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CURATO, N. (2017). Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 47(1), 142-153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2016.1239751>

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## 2017 Peer Reviewed Journal Article

### Citation:

Nicole Curato. (2017) Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47:1, pp. 142-153.

DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2016.1239751

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# Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies?

## Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism

Curato, N. (2017) Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47(1): 142-153.

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**Abstract:** This commentary aims to take stock of the 2016 presidential elections in the Philippines that led to the landslide victory of the controversial Rodrigo Duterte. It argues that part of Duterte's electoral success is hinged on his effective deployment of the populist style. Although populism is not new to the Philippines, Duterte exhibits features of contemporary populism that are befitting of an age of communicative abundance. This commentary contrasts Duterte's political style with other presidential contenders, characterises his relationship with the electorate and concludes by mapping populism's democratic and anti-democratic tendencies, which may define the quality of democratic practice in the Philippines in the next six years.

**Keywords:** populism, Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, elections, democracy

The first six months of 2016 were critical moments for Philippine democracy. In February, the nation commemorated the 30th anniversary of the People Power Revolution – a series of peaceful mass demonstrations that ousted the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III – the son of the president who replaced the dictator – led the commemoration. He asked Filipinos to remember the atrocities of the authoritarian regime and the gains of democracy restored by his mother. He reminded the country of the torture, murder and disappearance of scores of activists whose families still await compensation from the Human Rights Victims’ Claims Board.

“Let me also remind you that the dictatorship has many faces,” Aquino warned the public. “That there are other personalities who want to reinstate all this – to deprive the people of the right processes, and put in the hands of one man the power to determine what is right and what is wrong, who is innocent and who is guilty” (Aquino 2016).

He spoke of the creeping return of autocratic rule, embodied by the steady climb of then presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte in the polls. The foul-mouthed mayor of Davao City has been called “Duterte Harry” by both local and international press because of his reputation for violence when in office. Duterte’s campaign promise included a killing spree that would end in 50,000 dead criminals. Funeral parlours would be packed, and he said he would supply the corpses.

It was not an effective warning. Three months after Aquino’s speech, Duterte won the presidency, in a landslide, with 16 million votes.

### **2016: The Rise of the Populist**

A long view of Philippine power transitions makes Duterte’s win seem part of an inevitable pattern: the presidency has been alternately occupied by “reformist” and “populist” personalities (Thompson 2010). This “pattern” began in 1998 when Fidel Ramos – the “military reformer” who “achieved considerable success in bringing about economic reform through deft manipulation of old-style patronage politics” – was replaced by movie star Joseph Estrada, a “populist aggrandizer” who forged a deep relationship with the masses (Hutchcroft 2008, 144). Embroiled in corruption controversies and demonised for his alleged vices by the Catholic Church, Estrada’s rule was cut short in 2001 by a civilian and military uprising. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Estrada’s vice president and daughter of the ninth president, took over for the remaining three years of Estrada’s term. She promoted an agenda of good governance with the support of a coalition of civil society organisations.

The legitimacy of Arroyo's regime has been consistently challenged. Massive protests by Estrada supporters and a failed military coup by junior officers in 2003 illustrated the tensions between reformism and populism. Arroyo sought a fresh mandate by running for president in 2004. She narrowly defeated Fernando Poe Jr – a legend in Philippine cinema and one of Estrada's closest friends. Arroyo's slim margin over Poe exposed the endurance of populist appeal among voters. Here was a charismatic candidate with no political experience fighting neck-and-neck with the incumbent president. It was an election marked by credible reports of electoral fraud, with some precincts known to be Poe's bailiwicks registering zero votes. The years after Arroyo's re-election were spent cutting deals "with one sector after the other to legitimize itself at each turn" while quashing dissent from disgruntled military officers and protest movements (Mangahas 2001). Unlike Estrada, Arroyo was able to complete her term. But, like Estrada, she was arrested for plunder that included the misuse of over \$8.8 million in state lottery funds.

This is the context of Aquino's rise to power. Running on the campaign slogan "where there is no corruption, there is no poverty," Aquino's 2010 campaign deployed discourses of reform, drawing political capital from the legacy of his heroic parents. The vocabulary of the Aquino regime is filled with civil society speak, invoking the phrases "transformational leadership" and *daang matuwid* (the straight path).

