

Hijacked Victimhood: The Political Communication Strategy of Vice President Sara Duterte at Congress Hearings

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This article examines the way in which hijacked victimhood was used to evade accountability and preserve the power of Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio at three congressional hearings. To achieve its goals, the study used the concept of indexicals to identify linguistic forms that signal a repurposing of the traditional concept of victimhood. The study found five discursive devices of victimhood employed to demonise critics, deflect their criticism, and elicit public sympathy and support. Through these discursive strategies, the vice president avoided critical scrutiny of her budget during the hearings, which could have caused her legal difficulties. She launched personal attacks against her opponents through her answers, a tactic that appears in populist rhetoric. The results highlight the need for critical vigilance and analysis of political communication in the Philippines to ensure that concepts traditionally associated with campaigns for justice for actual victims of harm are not reconfigured to serve partisan purposes.

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Introduction

Over the years, considerable attention has been paid to the concept of victimhood in politics and political discourse (e.g. Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Armaly & Enders, 2022; Banet-Weiser, 2021; Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024; Neville-Shepard, M. & Neville-Shepard, R., 2022). This article contributes to the literature on victimhood in contemporary political discourse by investigating how victimhood was repurposed and hijacked in the Philippines during the 2024 budget deliberations for the Office of the Vice President (OVP) in order to avoid accountability and preserve the dominant group's grip on power (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). Specifically, this paper attempts to demonstrate that the language used by Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio during congressional hearings on the budget for her office was an *indexical* of this use of the concept of *strategic victimhood* (i.e. hijacked victimhood) (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024) and of the contestation, preservation and expansion of the dominant group's hold on power in the Philippines. Through her language, Vice President Duterte-Carpio encoded *tactical vulnerability* (Chouliaraki, 2021) and employed victimhood as a powerful discursive device in her rhetoric (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021). Investigating victimhood in this context is important because, while the literature has extensively discussed strategic and hijacked victimhood, little is known about how these operate in Southeast Asian populist democracies such as the Philippines, or indeed about how strategic victimhood is encoded in institutional discourse, such as in congressional testimony.

At the centre of this project lies the concept of victimhood, which serves as a framework for affective communication, turning public discussions into a battleground over differing assertions of suffering and the quest for their acknowledgment (Chouliaraki, 2021). Recognition refers to the successful procurement of the moral values associated with the vulnerable (Chouliaraki, 2021, p. 17). Chouliaraki further argues that victimhood is a 'dispersed and mutable' communication framework that uses claims of traumatisation and injury to show the self as the sufferer and to invite sympathy from others. Claims of victimhood are made in a symbolic field where there are contending powers and abilities for rights violations (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024).

The concept of victimhood is also central to politics and contemporary political messages (Armaly & Enders, 2022, p. 1605). Today, many points surrounding political debates centre on who victims are (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021), on who or what the source of that victimisation is, and on who can address the injuries incurred through victimhood. The feeling of being a victim in politics is related to attitudes toward the establishment, political efficacy, personality traits, and support for particular candidates, among other factors (Armaly & Enders, 2022). However, this does not mean that the use of victimhood is new (Zembylas, 2021). It has been a dominant discourse in politics and the history of trauma, pain and resentment in the 20th century (Chouliaraki, 2021).

In one way or another, politicians have capitalised on victimhood, especially in rhetoric, in making their cases to their electorates (Armaly & Enders, 2022). Armaly and Enders noted that some political actors, for example, portrayed ordinary citizens as victims of specific and abstract policies and circumstances such as high tax rates, exorbitant healthcare costs, and unfair taxation. In the process of this portrayal, these politicians would also present themselves as being in the best position to address those problems. Viewed from one perspective,

the preeminent place of victimhood in politics and political discourse is not necessarily a bad idea, as any electorate would want politicians to address its needs and develop the conditions for a happy and satisfying life (Armaly & Enders, 2022). What is problematic, however, is the extent to which politicians are willing to exploit victimhood, severely threatening a civilised democratic system (Armaly & Enders, 2022), and one controversial form requiring serious consideration and investigation is that of hijacked victimhood.

Hijacked victimhood is a form of strategic victimhood that is commonly employed by interest groups to claim victimhood status in power and legitimacy struggles, and, as Hronešová & Kreiss (2024) go on to explain, strategic victimhood can be a politically valuable construction of harm for the achievement of equity and justice. However, they also recognised that this tool could be co-opted and hijacked, inverting moral relations and perverting an understanding of harm to defend those in powerful positions (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). The term hijacked victimhood – a co-optation of strategic victimhood – is used by dominant groups to show themselves as imperilled and in need of protection at the expense of those in precarious situations (Neville-Shepard, M. & Neville-Shepard, R., 2022). Thus, hijacked victimhood is a way of subverting the moral power usually accrued by victims by undermining moral hierarchies (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). This hijacking and the co-optation of victimhood are evident in the rhetoric of populist leaders such as U.S. President Donald J. Trump and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to mobilise support and justify aggressive actions (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024; Neville-Shepard, M. & Neville-Shepard, R., 2022; Patrona, 2025).

