracy."

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The divisive politics in the Philippines has seen political intolerance creep into interactions with people, from levels of the state to levels of conversations one may have with a stranger. Various literature has given different names to this — moral politics, illiberalism, or cancel culture. This paper shows five (5) general themes to have been generated from the participants' narration and interpretation of their experiences: (1) political intolerance is a degrading experience; (2) political intolerance comes from those in power within places of experience; (3) resorting to selective and strategic communication to get around political intolerance; (4) opposing the current state of democracy in favor of true democracy; and, (5) tapping institutions to foster critical thinking and open-mindedness.

The experience of NDMO student activists of political intolerance came from parents, professors, and the state, whether directly or otherwise. Discussions involving progressive notions were shut down. The labels of being terroristic or trying to fight against their government became persistent. Conversations with parents and figures of authority turn from civil to being personally attacked. Discrimination is also experienced through labels that associated the participants with terrorists or fighting the government. These labels signal the moral divide between civic and mass spheres into a 'moral us' and an 'evil them.' From invalidation of belief to suppression by State forces like the police, psychological and social consequences were also felt by the activists, which made them more silent, cautious, but nonetheless faithful to national democracy. They characterized the intolerant to comprise the masses, family members, teachers, and the State who became emotional and lacked critical thinking. The masses are nonetheless allies to be reached out to.

In these experiences, a pattern emerged where perpetrators of intolerance were those with authority. The power dynamics in varying spaces between father and child, professor and student, old and young, bourgeois state and mass non-state became highly visible.

Furthermore, as political intolerance did not separate participants from their agenda, they communicated these by cautiously navigating political intolerance. Crucial to the national democratic line is being patient with the masses, whether intolerant or not, as they play an important role in their struggle for a people's democracy, and must be persuaded and educated to be aroused, organized, and mobilized. NDMOs student activists attribute intolerance not necessarily to the people's individual traits but to the system that influences them. They therefore try their best not to make enemies out of them while at the same time avoiding immediate threats posed by parents and others. Thus, some hide their activism from their parents and move to social media to remain active. Still, if everything has been exhausted and intolerance remains, the resort is to ignore and disengage. The discrediting of the intolerant and the 'other' also stems not simply from stigma, but from perceptions of disparate power and the psychological and social burdens they take out of these experiences.

In terms of interpreting democracy in relation to political intolerance, the participants were guided by their beliefs in national democracy that is built on Marxist-Leninist-Maoist principles. Activists see present Philippine democracy as bourgeois, hijacked, and an illusion, which explains the experience of political intolerance from the state and other authorities that seem to be targeting the participants' views that challenge their power. Political intolerance directly contradicts democracy and must be replaced by one that empowers and legitimizes the

masses' role in politics where free speech is to be guaranteed — the right that makes democracy thrive. Nonetheless, the ousting and succeeding intolerance of the enemy of the masses may further lead to intolerance of views within the left that can give rise to further 'leftist infighting.' Then again, they themselves recognize their tendencies to be intolerant. An instance mentioned is when Anakabayan attempted to physically block and continued to discredit Akbayan's legitimacy as a partylist, calling it as 'fake' among other things during their feud.

These responses conclude with the way of addressing political intolerance. The role of institutions is highlighted. Student activists sought to repeal repressing laws and to remove NTF-ELCAC. Education is also seen as a viable course. Schools and families should teach people to be more open-minded and to constructively disagree with other beliefs. Tackling taboos and political issues in open conversations should start in the family to make people familiar with how discussions could become civil and not dangerous to one another. These suggestions can only happen through the participation of those who suggest it. Because the repercussions of intolerance include a chilling effect that turns participants to silence, caution, and selective dialogue, the change for these suggestions to bring about an ideal public sphere becomes a difficult effort.

