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The Early Duterte Presidency in the Philippines

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## Introduction

# The Early Duterte Presidency in the Philippines

Mark R. Thompson

After only a little over a half year in power, as of this writing, Rodrigo's R. Duterte presidency already represents a sea change in Philippine politics.<sup>1</sup> Despite the personal popularity of Benigno "Noynoy" S. Aquino III (who had the highest opinion poll ratings among post-Marcos presidents), Duterte has quickly replaced a "liberal reformist" political order with its emphasis on civil liberties, if limited political participation, with an illiberal "law and order" regime. He is a strongman leading a bloody fight against the drug scourge (with over 6,000 people killed by police and vigilantes by the end of 2016) (*Rappler* 2016). Duterte's rule of Davao (as mayor or behind-the-throne ruler of Davao through his family dynasty) for a generation following the fall of Marcos had already been bloody. He had pioneered the practice of "*tokhang*" (from the Cebuano *tok-tok*, knock, and, *hangyo*, request) with police using lists compiled by local politicians (*barangay captains*) and other government officials. Suspected drug dealers or abusers would be warned to surrender and stop selling and/or using drugs. But this was still often a prelude to suspects being killed in "police encounters" or by only thinly disguised "vigilante groups" (see the article by Danilo Reyes). As a local politician who became president, Duterte has now implemented this policy nationally.

Duterte boasts of the campaign's initial "success" (although he claims that he still needs more time to "win" his "war"), while warning critics he does "not care about human rights." Criticised by several Catholic bishops for the extrajudicial slaughter, Duterte reminded them

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1 Several of the authors in this special issue (Batalla, de Castro, Teehankee, and Thompson) presented papers to a panel on the Duterte presidency to the International Studies Association Asia-Pacific Conference at the City University of Hong Kong, 25–26 June, co-hosted by the Department of Asian and International Studies (AIS) and the Southeast Asian Studies Centre (SEARC), both at the City University of Hong Kong. I would like to thank Curato, Holmes and Reyes for their willingness to also submit papers for this special issue. I would also like to express my appreciation to JCSAA Co-editor Marco Bunte for his support in putting together this special issue on short notice and Christine Berg for her editorial assistance.

of the history of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. For daring to criticise his “war on drugs,” he has also denounced local human rights advocates, a US ambassador, President Obama and even the United Nations, which he threatened the Philippines would leave if it continued to point to human rights abuses linked to the violent crackdown.

Duterte has been labelled the “Donald Trump of the East” (Teehanke and Thompson 2016). Duterte has disavowed the comparison, saying he is not a racist. But he chose an ally who is a business associate of Trump to be a special envoy to the US whom he presciently sent shortly before Trump’s election (Robles 2016). Like Trump, Duterte’s off-colour comments did not stop his poll numbers from rising but were instead seen as part of his tell-it-like-it-is political style. Despite obvious differences in terms of context, power, and global significance, “Digong” (one of Duterte’s nicknames) and the “the Donald” have both caused outrage, locally and globally, with their offensive and vulgar communication styles (Szilágyi and Thompson 2016). They spoke from the political stage using the language of the “backstage.” The lack of style-shifting also provides an important background for these politicians’ agendas. Through radical informality, Duterte and Trump can present themselves as outspoken, brave and even heroic politicians who dare to say what is usually left unsaid and liberate their people. Duterte still speaks like a tough-talking local mayor (a label which, despite now being president, he still often uses when referring to himself). He also uses expletives when referring to foreign officials (Obama and UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon) or foreign governments or entities like the EU criticising his violent anti-drug campaign in the name of restoring Philippine “dignity” on the international stage (Szilágyi and Thompson 2016). Unlike Trump, however, Duterte has already been in office for a half a year and a preliminary assessment can be made in early 2017 on the nature of his presidency.

The seven articles in this special issue examine the early Duterte presidency from various perspectives and according to different issues. They seek to explain why Duterte was elected, why he is waging a violent “war on drugs,” and the nature of his presidency as well as its impact, particularly on the country’s foreign policy and economic growth.