Hijacked victimhood, particularly in political discourse, can thus help us to understand the language of populists such as Vice President Duterte-Carpio's father, former Philippine President Rodrigo R. Duterte. Although a precise definition of populism still evades experts (Curato, 2016), some see populism as an ideology that splits society into two homogeneous and opposing groups – pure people and a corrupt elite – asserting that politics should reflect the will of the people (Mudde, 2004). For others, populism is better defined by its social base, which is mostly composed of those who are frustrated by their diminishing space in society (Lipset, 1960, as cited in Curato, 2016; Moffitt, 2015, as cited in Curato, 2016). Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte employed an illiberal populist law and order message when he campaigned for and won the Philippine presidency in May 2016. Vice President Duterte-Carpio's ascent to the second highest position in the Philippines in 2022 can be seen as riding on the back of the populism of former President Duterte, who was still popular with the Filipino electorate at the time of the election. In her own right, Vice President Duterte has generally dovetailed with the populist law and order message of her father and cultivated a tough politician persona. Iglesias (2022) argued that the elder Duterte played a significant role in the victory of his daughter and her running mate, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., by creating an environment of violence and impunity.

The concept of victimhood can help in investigating the way, in her testimony before Congress, Vice President Duterte-Carpio – a member of one of the country's elite political families – indexed hijacked victimhood to portray herself as being under attack by legislators whom she accused of politicising the budget hearing of her office. Such analysis became all the more important following Duterte-Carpio's impeachment at the Philippine House of Representatives in early 2025 on allegations of misuse of public funds and of threatening

to have Marcos, Jr., the First Lady and the Speaker of the House assassinated should she be killed (Elemia & Wee, 2025). That trial did not come to fruition owing to the Supreme Court decision to declare the process unconstitutional (Marcelo, 2025). Her portrayal of herself as being under attack from members of Congress could be considered a form of ‘tactical vulnerability’ – a form of suffering claimed by individuals for personal gain or benefit (Chouliaraki, 2021). Through all these deployed strategies, she was able to flip the victim–victimiser dichotomy, an action that reverses the moral order and mobilises real or perceived security threats (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). By encoding tactical vulnerability and turning the victim–victimiser dichotomy on its head, she might have been able to preserve, expand and protect the budget of her office, which was already substantially more significant than that of her predecessor (Panti, 2024). Furthermore, she hoped to evade scrutiny of her office’s budget utilisation, especially the way it had spent around ₱125 million in confidential funds over 11 days in 2022 (Crisostomo, 2023). All of these had the goal of protecting and preserving her own and her family’s power. To better understand how Vice President Duterte-Carpio’s language indexed hijacked victimhood in her congressional testimony to protect and preserve power, this study answered the following questions:

1. Which indexicals of hijacked victimhood did Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio use in her testimony before Congress during her office’s budget hearings to portray herself as a victim?
2. How did the reversal of the victimiser–victim dichotomy allow Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio to avoid scrutiny of her actions and contest, preserve and expand her power?

Understanding how political figures hijack victimhood is crucial because such rhetorical strategies reshape the way in which accountability, justice and power are perceived in democratic societies. When powerful actors claim victimhood, they blur the moral distinction between genuine victims and political elites (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021; Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024), undermining public empathy for those who suffer real harm and eroding trust in democratic institutions. These hijacked narratives transform legitimate scrutiny into perceived persecution, weakening mechanisms of democratic oversight and normalising impunity while pushing genuine issues of injustice into the background. In the Philippine context, where populist leaders already command intense affective loyalty, such discursive practices can silence criticism and redirect public attention away from accountability issues such as corruption and mass murder, as in the case of the Duterte Government’s war on drugs (Iglesias, 2022). Recognising these rhetorical manoeuvres is therefore essential for citizens, journalists, and watchdog organisations to critically evaluate political communication, resist the co-optation of moral discourse, and defend victimhood as a framework for justice rather than for self-preservation by an elite (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021).

The rise of populism in the Philippines

From one perspective, Duterte’s rise to power on the back of populism is part of a worldwide trend of politicians using bombastic rhetoric and diplomacy to paint themselves as true

representatives of the people against corruption. Railing against the economic and global elites, a new breed of populist leaders speedily and simultaneously emerged in different parts of the globe by echoing the public's concern over the cost of globalisation (McCoy, 2017). Once in office, these populist leaders take on a moral tone and claim to lead in the name of and following the will of the people and do not recognise the legitimacy of their opposition (McCoy, 2017). This trend can be observed in Europe (e.g. the U.K. Independence Party, France's Marine LePen, Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Turkey's Recep Erdogan), in the USA in President Donald J. Trump, in Asia in India's Narendra Modi, Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra and the Philippines' Rodrigo R. Duterte. However, despite being part of and from this lineage of populist politicians, McCoy argues that Duterte was unique because of his violent social policies and disdain for the world order. This leads to the point that Philippine populism is an intersection of a rising global tide and a meandering local movement whose origins could be traced back to the time of former Philippine President Manuel Quezon.

Although populism has been framed as a global reaction to widespread economic and social conditions, its uncritical application in the Philippines does not completely explain the rise of the movement on this archipelago (McCoy, 2017). The strategy of many former Philippine leaders, including Duterte and the former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., the father of the current chief executive, could be explained by a balancing act between political patronage and performative violence, which allowed them to promise law and order if given power (McCoy, 2017). According to McCoy, both present and past Filipino strongmen used performative violence to project domestic strength and success on the diplomatic front to show the local electorate international influence. The country's gravitation toward populist leaders offers better analytical tools for studying similar shifting trends overseas, as two key ingredients have been identified: local performative violence and skilled diplomacy (McCoy, 2017).

What is relevant in this study is the rise of former President Duterte to national power from his power base in the southern Philippine city of Davao. His ascendancy represented a significant shift in Philippine electoral politics, considering that his predecessor – former President Benigno Aquino III – was relatively popular when his term ended in June 2016. Duterte's presidency could be considered an inflection point in Philippine political history as he put in place an illiberal law and order regime (Thompson, 2016b). The most egregious example of this was Duterte's 'war on drugs', which claimed the lives of somewhere between 6,000 and 30,000 individuals (Iglesias, 2022), many of whom were drug users and street peddlers.