In the 2016 presidential race, Aquino campaigned for Liberal Party candidate Manuel Roxas, who served as his interior secretary. Aquino reminded the electorate of the gains of his six years in power – rapid economic growth of 6.9% and improved performance in the global competitiveness ranking (from 86th place to 47th). Aquino ended his term with a "very good" net satisfaction rating, recovering from a dip in his performance at the beginning of 2016 (Social Weather Stations 2016). Continuity was the main message of the Liberal Party's campaign. The message was carried from prepared speeches to ambush interviews, and was carried so consistently that Roxas officially added *Daang Matuwid* to his name on the ballot: Roxas, Mar Daang Matuwid (LP).

But 2016 again saw a swing from reformism to populism. The swing appeared inevitable even in the early months of 2015, long before Duterte became a serious player for the presidency. It was incumbent Vice President Jejomar Binay who took on the populist mantle. Before beating Roxas for the vice presidency in 2010, Binay was the mayor of Makati City for over 20 years, except for a brief period where his wife Elenita took over his office due to term limit rules.

Binay “reoriented the machinery of Makati politics around his person as its peerless boss, as well as successfully styled himself the preeminent advocate for the ‘other’ [poor] Makati” (Garrido 2013, 179). For decades he forged personal relationships with his constituents, attending funerals and eating with his hands in town feasts. He institutionalised welfare policies, including free health care and education. Binay scaled up the politics of personal relationships nationally, patiently building relationships with local government officials all the way down to barangay (village) captains. These relationships provided the electoral machinery that delivered votes for Binay in his come-from-behind win of the vice presidential race in 2010. He used the same formula in 2016, coupled with populist campaign promises of expanding Aquino’s conditional cash transfer programmes to senior citizens and the scrapping of income taxes for low wage earners.

Binay’s political achievement is not something that can easily be dismissed, but neither can it be romanticised. For a full year the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee investigated Binay and his family over corruption allegations in the construction of a Makati parking building. The Anti-Money Laundering Council sought an order from the court to freeze 139 bank accounts and 19 real estate properties of Binay, his family members and his close associates – allegedly serving as “dummies.” Binay refused to attend any of the hearings. He responded with an eight-page affidavit denying the accusations and opted instead to defend himself to the public. He sounded populist in dismissing all attacks against him as proof of the elitist government’s anti-poor agenda. “They don’t want us poor to come together,” he said in his advertisement.

As corruption allegations continued to discredit Binay’s candidacy, his poll numbers dropped from 34% in June 2015 to 13% in May 2016. This was when Grace Poe, a junior senator who had set the record for securing the highest number of votes in the history of the Philippine Senate, entered the race. She saw a steady rise in her polling numbers. But she was not free from controversy either, facing cases in the Supreme Court questioning her status as a natural-born Filipino – a prerequisite for any presidential candidate. Poe, a founding adopted by one-time presidential contender Fernando Poe Jr, also found her residency a subject of much debate. Most of her adult life had been lived in the US as a naturalised American citizen.

Poe cleverly incorporated these attacks into her campaign message. Her slogan “Government with Compassion” was linked to her dramatic life story of triumph amidst persecution: The founding, left at the steps of Jaro Cathedral and adopted by the superstars

of Philippine cinema, being harassed by vicious political opponents. Like Binay, Poe utilised the populist trope of equating her experience of persecution to the misery of everyday Filipinos. And, like Binay, she proposed wider access to social services, enumerated in a 20-point agenda she outlined in her proclamation rally. Joseph Estrada boosted Poe's populist credentials as the former president reminded the public of her family's suffering when Arroyo stole the presidency from her father.

Poe did not just bank on populism, but attempted to reach out to reform-minded constituencies. She surrounded herself with technocrats and progressive allies and styled herself as the champion of the Freedom of Information Bill in the 15th Congress. Her reformist claims were bolstered by an impressive performance in three presidential debates. Poe's "middling strategy" of presenting herself both as a populist and a reformist worked until she reached the peak of her polling numbers at 27% two months before the elections (CNN Philippines, May 13, 2016).