## Why Duterte?

Duterte won the 9 May Philippine presidential elections with nearly 40 per cent of the vote, a solid plurality in a five-way race in which his competitors conceded and no major accusations of vote fraud were made. His election follows six years of high growth and political stability under

the popular president “Noynoy” Aquino. But Manuel “Mar” Araneta Roxas II, endorsed by the outgoing president, finished a distant second. Roxas was widely seen as incompetent, despite (or because of) serving in various high level government positions, and being an elitist, lacking a connection to ordinary people. Instead, voters choose Duterte, a proudly foul-mouthed maverick who promised to end a crime wave quickly by killing thousands of criminals and threatened to abolish Congress and tame the courts if they dared stand in his way.

In his contribution, Ronald D. Holmes, a Ph.D. candidate at the Australian National University and president of Pulse Asia Research, one of the Philippines’ two leading polling organisations, discusses how Roxas was pitted against three other major other candidates who presented themselves as alternatives to the presidency of “Noynoy” Aquino. But the two other “outsider” candidates besides Duterte did not have a clear message (Senator Grace Poe, who mixed appeals for good governance with promises to help the poor) or were severely damaged by political scandals (then-incumbent Vice President Jejomar “Jojo” C. Binay, whose pro-poor message was overshadowed by a major corruption scandal relating to his time as mayor of the Metro Manila business district Makati and his inability to adequately address the issue during the campaign). Duterte, by contrast, had both a clear message – “criminality, in general, and the pervasiveness of drugs, in particular” as Holmes argues – and a reputation for toughness and honesty, with accusations about a large bank account he held being too little and coming too late in the campaign to harm his candidacy. Despite claiming to have been a reluctant candidate (Duterte was substituted for another candidate of his party at the last minute), Holmes points out that he ran a very strategic campaign, with his late entry giving his opponents less time to attack his reputation.

Holmes uses opinion poll survey data to show the “traction” Duterte gained with this law-and-order messaging, with the fight against illegal drugs going from a lower-level concern to the top national priority in Pulse Asia opinion polls surveys of January, February and April 2016 (several months after Duterte’s election concern with criminality again was overtaken by other concerns such as poverty, jobs, inflation, and corruption). Holmes also examines the socio-economic and geographical bases of Duterte’s and the other candidates’ voter support. As in past presidential elections,

pre-election surveys show that candidates generated considerably more support from areas that they came from or the ethnolinguistic group that they belonged to.

Duterte benefitted from having a broad base of support in Mindanao but also from his fellow Cebuano speakers in the central Visayas. While Duterte was the most popular candidate across social classes, his greatest percentage of support came from the elite and middle class, which Holmes explains based on their “greater concern for issues pertaining to personal safety.”

However, Holmes’ article leaves open the question of why voters would turn to Duterte despite the popularity of Aquino and why voters only began prioritising drugs as a national concern when he launched his candidacy. In my article, I argue that although Aquino was widely perceived to be personally honest, his “liberal reformist” administration had become “systemically disjunctive,” vulnerable to replacement by violent illiberalism because its narrative of “good governance” had been undermined, its strategic allies weakened, and liberal institutions discredited. Making a similar point in his article, Prof. Julio C. Teehankee, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at de la Salle University and one of the Philippines’ leading political scientists, argues that Duterte repudiated “the liberal reformist, albeit elitist, narrative of the Aquino [Corazon “Cory” C. Aquino’s immediate post-Marcos presidency] to Aquino [Noynoy Aquino’s administration 2010-2016] regime.”

In her contribution to this special issue, Dr Nicole Curato, an award-winning sociologist at the University of Canberra, offers another insight into Duterte’s popularity: his successful “penal populism.” Based on fieldwork in disaster-affected communities in Tacloban City, Leyte, Curato finds that it “gives voice to pre-existing frustrations as well as give life to new possibilities for conducting electoral politics” disrupting an “electoral system that is partial to money and political machinery.” This does not mean that penal populism (a concept she adapts from Pratt 2007) – a call for “harsher mechanisms for social control to address the public’s demand to be ‘tough on crime’” – is not “a pathology of democratic practice,” silencing “the perspective of ‘the dangerous other’ for they are considered enemies that should be eradicated.” Curato concludes that the

punitive foundations of the politics of fear limits the public’s imagination for measured and systematic responses to the drug problem. Instead, it promotes short-term, spectacular solutions to complex problems.