Duterte's populist appeal hinges on the dichotomy between virtuous law-abiding citizens and the dregs of society (Curato, 2016). This type of populism is termed *penal populism* (Pratt, 2007) and is a response to the public's clamour for political institutions to take a tougher stance against crime, leading to stronger punitive measures for control (Curato, 2016). Curato further explains that Duterte was able to leverage his appeal based on his supposed ability to surmount the slow wheels of the country's justice system and take action decisively. He was able to mount this challenge to the country's liberal order through a confluence of factors, primarily centred on the dysfunction in this dominant political order, such as the weak influence of once influential groups (e.g. the Catholic Church, non-governmental organisations), besmirching of the good governance (*Daang Matuwid*

or the Straight Path) narrative of the previous government, and the weaknesses of critical institutions (Thompson, 2016a). Duterte swiftly consolidated his power and established a new regime focused on his penal populism, characterised by human rights violations and impunity in the bloody crackdown against illegal drugs with no effective political opposition to speak of (Thompson, 2016a).

Until the end of this term, Duterte enjoyed ‘excellent’ net satisfaction ratings across geographical areas (Social Weather Stations, 2022). In fact, SWS noted that Duterte’s satisfaction rating in June 2022 was 10 points higher than the polling firm’s preceding reading in April 2022. This enduring popularity remained despite a series of controversies that beset his administration and eroded his appeal (Teehankee, 2022). The political capital that Duterte had at the time of the 2022 elections was further demonstrated when it helped propel the Marcos, Jr. and Duterte-Carpio ticket to an absolute majority win, the first since the end of the Marcos, Sr. dictatorship (Iglesias, 2022). Duterte’s political capital elevated his family to national prominence status and fuelled them in a successful run for the vice presidency, evidence of the transferability of his appeal. It was this transferred political capital that Duterte-Carpio was riding on and trying to protect as she faced severe political headwinds that she alleged were related to her possible 2028 presidential election candidacy (Lalu, 2024). However, the current satisfaction and approval ratings data demonstrate that this did not work, with her numbers, which had been the highest among government officials, sliding below those of Marcos, Jr. and congressional leaders (Mateo, 2024) for a certain period.

Victimhood in politics

Although victimhood is a crucial element of political and public opinion, it is often overlooked (Armaly & Enders, 2022). According to Armaly and Enders, victimhood is related to anti-establishment views, personality traits, and support for specific politicians. It has become a central element in today’s political battles, as debates today centre on the question of who the victims are (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021). Previously, the discourse on victimhood had centred on claims of injury on behalf of the powerless (e.g. victims of war or emotional trauma); this has radically changed in the 21st century with worldwide gyrations such as the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of social media platforms that have allowed everyone to stake a claim to victimhood (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021). Specifically, victimhood today, once the righteous expression of the vulnerable, is seen and claimed everywhere and ‘politically weaponized’ (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 4); for example, perceiving oneself as a victim is everyday political fare in the United States (Armaly & Enders, 2022) and an important signal of identity position (Horwitz, 2018).

Hijacked victimhood is a form of politicisation in which narratives of victimhood are used to depict the dominant group as being in danger and in need of protection – from the narrative’s creator in particular – suggesting that they are current or future victims facing threats, often from others (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). As a subset of strategic victimhood, it refers to the practice of political communication to seek justice and equity (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). Such appeals can then be mobilised for electoral and policy gains, as they often dovetail with the groups that politicians and their parties represent

(Lerner & O’Loughlin, 2023). Although hijacked victimhood traditionally manifests in the usurpation of a marginalised group’s experiences, delegitimation of that group, presentation of vulnerable groups as threats, and portrayal of the opposition as enablers of dangerous elements (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024), this paper posits that it also covers attempts to portray ‘tactical vulnerability’, which is suffering claimed to the advantage of particular individuals or groups (Chouliaraki, 2021). As inherent in the structure of victimhood, anyone who successfully mobilises grand victimhood narratives and stakes a claim to suffering, regardless of their social position, will be able to claim victimhood status and, consequently, the moral value attached to it (Chouliaraki, 2021). Chouliaraki explains that this ability to mobilise grand narratives for victimhood is especially acute in today’s post-2008 crisis and platformed world, where pain is detached from the victims of neoliberalism and attached to those benefiting from current structural relations of power (Chouliaraki, 2021), and is amplified and monetised on and through social media (van Dijck et al., 2018).

Informed by the scholarship on how powerful and vested individuals and groups have deployed strategic vulnerability – as opposed to systemic vulnerability arising from conditions that perpetuate violence and suffering – and hijacked the concept of victimhood, this study examines how Vice President Duterte-Carpio strategically deployed victimhood in her congressional testimonies to preserve and protect her political power amid questions on her office’s budget and its utilisation. This paper argues that Duterte-Carpio indexed hijacked victimhood in her responses at congressional hearings to avoid scrutiny of her actions and contest, preserve and expand her political power in preparation for a possible presidential run in 2028. By investigating her *indexicals of victimhood*, this article is intended to shed light on how politicians have usurped victimhood and its associated moral value for their personal and political gain to the detriment of genuine victims of systemic and political violence in the country such as the casualties of former President Duterte’s war on drugs. This article is also intended to demonstrate another way of deploying victimhood – through a combination of victimhood indexicals and aggression – in keeping with the Duterte family’s penal populism (Pratt, 2007).