Liberal Party candidate Roxas, in spite of massive administration support, was never a frontrunner in any credible poll. His campaign, while establishing his promise of continuing Aquino's reformist agenda, failed to gain him much traction. Attempts to make Roxas more likeable were made early in the campaign. He was fist-bumping athletes and dancing with teen stars in advertisements but this only produced contempt among the social media savvy electorate, with criticism that a privileged hacendero was trying to connect with the common person. His campaign switched gears early in 2016. Roxas portrayed himself as the serious candidate with "no drama" (unlike Grace Poe) who has no intention of stealing from public coffers (unlike Binay). This reimagined Roxas saw little impact on his poll numbers, which hovered around 15–20%.

Binay's populism and Poe's "middling strategy" lost their currency as Duterte started climbing in the polls. He took the lead in April, and sustained his frontrunner status until the elections in May. His poll numbers did not take a hit from any of the controversies he created for himself. He cursed the Pope in November. He admitted he had multiple mistresses. He was accused of having undeclared bank accounts. In a last ditch effort to avert a Duterte win, Roxas held a press conference two days before the elections and also invited Poe "to talk." Roxas warned that the "uncertainty and the spectre of a dictatorship are looming over our country once again," although he did not explicitly identify Duterte in his statement (Roxas 2016). This so-called "call for unity" was interpreted by some as a way of pressuring Poe to



bow out of the race and endorse Roxas instead. Poe flatly rejected the invitation on national television.

Four hours after polls closed on May 9, 2016, at least 80% of votes had been transmitted to the Commission on Elections' central server. It was the fastest transmission of election results in the Philippines' brief history of automated elections. The 2016 elections also saw the highest electoral turnout in decades at 81.62%. Aside from a few issues of malfunctioning voting machines, reported cases of election-related violence and 11 towns declaring failures of election, observers generally considered the elections peaceful and orderly. Duterte maintained a commanding lead throughout the tally.

### **Dutertismo as Political Style**

There are various ways to account for Duterte's rise to power. His brand of populism is one of the most compelling approaches to make sense of his electoral victory. Populism may not be new to the country, but Duterte's style is a departure. While Estrada and Binay were often compared to Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra, whose anti-elite rhetoric and pro-poor programmes were tainted with corruption scandals, by mid-2016, Duterte's brand of populism was often compared to that of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in the US.

This comparison has some basis, particularly when populism is understood not as an ideology as traditionally conceptualised in political theory, or a reaction to economic inequality as conceptualised in political economy, but as a "political style." For Moffit (2016), contemporary populism is a "repertoire of performance" that builds the relationship between the leader as the performer and the people as the audience. To understand populism as performance, however, is not to dismiss it as superficial or purely aesthetic. Instead, appreciating populism as a political style foregrounds the reality that politics today is predominantly conducted in televised and digital media. Politics has become stylised such that its theatrical features have become central in enacting politics. This is particularly relevant in the Philippines where 94% of Filipinos have access to the internet and use social media. The digital media have become part of the news cycle, such that even those with no internet access know about the online discourses. Performance matters for pronouncements to get traction in the context of "communicative abundance," where the issue is no longer the lack of information but the deficit of attention among audiences saturated with various

messages (see Keane 2013). For contemporary populists, media has become their stage of performance.

The populist political style appears in various contexts, promotes a range of political leanings, and is practiced by various personalities. This makes Trump and Duterte's political styles comparable. Yet their views are vastly different – Duterte is a selfproclaimed leftist who cites historic injustice as reason for Islamic insurgency and has taken a stand against unfair labour practices such as the hiring and firing of workers every five months so employers can avoid payment of benefits. Trump argues for the institutional discrimination of minorities and a rapid and extreme shift to the right. Nevertheless, their mammoth appeal hinges on a shared political style: the people versus the other, the performance of crisis and bad manners (Moffit 2016).

The sequence of events that led to Duterte's presidential run is a clear example of the theatrical nature of contemporary populism and the role digital media plays as the stage for the populist performance. There were rumours of a possible Duterte run in the months leading up to the filing of candidacy. Duterte denied these rumours, explaining that he was too old, too tired and too poor to run for president. At the same time, Duterte travelled across the country, giving speeches about federalism. This fuelled speculation that the mayor of Davao City had already begun a presidential campaign. In his typical tough-talking language, Duterte told his supporters to support other candidates because a Duterte rule "will be bloody." On the final day for filing candidature, Duterte's executive assistant submitted his documents to run for the mayorship of Davao City. While Binay, Poe and Roxas shook hands and waved at supporters after personally filing their candidacies, Duterte's presence was only felt through the printing on the shirt his executive assistant wore. "A no is a no" was emblazoned in front. Lettered on the back were the words: "I told you I don't want to [run], you're being hard headed – Rody Duterte."

