



WAR OF WORDS

Rodrigo Duterte's violent relationship with language

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"I know that there are those who do not approve of my methods of fighting criminality," Rodrigo Duterte announced in his first speech after being sworn in as president of the Philippines on June 30, 2016. Despite having been mayor of the war-torn city of Davao for more than two decades, the new president was a political outsider, having narrowly secured his victory after a late turnaround in the polls.

In his inaugural address, he was referring to criticism and accusations that had hounded him throughout the campaign—that in his confrontations with a communist insurgency, Islamist rebellion, and illegal drug epidemic, he had ordered the killing of hundreds of suspected criminals and even admitted to shooting some of them personally:

“They say that my methods are unorthodox and verge on the illegal. In response, let me say this: I have seen how corruption bled the government of funds, which were allocated for the use in uplifting the poor from the mire they are in. I have seen how illegal drugs destroyed individuals and ruined family relationships. I have seen how criminality, by means all foul, snatched from the innocent and the unsuspecting, the years and years of accumulated savings. Years of toil and then, suddenly, they are back to where they started. Look at this from that perspective and tell me that I am wrong. In this fight, I ask Congress and the Commission on Human Rights and all others who are similarly situated to allow us a level of governance that is consistent to our mandate. The fight will be relentless and it will be sustained.”

Davao City is why many Filipinos chose Duterte over his rivals. One of the largest cities in the Philippines (and the largest on the island of Mindanao), Duterte raised Davao from the ashes of rampant crime in the 1970s and transformed it into a bustling metropolis. He rid the streets of violence, negotiated a truce with communist rebels, and welcomed in business. The mayor’s draconian style made him a ruthless arbiter of the law, and he managed to persuade rebels to do their

fighting elsewhere, away from his turf. He also made use of more aggressive tactics. During his time as mayor, he likes to tell journalists, he had criminals thrown from flying helicopters. He once advised police in a nearby city that the best way to fight the drug trade was to “throw [drug lords and users] to the sea where their bodies will be eaten by the fish.”

Duterte’s equal exercise of charm and terror for more than two decades turned Davao into Mindanao’s economic and political capital, the aberration in a region that plays host to warlords, syndicates, militants, and terrorists. If he could change Davao, the logic goes, what would stop him from changing the entire Philippines, which continues to be held back by crime, insurgency, and corruption?

In wooing their votes, Duterte made a promise to Filipinos: Change is coming.

The Philippines had five presidents after the ouster of longstanding dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 and before Duterte, and all were elected by appealing to the poorer segments of Asia’s largest Catholic nation. Bold leadership, radical reforms, more jobs, and more roads—candidates on the campaign trail repeated these promises as they pressed palms with voter after voter. Corazon Aquino, running against Marcos in 1986, vowed: *Tama na, sobra na, palitan na!* (“Enough already! Change!”) When Aquino, who became an icon for freedom, endorsed retired general Fidel Valdez Ramos to replace her, he trumpeted an acronym for Filipinos to live by: UST—unity, solidarity, teamwork. Joseph “Erap” Estrada, the popular movie actor who succeeded Ramos in 1998, won over voters with his campaign slogan: *Erap para sa mahirap* (“Erap is for the poor”). Forced to step down after only two years in office due to unexplained bank accounts and mansions,

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Estrada's ouster became a case study of a successful "people power" protest. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the second woman to become president of the Philippines, succeeded Estrada by promising a sober, studied approach to governance. Her style was projected in her best-known quote: "Do your best. Let God take care of the rest." By the end of her term in 2010, allegations of malfeasance and corruption had made her so unpopular that her opponent, Benigno Aquino III, campaigned on this slogan: *Kung walang kurap, walang mahirap*—"If there's no corruption, there's no poverty."

Yet none of these leaders have used their words to greater effect than Duterte. And none have put their words into action nearly as much. The 73-year-old mayor burst onto the national scene in 2016 at a transformative time for his country (and for the world, for that matter). The Philippines had by then become the world's social media capital, a reputation it holds to this day. There are at least 67 million Filipino accounts on Facebook as of 2017, a number that matches the estimated total number of internet users in a country of 105 million people. Social media also is the preferred way to stay in touch for the at least 10 million Filipinos who work abroad and who, back in the day, spent a huge percentage of their take-home pay on phone calls to loved ones back home. It was on social media where Duterte's campaign team focused much of its effort in discrediting rivals, spreading real and fake news, and projecting his strengths as a stern but compassionate leader. Small wonder that not only did Duterte clobber his more moneyed and established rivals in the election, but that a majority of Filipinos living and working abroad also picked him as their number-one choice.

The president speaks the language of the times: punchy, unedited, unapologetic, angry. He was "authentic" long before it became a fad. His style is perfect for social media: He fans anger, aims for the gut, and tells stories that go

viral in the networked public sphere. He's an outlier, an anti-establishment candidate who belongs to neither a huge political party nor a landed family. All he has is political will, and the words to fuel it. He knows how to entertain an audience: "I was separated from my wife," he once recalled during the presidential campaign, in one of his meandering speeches. "I'm not impotent. What am I supposed to do? Let this hang forever? When I take Viagra, it stands up."