Investigation of the way in which Vice President Duterte-Carpio indexed hijacked victimhood in her selected congressional testimonies is important for two reasons. While previous studies have examined the strategic use of victimhood in populist rhetoric, these inquiries have primarily centred on Western contexts (Armaly & Enders, 2022; Hronešová, 2024; Neville-Shepard, M. & Neville-Shepard, R., 2022; Patrona, 2025) and prominent leaders such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024; Chouliaraki, 2021). Limited empirical analysis exists on how hijacked victimhood manifests in Southeast Asian political communication, particularly in the Philippines, where populist discourse can intersect with entrenched political dynasties and localised moral hierarchies. Moreover, existing research has tended to focus on speeches and campaign materials (e.g. Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024; Patrona, 2025) rather than on institutional forums such as congressional hearings, which provide a different arena for the enactment of victimhood. This study fills these gaps by examining Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio’s congressional testimonies to show how hijacked victimhood operates linguistically as a strategy for the avoidance of accountability and the preservation of power within Philippine populism. In doing so,

it extends the conceptual framework of strategic victimhood to a new geopolitical and discursive context.

Methods

This study used a qualitative design and examined the transcripts of three hearings at the Philippine Senate and House of Representatives: 1. 20 August 2024, Hearing of the Senate Committee on Finance on the Proposed Budget of the Office of the Vice President; 2. 27 August 2024, Hearing of the House Committee on Appropriations on the Proposed Budget of the Office of the Vice President; and 3. 18 September 2024, Hearing of the House Good Governance and Public Accountability Committee on the Budget Use of the Office of the Vice President. The analysis of these transcripts involved two phases. In the first phase, incidents of hijacked victimisation were examined. These critical incidents were signalled by the Vice President's recourse to language that evoked persecution, unfair treatment, victimisation, vulnerability and willingness to suffer, among other affective investments she made to evince victimhood and vulnerability. Essentially, this phase investigated the discursive construction of tactical vulnerability and victimhood. QualCoder 3.5 was utilised in the coding process to examine these incidents. QualCoder is open-source, free software for the analysis of qualitative data, which allows the coding of text, images and videos, the writing of notes and memos, and the generation of tree-like hierarchical categorisation of data (QualCoder, 2019).

To establish the link between her language and the recourse to victimhood and vulnerability, the concept of indexicality was used to understand how this was reflected in language. Indexicality refers to the linking of semiotic forms, such as language, to context-specific social meanings (Bucholtz, 2015). An index is a linguistic (or semiotic) form that depends on the meaning of the social environment (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The second phase of the data analysis involved categorising the indexicals found in the first phase to ensure that the categories were conceptually distinguishable from each other and did not overlap, or if they did, their definitions were combined.

Results and discussion

This section presents the indexicals of hijacked victimhood that Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio employed in three of her testimonies before the Philippine House of Representatives and Senate, which conducted hearings on her office's proposed budget and the use of previous capital outlays. Based on the results of the analysis of the congressional-hearing transcripts, this paper argues that Duterte-Carpio relied on aggressiveness and passiveness to hijack the concept of victimhood (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024) to serve her own political ends. To do this, she specifically employed sharp answers to inquiries, a veneer of deference to Congress's decision, claims of political harassment, an expression of willingness to answer allegations in the proper venue, and projecting herself as a responsible, transparent, and kind leader, among others. The analysis of the congressional transcripts revealed how the language of

Duterte-Carpio employed both aggressive and non-aggressive techniques to defend her budget and avoid scrutiny of her utilisation of capital outlays in the past two years. Table 1 summarises the five main indexicals of hijacked victimhood found in this investigation. This list excludes three themes that were recorded only once or twice: use of house rules, defence against criticism, and recall of previous favour given.

*Table 1:
Summary of Duterte-Carpio’s indexicals of hijacked victimhood*

Strategy	Number	Examples
Sharp answers in testimonies	52	Madam Chair, I do not understand <i>bakit</i> [why] a person convicted of child abuse is still sitting in a seat of the House of Representatives.
Veneer of deference to congressional decision	42	Madam Chair, we only submit the budget, and we leave it to the discretion of all the members of Congress to decide on the budget. We can only propose a budget for the Office of the Vice President.
Claims of political harassment	21	What we are witnessing now is no ordinary legislative inquiry. This exercise is a well-funded and coordinated political attack.
Willingness to face allegations in the proper venue	18	If there are audit findings, we shall gladly respond to them before the Commission on Audit (COA), and if there are legitimate cases to be filed, then we shall gladly respond to them before the appropriate courts.
Projection of responsibility and transparency as a leader	9	It is then my lawful duty to give aid to every person who reaches out to the OVP seeking relief. I must do justice to any man, and I intend to do so.

Source: Compiled by the author.

The following sections provide a succinct discussion of the identified indexicals using representative samples from congressional transcripts. These indexicals were identified by examining the patterns within and across transcripts.

Sharp answers in testimonies

The most preponderant indexical found in Duterte-Carpio’s congressional testimonies was her deployment of sharp and aggressive answers during the hearings. In many instances, this was in response to the critical questions asked and comments provided during the hearings. In some episodes where this was found, she asserted that the panels conducting the hearings should allow her ‘snide’ remarks in the same way they allowed those of some legislators. These sharp answers included personal attacks, outright refusal to answer questions, sarcastic comments and engaging legislators in back-and-forth verbal tussles. The questions that she refused to answer were primarily related to her office’s rapid utilisation of confidential funds in previous years.