It could have been the conclusion of a dramatic series of events – the #DuterteSerye, as popularly called in traditional and social media – except that a little known personality from Duterte's party, PDP-Laban, filed for president himself. The move was viewed as an opening for Duterte, as Philippine law allows for the substitution of candidates. Once again anticipation was created that Duterte's "refusal" to run was a tease. Massive gatherings, fund raising appeals and online petitions were conducted nationwide to support the mayor's candidacy. Duterte's daughter, Sara, posted a photo of herself on Instagram with a shaved head, captioned with the hash tag #NoHairWeCare #justDuIt. The post went viral, given how

the Duterte family had been reportedly against a presidential run. The maybe-maybe-not dance kept Duterte in the limelight, scoring precious airtime in primetime news and headlines in broadsheets. Finally, in November, Duterte filed for a substitution of candidacy.

The soap opera beginnings of Duterte's presidential run set the tone for the rest of the campaign. He put on a spectacle that pushed the boundaries of traditional political practice. Sociologist Randy David (2016) characterises "Dutertismo" as "pure theatre – a sensual experience rather than the rational application of ideas to society's problems." Historian Vicente Rafael (2016) describes Duterte's political rallies as "semiotic overdrive." His campaign speeches were rambling and unstructured and peppered with swearing and sexist remarks. He was capable of going on for hours – and would have, if his 12-year-old daughter didn't come on stage to ask him to wind up every now and then. For the length of his diatribes, he held the full attention of thousands of supporters crammed into stadiums and parks. His campaign rallies often ended with patriotic songs and the image of Duterte kissing the Philippine flag.

Duterte's brand of populism has a tricky relationship with democratic practice. On the one hand, it can be a force for democratisation, by making politics engaging to citizens turned off by politics as usual and elite control of office. On the other, it can reinforce anti-democratic tendencies and legitimise authoritarian practice. Whether Aquino's warning about creeping authoritarianism applies to Duterte has been the subject of intense debate among scholars and citizens. At best, the legacy of Duterte's campaign for Philippine democracy has been mixed.

### **Democratic Movement or Political Thugs?**

Take the case of the citizenry animated by Duterte's campaign. If one were to focus on engagements online, there is considerable reason to think that Duterte-inspired public discourse follows his brash and vulgar tone. Compared to all candidates, Duterte had the most engaged fan base on Facebook and the most mentions on Twitter (Sinpeng 2016). A cursory investigation of posts on social media suggests that a culture of online thuggery has emerged. A student from the University of the Philippines, for example, received death threats after he confronted Duterte in a forum where the mayor gave a long-winded answer to his question. A Facebook group calling for his murder was set up, with an image of a tombstone engraved with the student's name serving as the banner photo. Journalists have been barraged with comments about media bias each time Duterte gets what is construed as

unfavourable coverage. Duterte's bad behaviour also finds defenders online, as in the case of his controversial joke about wanting to rape a dead Australian missionary. "Better a bad joke than a bad government," said one supporter. The viciousness has gotten out of hand for one human rights activist who filed cases of harassment after she posted that "Duterte is a lazy choice. No one man can solve the problem. Discipline comes from ourselves." The responses ranged from the insulting to the threatening. "Hey, stupid! I hope you get raped and your family massacred. Only then can you say your opinion," is one of many she received. The Facebook profiles of these commenters reveal that the comments were written not by a fringe group of reactionary fanatics but "normal" citizens. They were mostly middle class and educated employees in call centres and banks who post photos of Jesus on Twitter and take selfies with Starbucks mugs. Opinion pieces have started calling out such practice as the makings of a fascist movement, where ordinary citizens have given up the Enlightenment virtues of tolerance and reason-giving, in support of a popular candidate.