## *La Violencia*

The use of the Colombian expression referring to peasant-on-peasant violence in that country for a decade from the late 1940s to the late 1950s shortly after the Conservatives' return to power and the assassination of a charismatic Liberal presidential candidate may not seem an apt analogy to the Philippines under Duterte where supposed drug dealers and users are being singled out for extrajudicial killing. There are also certain parallels: the abrupt outbreak of violence and the staggering number of deaths locally around the Philippines in a short period of time due to violence provoked by political change at the national level.

In his contribution, Danilo Reyes, a PhD candidate at the City University of Hong Kong and a long-time human rights campaigner originally from Mindanao, offers four theoretical frames to understand this violence better. These are: violence as spectacle (Foucault 1979), as political messaging (Feldman 1991), as othering (Agamben 2005), and as characteristic of a form of rule by "violent ideological leaders" (Mumford et al. 2007). The "spectacle of violence" is designed to "humiliate and cow criminals," while "convincing ordinary citizens they are being protected" and reinforcing Duterte's presidential authority. This is "performed" by reducing supposed criminals' bodies to objects that carry political messages that have boosted Duterte's popularity, as it has other politicians who have also resorted to violent "law and order" measures in imitation of the Philippine president. As Reyes points out, when Duterte was elected president, he appointed Ronald Dela Rosa as chief of the Philippine National Police (PNP), confirming that Duterte would do exactly what he had promised: implement the "Davao model" nationwide. Duterte and Dela Rosa explicitly made drug dealers legitimate targets of the police, vigilante groups and even ordinary citizens. The drug dealers' dead bodies have been turned into spectacle, shaming the victims' families and friends. Dumped along roads, under bridges, or in neighbouring town, tortured and taped-up bodies are often left with a cardboard confessional sign strapped around their necks saying "I'm a pusher" or "a drug lord" and "do not do as I did," with the guilt of victims is assumed, not proven, seriously investigated, or even questioned.

Since Philippine National Police (PNP) "Anti-Illegal Drugs Campaign Plan Project" dubbed "Double Barrel" commenced on 1 July 2016, a number of politicians, judges, and policeman have been cited in lists Duterte has made public accusing them of involvement in illegal drugs. Most killings have been of the poor, who are at most small-time drug users, with mounting evidence of a large number of "innocents" who are not involved in the drug trade being "killed in the cross-fire." Walden

Bello (cited in Dioquino 2016) has called this “a war against the poor” that “only addresses the symptoms rather than the root cause.” A recent study by the London School of Economics (Collins 2016) of coercive anti-drug campaigns around the world concluded, after surveying the literature, that “the failures of the ‘war on drugs’ have been well documented.”

There has been no mass “poor Filipinos’ lives matter” movement comparable to the “Black Lives Matter” movement in the US (Thompson 2016). During much of the post-Marcos period, many of those killed extra-judicially were linked to the communist left, which blamed the military. Duterte has reached out to the Communist Party of the Philippines, giving their allies several social-welfare related cabinet positions and so far sticking to his promise of negotiating a peace deal. Hoping for a chance to re-enter mainstream politics, much of the left has been silent about Duterte’s anti-drug killings. A bastion of liberal critiques of human rights abuses during the Marcos and, to a lesser extent during the post-Marcos period, the Catholic Church was easily out-manoeuvred by Duterte who threatened to expose their sex scandals (claiming himself to have been abused by a priest as a child), involvement in corruption, and their hard-line stance against all forms of reproductive health as a hazard to Filipinas’ well-being.