Extract 1:

Madam Chair, I do not understand bakit [why] a person convicted of child abuse is still sitting in a seat of the House of Representatives (27 August 2024, House Appropriations Committee Hearing).

Extract 2:

Madam Chair, the invitation letter that we received from the House of Representatives: 'Dear Vice President Duterte, the House Committee on Appropriations will hold briefing hearings on the budget proposals of various departments, agencies, and corporations relative to the fiscal year 2025 National expenditure program as a basis of the fiscal year 2025 general appropriations bill.' Nasaan sa presentation ko kanina – ang haba – ang confidential funds? [Where in my earlier presentation – which was very long – were confidential funds?] (27 August 2024, House Appropriations Committee Hearing).

Extract 3:

We would like to thank all the honorable members of the Senate for doing your work here in the Senate of the Philippines, except—joke lang, Ma'am [just a joke, Ma'am] (20 August 2024, Senate Appropriations Committee Hearing).

In Extract 1, Duterte-Carpio questioned why ACT Teachers Party-list Rep. France Castro was still holding a congressional seat despite her child abuse conviction. This statement presumably referred to the guilty verdict handed down against Castro and several others for allegedly endangering the lives of Lumad children (Galvez, 2024). Prior to this, Castro criticised Duterte-Carpio for not providing direct answers to questions about the notice of disallowance issued by the COA over her office's use of confidential funds. Instead of giving direct answers, Duterte-Carpio launched a personal attack on Castro, who is appealing against the lower court's verdict. Extract 2, meanwhile, shows Duterte-Carpio's refusal to answer questions on her confidential funds use asked during a budget scrutiny hearing. Finally, Extract 3 demonstrates Duterte-Carpio by jokingly excluding a senator from her message of thanks, presumably Senator Risa Hontiveros who had a sharp exchange with the vice president over the latter's budget request for the printing of a children's book she had written.

Duterte-Carpio's sharp and confrontational remarks exemplify what Cervi et al. (2023) identify as a populist personalisation rhetoric where opponents are vilified or mocked to focus on their personal lives and besmirch their public persona. This rhetorical aggressiveness is not just a question of temperament; it functions as an indexical sign of strength and weakness, allowing the speaker to frame herself simultaneously as strong and victimised. From the lens of strategic victimhood (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024), such responses invert the traditional moral hierarchy by portraying the powerful as besieged by unfair critics. The sharpness of tone thus encodes both populist antagonism, the people vs. elite, law-abiding vs. law-breaking citizens divide (Curato, 2016; Mudde, 2004), and tactical vulnerability (Chouliaraki, 2021), signalling that the vice president is being unjustly targeted by a hostile establishment. In this sense, her sarcasm, ridicule and personal attacks become semiotic tools that fuse aggression and victimhood, a hallmark of hijacked victimhood narratives.

This interplay of aggression and victimhood typifies the communicative logic of populism, where emotional performance replaces rational accountability. The next theme, ‘Veneer of Deference to Congressional Decision’, reveals the contrasting strategy through which Duterte-Carpio tempers this aggression with an apparent submission to authority.

Veneer of deference to congressional decision

In contrast to the overt aggressiveness encoded in the first theme, this second indexical encoded passiveness and the vice president’s willingness to submit herself to Congress. Specifically, in this indexical, Duterte-Carpio communicated her willingness to abide by Congress’s decision regarding her submitted budget. This stance portrayed her as helpless before the powerful body and as a law-abiding individual.

Extract 4:

Hence, just as we have done last year, we again leave the 2025 OVP budget to the pleasure of Congressman Martin Romualdez. I am not asking for any special treatment, nor am I asking you to uphold any tradition. There is no disrespect. All I am saying is that you have the complete freedom to do whatever you wish with the OVP budget. If you feel that all the documentary submissions are not enough, then by all means, huwag kayong magbigay ng budget [do not give us any budget] (18 September 2024 Hearing, House Committee on Good Government and Public Accountability).

This statement showed the vice president’s apparent willingness to accept Congress’s decision on the budget for her office. What was notable here was the specific mention of House Speaker Martin Romualdez, whom she accused of actually controlling the country’s national budget (Peralta-Malonzo, 2024). By naming the House Speaker, Duterte-Carpio subtly attacked and signalled that Romualdez was behind the critical questioning of her outlay utilisation. This subtle offensive was hidden beneath a veneer of deference to Congress’s decision regarding her proposed budget. The line: “...you have the complete freedom to do whatever you wish with the OVP budget”, demonstrated this. This investigation views this apparent deference as just a veneer because of the context in which it was uttered. Prior to this, the vice president had called the hearing a “well-funded and coordinated political attack”, signalling the third indexical of victimhood in the investigation, political harassment. The next statement also claimed that the hearings were meant to make a “case for impeachment”, again tying everything to political harassment.

Duterte-Carpio’s apparent humility before Congress can be read as a strategic performance of tactical vulnerability (Chouliaraki, 2021), a rhetorical move where powerful actors portray themselves as weak or submissive to elicit sympathy and moral legitimacy. Her language of surrender (e.g. “we leave the budget to your pleasure”) indexes compliance while simultaneously undermining institutional authority, suggesting that the process is politically biased and therefore meaningless. This ambivalence typifies hijacked victimhood (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024), where moral hierarchies are inverted and scrutiny from others is reframed as persecution. At the same time, such stylised passiveness resonates with populist

performance, which often oscillates between aggression (Cervi et al., 2023) and humility to project authenticity (Curato, 2016). By cloaking defiance in politeness, Duterte-Carpio positions herself as the wronged yet dutiful servant of the people, an indexical sign of strategic victimhood that appeals to audiences who reject elite authority (McCoy, 2017). In doing so, she claims moral high ground and turns accountability into a test of loyalty rather than legality.