This, however, is only one side of Duterte's support base. The situation is different offline, where Duterte's grassroots support is nothing short of phenomenal. The size of his political rallies is record breaking, mostly composed of disparate groups of citizens, some of whom would borrow a couple of dollars to pay for a jeepney fare to rally venues. Overseas Filipino workers remitted money to their families to print banners they designed themselves to hang outside their homes. In some provinces, Duterte volunteers went around slum communities engaging in voter education programmes, driven by concerns that moneyed candidates might buy votes to beat Duterte. Supporters who complain of mainstream media's bias against their candidate took it upon themselves to share online videos showing huge crowds listening to Duterte speak.

Duterte's populist style interrupted the usual practices of patronage during electoral campaigns. It has been common practice for people to be paid to attend a political rally, wear a campaign shirt and carry mass-produced campaign paraphernalia – the so-called *hakot* (transported) crowd. Duterte's campaign was able to forge an authentic community of believers engaged in politics online and invested in action offline. This is not to say that Duterte has gone beyond traditional practices. It was not uncommon, for example, for local candidates to carry Duterte's name in their sample ballots with money attached for vote buying. Nevertheless, the energy Duterte's candidacy created among the citizenry is a significant achievement in a country whose elections has been described as run by guns, goons, gold and, recently, gigabytes. The 2016 electoral race saw the rise of a public that has

found its voice in the mayor of Davao City. Duterte has changed the tenor of political conversation. The tone is indignant, often violent, sometimes offensive, but it is hopeful nonetheless, and it has energised a citizenry once resigned to politics as usual.

### **Democracy in Dark Times**

There are various accounts that make sense of Duterte's phenomenal connection with committed supporters. For contemporary populism, a core feature of such connection has to do with the performance of crisis. Populism gets its impetus from the perception of an impending breakdown, real or imagined, which requires strong leadership to save "the people" from the "dangerous other." While Binay, Poe and Roxas presented themselves as the most capable to reduce poverty and deliver the promise of inclusive growth, Duterte painted a more basic problem: the issue of order. Duterte's political style is consistent with the so-called "global wave of populism," where appeals to expertise, stability and progress associated with technocratic leaders are rendered irrelevant by firebrand populists who can successfully perform a crisis and find support among a frustrated public.

Duterte performed crisis in various ways. In a forum where he first indicated his interest to run for president, he said, "If only to save this Republic, I can run for President." He warned the audience of an "imminent disaster" if illegal drugs, criminality and stalled peace talks are not resolved. Framing the campaign in this manner presents a sharp contrast to how Aquino and Roxas described the state of the nation as one that is on track to development but needs another reformist push. For Duterte, the nation is on the brink "of being fractured," and it takes a leader who can say, "if you don't follow the law, you're fucked with me." Duterte's framing of fighting illegal drugs as a major election issue gained traction, evidenced by a poll where low pay and illegal drugs became some of the top issues concerning voters (Pulse Asia 2016). This is a change from the usual issues that survey respondents identify outside the electoral season, where jobs, poverty and inflation are among the top concerns, while illegal drugs are not part of this list.

Duterte's language, needless to say, has been a cause for alarm. The literature of contemporary populism suggests that such "coarsening of political discourse" is integral to the populist style. Invoking the discourse of crisis requires a different political vocabulary. Gravitas, seriousness and sensitivity to others' views are taken over by an apparent frankness, sensational language and the use of anecdotes as "evidence" as desirable qualities for a leader (Moffit and Tormey 2014, 392).

In Duterte's case, his use of gutter language lends credibility to the urgency of saving the republic. By rendering the visceral rejection of the status quo visible, he gives voice to people's frustration. Closely linked to Duterte's exasperation-driven vulgarity is his politics of "I will." His main campaign message was the suppression of criminality and drugs within three to six months. He offered no clear economic platform, except for a vague proposal of a shift to the federal system. His currency is his promise of certainty, anchored on the rhetoric of violence and machismo.

Duterte's approach to politics is not new. A candidate styling himself as a strongman has been a staple in national elections. Former Police Chief Panfilo Lacson ran for president in 2004 with the slogan "Iron Fist." Metro Manila Development Authority's Bayani Fernando ran as vice president in 2010 with the slogan "political will." Neither of them was successful. Duterte's appeal is different. He offers a compelling narrative of what can be done if he is in charge. He calls it Exhibit A: Davao City.

