

# The Duterte Presidency as a Phenomenon

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Rodrigo Duterte, Jr., mayor of the southern Mindanao city of Davao, was proclaimed winner of the 9 May 2016 presidential election and assumes office as the 16th president of the Republic of the Philippines. In the process he bested the vice-president, two senators and a former senator and a key figure in the Aquino administration.

Duterte is the first provincial official to be elected to the highest political post in the country. He did it in a convincing manner, garnering more than 16 million votes or 39 per cent of the 42.5 million total votes cast in the presidential elections. In contrast, the administration and ruling Liberal Party candidate Manuel Roxas II only received 23.4 per cent of the total votes cast, a far second place.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Duterte Win Ends the Era of Post-Marcos Democracy**

Duterte's overwhelming victory came exactly thirty years after the EDSA (so named after the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue in Manila) "People Power" revolution toppled the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos and brought Corazon Aquino to power. The 1986 uprising mandated the establishment of the revolutionary Aquino government despite Marcos' attempt to proclaim himself as president based on fraudulent results of the 1986 snap elections.

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Aquino set aside Marcos' 1973 Constitution and issued her own, self-written Freedom constitution. She later consolidated power through the enactment of the 1987 Constitution that was ratified by the people in a plebiscite. The latter became the foundation of the Philippine political system for the next thirty years.

The 1987 Constitution remained in its original form despite repeated attempts by succeeding administrations to revise it or amend its provisions. Benigno Aquino III, the outgoing president and Cory Aquino's only son, flatly refused to even consider changing it despite proposals coming from his own party, the Liberal Party.

Duterte made changing to a federal system from the present unitary system the centrepiece reform of his campaign. To be sure, this can only be done through a revision of the Constitution. To this end, he has already indicated that he will convene a constitutional convention to craft a new federal constitution. In doing so, Duterte has signalled that the political system needs, at a minimum, further refinements, and, at the most, restructuring. A constitutional convention — as opposed to a constituent assembly heretofore proposed by past presidents — will bring constitutional change closer to the people. In effect, this will either cure the defects of the post-Marcos democracy or replace it entirely. At any rate, people's participation will ensure that the next political system adheres more closely to their interests.

### **The Aquinos' Legacy of Elite Democracy**

The vote for Duterte can be considered a protest vote. In essence, it is a vote against the way the post-EDSA governance favoured the political and economic elite over the interests of ordinary Filipinos. The latter, of course, carried the whole weight of the anti-Marcos struggle and, even in EDSA, tipped the balance that ended the Marcos dictatorship.

Corazon Aquino and subsequent administrations consistently favoured the elite.<sup>2</sup> The anti-Marcos elite dominated the government, except for some concessions to the moderate Left and known Left personalities. Some on the Left were later removed due to pressures from the Right or when they stood firm on issues of social reforms and popular democracy.<sup>3</sup>

For political scientists, the essential weakness of the post-Marcos democracy was the elite capture of political power. Paul Hutchcroft once argued that the Marcos dictatorship only gave way to an "elitist" democracy supporting "booty capitalism".<sup>4</sup> Walden Bello went so far as to characterize the post-Marcos Philippines as

a “failed democratic state”.<sup>5</sup> The persistent internal conflicts have also been attributed to the failure of the “People Power” political order to encompass the demands of the constituencies of the rebellions.

The machinery of the Marcos dictatorship was not dismantled; nor were Marcos’ henchmen ever convicted, including those military officers accused of massive human rights violations. Many of them were allowed to join government without clearing their names or making reparations. Eventually, even the Marcos family was allowed to return and rebuild their political machinery.

The 2016 presidential and vice-presidential elections reflect this elite capture of political power. Of the five presidential candidates, only Duterte had no substantive political link to the national political elite. Of the six vice-presidential candidates, all were members or backed by various factions of the elite, including candidate Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., namesake and son of the late dictator.

There was a sense of frustration and disappointment towards the elite among those who voted for Duterte. Even the votes for Senator Grace Poe, a political neophyte, can be interpreted as a vote for change and reform. Moreover, the second Aquino administration is seen to have squandered the clear reform mandate given to it, and failed to build an inclusive democracy that benefits ordinary Filipinos.

In a way, the people have rejected EDSA and its elitist democracy. The Duterte victory signals a historic shift in Philippine politics, towards a more inclusive democracy.

### **Towards A Populist Democracy**

Duterte’s rough and irreverent manners have no precedent in the Philippines’ presidential contests. He has attacked all hitherto sacrosanct institutions and belittled his opponents. He has cursed his male opponents, the elite, the Aquino administration, the media, human rights and pro-women activism, Manila’s traffic problems, members of the diplomatic corps, and, yes, even the Pope in this predominantly Catholic nation. But his supporters loved it. They revelled in the bringing down of political icons and there was a hint of rebellion against the present order as imposed by governmental institutions. There was, of course, the unrest over their worsening livelihoods over the past thirty years, an indictment of the anti-poverty promises of EDSA.

