

The Philippines in 2017

Popularity Breeds Contempt

ABSTRACT

Amid the bluster of Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte over the past year, a clearer picture emerged in 2017 of the leader and the direction he wants the country to take. Duterte may be a popular shaker and change-maker, but for the most part, he has also proven to be a divisive president.

KEYWORDS: drug war, armed militants, populist leader, Duterte, Philippines, federal system, martial law

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is at that juncture once again when it sees the end of one political administration and the beginning of a new one.¹ Although Rodrigo Duterte's term as president began in June 2016, 2017 had been about asserting his administration over the last. How much has changed since Duterte took office? How much has the country and the office changed Duterte? He was a mayor throughout his previous political career; what can be gleaned so far in his approaches to foreign policy and economic management? This essay argues that Duterte may still need to prove himself more as a statesman and institution-builder and less a popular iconoclast.

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1. The term of Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III as president officially ended on June 30, 2016. Rodrigo “Digong” Duterte's term began at noon on the same day.

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HARD ECONOMIC REALITIES

On the surface, the Philippine economy appears to be doing well. It has managed to weather regional and global financial crisis after crisis. It grew over the past year by 6.8%, one of the highest rates in the region. The economy has enjoyed rapid growth since the 2000s due in no small part to booming business process outsourcing, a sector that contributes around 7% of the country's GDP and provides one million jobs.²

The president's economic managers are attempting to sustain this growth by increasing infrastructure spending. However, much of the economic prosperity in the country has been fueled in large part by the billions of dollars in income remittances sent by overseas Filipinos. In 2016 these inward remittances reached nearly US\$ 27 billion, the highest amount on record.

Major economic challenges remain. To boost economic performance further, Duterte promised a "golden age of infrastructure" in his Build Build Build program by raising annual spending to 7% of GDP from less than 3% under the previous administration and far above the 5% average of neighboring countries. The planned major infrastructure projects, however, will certainly test the capacity of the bureaucracy. The country's ranking in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business survey fell from 99 in 2016 to 113 in 2017.³

SUPPORT FROM BELOW?

Ever since he became president in 2016, Duterte has enjoyed vigorous support from thousands of Filipinos in the Philippines and abroad. Many in his base are people who have long been frustrated by sweet-talking politicians and members of the elite who have no sympathy for the poor. Likewise, many Filipino overseas migrants not only relish the tough-talking president but wholeheartedly support both his style and his outlook. It was among the overseas absentee voters that he received the widest electoral support in 2016.

2. On the growth and contributions of the business process outsourcing sector, see Dominik Banzon, "2017 a Good Year for BPOs in the Philippines," Global Innov8ion, January 20, 2017, <<http://globalinnov8ion.com/2017-a-good-year-for-bpos-in-the-philippines/>>, accessed October 18, 2017. For a more extensive treatment of the country's economic prospects over the medium term, see National Economic Development Authority, *Philippine Development Plan 2017–2022*, 2017, Pasig City, Philippines.

3. World Bank Group, *Doing Business 2018*, Washington, DC.

Not surprisingly, with the popularity of new social media, Duterte's support groups are most vocal in cyberspace. While this support base has been described as non-fanatical,⁴ many of Duterte's die-hard supporters have been quick to malign and blame the previous administration for nearly any criticism of their beloved leader, especially on social media. Those critical of Duterte's policies and pronouncements are called *dilawan* or "yellows," for the color of the previous president's political party. The administration is keen to endorse their caustic vitriol.⁵ In early May 2017, Margaux "Mocha" Uson was appointed assistant secretary in the Presidential Communications Operations Office, Malacañang's lead public relations agency.⁶

It remains to be seen, however, whether the administration can continue to cultivate this strong support for Duterte to broaden his mandate and strengthen the country's democratic institutions and processes. At the moment, given the anti-intellectual and oppositional character of Duterte's mass base, it is unlikely that any coherent and constructive conversation could come out of any political debate, if one were to take place. If anything, the effect of his leadership style is to vitiate any sensible or productive debate over policy. Throughout much of 2017, Duterte has called for the country to move forward by shifting to a federal system to "correct the injustices" done to the Muslim Moro minority in Mindanao. However, not much discussion has actually taken place in terms of examining the full merits of such a shift. As discussants at one forum at the University of the Philippines asked skeptically, "If Federalism is the Answer, What is the Question?"⁷

4. See the points raised by Cleve Arguelles in Danielle Nakpil, "Duterte Supporters Are Not Fanatics, Says Author," *Rappler Philippines*, October 25, 2017 <<https://www.rappler.com/move-ph/186231-duterte-supporters-not-fanatics>>, accessed December 14, 2017.

