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Why Duterte Remains So Popular

The Failure of the Philippines' Liberal Reformism

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Three years ago, as Hillary Clinton was making final preparations for her U.S. presidential campaign, Philippine Secretary of the Interior Manuel “Mar” Roxas was planning his own bid for the presidency—one in which he would run as the default candidate of the Philippines' ruling elite [1]. A buoyant economy, as well as the apparent success of the economic and social reforms passed by Roxas' boss, President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III, made him confident of victory. But during the 2016 campaign, Roxas was effectively attacked by a populist challenger who derided him as incompetent, soft on crime, and out of touch with ordinary people. And like Clinton, Roxas lost. In May 2016, Rodrigo Duterte—a local political boss who had overseen large-scale extrajudicial killings during his time as mayor of Davao City—was elected president of the Philippines, with Roxas finishing a distant second.

Why did the Philippines, a seemingly stable electoral democracy, prove so vulnerable to Duterte's strongman challenge? The 2016 election revealed that despite surface-level calm, a systemic crisis of the Philippines' political order had been building for years. Although Aquino had remained personally popular, his liberal reformist agenda had been slowly sapped of its legitimacy [2] by administrative bungling, a failure to address structural problems or root out institutionalized corruption, and at least one major scandal. This created an opportunity that was skillfully seized by Duterte.

## LIBERAL REFORMISM'S DEAD END

Since the end of Ferdinand Marcos' corrupt dictatorship in 1986, Philippine politics have been dominated by an agenda that I call “liberal reformism,” [3] which has emphasized civil liberties (honored more in the breach than in the observance), good governance (usually conceived of in terms of rooting out corruption), and market-based economic reform as the keys to the country's developmental success and democratic consolidation. This agenda, which tends to skirt more fundamental questions of inequality and redistribution, has proved popular among members of the Philippine elite, including powerful interest groups such as the Catholic Church and big business.

Duterte's predecessor, Noynoy Aquino, was a politician in this liberal reformist tradition. The son of Corazon Aquino, a popular former president and leader of the 1986 anti-Marcos revolution, he easily won the 2010 election by promising to take the "straight path" and clean up corruption—a popular message coming on the heels of the scandal-plagued administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. In the early years of his presidency, Aquino cracked down on tax cheats, passed a number of (often symbolic) anti-corruption measures, and achieved high rates of economic growth—between six and seven percent a year from 2012 to 2016. International credit-rating agencies promoted the country's bonds to investment grade, and its ranking in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index steadily improved.

But Aquino's liberal reformist agenda soon ran off track in the face of the Philippines' endemic structural problems. Aquino had pledged that "if there is no corruption, there will be no poverty," but the country saw little improvement in the lot of the poor, while a major pork barrel scandal [4] in 2013 exposed legislators pocketing public funds. Growth, although fast, remained profoundly unequal [5], with high unemployment and an increase in self-reported poverty [6]. The government continued to drag its feet on the persistent issue of land reform, symbolized by the Aquino-Cojuangco family's tenacious resistance to court-ordered land redistribution of its huge sugar estate. And other missteps added to public perceptions of incompetence: the Aquino administration was unable to deal with the devastation caused by the super-typhoon Haiyan in 2013; it made slow progress on building or maintaining infrastructure in the country's major cities, which are plagued by some of the worst traffic in Asia; and its promised institutional reforms, including an attempt to clean up the notoriously corrupt Bureau of Customs, mostly came to nothing.

It was the problems of the Philippine justice system, however, that were ultimately the most damaging. These were symbolized by the trial of the accused perpetrators of the 2009 Maguindanao massacre, in which 57 people, including 32 journalists, were murdered at the behest of the powerful Ampatuan family. Aquino had promised the trial would be concluded during his presidency. It wasn't, leading to widespread perceptions that the state was powerless to punish the guilty. Along with other high-profile scandals—such as the revelation that drug lords in the country's Bilibid Prison were "living like kings [7]"—this contributed to a sense among many Filipinos that the Aquino government was incapable of enforcing the law, despite statistics [8] showing a decline in violent crime.

## **PENAL POPULISM AND ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

The Aquino administration's failures proved a boon for Duterte. Although drugs and the criminal violence surrounding them had long been an issue in Philippine politics, incidents such as the Bilibid scandal allowed Duterte to hammer the country's establishment over the supposed breakdown of law and order, striking a chord with the public through promises to crack down on drug use and trafficking by whatever means necessary. Practicing a style of politics described by the sociologist Nicole Curato as "penal populism [9]," he politicized latent anxieties about crime and social disorder, pointing to his alleged success in cleaning up Davao City—where he had been either the mayor or the power behind the throne for three decades—to argue that he was the country's only shot at overcoming its enormous challenges, and that progress would have to come at the price of liberal rights [9].