## Nature of Duterte’s Rule

The Duterte phenomenon is not a revolt of the poor, as support for the strongman candidate has been strongest at the higher rungs of the social ladder. “Dutertismo,” as the Filipino sociologist Randy David (2016) has termed it, is driven by middle-class anger at rising crime, crumbling infrastructure, and continued corruption. Duterte’s “war on drugs” has played particularly well to the resentments of those marginally better off, such as taxi- and Uber-drivers, small shop owners, and overseas workers after a couple of decades of solid growth and despite the “straight path” reform programme of the Aquino administration.

By challenging liberal reformism despite his predecessor Noynoy Aquino’s personal popularity, Duterte was able to take advantage of the “systemic disjunction” of this once-dominant political order. Agreeing with Curato’s “penal populism” argument, I suggest in my contribution that Duterte’s illiberal populism is creating a new political order with a law and order governing script, new key strategic groups (the communist left and the police), and the quick removal of remaining liberal constraints (particularly in Congress and the Supreme Court). Duterte con-



structed himself as strongman who protects ordinary citizens against the menace of drugs at the local level as mayor of Davao before “nationalising” this strategy after his election as president. Duterte’s demonology does not focus on abstract, structural factors (“globalisation” and “capitalism”) like “left” populists but rather on a specific group deemed sub-human and worthy of extermination: drug dealers and users. Duterte considers drug addicts “beyond redemption” because “once you’re addicted to shabu [the term used for crystal meth in the Philippines], rehabilitation is no longer a viable option” (quoted in Esmaque 2016).

This does not diminish the importance of Duterte’s “leftist” leanings. In his article in this special issue, Teehankee analyses Duterte’s anti-US nationalism. Duterte was the first post-war Philippine president to “announce a separation from the geopolitical interests of its former colonial master, the United States of America.” This was not just due to US criticism of his anti-drug campaign but also due to “a deeper sense of historical grievance that has been ingrained in Duterte’s generation and his identity as a Mindanaoan.” Teehankee analyses this as “historical blowback against ‘US imperialism.’” Teehankee places Duterte’s “nationalist exhortations” within the broader context of a “cycle of regime narratives in the Philippines which serves as a medium for institutional continuity and change through the mobilisation of ideas at a discursive level.” Duterte’s so-called “pivot to China” is also a dramatic reversal of his predecessor’s strong anti-China and rabidly pro-American foreign policy position.”

## Switching Sides

In his paper, Prof. Renato de Castro, a leading international relations scholar at de la Salle University, assesses Duterte’s shift away from the US towards China (and also Russia). After standing up to China’s “heavy-handed” actions in the South China Sea (recently officially renamed “West Philippine Sea” in the Philippines), the Aquino administration challenged China directly (by filing a case, which the Philippines won last summer, with an international arbitration panel) while seeking closer security cooperation with the US. Duterte quickly distanced the Philippines from its long-time treaty ally, the United States, while moving closer to China. Besides reaction to US/Western criticism of his drug crackdown, de Castro argues Duterte is seeking to “to harness China for several major infrastructure and investments projects in the Philippines and to resort to bilateral negotiations with Beijing.” To complicate matters, while courting Beijing, Duterte is also cosyng up to Japan, China’s

leading rival within East Asia, giving the Philippines a countervailing force to Chinese influence that will inevitably expand as economic ties tighten. This has allowed Duterte to “play its classic diplomatic gambit of equi-balancing”, which pits “one great power against the other.”

Returning to Teehankee’s analysis, one can see that Duterte has a clear ideological justification for at least a rhetorical switching of sides between the US and China: his strong nationalist convictions. With an anti-colonial discourse aimed at past American abuses in the Philippines, Duterte has been careful not to offer similar verbal jabs against China, which he portrays as a good Asian neighbour that has also suffered under the depredations of Western colonialism and helps poor countries with development assistance. *The Economist* (Banyan 2016) called Duterte “a moonstruck lover” for saying China “deserves the kind of respect that [it] now enjoys [...] It’s only China that can help us” while pointing to his own Chinese ancestry. Southeast Asian politics was dominated by nationalist figures in the early independence period – Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, Sukarno in Indonesia, Aung Sang of Burma (now Myanmar), and Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia. Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohammad and Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew emerged as notable nationalist leaders criticising the liberal dogmas of the West in the early post-Cold War era. As Teehankee stresses, Duterte is the first Filipino leader to be openly nationalist, rhetorically anti-Western leader. This makes him a kind of Filipino Sukarno or Mahathir. The implications of this change of discourse are still uncertain. Given China’s rise and aggressive stance in the South China seas, De Castro predicts Duterte’s China leanings may prove short-lived. Rapprochement may prove easier with the US under Donald Trump, who seems to have little interest in criticising Duterte or any other US ally for human rights violations. However, it also seems wise not to underestimate the importance of this “nationalist turn” under Duterte for the Philippines or Southeast Asia generally.

