



Possible re-introduction of mandatory military training: a human rights battle for Filipino youth

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Abstract: The Philippines is bracing itself for potential imminent revival of mandatory military training in schools, scrapped in 2002 following the abduction and murder of a student by his fellow cadets. What are the implications for Filipino youth?

Philippines President Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr’s classification of the mandatory military training for students or the Reserved Officers Training Corps (ROTC) as a [priority bill](#) at the Upper House dashed the earnest hopes of those longing for improvement in the country’s languishing educational system. This is not a drill!

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A recent [study](#) showed that most Marcos sympathisers believe that the incumbent vice president, the daughter of former president and drug war butcher Rodrigo Duterte, will instil discipline among students through mandatory re-introduction of the ROTC and revival of so-called 'good morals and proper conduct' in the curriculum. One must remember that former commander-in-chief Duterte scurried from ROTC by [bribing a tuberculosis patient](#) into having the latter X-rayed under his name, all because he did not want officers shouting at him.

Furthermore, a [commissioned survey](#) revealed that over 69 percent of Filipinos approve of mandatory military training among youth. Hence, the government's move is heavily backed by mostly pro-regime and pro-Duterte groups.

However, the incumbent regime's plans to revive mandatory military training are not in accordance with international human rights principles and could go off-tangent with Sustainable Development Goal 4. This would set a dangerous precedent for student human rights defenders.

Bill aims to remilitarise educational spaces

The ROTC was mandatory through Republic Act No. 7077, otherwise known as the '[Citizen Armed Force or Armed Forces](#) of the Philippines Reservist Act' passed in 1991. According to this law, Filipino males aged 18 to 25 years old are required to enlist in the military for two years. Without military training, male college students would not get their diplomas and graduate.

The implementation of this repressive law reached its critical juncture at the dawn of the new millennium. This was the murder of 19-year-old [Mark Welson Chua](#), an engineering student of the University of Santo Tomas. His fellow cadets killed him and disposed of his body in a river after he exposed corrupt practices of his ROTC unit in UST's student publication *Varsitarian*. His demise prompted the abolition of ROTC and instead, it was made optional under the Republic Act No. 9163 or the National Service Training Programme (NSTP) Act of 2001.

The NSTP required both male and female college students, including vocational students, to undertake one of its training components for two semesters. Under the revamped scheme, students can currently choose between three components: the ROTC; a civic welfare training service, where students can engage in community development or outreach activities; or a literacy training service, where students can teach reading comprehension or mathematics to children and out-of-school youth

More than 20 years later, a wave of nostalgia swept over macho-fascist salons when the lower house of the Philippine Congress passed the bill reviving ROTC in 2022. The call for its revival took another dramatic turn when vice president Inday Sara Duterte, then the Education Secretary, requested confidential funds from the government budget worth Php

500m (Usd \$8.7m) for the Office of the Vice President and a further Php 150m (USD \$2.8m) for the Department of Education, which she later [retracted](#). This ulterior motive not only undermines transparency and ethical checks and balances but also emboldens corruption and misuse of these public funds, which could have been allocated for human rights and anti-poverty measures. Her father, who is currently detained at The Hague for crimes against humanity, [revealed](#) that a portion of these funds will be used for the revival of ROTC.

Misguided plan will lead to violence, trauma and inequality

The government's dogmatic stance on the revival of mandatory military service in higher education institutions is completely misguided and loosely based on distorted views on youth. For instance, one senator who filed the counterpart bill in the upper house remarked that the re-introduction of mandatory military training '[includes respect](#) for human rights and humanitarian law'. Another pro-regime senator remarked that mandatory military training is better than 'spending so [much time on Tiktok](#)'. Apart from these fallacies, the ongoing Chinese aggression and escalating tensions at the West Philippine Sea [drummed up calls for more reservists](#).

The bill is deeply flawed for many reasons and is rooted in a false intuition that mandatory military training or service instils patriotism and discipline among the youth, for which there is no concrete evidence. The ship has long sailed for the elderly proponents of this measure—resorting to violence or harsh treatment is not instilling discipline. Just because baby boomers and millennials faced traditional methods of discipline when they were younger does not mean that the youth and future generations should suffer it too.

Instead, this proposed measure would fuel hazing, ill-treatment, extortion, and violence toward progressive young students. These human rights violations would further silence, intimidate, and inflict trauma upon young people. Schools should be safe spaces for youth to exercise their freedom of expression and assembly and association granted by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ([ICCPR](#)). Moreover, the proposed bill would enable public colleges and universities to charge higher miscellaneous fees disguised as [ROTC training fees](#), which would further disenfranchise students from poor and vulnerable backgrounds or even cost the government an arm and a leg in enforcing it.

Senate President Francis Escudero revealed that if the bill slithers through the President, the government would allocate approximately Php 27.12b (USD \$486m) for the mandatory military training between 2025 and 2029. Extracting a large yet frivolous chunk of the budgetary expenditure would result in budget cuts on welfare services such as healthcare and bursaries at state universities.

Angeli Mari Rodenas, a public administration major at the University of the Philippines - Diliman, leads the university's broadest alliance of campus press publications and student

writers' groups opposing the revival of mandatory ROTC. In an interview with the present author, she said:

The abolition of mandatory ROTC in 2001 was grounded in the recognition that it fosters a culture of violence and impunity. It also diverts public funds from urgent education and welfare needs, imposes heavy financial burdens on students, and violates fundamental freedoms, including our rights to self-expression, organisation, and peaceful dissent.

Way forward

As of February 2025, [interpolations on the bill](#) reviving mandatory military training have concluded, and senators will vote on the proposed measure soon. The uproar of human groups and opposition senators has also proven instrumental in dampening public support for this measure. Angeli Mari Rodenas has also commented:

Through sustained reportage, protest actions, and community engagement, we advance the struggle for press freedom, the right to education, and civil liberties. We believe that a well-informed, politically engaged student is the strongest defence against repressive measures like mandatory ROTC.

Several lawmakers, including youth representatives, have introduced [alternative measures](#) to counter mandatory military services, some of which are friendlier to human rights and peace. Some youth groups are pushing to [expand the components](#) of the NSTP while some call for [mandatory civic training](#) or even a programme of youth volunteerism in times of calamities. Or perhaps—the Philippine government can stall plans to re-introduce mandatory ROTC and focus on improving the country's failing human rights landscape. As of this writing, the bill is being deliberated in the upper house of the Philippine Congress and the fate of this bill lies in their hands.

Instead, much can be done to address gaps in the education sector. The government should focus their energies on improving Filipino youth's access to quality education through scholarship programmes, human rights and civic education, and continuous upgrading of school facilities.

In the security sector, a decent budget must be allocated for modernising the country's armed forces to counter external threats instead of thrusting young cadets into the battlefield. Other [key government officials](#) prefer enacting amendments or evaluating the effectiveness of the NSTP.

The Philippine government must ensure that human rights are protected amidst the surge of vague and repressive bills clobbering marginalised and vulnerable groups, including the youth. Fostering a deep understanding and appreciation of human rights principles can lead to impactful, holistic, and people-centred laws. Let us soldier on towards a stronger commitment to human rights for the current and future generations to enjoy.