



# How Political Elites Deny Accusations of Human Rights Abuses

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## Abstract

Human rights advocates generally rely on the “naming and shaming,” or public criticism of human rights practices, the effectiveness of which is debated, under-researched, and the validity often denied by governments. This study seeks to collect data on exactly when and how political elites deny accusations of human rights abuses, aiming to discover a relationship between methods of denial employed and their effect on public opinion of the accused government. First, denials were hand-coded with articles by the Associated Press and the New York Times, then analyzed to reveal that denial varies in the target of denial and the type of rhetoric used. Second, a survey experiment fielded in the Philippines assessed how denials affect public opinion, the findings of which countered the hypothesis that public attitudes were significantly impacted by denial. One possible explanation could be that the influence that the U.S. has over its weaker allies was underestimated, in this case Philippines-U.S. ties are stronger than previously thought. This research seeks a more complete understanding of how political elites interact with human rights advocacy, gauging how effective “naming and shaming” is in deterring further violations and improving human rights practices.

## Theory

1. The public is less likely to respond to human rights abuses and a repressive leader when they support the leader (Morrison 2023) and if the government claims victims are (Bracic & Murdie 2020).
2. Consequences of “naming and shaming” affect non-elite populations (Kohno et al 2023), potentially increasing public support for more repressive political elites (Snyder 2020).

Building on the existing theories above, we ask:

- How do denial campaigns unfold?
- What factors drive the use of denial, and the type of denial strategy political elites employ?
- What are the effects of denial on various political audiences and how does denial affect human rights practices and international cooperation?

## Hypothesis

**H1:** Denial will be common in instances of mass killings because of the potential costs of shaming.

**H2:** Defensive denial will be more common than offensive denial because of the attribution problem and existing norms surrounding humanitarian intervention.

**H3:** Denial will increase public support for the targeted leader and reduce public support for cooperation with the shamer.

## Methods

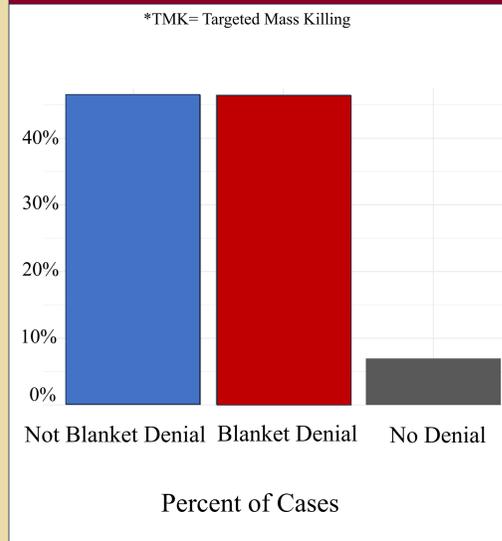
Hand coded original data was collected from the Associated Press and the New York Times about the use of denial in response to human rights abuses committed by government actors. Using public statements made by political elites, variables like offensive/defensive, sovereignty appeal, terrorist labeling, racial rhetoric, shift responsibility were coded.

Secondly, a survey experiment was fielded in the Philippines to assess the affects of denial on public opinion following international criticism, specifically how denial in a hypothetical scenario involving accusations from the United States affects support for both the incumbent Filipino President and military/economic cooperation with the U.S.

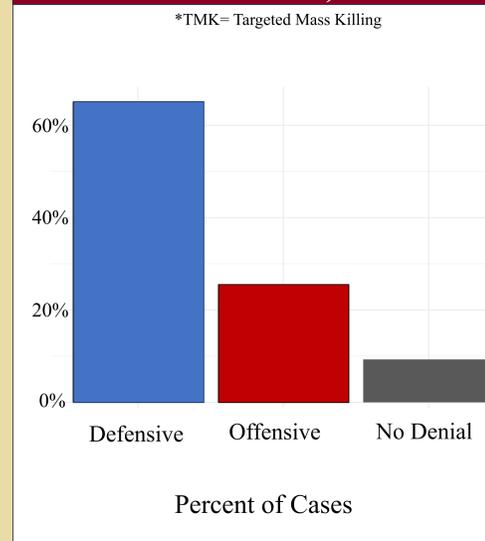
$$Y = \alpha + Denial + M + \epsilon$$

*M* is a vector of pre-treatment covariates to improve the precision of estimates. *Denial* is a dummy variable indicating a participant was assigned to the Denial vignette. The total sample size of the experiment was 3,000 participants.

## Extent of Denial (TMKS, 1983-2017)



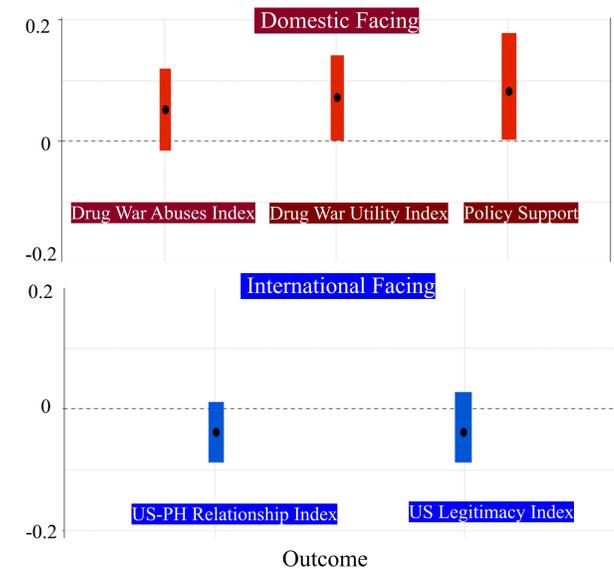
## Primary Denial Strategy (TMKS, 1983-2017)



## Results

The costs of human rights abuses for political elites is high enough in the diplomatic world that denial is a rational and frequent strategy, but does not have statistically significant effects on public opinion across many outcomes. A wide variety of strategies can be used to deny, and will expectedly increase domestic support for leaders among the mass public (specifically among Filipinos, the sampled population). Denial will decrease support for international cooperation among the mass public. Denial impacts public opinion and hinders support for human rights.

## Estimated Effect of Denial in Philippines



## Discussion

Committing and denying human rights abuses is unfortunately common, yet varies in type of denial strategy. Denial campaigns unfold as international political players levy reputational costs on human rights abusers that seek to evade them. Shaming by an ally tends to be more effective against plausibility of denial, emphasizing the importance and efficacy of holding allies accountable. The type of denial strategy employed reflects what kind of politics the abuser seeks to invoke: generally denying the occurrence of abuse or firing political shots. The commonly used tool “naming and shaming” violators of human rights is effective only to the extent that that denial does not incur heavier costs, raising questions about its overall effectiveness as a tool to advocate and enforce better human rights practices.

*“Whoever now visits Darfur... they [find] that all these accusations of ethnic cleansing, the killing of the people and mass rape, these are all false accusations.”*

*“[T]he Darfur problem has become an internal United States issue to serve political ends.”*

*“[W]e have examples of [government retaliation against citizen attacks] in the United States. Even someone who is in his car who is asked to raise his hands and refuses, he will be shot. We’ve seen it. Especially if he is black.”*

-President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan  
in an interview with The Washington Post, 23 December 2014

## References

