

The Vigilante President: How Duterte's Brutal Populism Conquered the Philippines

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Throughout his campaign and his early presidency-and, indeed, his entire public life-the stories Rodrigo Duterte has told and the way he has told them have resonated among a broad public. So have the denim jeans, checked shirts, and aviator sunglasses. His projection of both authenticity and muscular authority has enduring appeal.

Halfway through his presidential term, Duterte enjoys a satisfaction rating that is nearing 80 percent. His popularity helped propel candidates from his coalition to victory in midterm elections in May. For the first time in 80 years, no opposition candidate won a seat in the country's Senate, a tribute to Duterte's continuing hold on the Filipino imagination and the clout of his allies among the country's political clans. Duterte has control of Congress, where his allies constitute an overwhelming majority, and of a Supreme Court packed with his appointees. The liberal opposition has been decimated, the defeat of its strongest candidates at the polls both stunning and humiliating. Large sections of the press have been intimidated into docility. And many among the public cheer the president's war on drugs, leaving the Catholic clergy and human rights advocates tottering on the high ground, alone.

In his three years as president, Duterte has proved to be a consummate power broker and a masterful political tactician. His rambling rants against elites, drug users, and criminals feed on popular frustrations with the country's broken justice system and feckless ruling class. He has lashed out against "imperial Manila" and the "imperial" United States, articulating festering resentments against national and global elites. Duterte is riding the crest of a political wave, not just in the Philippines but around the world, where his brand of illiberalism is gaining ground. How could a 74-year-old, gun-toting former mayor from the Philippines' southern frontier have turned out to be so in tune with the global political moment?

FULL TEXT

In his final year in law school at a Catholic men's college in Manila, Rodrigo Duterte shot a classmate who made fun of his thick accent. The young "Rody," as Duterte was then known, was the son of a provincial governor on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. Like many of the progeny of the Philippine political elite, he had enjoyed a privileged upbringing. He grew up surrounded by guns and bodyguards, flew his father's plane when he was in his hometown, and hung out with the sons of local notables in his Jesuit-run boys' school. In Manila, however, Duterte's accent, typical of those from the country's southern periphery, marked him as an unsophisticated provinciano. Hence the classmate's teasing.

"I waited for him," Duterte would recall nearly 45 years later, when he was running for president and speaking before an enthusiastic crowd. "I told myself, 'I'll teach him a lesson.'" The classmate survived the shooting, he recounted, and presumably learned the lesson. And although he was banned from attending graduation, Duterte got his law degree. "The truth is, I am used to shooting people," he said. The audience lapped it up.

It was a typical Duterte story, with Duterte cast not as the aggressor but as the aggrieved, resorting to a gun to defend his honor. Sure, he took the law in his own hands, but by doing so, he earned the grudging respect of his tormentor. The telling, too, was classic Duterte: boastful while also self-deprecating. It was crass, hyperbolic, transgressive. And its conclusion—"I am used to shooting people"—could be construed as a joke, a fact, or a threat. Its power, and its beauty, lay in its ambiguity.

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THE DAVAO PLAYBOOK

Before Duterte made it the laboratory for his brand of muscular politics, Davao, a sprawling port city on the southern coast of Mindanao, was a petri dish for a Communist-led insurgency. In the early 1980s, the Philippines' ailing dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, was losing his grip on power. At the same time, Communist guerrillas were gaining ground, especially on Mindanao. In Davao, they recruited followers in the slums, in the universities, and among middle-class professionals railing against the abuses of dictatorial rule.

The Filipino Communists operated mostly in rural areas, and at their peak in the mid-1980s, they had a nearly 25,000-strong peasant army. But they also had an urban presence. As part of an experiment in urban warfare, they formed "sparrow" units, two- or three-person squads that moved quickly and often unnoticed as they gunned down police officers and soldiers on the streets. In Davao, their stronghold was a slum called Agdao, which became a battlefield between urban guerrillas and the military, earning it the moniker "Nicaragdao," a reference to the violence in Nicaragua.

Davao soon became known as the country's murder capital. Corpses were turning up on the streets or being fished out of the sea, victims of political killings and personal vendettas, as well as of hits by extortionists and common criminals. Law and order had broken down. In 1986, Marcos was overthrown by a popular uprising on the streets of Manila. Under pressure from both the military and the United States, the government of the new president, Corazon Aquino, unleashed the army and vigilantes in an iron-fisted crackdown against the Communists.

