

# Rodrigo Duterte and the Philippine presidency

Rupture or cyclicity?

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Scholars have devoted much attention to the rise of Rodrigo Duterte and the impact his brand of populism has had on the quality of Philippine democracy. This piece focuses instead on the evolving nature of the Philippine presidency and gradual diversification of the national oligarchy. Rather than viewing Duterte as a break from the Philippine experiment with constitutional democracy or a reassertion of national boss rule, it would be more accurate to view his rise as a manifestation of oligarchic proliferation, in which actors and power groups previously excluded from the presidency manage to break into the national elite via political and electoral manipulation.



Rodrigo Duterte and children at inauguration ceremony. Presidential Communications Operation Office, Public Domain.

## Rejecting oligarchs: Duterte as demagogic populist

The most widely disseminated interpretation of the Duterte phenomenon contends that this local strongman from Davao City is a national manifestation of a troubling international phenomenon. Namely, the rise of right-wing populist figures who have issued crude, but at times unsettlingly effective challenges to liberal globalism. According to its detractors, the humanist inclusivity of liberal rhetoric that claims to champion the rights of all races, genders, and sexual orientations is but a mild palliative in the face of turbocharged neo-liberal economic policies that have left more and more wealth in fewer and fewer hands. Neoliberal globalization has been accused of creating deep fissures between classes and regions across what were once more cohesive nation-states. Cosmopolitan upper and middle

classes based in globally connected cities have neglected the socioeconomic concerns of peripheral regions left behind as a result of rapidly evolving economic structures. These globalist structures have placed more emphasis on highly mobile forms of capital and service sector jobs that require levels of education and training inaccessible to poorer segments of the population.

According to proponents of oligarchic rejection, the origins of this populist backlash in the Philippines can be dated to the People Power Revolution of 1986.<sup>1</sup> A combination of virulent plunder politics and increasing repression of traditional elites by the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos led to a groundswell of mass opposition, which the armed forces refused to suppress. Abandoned by their military and police, the Marcos family fled. The new democratic government of Corazon Aquino gave the Philippines a new

constitution that strictly curtailed possibilities for authoritarian backsliding and greatly empowered the national legislature.

Almost immediately, however, it became apparent that the Philippines had overthrown a national cacique only to see the return of traditional political dynasties committed to a severely truncated form of democracy.<sup>2</sup> 1986 was more of a restoration than a revolution. Proponents of major social reform were either met with congressional obstruction or military repression. No meaningful land reform took place, particularly on those estates owned by well-connected oligarchs. Counterinsurgency operations against agrarian leftist organizations launched during the Marcos years continued under the new democratic dispensation. Beset by a wide array of economic woes and attempted coups by disgruntled elements of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), President Aquino could

not afford to alienate a military that used the protracted campaigns against communist guerillas to justify its continued preeminence.<sup>3</sup> Manifestations of the Philippines' continuing dependence on its former colonial master also persisted in aggravating nationalist sentiments. Eager to retain the favor of the United States, Aquino allowed Washington to hold on to its military bases at Clark Field and Subic Bay until these agreements came up for formal renewal. Disgusted by America's support for the Marcos regime, enough pressure was maintained inside and outside the political establishment to close these bases down in 1992. Yet, this only occurred after the Cold War had ended, thus creating the impression that the Americans had not been thrown out so much as abandoned an overt military presence in the Philippines once it was no longer necessary.

National leadership left much to be desired. Presidents, weak and strong, rewarded cronies and kinsmen with lucrative contracts and sinecures while leaving pressing problems unresolved. Politics seemed to be the exclusive preserve of a charmed circle of elite families who rotated high office amongst themselves. The dynastic nature of the Philippine presidency reached its apogee at the turn of the twenty-first century: two successive presidents, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Benigno Aquino III, were the children of former presidents. Impressive economic growth has occurred since the early 2000s but little of this wealth has trickled down and the Philippines remains far behind most of its neighbors in lowering the percentage of people living in poverty.

Structures of illicit political bargaining that typified the pre-Marcos era emerged seemingly unscathed after 1986. National politicians aligned with provincial warlords and local strongmen who delivered guaranteed vote-banks during election campaigns in exchange for patronage and pork barrel projects. Most resource disbursements from the center to the periphery disappeared into the pockets of local political clans, empowering a few elite families at the expense of an effective civil infrastructure and the satisfactory delivery of services.

