# ‘Security theater’ in PH elections

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In his book “Beyond Fear,” American technologist Bruce Schneier coined the term “security theater” to describe high-key security measures aimed at making people feel safe without actually improving their safety.

Examples include the requirement on passengers to take their shoes off before going through airport body scanners and the ban on bottled water and other liquids on flights. Equally superficial, and arguably as unnecessary, are those stop-and-frisk policies on public transportation, as well as fake surveillance cameras at street corners. Such protocols are inconvenient and often pointless, but they give people a sense of security and bolster the perception that the authorities are working to protect the public from harm.

Except, it’s all an illusion.

Naturally, Filipinos are quite familiar with the concept of security theater, having daily experience with mall guards poking into their bags with sticks or being forced to wear identification cards around their necks in office or school premises, all of which are just as effective as a “beware of dog” sign deterring burglars from a dogless house.

But perhaps there is no better example of security theater at work than during elections in the Philippines.

## Start of election period

On Sunday, the country marked the start of the election period, coinciding with the nationwide gun ban ahead of the May midterm polls, an observance punctuated by ceremonial fanfare from law enforcement agencies whose leaders, as always, seemed more concerned about the appearance of security than its reality.

In compliance with protocols, the first day of the five-month gun ban was preceded by the setup the night before of Commission on Elections (Comelec)-designated checkpoints, manned by police and military personnel across the archipelago, to ensure the strict enforcement of the policy against carrying or using firearms.

From Jan. 12 to June 11, only personnel of the Philippine National Police, Armed Forces of the Philippines, and other law enforcement agencies deputized by Comelec may carry firearms. Fully exempted, however, are the President, Vice President, senators and House members, Cabinet members and Supreme Court justices, among other government officials. But private individuals may also secure an exemption from Comelec, especially those who are considered “high-risk,” as well as those who carry large sums of money as part of their work.

Among the penalties for violations are imprisonment of not less than a year but not more than six years as well as disqualification from public office, deprivation of the right to vote, and in the case of foreigners, deportation to their countries of origin.

## Perfect storm

But the question is: Can these security measures truly protect Filipinos before, during, and after the elections on May 12?

Consider that in the weeks leading up to the declaration of the gun ban, a series of killings of barangay officials had already marred parts of Mindanao. Last month, Ponciano Onia Jr., president of the Abono party list and a municipal councilor seeking reelection in Umingan town, was gunned down in Pangasinan. A similar fate befell Ramil Capistrano, president of the Association of Barangay Captains of San Rafael town in Bulacan, and his driver Shedrick Suarez, who were killed in an ambush in Malolos City in October.

As these incidents show, election bloodshed is deeply entrenched in this country, fueled by political rivalries among dynastic clans that each wield private armies and weapons cache under a prevailing cloud of impunity. All together, these variables create the perfect storm for elections that are perennially marred by murder and mayhem.

Unfortunately, the government’s security measures do little in dismantling the longstanding networks and systems that spark election violence. If anything, all they do is to maintain the illusion that the state is in control.

## Core of poll violence

For law enforcers to effectively secure the elections, it’s imperative that they move beyond performative actions and focus on real solutions that strike at the core of poll violence: First, break up private armed groups and seize loose firearms, particularly in election hot spots, an endeavor that would require not only serious intelligence gathering but political will. Second, strengthen partnerships with Comelec and civil society groups to ensure the impartial enforcement of election laws. Third, invest in technology to modernize the state’s crime prevention and investigation capability, such as deploying surveillance drones in conflict-prone areas, installing security cameras in high-traffic places or using data analytics to preempt violent incidents.

These steps will take time, energy, and resources, but by adopting a smart, targeted approach, the government can genuinely improve public safety during the elections, while demonstrating that its law enforcers are capable of more than just “security theater.”