Davao then became a testing ground for U.S.-backed counterinsurgency. In 1987, the former U.S. attorney general Ramsey Clark led a mission to the Philippines that found that the CIA was involved in the rise of vigilante groups. The U.S. government also provided technical assistance to the Philippine army's counterinsurgency operations on Mindanao. During that time, civilians armed with rifles and long knives patrolled the streets on the hunt for suspected Communists. These anticommunist vigilantes were egged on by incendiary radio broadcasts hyping the Red peril. While reporting on Davao in the late 1980s, I encountered those marauding armed bands on the streets. I

also met Jun Pala, the radio broadcaster who went around the city with a Smith & Wesson revolver tucked inside his denim jacket and a hand grenade swinging from his belt. For the six hours a day he was on the air, Pala called out suspected Communists by name—lawyers, nuns and priests, activists, village officials.

It was during this period of terror that Duterte, a government prosecutor, became involved in Davao politics. When Marcos fell and all the local officials were replaced, Duterte was appointed acting vice mayor, thanks to his mother's connections with the anti-Marcos opposition. Two years later, he ran for mayor against Pala and a more established politician, and won. As mayor, he was both a patron of and an arbiter among rival groups, pitting them against one other in a divide-and-conquer strategy. And as the fighting wound down, he co-opted partisans on all sides, bringing in ex-Communists to work for him in the city government and warning both criminal gangs and recalcitrant Reds to move elsewhere—or else. He was cozy with the police; the city's police chief, Ronald Dela Rosa, was his godson.

During his 22-year mayoralty, Duterte ruled like a controlling patriarch. He imposed a curfew on minors, banned smoking in most public places, restricted liquor sales, and cracked down on traffic violators and petty offenders. He also beefed up social welfare programs, set up one of the most successful 911 emergency call lines in the country, provided services for abused women, and built clinics for the needy. He made business happy by cutting red tape and investing in infrastructure. Weary citizens welcomed a safer, more efficiently run, and more affluent Davao.

DAVAO'S DIRTY SECRET

Duterte borrowed freely from both the Communist and the counterinsurgency playbooks. He bombarded the media with the specter of not communism but criminality. Like Pala, he took to the airwaves, hosting a weekly television show in which he ranted against thieves and drug dealers. During a 2001 episode of his Sunday tv program, he read aloud 500 names of drug and crime suspects from the city's poorest neighborhoods. Carolyn Arguillas, a journalist in Davao, interviewed the mayor about a month after the broadcast, and she reported that at least four of those on Duterte's list had been found dead by the time of the interview. Another 17 suspected drug dealers and cell phone snatchers, including teenagers, were killed soon after.

The killers were mostly masked or hooded gunmen riding pillion on motorcycles, sometimes in broad daylight. Sometimes the assassins left cardboard signs that identified the victims as drug dealers or thieves. These were demonstration killings, intended as much to eliminate the targets as to warn others. They were the work of the Davao Death Squad, made up of thugs, ex-guerrillas, and out-of-work anticommunist vigilantes who gunned down pickpockets, drug peddlers, and other petty criminals. Amado Picardal, a priest who lived in Davao during this period, recalled officiating at a wedding at his church one afternoon in late 2008. "I heard shots outside, so after mass I went out, and there I saw this probably 15- or 16-year-old sprawled dead on our car park," he told me in late 2016, just months after Duterte became president. "There were policemen nearby, and they just fired [their guns] in the air as if to allow the killers to escape on their motorbikes." Picardal helped document more than 1,400 death-squad murders between 1998 and 2015. He has been speaking out against the killings for years, and he went into hiding in August 2018, after armed men were seen staking out a monastery he frequented. The Davao Death Squad, he said, borrowed their tactics from Communist guerrillas who executed cattle rustlers and other hooligans in the territories they controlled. The motorcycleriding assassins were reminiscent of the sparrow units, some of whose members had joined the Davao Death Squad.

This was Davao's dirty secret. Except for a few among the press, the Catholic clergy, and civic groups, residents largely accepted the logic of Duterte's frontier justice. As the mayor told Arguillas in 2001, "To be really truthful and honest about it, I would rather see criminals dead than innocent victims die, being killed senselessly." In fact, the death squad's victims were mostly small-time crooks, not murderers. Moreover, the statement implied that citizens had just two choices: kill or be killed. Due process was not an option. Residents of Davao knew the answer when Duterte asked, during a speech in 2015, "We're the ninth-safest city. How do you think I did it? How did I reach that title among the world's safest cities?" They remained complicit in their silence.