All these sociopolitical ills are magnified manifold on the island of Mindanao, particularly in the autonomous Muslim areas. Neglect, mismanagement, clan feuds, and corruption have left large parts of the island mired in poverty and disappointment. National politics are remote and seemingly uninterested in southern provincial problems. It was widely felt that only a presidential candidate from Mindanao could understand and resolve the island's inequities. Duterte presented himself as a familiar strongman who could get the job done. He gave frequent speeches and interviews in Visayan, the *lingua franca* of the central Philippines as well as northern and eastern Mindanao. This was a welcome relief from the Taglish-speaking elites of imperial Manila. His profanity-laced tirades and locker room banter made him come across as an avuncular figure not averse to using physical violence to keep unruly behavior in check. Mindanao's electoral mobilization on behalf of one of its own was a major factor in Duterte's victory, but it is unlikely he would have won the election without a similar sense of disillusionment with elite politics throughout the archipelago. In areas like Central Luzon and the National Capital Region, voters turned to Duterte because he was an outsider. A new generation of young voters who had no memory of Ferdinand Marcos, martial law or the People Power Revolution backed an unknown quantity for the sake of shaking up a stagnant status quo.

Duterte's ostensibly simple solutions to complex problems have brought disruption rather than resolution. The scourge of criminality and illegal drugs, which Duterte vowed to eradicate in a matter of months, has resulted in an interminable war on the poor. Drug users and small time pushers are targeted for extrajudicial execution while major kingpins have been largely unaffected. Duterte's true intentions appear to be a nationwide social cleansing of indigents and undesirables. The poor are a convenient scapegoat for the social ills that plague the body politic, but killing them does not reform the structural inequalities that produce those ills.

The near obsession with eradicating illegal drugs in slum areas further delayed the enactment of the Bangasamor Basic Law (BBL) of 2014, which would give territorial autonomy to the Muslim south. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front's inability to pass the BBL in partnership with Duterte expeditiously weakened the organization's credibility among its members and precipitated the breakaway of disaffected family clans who joined or founded more extremist Islamic groups. The Maute group's rise was a result of these frustrations. Their seizure of Marawi City in conjunction with other extremist gangs blindsided Manila. The AFP missed numerous self-declared deadlines for Marawi's complete liberation. More damaging has been Duterte's imposition of martial law on the entire island of Mindanao. Although not as all-encompassing a political crackdown as the variant imposed by Marcos over forty years ago, it brought back bitter memories of an era thought to be long gone. The fighting in Marawi also offset Duterte's attempted tilt away from the United States, with the military seeking the technical assistance of American special operations forces without initially informing Duterte of their intention to do so.

Oligarchic rejection thus led to a rash decision on the part of voters to back a local warlord for the nation's highest office. Although he ran Davao City relatively effectively, the use of local methods to solve national problems has had very mixed results. While Duterte has thus far been able to reward his supporters and coopt most of the national legislature through the disbursement of presidential patronage, he has not dismantled vested interests committed to the socioeconomic status quo. While Duterte's violence at home and grandstanding abroad have been cathartic for many, the Philippines remains as oligarchic a state as ever.

### Philippine oligarchic cycles: wild and reformist fluctuations

Theories of oligarchic rotation have viewed Philippine national politics as a cyclical phenomenon that operates according to the disposition of the national executive. Corazon Aquino's presidency from 1986 to 1992 saw the reestablishment of elite families who were denied the spoils of office under the Marcos dictatorship. Although President Aquino herself rarely engaged in pathological excesses, a number of her close family and key associates ruthlessly reasserted their dominance over local bailiwicks and lucrative assets. Fierce competition between provincial clans for legislative seats and mayoralties resulted in extensive electoral violence. The AFP and police remained on hand to suppress those voices and non-governmental organizations calling for genuine social reform. The administration of Fidel Ramos, 1992-1998, significantly tamped down on egregious political violence. Although a former Marcos crony and kinsman, Ramos went some way toward portraying the Philippines as a business friendly country eager for foreign investment. Attempted coups became a thing of the past and economic deregulation was the order of the day.

These reforms were far from complete by the time Ramos left office. Partial stabilization was followed by an extended period of wild oligarchic accumulation during the presidencies of Joseph Estrada, 1998-2001, and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, 2001-2010. The Arroyo years saw the very worst of what presidential predation had to offer. Provincial warlords such as 'Chavit' Singson in Ilocos Sur and the Ampatuan clan in the autonomous Muslim areas were given free reign so long as they delivered the votes Arroyo's clique needed to prolong its rule and amass further plunder. The damage inflicted under Arroyo was so extensive that significant reforms were required to salvage the Philippines' international image and economic prospects. Benigno Aquino III's presidential term from 2010 to 2016 saw a sustained drive against corruption and attempts to prosecute provincial clans involved in politically motivated massacres. While political killings as a whole were never completely eliminated, they ceased to manifest themselves in the brazen and bloody manner that typified the Arroyo era. However, Aquino III's administration did not last long enough

or try hard enough to lessen the staggering disparities between rich and poor. Access to socioeconomic resources were still heavily dependent on the favor and patronage of elite families. The Philippine presidency was still exposed to capture by a wild oligarch.<sup>4</sup> Oligarchic power was temporarily tamed through a plethora of civic reform programs and presidential initiatives, but its deep structures endured, making it possible for Duterte's predatory populism to take hold.

