

Philippines militants use cyberspace to recruit and organise

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The Philippine government has said that the country's communist insurgency will be defeated by mid-2019. However, *Mark Wilson* shows that the insurgency is thriving in cyberspace, using multiple social media platforms to carry out recruitment campaigns and to spread its ideology

Key Points

- Open-source research reveals an online network of Philippine communist insurgents who use social media to disseminate their propaganda and recruit new members.
- *Jane's* classifies this online network in two broad categories: local militant commands and politically focused organisations.
- The militants will likely remain active on the mainstream social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as they face little in the way of online crackdowns.

On 31 October, Philippine Secretary of National Defence Delfin Lorenzana announced that the military was on track to defeat communist militants who have waged a five-decade insurgency against the government. He said that in 2018 alone, 907 rebels had voluntarily surrendered, 1,238 rebel firearms had been seized, and 210 barangays (local government districts) had been cleared of communist influence.

The insurgency is led by the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). In July 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a unilateral ceasefire with the communists in an attempt to forge peace. However, those efforts fell apart, with the government claiming that the NPA was still carrying out attacks while negotiating for peace. On 23 November 2017, Duterte terminated the talks and declared that the CPP and NPA were "terrorist" organisations.

Nevertheless, although the government is focusing on the ground war, *Jane's* research shows how the NPA and the CPP have cultivated a strong online presence across the social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. This presence is reinforced through retweets, mentions, and hashtags that link NPA commands with official CPP media outlets, as well as the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), an umbrella leftist organisation that has conducted peace talks on behalf of the NPA-CPP.

NPA commands

Jane's has classified the insurgency's online activity into two categories: the NPA commands that claim attacks, drive recruitment campaigns, post photographs of life in militant camps, and promote Maoist ideology; and CPP and NDFP activities, which play a more strategic role in offering guidance to NPA militants, defending the militants from criticism, and boosting the fighters' morale. These posts also try to bolster NPA recruitment by exploiting political and military developments on the ground.

Jane's has identified at least 19 NPA commands with an online presence. Six of these commands limit themselves to the blogging platforms Blogger and WordPress. The rest are more social-network focused, using Facebook and Twitter as their media outlets.



NPA insurgents stand in formation in the Sierra Madre mountain range, east of Manila, on 30 July 2017. The group was founded in March 1969, making it one of the world's longest-running insurgencies. (Noel Celis/AFP/Getty Images)

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The commands are located throughout the Philippines. Jane's mapping of their online presence indicates that commands in certain regions tend to gravitate towards the use of particular social media platforms. For example, those on the southern islands of Mindanao, Negros, and Palawan tend to use Facebook, while those in the central regions of Bicol, Calabarzon, and Visayas favour Blogger.

When claiming an attack, NPA commands post written statements, but the NPA commands on Facebook and Twitter have adapted their approach, creating stylised images with key details of an attack that lend themselves to being easily shared on social media.

The commands also use social media to promote the activities of other commands with no online presence. For example, on 15 October the NPA's Efren Martires Command in the Eastern Visayas region published a press release praising an attack carried out by the Arnulfo Ortiz Command in Samar province, Eastern Visayas, which is not active online. On 8 October, NPA militants ambushed local politician Ananias Rebato, who died in hospital on 13 October. The Efren Martires Command praised Rebato's death, accusing him of being a rapist, murderer, and supporter of the military.

In other regions, NPA commands implement local media dissemination strategies, with one command leading the media strategy. In the Negros Island region, the Apolinario Gatmaitan

Command performs the lead role, supported by the Leonardo Panaligan Command, Mt Cansermon Command, and Roselyn Pelle Command. Blog reports published by the Apolinario Gatmaitan Command are promoted by the supporting commands on Facebook, with the Facebook page of each supporting command providing a link back to the lead command's blog.

A similar scenario has developed in the Bicol region, where seven NPA commands run a network of interlinked blogs on Blogger. Each blog features a list of links showing where other commands in the region can be found, and each carries a similar design, indicating that they have been produced as part of a regional media strategy.

Using social network analysis tool Mentionmapp Analytics, *Jane's* established how NPA commands also interact across regions using Twitter. Mentionmapp shows how, for example, the Celso Minguez Command in Sorsogon province promotes statements published by commands in Northern Mindanao and Eastern Visayas.

Amid government claims of rebel surrenders, NPA commands are constantly driving forward online recruitment campaigns. *Jane's* used social media analytics tool Social Bearing to analyse the hashtag activity of five NPA commands that were active on Twitter. Four of the five used the hashtag #JoinTheNPA most frequently, which indicates the importance that they place on using social media for recruitment.

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