5. For more on the perks of Duterte supporters, see Natashya Gutierrez, "State-Sponsored Hate: The Rise of the Pro-Duterte Bloggers," *Rappler Philippines*, August 18, 2017, <<https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/178709-duterte-die-hard-supporters-bloggers-propaganda-pcoo>>, accessed September 20, 2017.

6. Mocha Uson is a pro-Duterte blogger as well as a professional entertainer, singer-dancer, and leader of an all-female dance group called the Mocha Girls.

7. For an initial discussion of the questionable logic of the shift, see Jorge Tigno, "Beg Your Pardon? The Philippines is Already Federalized in All but Name," *Public Policy* 16/17 (2017): 1–14. Also see the interesting piece in two parts by former Supreme Court Associate Justice Vicente Mendoza, "The Proposal to Shift to a Federal System," *Manila Bulletin*, March 9 and 10, 2017, <<https://news.mb.com.ph/2017/03/09/the-proposal-to-shift-to-a-federal-system/>>, accessed October 2, 2017.

DUTERTE'S WARS

A key pillar of the Duterte administration's policy outlook is the war against illegal drugs. Since he assumed office in July 2016, more than 3,600 "drug personalities" have been killed in this campaign.⁸ Despite the mounting casualties, many Filipinos continue to support his anti-drug campaign, according to surveys by Social Weather Stations in September 2016 and September 2017.⁹ The waves of criticism of Duterte's anti-drug war have been met with derision by the Philippine leader—his trademark response. In late October, Duterte told the European Union to "go to hell," and told its envoys to leave the country within 24 hours, in the wake of EU observations on the Philippines' current human rights record.¹⁰

In the midst of mounting criticism, however, Duterte in October ordered the police to step aside and assigned the lead role in the anti-drug war to the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, targeting big drug syndicates and suppliers. Thus far, only small-time pushers and users, as well as countless poor young urban folk, have suffered the most from this indiscriminate national anti-drug campaign. The "collateral damage" includes minors and college students who have been caught up, arrested, and sometimes killed.¹¹

In November 2017, Duterte abandoned negotiations with the National Democratic Front, led by the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing the New People's Army, dashing hopes once again of securing a lasting peace with the communist rebels. Duterte had attempted to begin negotiations early in 2017, but they stalled, partly due to the government's refusal of the rebels' demand for the release of political prisoners.

A new form of extremism began to take root in the Philippines in 2017, embodied by a five-month battle for Marawi City in Mindanao. Armed

8. Oliver Holmes, "Rodrigo Duterte Pulls Philippine Police out of Brutal War on Drugs," *Guardian*, October 12, 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/12/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-police-war-drugs>>, accessed October 25, 2017.

9. Vladymir Joseph Licudine, "What Filipinos Say about Pres. Rodrigo Duterte's Drug War," Social Weather Stations, October 11, 2017, <<https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artclldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20171011192256>>, accessed October 30, 2017.

10. Dharel Placido, "Duterte Tells EU: 'Go to Hell' If You Won't Listen to Special Envoy Angara," ABS-CBN News, October 25, 2017, <<http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/10/25/17/duterte-tells-eu-go-to-hell-if-you-wont-listen-to-special-envoy-angara>>, accessed November 2, 2017.

11. Jodesz Gavilan, "List: Minors, College Students Killed in Duterte's Drug War," *Rappler Philippines*, October 3, 2017, <<https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/179234-minors-college-students-victims-war-on-drugs-duterte>>, accessed October 25, 2017.

groups that have declared loyalty to the Islamic State occupied Marawi City in late May. As with the anti-drug war, Duterte underestimated the force that confronted him. After declaring martial law over all of Mindanao, he initially announced that the siege would end in a matter of days.¹² The fighting in Marawi ended only in October.¹³ Philippine military forces found it difficult to fight these highly trained armed terror groups, who were aided in no small part by radical comrades, including Abu Sayyaf as well as Islamic State militants from neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia. And though the fighting may have ended, the challenges and threats facing the country in the aftermath of Marawi remain. Philippine officials have stated that the terrorist threat remains in die-hard fighters and survivors of the Marawi encounter. And the demands in terms of financial and other material resources to rehabilitate and facilitate the return of hundreds of thousands of persons displaced during the armed conflict will be a major challenge for the country's social and economic planners in the years to come.

HOUSE CLEANING AND FOREIGN POLICY REPOSITIONING?