### Oligarchic proliferation: an expanding national elite

The abovementioned theories focus more on contemporary practices and beliefs than on long-term historical trajectories. Once established, the traditional families appear unshakable and near hegemonic in their control of national political office. Some oligarchs are more civil and reform-minded than others, but they are basically cut from the same cloth and in being so their reformism can only go so far. While it is true that national elites have rarely been eliminated, they have had to share the trough of state with an increasing variety of voracious mouths.

An examination of Philippine political development since the American colonial advent demonstrates that Duterte is as much a manifestation of oligarchic proliferation as a rupture or cyclical phase. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Philippine national elite has become progressively diverse. Various oligarchs of different origins have had to share an increasingly crowded national political arena. The initial channeling of local and regional elites into Manila politics by American colonial officials led to a homogenization of the national political class. This homogenization began to break down during the Second World War. Marginal and more militarized elements of this elite began to penetrate national office in ways previously thought impossible. These aggressive up-and-comers assembled client networks that allowed them to distance themselves from established political families. Marcos's consolidation of power and declaration of martial law then saw the politicization of a heretofore apolitical military. Finally, since the year 2000, local warlords from fringe areas have been gaining in power and influence, a trend which culminated in one local warlord seizing control of the national state.

Political horizons began to expand for the indigenous elite during the archipelago's transition from Spanish to American rule. Philippine elites were no strangers to fierce electoral contests that determined the distribution and denial of resources. However, under Spanish rule elections were limited to the local level. As an increasingly valuable possession of Spain's dwindling empire, provincial and capital administrative positions were reserved for Spaniards alone. The lockout of indigenous elites from lucrative government posts was a major factor precipitating the Philippine struggle for independence.

Faced with a formidable insurrection of their own, American policymakers cast about for ways to dissipate mass resistance. Initially, they opted to govern the archipelago through highly educated Manila-based elites. Very soon, however, American administrators found these capital-elites ill-suited to govern a highly localized and deeply fragmented polity. The colonial state thus began to cultivate local and provincial elites who were then cast upwards into national politics.<sup>5</sup> Weaving local indigenous elites into central administrative and political networks substantially weakened the insurgency. Popular and millenarian movements would continue to erupt in rural and urban areas but were not enough to halt the coalescence of a self-replicating national oligarchy. This stage of Philippine political development reached a high point under the authoritarian presidency of Manuel Quezon.<sup>6</sup> He carefully cultivated alliance networks stretching from rural localities to Washington, DC. Soon, almost all state patronage flowed from his hands.

This period of centralized executive power was brought to an end by the Japanese invasion. The violence and dislocation that came with Japanese occupation created spaces for new power networks. Followings cohered around local strongmen who could obtain weapons and plunder. Rivals were eliminated under vague accusations of 'collaboration' as armed bands competed for smuggling routes and high-value contraband. The political future belonged to these local toughs. With independence in 1946, they quickly entered the national legislature, using their war records and armed followings to obtain electoral support. Ferdinand Marcos was only the most successful example of guerilla commanders who had gone to Manila. Once in the national political arena, he furnished his kin, armed followers, and former fraternity brothers with further rewards. Marcos also made extensive use of the rapidly modernizing news media to construct an image of heroic military service that went well beyond the factual record. In addition, he managed to market himself as a firm believer in top-down technocratic modernity, which would catapult the Philippines into the foremost ranks of developing nations.

All this was enough to win him the presidency in 1965, but if he wanted to hold onto it indefinitely he would need the military. The politicization of a heretofore professional officer corps began almost immediately. Budget increases, infrastructure projects, and slush funds gave military and police commanders a taste for power. When Marcos declared martial law in 1972 their status and opportunities for illicit enrichment increased exponentially. Marcos continuously allowed them to accrue wealth and in exchange they continued to support his dictatorship. Yet, the dictator had made a mistake. His military and police cronies soon became autonomous oligarchs in their own right. The profits they accumulated from payoffs, black market ventures, and smuggling routes were plowed back into constructing client networks of their own. When the regime's prospects became untenable they readily turned against it to preserve their privileges. Abandoned by his security forces during the People Power Revolution, Marcos had no option but to pack up and fly away.