To be sure, the anti-Aquino factions of the elite have tried to co-opt or ride on this wave of discontent. Vice-President Jejomar Binay, in his presidential campaign, harped on the fact that he wanted the prosperity of Makati City — the country’s financial centre and his political bailiwick — to be enjoyed by the rest of the country. Senator Poe emphasized that “no one should be left behind” in the quest for the country’s economic development. Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago had her own set of anti-poverty reforms such as reducing unemployment and underemployment, raising minimum wages, lowering taxes for the poor and establishing national industries to reduce the number of Filipinos from seeking overseas jobs.

However, it was Duterte who struck the right chords in this season of discontent. He boldly proposed a radical change — especially the promise of federalism and stringent law and order measures — and that this change was “coming”. According to him, bringing down government to the level of the people, finally solving the existing internal conflicts involving the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Communist Party of the Philippines/New People’s Army (CPP/NPA), cracking down on corruption, and aggressively maintaining law and order will ultimately level the playing field and bring in foreign investment. This in turn will lead to development and economic growth, thereby creating the conditions for inclusive prosperity for all.

This populist message proved highly attractive to many of the voters; and they voted for him by a landslide margin.

### **The People’s Mandate**

What exactly is the mandate of the Duterte presidency? Most opinions revolve around his controversial solution to the law and order problem, particularly the drug abuse problem, in “three to six months”. He proposed for law enforcement agents to pursue notorious criminals, especially drug lords and drug pushers, call on them to surrender and, if they resisted surrender shoot them.

This may be interpreted in a literal sense, and for many critics, it is the basis for judging his administration. They point to the many possibilities of abuse and human rights violations that may occur because of this proposal. His supporters however see this as a demonstration of firm political will — pointing to past administrations’ failure to tackle crime.

Of course, the more contextual and broader interpretation is the one that sees Duterte promising to deliver meaningful results within this timeframe. It should also be understood not only in terms of solving the country's crime problem but also in undertaking key social reforms within the campaign slogan of "Change is Coming".

The first and most significant reform he proposed is the institutionalization of a federal state, possibly with a parliamentary system. This may be done through a constitutional convention. The intent is to bring government nearer to the localities and enhance people's participation in government.

There is a definite rejection of the elite democracy model hitherto existing in the post-Marcos period. There is also the expectation of quick results in uplifting the quality of lives of ordinary Filipinos, especially the poor. The people who voted for Duterte also expect him to use the full force of the law in going after criminals, and to have a firm political will in pushing through reform measures.

Duterte may have only 39 per cent of the votes in the official count, but the same sentiments have been expressed by those who voted for Senator Poe, another political outsider who campaigned on a platform which emphasized that "no one should be left behind". She garnered more than 21 per cent of the votes.

Whether Duterte succeeds or fails, the people have taken a bold step forward, in the process redefining the terms of reference for building democracy. The mandate for change is supported by nearly two out of three Filipino voters.

### **Duterte as a Challenge to the Political Elite**

The political and economic elite class may try to co-opt the administration of President Duterte or resist any weakening of their privileged status, and may contest radical reforms every step of the way. On the other hand, the elite may also sue for a historic compromise amidst popular pressure. In this case, the proposed charter change will become an important process to realize the compromise.

Co-optation will essentially result in the preservation of the *status quo*. There may be some cosmetic reforms but these will not address the current inequalities and powerlessness regnant in society. The Duterte administration in this scenario — while starting with a bang — will end with a proverbial whimper.

Elite resistance to change is a given. If the Duterte administration fulfills its promise to undertake social change, then resistance may take the form of parliamentary challenges, including moves to impeach the president, parliamentary blocking manoeuvres, or media and street protests. However, in the setting of a fragile Philippine democracy, violent forms of elite resistance cannot be discounted either.

The way out proposed by the new Duterte government is a constitutional process of forging a new social contract. The constitutional convention is meant to enshrine an inclusive democracy based on federalism. To be sure, the details of this proposal have yet to be fleshed out and the concept of federalism will provoke much discussion. However, the process itself is seen as key to the elite acceptance of the reality of its exclusive claim to power and economic resources on the one hand, and the imperative for changing the rules of society to be equitable to lesser classes on the other.

The end of the post-Marcos elite democracy puts President Duterte in the role of a transition president. His challenge to the elite political class is to accept the inevitability of change and adapt to it. The unsaid threat is to be left behind in the wake of the change that he said “is coming”.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Final Results: 2016 Presidential and Vice Presidential Canvass”, available at <<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/787867/philippine-elections-final-results-2016-congressional-canvass-presidential-vice-president-race>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Walden Bello, “The Global Crisis of Legitimacy of Liberal Democracy”, available at <<http://www.waldenbello.org/the-global-crisis-of-legitimacy-of-liberal-democracy/>>.
- <sup>3</sup> “Aquino, Under Pressure, Removes Her Closest Adviser”, *New York Times*, 18 September 1987, available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/18/world/aquino-under-pressure-removes-her-closest-adviser.html>>.
- <sup>4</sup> Paul Hutchcroft uses the term “booty capitalism” to describe the predatory behaviour of the oligarchy in the Philippines, especially in the Marcos years. See Paul Hutchcroft, *Booty Capitalism: The Politics of Banking in the Philippines* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).
- <sup>5</sup> Walden Bello, “Can the Philippines Handle Globalization?”, *Business World*, 23 January 2005.