Given his polarizing stance on nearly every political issue, Duterte is not short on detractors. In March 2017 an impeachment case was filed against him by a minority party-list member of congress. Not surprisingly, the case was dismissed in May 2017 after it was found to be “sufficient in form but deficient in substance.”¹⁴

In March 2017 Duterte himself dismissed the chief of the National Irrigation Administration, a supporter from his days as Davao's mayor, over corruption allegations. In early April he dismissed one of his cabinet secretaries over the controversial purchase of fire trucks. In October, Duterte ordered the removal of the head of the Bureau of Customs after a scandal

12. Shara Mae Balce, “Duterte: Marawi Siege to End ‘In a Matter of Days,’” *Inside Manila*, June 30, 2017, <<https://insidemaniila.ph/article/2164/duterte-marawi-siege-to-end-in-a-matter-of-days>>, accessed October 2, 2017.

13. Allan Nawal, “Why it Took 5 Months to End Marawi Siege,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, October 22, 2017, <<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/939746/marawi-siege-mindanao-martial-law-islamic-state-romeo-brawner-jr-task-force-ranao-abu-sayyaf-maute-group-marawi-stragglers-abdullah-maute-madie-maute-omarkhayyam-maute-isnilon-hapilon>>, accessed November 2, 2017.

14. Marc Jayson Cayabyab, “House Panel Junks Duterte Impeach Complaint for Lack of Substance,” *Philippine Inquirer*, May 15, 2017, <<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/896800/house-justice-panel-junks-duterte-impeach-complaint-for-lack-of-substance>>, accessed October 21, 2017.

involving a shipment of P 6.4 billion (US\$ 125 million) of illegal drugs that slipped through the bureau.

The strong support enjoyed by Duterte has given rise to growing calls to weed out dissenters in the country's key political institutions, beginning in December 2016, when Vice President Leni Robredo was barred from attending cabinet meetings, presumably due to her participation in mass protests against the burial of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the Heroes' Cemetery (Libingan ng mga Bayani). Duterte had authorized the burial despite popular opposition. In February 2017, Senator Leila de Lima, a known Duterte critic, was arrested over alleged links to the drug trade during her stint as justice secretary. Immediately after her arrest, four other senators affiliated with the Liberal Party of former president Benigno Aquino III were stripped of their senate positions and replaced with colleagues friendlier to the current administration. Impeachment cases have also been initiated against the head of the Commission on Elections, the Ombudsman, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court for reasons ranging from questionable and lavish lifestyles to selective justice.¹⁵

Having been a local politician throughout much of his professional career, Duterte has come to show that diplomacy and international relations are not his strongest suit. He takes his independent foreign policy to be pulling away from one major power (the US) into the arms of another (China), unmindful of the nuances, intricacies, and ever-shifting nature of international politics.¹⁶ At the annual summit of ASEAN in Manila in November, Duterte acknowledged China as "the number one economic powerhouse" and stressed the need for all countries to forge closer ties with this Asian power, especially in the midst of persistent tensions in the South China Sea.¹⁷ His glowing references to China prompted one commentator to say that Duterte had become Beijing's spokesman on the maritime issue.¹⁸

15. Trisha Macas, "Duterte to File Impeachment Case vs. Ombudsman, CJ Sereno," *GMA News Online*, October 4, 2017, <<http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/628281/duterte-to-file-impeachment-case-vs-ombudsman-cj-sereno/story/>>, accessed October 15, 2017.

16. For more critical insights on Duterte's foreign policy, see Albert Del Rosario, "Philippine Foreign Policy in a Year of Change," *Philippine Star*, June 30, 2017, <<http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/06/30/1714898/philippine-foreign-policy-year-changes>>, accessed October 19, 2017.

17. Ian Nicolas Cigaral, "Fact Check: Duterte Says China Is 'No. 1 Economic Powerhouse,'" *Philippine Star*, November 13, 2017, <<http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/11/13/1758523/fact-check-duterte-china-no-1-economic-powerhouse/>> accessed December 13, 2017.

18. Panos Mourdoukoutas, "South China Sea: Duterte Is Turning into China's Spokesman," *Forbes*, November 15, 2017, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/panosmourdoukoutas/2017/11/15/south-china-sea-duterte-is-turning-into-chinas-spokesman/>>, accessed December 13, 2017.

CONCLUSIONS

In the past year, Duterte has managed to show the effect of a polarizing president on the Philippines. Putting aside the anti-drug war, the Duterte government has been largely reactive and unable to bring about meaningful and sustainable improvements in many of the country's problems, most notably the lack of capacity to attract investments and the traffic and transport problems of large urban hubs like Metro Manila. The national leadership continues to be hugely personality-driven, to the point that it is unable to consolidate or strengthen political institutions that would have been a stabilizing factor for Duterte.

The biggest problem for the Duterte presidency is how to broaden its base of support beyond the die-hards. Duterte is not the president only of those who voted for him. He will have to rally more people around him and, most importantly, nurture and strengthen the institutions that operate outside his sphere of influence. His leadership style so far does not seem to build a broader constituency base. This is not an approach that can take him through the next five years. After all, he is the president of the whole country.