

The neo-authoritarian threat in the Philippines



Rodrigo Duterte's rise in opinion polls ahead of presidential elections on 9 May represents potentially the most serious crisis of Philippine democracy since 'people power' overthrew the Marcos dictatorship 30 years ago. Julio C Teehankee and Mark R Thompson outline why.

Nearly two years ago in these pages, several *New Mandala* contributors questioned Indonesian presidential candidate [Prabowo Subianto's commitment to democracy](#) (or more specifically his threats to undermine it). Prabowo, one of the most repressive high ranking generals in the Suharto dictatorship, narrowly lost the July 2014 presidential elections in Indonesia to Joko Widodo, who, although a disappointment to many of his supporters, has not posed a significant threat to the country's democratic institutions as president.

Now it is the Philippines turn to have a major neo-authoritarian presidential candidate. Davao City Mayor [Rodrigo 'Digong' Duterte](#), who the latest [Pulse Asia national opinion](#) shows leading a field of

four major presidential candidates with about a third of the vote (which would translate into a comfortable 5 million vote lead over his nearest rival in a multi-candidate race), has shown little regard for the archipelago's (often fragile) democratic institutions. His coarse language and outrageous statements have recently surfaced in the international media, notably his tacit approval for the use of 'extrajudicial' killings to 'cleanse' the country of criminals and drug lords in three to six months, and, most notoriously, his recent [casually insensitive, misogynous remark concerning the rape and murder of a female missionary in Davao](#).

He uses his record as mayor of the once rough and tumble city of Davao in the southern island of Mindanao as his calling card in the campaign. He claims he pacified the once dangerous city after he went after drug gangs, murderers and other criminals. He has shrugged off critics' accusations that he used death squads to achieve his goal, promising to implement his Davao model nationwide and daring human rights activists to stand in his way. He has threatened to [abolish Congress](#) and tame the courts if they do not prove cooperative with his radical plans to implement peace and order.

In another recent development, and according to the same electoral survey, [Ferdinand 'Bongbong' R Marcos Jr](#), the son of the dictator Ferdinand E Marcos, is now narrowly ahead in the race for the vice presidency, which is elected separately in the Philippines, with victors often coming from different parties than the president. This is an ominous sign, adding to the neo-authoritarian danger facing the country as Marcos refuses to apologise for the crimes of his father's regime -- both its human rights violations and economic plunder which he flat-out denies.

From populism to neo-authoritarianism

Duterte's unorthodox campaign style has captured the imagination of Filipino voters. His political back story runs parallel with the archetypical Filipino populist, ousted president [Joseph "Erap" Estrada](#). Both come from middle-class families with minor political connections who found affinity with the poor at an early age. Both were expelled from Jesuit-run schools, and both started their careers as successful mayors: Erap during the Marcos era, Digong during the post-Marcos era. Both projected a "*sigma*" (tough guy) image -- Erap magnifying this persona in the movies and in the Metro Manila town (later city) of San Juan, and Digong crafting this image in the communist infiltrated and crime infested city of Davao.

Estrada, however, managed to rise earlier from local to national politics: having been elected Mayor of San Juan in the late 1960s shortly before martial law and then to the Senate in 1987, as vice president in 1992, and as president in 1998. Digong, on the other hand, spent most of his political career in Davao (except for a short stint in Congress from 2001-2004). While Erap was viewed suspiciously by elites but enjoyed tremendous popularity among poor voters, Duterte's electoral appeal has been strongest among upper- and middle-class voters.

Duterte's calls for a [federal system draws on 'anti-Imperial Manila' sentiments](#), particularly in Mindanao. Besides this strong regional base (which extends into parts of the Visayas islands in the

middle of the country) he strongly appeals to voters within Manila itself where his calls for a brutal and immediate implementation of a 'law and order' have resonated particularly well.

Given that Duterte has his strongest base in the elite and the middle class, his campaign is distinct from the pro-poor populism of Estrada and of one of his current electoral rivals for the presidency [Jejomar 'Jojo' Binay](#) --who before becoming Vice President was long-serving mayor of the Metro Manila city of Makati where he was noted for his welfare measures directed at the disadvantaged. Duterte's emerging [neo-authoritarian constituency](#) was initially concentrated among the elite, and middle class and only recently has moved down the social ladder. Duterte is the candidate of the wealthy, newly rich, well off, and the modestly successful (including taxi drivers, small shopkeepers and overseas Filipino workers abroad).

The end of the EDSA 'people power' regime

Duterte's rise in the polls has to do with [frustration and anger](#) with the limits of the reformist agenda of the Aquino administration, but more generally with the "yellow" good governance pledged regimes stretching back to Fidel Ramos and Corazon Aquino. But this dissatisfaction is different than the kind Estrada tapped into in 1998 (after the presidency of Fidel V Ramos, when, like under the Aquino administration, growth rates were high but poverty was not substantially reduced). It is also different to incumbent vice president Binay's attempts to mobilise voters during this presidential election with welfare appeals to the poor. Duterte's rise is not a reaction by the dispossessed, the losers of "exclusive" growth, but rather it is symptomatic of the anxieties about criminality, rampant smuggling and government corruption of those now marginally better off after a couple of decades of solid economic growth.

Like Prabowo, Duterte appeals to the longing of the better off in Philippine society for the reimposition of discipline in the spirit of the dictator, whose most famous slogan was '*Sa ikauunlad ang bayan, disciplina ang kailangan*' (in order to make progress, the country requires discipline). This also reflects Lee Kuan Yew's infamous words to Filipino business people in a visit to the country in the early 1990s: 'the Philippines needs more discipline than democracy.'

Duterte's rise in opinion polls represents potentially the [most serious crisis of Philippine democracy](#) since 'people power' overthrew the Marcos dictatorship 30 years ago. The enormous powers of the Philippine presidency and Duterte's record of close ties to the military in Davao (and his promise to raise military salaries) make 'the punisher's' threats to implement the Davao model nationwide, killing criminals without asking questions and pushing aside democratic institutions and due process if they stand in the way only too credible.

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