Having enabled the fall of Marcos, the security forces felt entitled to a preeminent political role in the new era. A series of coups were launched against a tottering Aquino administration, several of which came dangerously close to succeeding. Consequently, Aquino agreed to maintain Marcos-era security structures and make Fidel Ramos her foremost advisor on military matters. Coup threats were thus contained, but at the price of sustaining institutions and personnel from an authoritarian past. The subsequent Ramos presidency saw former military and police commanders reach the commanding heights of political power. Ramos filled his administration with over a hundred retired officers.<sup>7</sup> Although the

armed forces were retrenched and modernized to a significant extent, Ramos maintained its privileged position and rewarded his former military associates with the plums of office.

The Estrada and Arroyo years witnessed the elevation of local warlords to heretofore unknown levels of prominence. Marcos had used warlords to drum up support and marshal votes in the past, but they were never a major component of his inner circle. Arroyo's reliance on the vote-banks of the Ampatuan clan by contrast meant sustained levels of presidential patronage and support for provincial predation. Full presidential backing created a sense of complete impunity that eventually went too far. Had the Ampatuans not committed the Maguindanao massacre in 2009, they might have used their near total control of the autonomous Muslim region to act as kingmakers in future presidential elections.

Rodrigo Duterte's urban warlordism proved far more successful.<sup>8</sup> He launched his career from a narrower base, Davao City, where he had to contend with fewer jostling interests.

His law-and-order platform, undergirded by a steady hum of extrajudicial executions, made him popular with local business interests and Chinese investors seeking to expand their horizons into the island of Mindanao. Duterte allowed the business sector to accumulate profits without being too avaricious or involved in their activities. This set the precedent and tone for his economic policy at the national level. Although his associations with the leftist movement and hostility to the United States make him something of an atypical president, he is quite the typical warlord. Duterte built alliances with and accepted resources from any quarter that would increase his personal power.

Upon his election to the presidency, Duterte brought a bevy of advisors and acolytes with him to Manila. Team Duterte quickly replicated local methods of social control on a national scale, with the killings of social marginals across the archipelago becoming a top priority. The rhetorical flourish utilized by traditional elites to mask the brutalities of a profoundly unequal society was quickly dropped in favor of a far cruder demonization of the superfluous poor. Oligarchs who had been under a cloud during Aquino III's administration were quickly rehabilitated and Duterte was frequently seen hobnobbing with the likes of Gloria Arroyo, Estrada, and the Marcos family. The Marcoses delivered him the votes of Ilocos Norte, their provincial bailiwick, in exchange for expediting their political rehabilitation, symbolized by Ferdinand's reburial in Heroes' Cemetery.

Duterte has also experienced substantial pushback from other established oligarchic interests. Fidel Ramos chided Duterte for his tilt away from the United States and other senior officers grumbled at his patronage of the police at the expense of the AFP. Such opposition has compelled Duterte to backtrack on his anti-American rhetoric and the protracted conflict in Marawi City made for quite amicable exchanges between Duterte, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and President Trump during ASEAN's 2017 summits. Certain senators have also expressed growing unease at the negative international imagery generated by the drug war, a downward slide that could result in divestment and credit rating downgrades. Duterte has responded to elite criticism with a combination of threats and half-hearted investigations of police excesses.

It remains to be seen if the various oligarchs in Manila will fully accept Duterte as one of their own. Established families and interests can be cajoled and occasionally bullied, but never fully eradicated. Most of them must eventually be accommodated, or else a hostile oligarchic coalition might coalesce, as it did in 1986, and place Duterte in an untenable position. Populist pronouncements aside, Duterte's principle intention appears to be the consolidation of his position as a new type of national oligarch; whether or not he succeeds, other local warlords will invariably follow suit. Duterte's rise to power represents a further widening of the Philippine oligarchic gyre.

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#### Notes

- 1 Teehankee, J.C. & M.R. Thompson. 2016. 'Electing a Strongman', *Journal of Democracy* 27(4):125-34.
- 2 Anderson, B. 1988. 'Cacique Democracy and the Philippines: Origins and Dreams', *New Left Review* 169:3-31.
- 3 McCoy, A.W. 1999. *Closer than Brothers: Manhood at the Philippine Military Academy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, ch.7-8.
- 4 Quimpo, N.G. 'Can the Philippines' Wild Oligarchy be Tamed?', in Case, W. (ed.) 2015. *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*. London: Routledge, p.347.
- 5 Cullinane, M. 2003. *Illustrado Politics: Filipino Elite Responses to American Rule, 1898-1908*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- 6 Abinales, P.N. & D.J. Amoroso. 2017. *State and Society in the Philippines*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, pp.153-157.
- 7 *ibid.*, McCoy, pp.31-32.
- 8 *ibid.*, Abinales & Amoroso, pp.337-342.

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