This oscillation between deference and defiance sets the stage for the next indexical, claims of political harassment, where Duterte-Carpio explicitly transforms institutional scrutiny into evidence of persecution.

Claims of political harassment

The third indexical in the data was the vice president's claim that what she was experiencing was due to political harassment. Under this theme, the vice president viewed the scrutiny of her budget as politically motivated and simply political harassment. The vice president purported that there was a coordinated and orchestrated campaign against her to politically damage her in the 2028 presidential elections, where she is one of the frontrunners (Hufana, 2024).

Extract 5:

Madam Chair, this is an example of politicising the budget hearing through the questions of a senator. Ang problema niya kasi, nakalagay iyong pangalan ko doon sa libro. At iyong libro na iyan, ibibigay namin doon sa mga bata. At iyong mga bata na iyan, may mga magulang na boboto. At iyong pangalan ko ay nagkalat doon sa kung saan man ibibigay iyong libro [Her problem is my name is written on the book. Copies of the book will be given to children whose parents are voters. My name will spread among those who will receive copies] (20 August 2024, Senate Appropriations Committee Hearing).

In this extract, Duterte-Carpio painted the questions raised by Senator Risa Hontiveros on the budget allocation for a children's book that she had written as an example of budget deliberation politicisation. Instead of explaining and justifying the requested allocation, the vice president went on the offensive in claiming that the senator was politicising the budget hearings of her office through her critical questions. It is important to note that many panel members supported the vice president's budget proposal during the hearing and did not scrutinise the proposed outlay or how the office had utilised its previous allocations. In the other data, the vice president claimed that the legislators asking questions about her budget were following a 'script' and that the hearings were a prelude to a possible impeachment.

Duterte-Carpio's framing of congressional inquiry as political harassment exemplifies what Hronešová and Kreiss (2024) describe as hijacked victimhood, where moral hierarchies are reversed and those in power portray themselves as being in danger and in need of protection (Neville-Shepard, M. & Neville-Shepard, R., 2022). By claiming that critical questioning constitutes a form of politicisation, she re-indexes scrutiny as injustice, transforming an exercise of democratic oversight into evidence of her own oppression. This rhetorical inversion performs what Chouliaraki (2021) calls tactical vulnerability, which in this case

is an exhibition of weakness calculated to accrue moral capital in the face of a legitimate congressional oversight hearing. Within the populist logic of antagonism, such moves divide the field into moral binaries of the people against the elite (Curato, 2016; Mudde, 2004). Through her narrative, the vice president positions herself as the authentic voice of the people besieged by a hostile establishment that is out to damage her politically, thereby activating affective solidarity from supporters who perceive her as a victim of the elite. This dual move, vilifying institutions while mobilising empathy, illustrates the affective politics of contemporary victimhood (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021), where emotional appeal supersedes factual accountability.

The claim of political harassment thus functions as a bridge between overt aggression and performative compliance, paving the way for the next indexical, willingness to face allegations at the proper venue, where the vice president further consolidates her image as a law-abiding victim rather than a subject of accountability.

Willingness to face allegations at the proper venue

Through this indexical, the vice president expressed readiness to answer allegations at proper venues such as the COA and the courts. In the data, these allegations primarily centred on her use of confidential funds during the previous two years. Her refusal to answer questions on the issue in Congress was based on a stated belief that questions on her budget use should be answered in the other forums; she believed Congress should just evaluate her proposed outlay for the following year as presented. One notable observation in the lines that encoded this indexical was their formulaic nature, where the vice president simply stated that they had received the COA's report and would respond to that and cooperate in the probe. In these lines, she also assured the public of their cooperation. This was demonstrated by Extract 6.

Extract 6:

On the issue of confidential funds, we have received audit actions from COA regarding the confidential funds of the Office of the Vice President. We have submitted our responses, and we assure the public of our full cooperation with the ongoing and unfinished audit (27 August 2024, House Appropriations Committee Hearing).

Duterte-Carpio's repeated invocation of the 'proper legal forum' argument is another manifestation of strategic victimhood (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024), where appeals to institutional procedure serve as discursive shields against moral and political accountability. By affirming her readiness to face charges before the courts, she projects legal compliance while simultaneously delegitimising the congressional inquiry as partisan or improper. This manoeuvre functions as a classic blame avoidance behaviour (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017), reframing accountability as a question of technical procedure rather than moral responsibility. From the standpoint of indexicality (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), her formulaic statements signal both transparency and persecution. This indexes the stance of a compliant official wronged by unfair scrutiny. This rhetorical performance resonates with populist narratives of moral purity, where there exists a dichotomy between virtuous law-abiding citizens and

the decadent law-breaking scum of society (Curato, 2016). Ultimately, Duterte-Carpio's insistence on legalism operates as a linguistic strategy that transforms accountability into virtue, thereby consolidating her image as a victimised yet law-abiding servant of the people.

This rhetorical balance between compliance and persecution is further reinforced in the next indexical, projection of responsibility and transparency as leader, where Duterte-Carpio expands her legal defensiveness into a broader narrative of benevolent public service.