Duterte's Davao City was resonant in the campaign. It presented a working model of what Duterte could offer. He presented his imagined city as the murder capital of the country he transformed into one of the most competitive in city indices, named one of the Top 20 Most Liveable Cities in Asia. Local government has been touted as a top performer, offering an effective 911-Emergency Response Service (now being replicated nationwide) and a streamlined process for securing business permits and other government services. All this, as the story goes, happened under the leadership of Rodrigo Duterte.

Such a narrative had a broad appeal. For those who grew up in the conflict zones of Mindanao, Davao City offered the hope that a city in the south could become peaceful and prosperous. For wealthy Filipino-Chinese mothers terrified of kidnappings, Davao City is a peace and order paradise where there is a curfew for unaccompanied minors, taxi drivers are reliable, and laws on smoking and drinking are consistently enforced. For domestic workers in Hong Kong, Davao City offers the possibility of how government officials can work for the people, instead of scamming the people. For feminists, Davao presents a model for a progressive city with gender-sensitive ordinances which can overshadow Duterte's sexist comments. The varied ways in which the Davao model can be appropriated allows it to gain traction in diverse constituencies.

This imaginary, of course, is contentious. Crime statistics from the Philippine National Police list Davao City's murder rate as one of the highest in the country. "You have to ask who are being murdered," Duterte clarified, because "they are the criminals, gunned

down by vigilantes.” Part of the legend of Davao City is a series of stories about the summary executions of petty thieves, rapists and drug dealers. Human Rights Watch reported over a thousand lives claimed by the infamous Davao Death Squads during Duterte’s tenure as mayor of Davao City (Kine 2015). On his local television programme, Duterte mockingly said “I am the death squad,” provoking his critics to file cases against him. There has yet to be actionable evidence linking Duterte to the killings beyond his tolerance, if not support, for summary execution.

While some Duterte supporters deny the existence of the death squads, others express moral complicity with such strategies to fight crime. Penal populism is the term sociologists of deviance use to describe the situation where the language of toughness, control and immediate gratification is prioritised over the long-term but tedious strategy of building an effective justice system (see Pratt 2007). Duterte vowed to give the police shoot-to-kill orders and pardon officers if they are charged with human rights abuses. He also calls for the restoration of the death penalty by hanging.

Whether Duterte is offering an authoritarian fantasy or proposing a model for governing a democracy in times of crisis warrants further observation. What the campaign season reveals, however, is the importance of differentiating the demand for immediate results from the demand to restore dictatorship. After all, 76% of Filipinos are still satisfied with the way democracy works, based on a poll conducted in December 2015 (in *Business World*, February 24, 2016). Duterte himself declared that there was no need to impose martial law as current conditions do not demand it. What is evident is the distrust of the electorate, not with democracy, but with the intricacies of “good governance” and a criminal justice system that tests the politics of patience that democracy demands.

Duterte’s discourse of “I will” laid bare the challenges when reformism places emphasis on taking the long view at the expense of immediately felt solutions to everyday problems that define citizens’ view of politics and power. The Aquino administration made substantial investments in human capital, such as shifting the educational system to the K-12 model, expanding the conditional cash transfer programme and building capacities of local communities through bottom-up budgeting. Substantive reforms were also made in institutionalising transparency in infrastructure planning, government procurement and bidding. Missing in Aquino’s success story, however, are clear and direct outcomes that address the daily miseries of poverty, high levels of inequality, poor public transportation, and the shameful conditions of airports. While the impact of Aquino’s social services are felt



in some impoverished communities, the middle classes, especially in urban areas, are excluded from the story of Aquino's reformism (ABS-CBN News, May 1, 2016). It is not accidental that aside from Mindanao, Duterte first gained popularity among middle class voters in urban areas, before his popularity cut across classes, age groups, regions and linguistic groups.

Davao City offers a counterpoint to imagine possibilities for governance, where gentlemanly rules of democratic procedure give way to aggressive problem-solving.