## CONCLUSION

The rise of illiberal values in the Philippines coincides with a highly dividing political environment caused by populist movements and divisive moral issues like human rights, workers' grievances, public order, and the like.<sup>45</sup> The public sphere is consequently affected by persistent red tagging, personal attacks, and unconstructive discourse that frustrate the workings of democracy to be truly deliberative, open, genuine, and unconstrained by external forces.<sup>46</sup> Abundant literature has treated these threats but has mostly ignored the importance of considering the ideological beliefs of the left, who are also a historically repressed group. The paper provides significant implications to how political actors can understand and address the contradictions of the supposed deliberative liberal democracy that the 1987 Constitution was meant to create. To this end, the paper posits the problem of how NDMO student activists experience and navigate political intolerance as they communicate their respective political agenda, followed by how they subsequently interpret democracy and how political intolerance can be addressed.

Existing literature on the marketplace of ideas from Holmes, moral politics from Kusaka, and communicative action and deliberative democracy from Habermas guides the paper in addressing these problems. Through interpretative phenomenology, political intolerance is understood to have been experienced in varying intensities. Labelling, attacks of character, abuse, and repression that evoke psychological and social challenges to the participants appear throughout the themes. Intolerance is also directly linked to traditional, legal, and cultural power relations. In communicating their agenda NDMO student activists were guided by the idea of National Democracy, and persisted to reach out to the intolerant masses as core recipients of their agenda. They cling to ideological, psychological, and social considerations as they engage in more strategic and selective dialogue. Findings further show that democracy is perceived as an

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<sup>45</sup> Borja, "Political Illiberalism in the Philippines," 63.

<sup>46</sup> Lyryl Mae Kelly, "Factors of Red-Tagging of Youth in a Selected Barangay in Itogon: On the Youth's Point of View," SSRN Electronic Journal (2024), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4810205>.

illusion in the status quo because of political intolerance. Finally, the student activists saw the need to remove tools of repression from the State. This is in addition to fostering education, open discourse, and constructive engagements in schools and the family.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper sought to fill the gaps of literature on understanding political intolerance as is experienced by one of the most vulnerable groups in Philippine politics. Returning to the findings, political intolerance is prevalent and tied to power relations, it is also consequential to dialogue and the type of public sphere that emerges and is sought to be addressed by cultivating more meaningful discussions and open-mindedness, alongside organizing. It is therefore hoped that the corresponding themes and subthemes shed light to unexplored opportunities for further research and action as the paper contributes to scholarship on deliberative democracy and the public sphere, political intolerance, illiberalism, and activism in the Philippines.

Student activists and NDMOs should develop or standardize protocols for discourse engagement that can protect both the activist and the masses from political intolerance and its repercussions in their encounters. Programs for members who have experienced political intolerance should also be standard so that organizations can fulfill their role as a social safety support for their members.

The Filipino public should endeavor to foster open discussion of taboo and political discussions in families that do not escalate into attacks of character and are facilitated by careful and conscious use of language. Political intolerance begins in the family. They may also consider organizing into collective bodies or political units to provide social support to like-minded individuals and where their ideas can flourish.

School administrators must review cases of harassment, attacks, and violence due to political beliefs and foster constructive debate within campus that do not antagonize people on the basis of character. Stricter measures must be put in place to protect students and to guarantee free speech regardless of ideology. Within classrooms, they must encourage critical pedagogy and root out the abuse of teacher authority to repress the flow of ideas and discrimination of students.

Having been perceived as a source of intolerance, government officials should reassess laws and policies that inflict a chilling effect on free speech in view of deliberative democracy and reaching proper consensus that places all partaking citizens on an equal platform without compulsion. It should broaden the exercise for free speech by setting more lax standards to its regulation. In conjunction, the government should hold to account those treading the lines of harassment, violent threats, and physical abuse based on political beliefs.

Finally, future research should delve into the dynamics within the school and how administrators and people of authority respond to political intolerance, namely for its implications to pedagogy and politics within the academe. Multidisciplinary research may further be undertaken on the consequences of political intolerance to mental health, to varying levels of strain in communicating political agenda, intolerance and infighting between left activists, and philosophical undertones of power being assumed in spaces of encounters between activists

coming from the masses and the intolerant masses as they both find themselves within the same class but of varying ideological and organizational background.

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