FROM DAVAO TO THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE

Davao was Duterte's school of government. He remade the city, and it remade him. It was also his ticket to the presidency: he promised he would bring peace and prosperity to the country as he had to his hometown. He is the author and champion of the Davao model- imagine Singapore with thugs instead of technocrats. The social contract he offered his constituents in Davao-I will take care of you but don't ask questions- is what he is offering Filipinos now.

Duterte has no executive experience apart from being the city's mayor. Running Davao is all he knows. This is why he prefers to be called "mayor of the Philippines" instead of "president." A mayor's concerns are micro: crime, potholes, business permits. Duterte is not an ideologue. His rants against imperialist elites in Manila and the United States and his overtures to China and Russia are driven not by ideology but by emotion. They are salve for wounded pride. They are also political gamesmanship: whether in foreign policy or domestic affairs, Duterte likes to play off rivals against one another.

Duterte's politics are defined by his gut, his experience, and his friends. He didn't promise Filipinos a statesman. He offered them Duterte, Punisher of Criminals, Avenger of Filipinos' Wounded Pride, a man who would also build roads, fix traffic, and get things moving in their gridlocked democracy.

Duterte's trusted circle is made up of people he knew and worked with in Davao. The closest political adviser of his early presidency was Leoncio Evasco, Jr., a Catholic priest who had defected to the Communist underground before becoming chief of staff to Duterte when he was mayor. Evasco has since fallen out of favor, eased out in the infighting among those in the president's inner circle. Christopher "Bong" Go, who served as a longtime aide in Davao, also followed Duterte to the presidential palace. Now a senator, Go is said to have Duterte's ear. Some of the president's more influential cabinet members-notably Carlos Dominguez III, the secretary of finance, and Jesus Dureza, who was the presidential adviser on the peace process until last year-were classmates from Duterte's Davao boyhood.

Duterte's policing strategy, too, was inspired by Davao. The architect of his antidrug campaign and his first police chief as president was Dela Rosa, formerly Davao's chief cop and now a senator. Dela Rosa introduced the policing technique known as tokhang, a shortened, combined form of the Visayan words for "knock" and "plead," in which police and village officials would knock on the doors of drug suspects and "plead" with them to stop their drug activities. On his first day as top cop, Dela Rosa ordered all police stations in the country to conduct tokhang operations. Many of those at the receiving end of the door knocks eventually ended up dead; they were either shot during police drug stings or killed by masked assassins. Duterte's war on drugs is trademark Davao: the drawing up of lists of suspects and then publicly naming and threatening them, the brazen executions by motorcyclericiding gunmen, the handwritten signs left alongside corpses, and the incessant hyping of drugs as an existential threat. The truth is that the level of illegal drug use in the Philippines is lower than that in the United States or Thailand, but Duterte's warnings about the drug scourge have fueled the public's anxieties about safety.

Even now, Duterte spends part of the week in Davao, professing to be uncomfortable mingling with Manila society. His discomfort resonates among the new middle class, who are his hardcore supporters. These include Filipinos employed around the world as nannies, nurses, seamen, and construction workers, as well as those who work in the country's booming call centers in Manila and other cities-the digital underclass of the global technology industry.

Duterte's base is made up of scrappy, hard-working, and aspirational men and women. The global economy has given them tickets out of poverty but not to affluence. They are better off than the poor, but their life choices are still limited. They cannot afford the fancy condominiums that dominate the skylines of the new luxury enclaves, nor do they shop in the malls that peddle Gucci and Prada. They worry about petty crime, long commutes, and the prospects of their children. They resent the rich for sucking up the profits from an economy that has been growing, on average, at five to six percent annually for the past dozen or so years. They also resent the poor, who have benefited from antipoverty programs. They are mad because they obey the law, pay their taxes, work long hours, and yet feel squeezed. As the Filipino political scientist Julio Teehankee has explained,

The Duterte phenomenon is not a revolt of the poor; it is elite-driven. It is the angry protest of the wealthy, newly

rich, well off, and the modestly successful new middle class (including call centre workers, Uber drivers, and overseas Filipino workers abroad). However, instead of feeling better off, despite robust economic growth during the past six years of the Aquino presidency, the middle class have suffered from lack of public services, endured the horrendous land and air traffic, feared the breakdown of peace and order, and silently witnessed their tax money being siphoned by corruption despite promises of improved governance.

THE DUTERTE DISRUPTION

No doubt, Duterte is a disruptor. In his bid for the presidency in 2016, he defeated the money and machines of more established political players. His campaign relied on unpaid volunteers and Facebook; he became the country's first president to be propelled into office by the power of social media. Unlike his predecessors, he cast aside any pretensions of respect for democratic norms. He mocked human rights advocates, endorsed police killings, and encouraged violence against drug users and criminals. He set the tone for uncivil discourse in public spaces, especially social media, where his army of trolls, influencers, and dedicated followers continue to spew venom against his critics.