Since taking office in May 2016, Duterte has made good on his word, moving to eliminate liberal barriers to his agenda. He has sought to sideline domestic critics by intimidating independent media <sup>[10]</sup>, government institutions (particularly the Commission on Human Rights), and civil society groups, whom he accuses of “coddling” criminals. And in May, his judicial allies removed <sup>[11]</sup> the chief justice of the country’s Supreme Court, who had questioned Duterte’s list of judges supposedly involved in the drug trade and his administration’s extension of martial law on the island of Mindanao.

Duterte’s drug war has led to spectacular levels of violence—although the police have deliberately made it difficult <sup>[12]</sup> to count the dead, one opposition senator plausibly claims that as many as 20,000 people <sup>[13]</sup> may have already been killed—and drawn condemnation from rights groups around the world. Yet the bloodshed has been a political success: Duterte is one of the most popular Philippine presidents since the return of democracy, with one major polling organization recording approval ratings of 78 percent or higher <sup>[14]</sup> during his first two years in office before dipping below that level last September. And although most Filipinos acknowledge it has involved extrajudicial killings <sup>[15]</sup>, they consider the drug war to be Duterte’s major achievement <sup>[16]</sup>.

In some respects, there has also been considerable continuity between Duterte and his liberal reformist predecessors. He has pursued governance reforms and, like his predecessors, met with only middling success. Despite pledges to root out corruption in his administration, for instance, several officials accused of corruption, such as Bureau of Customs Commissioner Nicanor Faeldon <sup>[17]</sup>, have simply been reassigned. Duterte established a commission that has drafted a new constitution, which would put strict limits on political dynasties and federalize the country in order end the dominance of Manila, but the project has become embroiled in controversy. He has also, despite labeling himself a “socialist” <sup>[18]</sup>, deferred to market-friendly technocrats when designing his economic policies, including implementing a major tax reform, lowering and simplifying personal income taxes while increasing VAT, and stressing infrastructure with his “build, build, build” campaign, ramping up government spending in the hopes that major Chinese investments will materialize in the future.

## **DUTERTE’S TROUBLES**

Duterte’s dystopian depiction of drugs as the root of all social ills has been a successful deflection strategy, distracting Filipinos from the country’s limited developmental gains and shifting the blame for social problems onto drug criminals, who can be ruthlessly targeted in the name of national progress. Yet recent months have been less kind to Duterte. The president, who has admitted to using the powerful opioid fentanyl <sup>[19]</sup>, has had a recent health scare involving a potentially cancerous growth <sup>[20]</sup> in his intestines. And during a rambling speech in September, he seemed to openly admit <sup>[21]</sup> his involvement in extrajudicial killings, leading critics to call for the International Criminal Court to step up its investigations of his “drug war”.

Duterte has also started running into political problems. At the beginning of his presidency, he successfully had one of his leading critics in the Senate, Leila de Lima, imprisoned on improbable drug charges after he publicly “slut-shamed” her <sup>[22]</sup>. But his efforts in September to jail another opposition senator, Antonio Trillanes IV, have backfired. Trillanes, a retired army officer who helped plot a coup against the unpopular former

president Macapagal Arroyo, has accused Duterte and several of his top officials of corruption, and has suggested that his son and son-in-law are both involved in drug smuggling [23]. It is impossible at this point to assess the credibility of Trillanes' accusations, but multiplying scandals and the heatedness of the Duterte administration's reaction suggest that where there is smoke there well may be fire.

Duterte's feud with Trillanes has brought him into open conflict with elements of the military, including some of the top brass, who fear that the attempt to prosecute Trillanes will provoke a split [24] within the armed forces. Many officers also worry about Duterte's close ties to China—the Philippine military has historically close ties to the United States, which were reinforced by U.S. assistance during the siege of Marawi, after the city was taken over by an Islamic State affiliate in mid-2017. A coup is unlikely, despite Duterte's warnings [25], but the country's armed forces appear to have maneuvered behind the scenes to preserve their institutional integrity, putting limits on his authoritarian ambitions.

Some of Duterte's reform efforts have also begun to falter. His attempt to change the constitution has met with strong resistance, including from some of his own cabinet officials, who have criticized provisions creating state-level governments as too expensive. A combination of rising oil prices, VAT tax increases, and a falling peso have led inflation to more than double this year, reaching nearly seven percent. The rising price of rice and other basic foodstuffs has hit the poor hard, yet the depreciating peso has done little to boost the country's weak export sector.

But although his approval ratings have begun to sag [26], three-fourths of Filipinos continue to back him. Duterte remains widely revered, including by many Filipinos working abroad who fear the corruption of Manila and the danger posed by drug addiction to their families in the provinces. Duterte promises national political salvation by claiming only that violent strongman rule can bring about needed reforms and establish order in a country with institutions weakened by the failures of liberal reformists. For now, at least, it seems that most Filipinos still believe him.

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