Projection of responsibility and transparency as leader

Another non-aggressive indexical used was the vice president's projection of herself as a responsible and kind-hearted leader who was just doing her part in helping the Filipino people. This theme also covered her transparency in her actions and readiness to protect people around her and her staff from the political attacks against her, as demonstrated by Extract 7.

Extract 7:

On the matter of OVP projects being similar to the mandate of other government offices, there is certainly no agency that has the monopoly of government services. No office of the government should be so helpless as to deny assistance to a person in distress. After all, the duty of government is to accord our countrymen with faithful public service (27 August 2024, House Appropriations Committee Hearing).

In this extract, the vice president was justifying the budget earmarks for several of her office's projects, which seemed to overlap with those of other government agencies. There were suggestions for the funds to be transferred to concerned government agencies and for the OVP to direct requests for assistance to those offices. Carpio-Duterte explained that no government agency had a monopoly over public service. In other parts of the data, she claimed that she had sworn an oath to do justice to every man, and her projects were just part of the fulfilment of that oath.

Duterte-Carpio's presentation as a compassionate and dutiful leader exemplifies how hijacked victimhood operates through moral appropriation. By foregrounding her benevolence and commitment to 'faithful public service', she reframes political accountability as moral virtue and insulates herself from critique. This aligns with Hronešová and Kreiss's (2024) observation that powerful actors invert moral hierarchies by adopting the ethical language of the marginalised to defend privilege. Her discourse also indexes tactical vulnerability (Chouliaraki, 2021), which is the strategic invocation of care and service to evoke sympathy and legitimacy while deflecting accusations of wrongdoing. Within the populist moral framework (Curato, 2016; Mudde, 2004), this projection reinforces the binary of a selfless leader serving the 'ordinary people' against self-interested elites. Linguistically, these statements function as indexicals of moral authority (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), signalling integrity and care for other people to authenticate her public persona. In effect, her appeals to responsibility and transparency do not simply describe governance; they perform it, transforming ethical language into a communicative shield that sustains her image as a persecuted yet virtuous leader.

Collectively, these indexicals – ranging from aggression to humility – reveal how Duterte-Carpio linguistically constructs a dual identity as both a victim and a moral exemplar, enabling her to preserve political capital while deflecting institutional scrutiny.

Conclusion

Considering the cluster of indexicals identified in Duterte-Carpio's congressional testimonies, her hijacking of victimhood can be characterised as a combination of aggressive and non-aggressive strategies. These indexicals, from sharp aggression to moral self-presentation, reveal a coherent rhetorical pattern that aligns with the logic of populism and hijacked victimhood. These linguistic performances illustrate how power speaks the language of vulnerability to legitimise itself. The combination of confrontational and deferential strategies demonstrates the possibility of affective duality in populist discourse: the ability to be in power and yet claim victimhood status (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). In this sense, Duterte-Carpio's congressional rhetoric exemplifies how political elites mobilise victimhood as a discursive device (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021) to maintain legitimacy in times of legal crisis. This allows her to claim victimhood status strategically and, at the same time, demonise her opponents, similar to the strategies used by populist leaders like Trump and Orbán (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). Duterte-Carpio's strategies enable her to assert victimhood, thereby establishing moral high ground and deflecting guilt (Hronešová, 2024). Additionally, the vice president weaponised her hijacked victimhood status to attack her opponents. This resembles the weaponisation of victimhood to justify aggressive actions, such as war in other countries (Hronešová, 2024).

On the one hand, the vice president's first component of hijacked victimhood, composed of a veneer of congressional deference, claims of political harassment, willingness to answer allegations, and projection of responsibility and transparency, allows her to claim the moral high ground (Chouliaraki, 2021; Hronešová, 2024) and deflect scrutiny of possible wrongdoing. The claimants to hijacked victimhood rewrite moral hierarchies, use legitimate victims' moral power, and adopt harm to defend their current political standing and power (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). Duterte-Carpio portrays herself as a law-abiding, compassionate public servant simply doing her job, who is subjected to political harassment at these hearings because of her popularity for the 2028 presidential elections (Hufana, 2024). However, despite this persecution, she continues to serve the public who voted her into office and is willing to face these allegations at proper venues. On the other hand, the second component of Duterte-Carpio's hijacked victimhood gives her the opportunity to demonise opponents through aggressive and pointed responses. This is characteristic of populist rhetoric, which is rich in character assassination, personal attacks and sharp language, and is also observed in other countries (Cervi et al., 2023). Cervi et al. explained that personalisation in politics is a critical element of populism and allows focus on opponents' personal lives and qualities to undermine their reputations. This also affords amplification on social media platforms to strengthen populist communication (Cervi et al., 2023), one of the key characteristics of contemporary notions of victimhood (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021). Taken together, the five indexicals demonstrate a discursive choreography of power that moves fluidly between

aggression and humility. This interplay shows how indexicality (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) operates in populist victimhood rhetoric to produce recognisable moral cues that audiences can identify with. By drawing from the semiotics of sincerity and service, Duterte-Carpio's discourse constructs tactical vulnerability (Chouliaraki, 2021), which allows the powerful to embody both authority and fragility at once.