More important, in office, he has vitiated the institutional checks on presidential power. He has cracked down on the independent press, jailed a senator who investigated his death-squad past, and engineered the ouster of an independent-minded chief justice of the Supreme Court. He is a vociferous critic of the Catholic Church, which has a history of standing up to presidential overreach. By cozying up to China and thumbing his nose at the United States (he famously called U.S. President Barack Obama "the son of a whore"), he is also upending Philippine foreign policy.

Duterte was not the first Filipino leader to ride the populist wave. He came to power almost exactly 30 years after the fall of Marcos' dictatorship. By then, the elite democracy that had risen from the ashes of authoritarian rule had lost its sheen. The political class elected to public office post-Marcos was widely seen as corrupt, inept, or indifferent to the plight of ordinary people. In 1998, Joseph Estrada, a former movie star, was elected president by capitalizing on his celluloid persona as defender of the poor. In 2004, his best friend, the charismatic action star Fernando Poe, Jr., nearly became president by riding the same wave. These movie-star politicians found a solid electoral base among the poorest Filipinos.

Where Duterte strayed from the movie stars' script was in his decision to appeal not to the poor but to the aspiring middle class. Indeed, they have fared well under his presidency. He has given them free tuition in state colleges, longer maternity leaves, salary raises for those who work for the government, and free WiFi in public places. He has also promised to ease traffic and shorten commutes: his centerpiece \$170 billion "Build, Build, Build" public works program, funded mainly by China and Japan, will supposedly decongest the land, air, and sea routes in the country's fastest-growing areas.

This is Duterte defining the presidency as if it were the mayoralty writ large. After Marcos fell, democratic reformers devolved authority to local governments, thereby empowering local bosses and political clans, the Dutertes among them. Across the country, these families dominate public office in their fiefdoms and govern to advance their own interests and extend their hegemony.

Duterte belongs to a class of local officials who have remained in power through pump-priming designed to spur entrepreneurial activity and property development. They provide companies with generous financial incentives, infrastructure, an efficient bureaucracy, and a safe place for doing business. The resulting real estate and public works projects often displace poor communities even as they raise property values for the rich and the middle class, but by co-opting or clamping down on dissenters, the local politicians also guarantee a compliant citizenry. Long vilified as breeding grounds for drugs, disease, and crime, the shantytowns are easy targets for forcible, and often violent, evictions and brutal policing. Duterte's war on drugs is notable for the volume, velocity, and visibility of the killings, but there has long been a war on the disposable poor.

Duterte's conduct earned him the special moniker of "death-squad mayor" from Human Rights Watch in 2015. But he was not the only one: extrajudicial killings of criminals and dissenters have been documented in places such as Cebu, in the country's central region, and, closer to the capital, in the provinces of Bulacan, Cavite, and Laguna,

where business is booming and property developers are thriving. On a trip to Manila earlier this year, I spoke to mothers who had lost their sons to the war on drugs and were now in danger of losing the tiny cinderblock and tinroofed structures they call home. Concrete pillars of a massive overhead transit system were rising nearby, and these families had nowhere else to go.

In many ways, Duterte's presidency represents continuity, not change. He has dispensed government largess and positions to his cronies, some of whom have racked up serious corruption charges. He has so far governed as a garden-variety patron, not a graft buster.

Like past presidents, he rules over a fractious alliance of political families. Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, had the support of the liberalminded elites who came to power when Marcos fell. Duterte's coalition was cobbled together from the Marcoses and other families displaced by those same liberals. It may hold as long as Duterte is in power, but the president has thus far shown scant interest in building a party that will outlast him. The more progressive thinkers among his cabinet attempted to organize a grass-roots political movement, Kilusang Pagbabago, or "Movement for Change," but this has fizzled.

India's Narendra Modi has built both a grass-roots political party and a political movement on the bedrock of Hindu nationalism. Hungary's Viktor Orban has articulated an intellectual justification for his rejection of liberal democracy and the liberal international order. Duterte suffers in comparison. His illiberalism may be less enduring, as he is bereft of a movement, party, or ideology that will carry on his legacy. He has coyly hinted at his daughter Sara, who is already following in his footsteps by serving as the mayor of Davao, as a possible successor. In true Filipino fashion, he is reverting back to family. For the time being, it's only Duterte's dark charisma that holds the country in thrall.©

DETAILS

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