## Economic Implications

In his article, Prof. Eric Vincent C. Batalla, chair of the de la Salle Political Science Department and a leading Filipino political scientist, argues that, over the last three decades, the performance of the Philippine economy has become increasingly

insulated from the divisiveness of its politics [...] Despite the political turbulence that characterised the Estrada and Arroyo presidencies, the Philippine economy managed to continue its growth path following the difficulties of the 1983–1992 period.

This is due to the fact that the country has achieved financial stability through increasing tax collection and a liberalised and reformed banking and financial system, as well as because of increasing foreign exchange revenues – particularly from overseas remittances and from a thriving business processing/call centre industry. Batalla suggests that “these factors continue to enable sustain rapid economic growth despite Duterte’s controversial leadership.” Political risks may be “unpredictable” but “the country’s economic fundamentals remain strong.”

Batalla’s article leaves open the reverse question, which why there has been repeated political upheaval over the last decade-and-a-half despite rapid growth and economic stability. Many critics have pointed to the shallowness of rapid growth in the Philippines – in terms of slow poverty reduction, as well as continued high levels of inequality and joblessness. While the fact that Duterte’s support is stronger among the elite and middle class than the poor makes it difficult to claim Duterte’s rise is part of the global outrage against growing inequality, it does suggest that growth itself is not enough to ensure political stability. The “shallowness” of the Philippine economy explains the continued resurgence of pro-poor populists (overthrown president Joseph E. Estrada, cheated presidential contender Fernando Poe, Jr., and defeated 2016 presidential candidate Jojo Binay). However, growth itself may have raised the expectations of the “winners” in society, particularly in the elite and middle class, that the state would offer them greater protection. Given the seeming failures of the liberal and supposedly reformist administration of Noynoy Aquino to do so, many better-off voters opted for Duterte and his promise to violently restore law and order.

## Conclusion

The articles in this special issue assess the reasons for Duterte’s rise to power, his violent anti-drug campaign, the nature of his rule and the implications of it. Although, as Holmes shows, there was some contingency in his victory in the 2016 presidential elections (particularly given the weakness of the other major candidates), Duterte’s “law and order” message, which was a form of “penal populism”, did resonate strongly with voters, as Curato demonstrates. However, as my and Teehankee’s essays stress, Duterte kicked in a door that was already rotten due to the “disjunction” of the liberal reformist order. Driven by middle-class anger and anxiety about their personal safety, Duterte has used violence as spectacle to cow criminals while assuring “good citizens” that they are safe, as Reyes shows. As Teehankee argues, Duterte’s strong nationalism

is not only a reaction to US/Western criticisms of his violent anti-drug campaign but also due to his deep seated anti-colonial sentiments that, under his presidency have, for the first time in the post-World War II era, found expression at the highest level of the Philippine government, leading Duterte to be the most recent in a long line of anti-Western South-east Asian leaders. This nationalism has also led Duterte to, at least rhetorically, “switch sides” (if in fact it is reviving “equi-balancing” as de Castro argues) from the US to China with regard to the South China/West Philippine Sea territorial disputes as he seeks Chinese investment. Economically, Batalla predicts the Philippines will remain stable, with growth likely to be steady despite these rapid political changes. There is no doubt that, unlike Obama, who had also promised political change, Duterte, whose campaign slogan was “true change” (*tunay ng pagbabago*), has brought rapid transformation to the Philippines. However, if the analyses offered in this special issue are to be believed, not all of it is not for the better.

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