By hijacking victimhood, Duterte-Carpio avoided having to detail and justify her office's use of confidential funds by refusing to answer congressional questions while claiming to be ready to answer inquiries on that issue at the proper forum and supposedly deferring to congressional wisdom on the current budget. The 'proper legal forum' argument is part of blame avoidance behaviour (BAB), which covers all actions to protect the integrity of officeholders amid possible threats from events (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). The public's expectations are duly managed, and accountability is established by demonstrating that the matter is being taken with the requisite seriousness and addressed through appropriate legal channels (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). Using the 'proper legal forum' argument, the vice president avoids legal exposure and risks that might stem from her statements before Congress. Additionally, by portraying herself as a mere public servant striving to 'do justice to every man' while experiencing political oppression, she was able to paint herself as a victim who needed the sympathy and support of the public. These moves are tactics under hijacked victimhood, which the political elite, including populists, use to usurp victimhood's moral power in their pursuit or preservation of power (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). They use potential threats to maintain or gain political standing (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). In the case of Duterte-Carpio, she caricatures herself as a responsible and compassionate official whom legislators are politically harassing because of the threat she poses to the ruling coalition. Through her deployment of hijacked and aggressive victimhood, she hopes to protect herself legally and, at the same time, preserve her popularity, which will fuel her possible 2028 presidential run.

Previous literature on victimhood has shown that politicians who use victimhood narratives use a variety of indexicals in their political communication. For example, some politicians distinguish between in-groups and out-groups through their 'we vs. they' rhetoric in their speeches (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024; Matos & Miller, 2023; Muhammad Jasim & Mustafa, 2021). Meanwhile, others promote their victimisation narratives through urgent temporal constructions and the infusion of legitimacy and urgency into their rhetoric, which allows them to urge immediate action (Al-Ghazzi, 2021). The current study contributes to this discourse by identifying the indexicals of hijacked victimhood in the Philippines. This paper demonstrates that Duterte-Carpio primarily deployed five indexicals to hijack victimhood in order to protect and preserve herself and her political power. This paper argues that these indexicals were intended to mobilise support and protection for the vice president and delegitimise congressional inquiries into her budget utilisation by painting them as having been politically motivated. She evidently hoped that, by doing this, she could protect herself from the possible legal repercussions of her actions (e.g. impeachment) and preserve her and her family's political power in time for the next presidential polls. However, this strategy did not seem to pay off, as her trust and approval ratings continued to slide at that time (Mendoza, 2024).

The insights of this study are essential to better understand political movements and the rhetoric employed by politicians. Specifically, the study shows how victimisation is utilised in Philippine political communication to achieve local politicians' goals and ends. This study shows how the vice president, who belongs to one of the most powerful political families in the country, exploited victimhood to preserve and protect her political power. The results of this study allow observers and the public to be vigilant against attempts to avoid scrutiny of officials' actions involving public interest and welfare. Furthermore, by shedding light on strategic vulnerability and hijacked victimhood, this study obliquely highlights the need to remember the real victims of injustice and violence in the country, such as those of Duterte-Carpio's father's war on drugs.

These findings extend the conceptual work of Hronešová and Kreiss (2024) by demonstrating that hijacked victimhood is not only an ideological strategy but also a linguistic and performative one. The Philippine context shows that such strategies are localised through familiar cultural values (e.g. humility and service) that make moral inversion even more persuasive to the public. This exhibits that hijacked victimhood adapts to local moral repertoires and can therefore thrive in democracies where affective performance carries more weight than institutional accountability. The results thus broaden our understanding of the way in which strategic victimhood travels across contexts, from Western populisms to Southeast Asian political communication.

Beyond its academic contribution, this study has implications for civic education and democratic participation. When political victimhood is hijacked by the powerful, it risks dulling the public's moral sensitivity through the exploitation of the concept of victimhood (Hronešová, 2024). Such discourse reconfigures citizens from active agents of accountability into spectators of conflict, thereby weakening public vigilance. Civil society organisations, educators and the media can counter this trend by promoting critical media literacy and discourse awareness that expose how emotional appeals and inverted victimhood narratives serve partisan interests (Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2021). Encouraging citizens to interrogate political communication and re-focus on the experiences of genuine victims of structural and political violence (e.g. war on drugs) is essential to restore moral clarity and sustain democratic accountability in the Philippines.

Further research is needed on strategic and hijacked victimisation in the Philippines. First, this study only investigated hijacked victimhood in Duterte-Carpio's three congressional testimonies. A richer understanding can be developed if expanded to include all of her testimonies following her resignation from the cabinet, pronouncements, statements, and actions. This might demonstrate how hijacked victimisation is encoded textually and through other semiotic resources. Second, it is also interesting how former officials of the Duterte Government (e.g. former presidential spokesperson Harry Roque) utilise victimhood narratives now that the tables have turned and they are the ones alleging political persecution. Finally, research can also be conducted on the role of strategic victimhood (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024) in successful advocacies and campaigns for people in peripheries worldwide.

In conclusion, while victimhood has been helpful in redressing harms done in the past, this study and previous literature have demonstrated that politicians around the world have repurposed this to serve political and personal ends (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Banet-Weiser, 2021; Chouliaraki, 2021; Hronešová, 2024; Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024; Zembylas,

2021). The Philippines is no exception to this trend, with no less than its vice president employing hijacked victimhood indexicals in her congressional testimonies. As more research is conducted on this topic, a critical examination of victimhood claims is warranted to ensure that it serves the ends of justice for those who truly experienced harm and trauma rather than the vested interests of political actors. This study underscores that the struggle over victimhood is also a struggle for moral authority. As populist leaders increasingly rely on affective communication to project authenticity and grievance, the ability to decode such rhetoric becomes all the more crucial. Future scholarship should continue to map how these indexicals of victimhood circulate in digital and institutional arenas, shaping public perception and political legitimacy. At the same time, civic education and critical journalism must reclaim victimhood as a moral vocabulary of justice rather than a rhetorical tool of evasion.

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