### **New Beginnings, New Exclusions**

"Change is coming" was Rodrigo Duterte's battle cry in his bid for presidency. Indeed, at least as far as the 2016 race is concerned, change has come. Duterte's populism has already transformed the tenor of the political conversation. He has broadened the scope of what can and cannot be said during an electoral race. Beyond the swearing are meaningful transgressions in the conservative vocabulary of Philippine politics. From screaming "Allahu Akbar!" in his final campaign rally to foreground his Maranao identity, to declaring he is a socialist, Duterte has brought to the political mainstream discourses that have been in the margins for decades. There have also been early indications of how the centre of power has shifted away from Manila. As the first president of the Philippines from Mindanao, it is not insignificant that all eyes are on Davao City a month after the elections. Duterte refused to travel to Manila even for his proclamation, and instead formed his cabinet and held press conferences in what journalists now call the Malacañang of the south.

Part of populism's capacity of including previously marginalised voices is its corollary logic of exclusion. Duterte's language has offended women, journalists, the Commission on Human Rights, the diplomatic community and the United Nations. Davao-based journalists who covered Duterte for years have shrugged off complaints about Duterte's offensive language as an alarmist reaction from citizens using the prudish lens of "Imperial Manila" to understand the brash Bisaya.

Duterte promised a "metamorphosis" after he won the elections, and committed to behaviour "more in keeping with the dignity of the office." He delivered on this promise on his first day in office. In his inaugural address, he read a short and powerful speech free from expletives. He assured the public that he knows the limits of presidential power and vowed to adhere to due process and the rule of law.



This metamorphosis, however, seemed to apply only to the most formal of functions. Hours after his inauguration, the president started cracking jokes about the profitability of funeral parlours under his administration in a solidarity dinner with an urban poor community. In the turnover ceremonies of the Philippine National Police and Armed Forces of the Philippines, he once again resorted to off-the-cuff speeches. “There is time to rest and to die,” he said, pertaining to drug lords. And, in perhaps one of the most controversial moves in his first month in office, he publicly named top police generals, judges, and politicians who are part of the illegal drug trade.

Duterte’s disregard for human rights has been the most worrisome aspect of his administration. “Human rights cannot be used a shield or an excuse to destroy the nation,” he declared in his first State of the Nation Address, a direct retort to his critics, who include human rights advocates, academe and the Roman Catholic Church. His police chief describes their anti-drug war as Operation Plan Double Barrel: “One touch of the barrel, two triggers will be set off. There’s a barrel that will target from above, the high-value targets. And there’s a barrel that will target from below, the street-level personalities.” One month after Duterte took office, there had been over 900 drugrelated killings, 700 anti-illegal drug operations, 700 arrests and hundreds of thousands of voluntary surrenders all over the country, further crowding jail cells already serving over five times their maximum capacity (see ABS-CBN Investigative and Research Group 2016).


The six years of Duterte’s presidency will be a democratic experiment for the Philippines. Duterte’s politics of inclusion has taken shape in creating a diverse cabinet composed of Mindanao elites, members of the left endorsed by the Communist Party of the Philippines-National Democratic Front, a military official known for crushing the communist insurgency, traditional politicians, and former cabinet secretaries from the Estrada and Arroyo administrations. While Duterte has made campaign promises consistent with what might be considered a socialist agenda, such as putting an end to unfair labour practices, breaking up oligarchies and speeding up land reform, his broader economic agenda of attracting foreign investments and investing in publicprivate partnerships continues to take a neo-liberal character (Ibon 2016).

Finally, it is important to focus on the character of the opposition and the civil society during the rest of Duterte’s term. The newly elected Congress was quick to form a “super majority” to support Duterte. The legislature – the branch of government mandated to check the executive – will be tested once thornier issues such as charter change, federalism and the

reimposition of the death penalty are discussed. A weak opposition compromises the democratic credentials of Duterte's regime. President Duterte, a week after he assumed the presidency, enjoyed an unprecedented public trust rating of 91%. Some 63% of Filipinos think he will fulfil "most if not all" of his campaign promises. Some pundits have already used the term "fascism" to caution the public about the dangers of placing too much trust and support in a strong executive who makes no apologies for the killing spree. The future is hinged on finding the right balance for populism to be a force for democratic inclusion without lapsing into the legitimisation of its anti-democratic tendencies. Change is coming Duterte said, and, indeed, change is welcome, as long as it is change for the better.

Acknowledgements: The original version of this article was presented at "Politics, Democracy and Stability in Southeast Asia: Exploring the Implications of the 2016 Presidential Elections" at the University of Sydney and "The Philippines' Future" at La Trobe University.

Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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