EDITOR'S NOTE: CRIMINAL INJUSTICE

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Philippine National Police officers train with members of the U.S. military.

Even prison walls cannot muffle the foremost critic of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. From her cell, Leila de Lima, a member of the country's Senate, calls the 71-year-old ruler a "geriatric dictator wannabe" involved in "mass serialized murder."

Duterte had promised that his administration would be "bloody," and after less than a year in power, he's lived up to his pledge—as well as his sadistic nickname, "the Punisher." Human rights organizations estimate that there have been over 7,000 vigilante executions of Filipino citizens accused of dealing or using illegal drugs. But, as Lima says in our Conversation section, Duterte's "brutal crackdown has proven to be ineffective and only lead to more violence."

Though the Philippines may be an extreme case, many governments have taken a punitive approach to drug control, ignoring overwhelming evidence that favors a public-health strategy. Harsh punishment, militarized policing, and extrajudicial killings have yet to make any society safer or freer of banned substances.

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University of Chicago law professor Aziz Z. Huq describes this another way. In his piece, "Dignity, not deadly force," Huq argues that the practice and theory of policing are on divergent paths. While squadrons around the world equip themselves with military-grade weapons and surveillance technologies, those who research crime have reached a different consensus: In policing, as in life, "it's the small gestures that count," Huq writes. Hundreds of studies demonstrate that, if the goal is to reduce lawbreaking, police officers should listen to the accused, show basic courtesy, and exhibit evenhandedness. "All this matters not only because dignity and human rights are intrinsically important (although they are)," he contends, "but also because the form of policing employed in a nation will necessarily influence the health of its democracy."

The more a society comes to tolerate brute force and infringement on privacy, the greater the "risk to the substance of democracy itself." Coercion creates a dangerous, violent cycle that only cements repressive governance.

Mai El-Sadany, a fellow for legal and judicial analysis at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, tracks this very process in Egypt, where Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi continues to manipulate the law to consolidate power. Arbitrary arrests, torture in detention, and forced disappearances are not new in Egypt, but el-Sissi has made these abuses difficult, or even impossible, to challenge in court. By codifying authoritarian rule and attacking dissent, el-Sissi has transformed legal culture in a way that will be difficult to undo.

In the West, countries with robust institutions may still struggle with fatal inequalities in policing, prosecution, and sentencing. Eddie Bruce-Jones, a senior lecturer at the Birkbeck College School of Law, University of London, points to the grisly death of Oury Jalloh in German police custody to illustrate that country's unaddressed patterns of racism and xenophobia. According to Bruce-Jones, "there is still a sense among Germans that the United States has a monopoly on racism, and that racism in the U.S. defines all that racism can be." For many Germans, the fact that American police kill an average of three civilians per day, a disproportionate number of them African American, has become an excuse not to examine systemic racism in their own multiracial society.

Criminal justice remains elusive, but there is hope. In the Philippines, Sen. Leila de Lima and others are risking their lives for the principles of due process; in Egypt, citizens are finding new ways to protest el-Sissi; and in Germany, activists are shining a light on institutional prejudice. Meanwhile, academics in various regions are shaping an intellectual framework for demilitarization.

Grass-roots organizers, especially in concert with researchers and politicians, can help hold even authoritarian governments to account. As Mari Margil of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund argues in her piece, "For governments to make the right choice—what through the lens of history may appear as the *only* choice—they must be made to do it." This, despite the global lurch toward autocracy, is cause for optimism, and our best means of achieving justice. ●