He uses words to denigrate women in the guise of entertainment. A month before he was elected president, a YouTube video of Duterte joking about an Australian missionary who was raped and killed in his city went viral. He said on the campaign trail, in Filipino: "I looked at

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her face, son of a bitch, she looks like a beautiful American actress. Son of a bitch, what a waste. What came to mind was, they raped her, they lined up. I was angry because she was raped ... but she was also beautiful, the mayor should have been first. What a waste." He responded to accusations of being a womanizer by telling voters: "That's correct. I have a wife, I have a second wife. I have two girlfriends." In 2017, speaking to victims of the deadly typhoon Yolanda, Duterte quipped: "I looked up to the sky and said, 'Lord, I hope only the ugly died. I hope the beautiful ones did not.'"

And he uses words to cut his way through bureaucracy. "When I become president, I'll order the police and the military to find [drug users] and kill them," he told a crowd of supporters during his campaign. The most recent government data on drug use nationwide estimates that there are roughly 1.8 million users,

but the president, citing his own intelligence gathering, claims that number is far higher. After he was elected, Duterte told an audience during a long-winded speech: “Hitler massacred 3 million Jews. Now, there are 3 million drug addicts. I’d be happy to slaughter them.” According to independent media investigations, Duterte’s war on drugs has killed at least 7,000 civilians so far, many during extrajudicial operations. (The government calls that figure “fake news,” and the National Police say that the number of Filipinos killed in “official” anti-drug operations is closer to 4,000.) Between July 2016 and Sept. 30, 2017—during the height of the campaign against drugs—the government classified 16,355 homicide cases as “deaths under investigation.” Duterte has imposed a policy of deploying cops to poor neighborhoods to arrest suspects without warrants and, according to many documented cases in Manila and other cities, to shoot them dead.

Shoot them dead. That’s what he promised. And that’s what he’s done in a nation that, a little more than three decades ago, ousted a strongman and forced him to live in exile in the United States. A nation that then pushed for a massive human rights lawsuit to be filed against this former dictator in U.S. court (the case was ultimately decided on behalf of the more than 10,000 claimants), that stipulated that human rights courses be included in the curricula of police and military academies, that set up human rights bodies in the armed forces and the national police, and that ratified a constitution mandating the creation of a Commission on Human Rights.

Don’t take him literally, advised his allies and even journalists who covered his mayorality. He can be impulsive and emotional, they said, but in the end he sobers up and weighs pros and cons before rushing into any decision. It’s just a war of words, they said.

The blood in the streets of Manila is proof of the contrary.

As the president believes women are the weaker sex, he’s especially unhappy about women who challenge him. He constantly mocked Leni Robredo, a female vice president in the opposition party, about rumors that she had a boyfriend. “If that’s true, ma’am, another congressman will be killed so you’ll be a widow again.” A few months after taking office, Duterte went beyond embarrassing Robredo; he sacked her from his cabinet via a text message from his aide, accusing her of plotting his overthrow. Upset by the candor of Maria Lourdes Sereno, the first woman to head the Philippine Supreme Court, Duterte declared he wanted her out. His allies in Congress recently agreed to have her impeached. Retaliating against Senator Leila de Lima, a fierce critic who once pursued human rights cases against him during his stint as a mayor, Duterte promised to give her hell. “You libeled me, you slandered me. I kept quiet because you are a lady. But you went too far,” Duterte said in a speech before political allies. His justice secretary then opened an investigation into De Lima’s alleged links to drug lords, and used prisoners as witnesses against her. Now De Lima is behind bars over accusations of bribery, and faces a sentence of 12 years to life. The man who sent her to jail, Vitaliano Aguirre II, was recently forced to resign from his post as Justice Secretary in the wake of a series of scandals, including the controversial decision to drop a case against a notorious and well-connected drug lord.

Strong, powerful women who do not agree with him do not have a place in Duterte’s Philippines—a country that has already had two female presidents; that hosts corporations, organizations, and government agencies led by women; and that has recognized the city he once governed for its innovative work in protecting women’s rights via its Women Development Code. The president and his use of the national stage dwarf these facts.

And in a country known for hard-hitting journalism that scrutinizes and exposes politicians, Duterte changed the media landscape. In the countless stories by Filipino reporters about Duterte's drug war—about mothers who lost teenage sons, about police shooting unarmed suspects, about families pleading for a fair trial—Duterte saw conspiracy and bias. The media is out to get me, he would say. While previous Philippine leaders tried to silence the press through libel suits and intimidation, no other president since the end of dictatorship has been as systematic in shaming and coercing the media. Shortly after taking office he began a verbal war on the independent press, using his annual State of the Nation Address (SONA) to single out two of the Philippines' most influential media companies: the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* newspaper and Rappler, an online media start-up I co-founded in 2012. They are both, perhaps not coincidentally, led by women.

In his first SONA in 2016, Duterte decried the *Inquirer* for portraying victims of his drug war as martyrs. He attacked its owners as tax evaders. Like oil to a machine, Duterte's words kicked the government bureaucracy into gear. In no time, a long-dormant tax case against the paper's owners was revived. And in short order after that, they were forced to sell the newspaper to a businessman friendly to the president. In his second SONA, Duterte accused Rappler of being "100 percent America-owned," a lie that had already been spread by his social media machine prior to the speech. Barely a month after, the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission started a formal probe into Rappler's ownership structure, and within four months had issued an order for it to be closed. That order is on appeal in court, and for now, Rappler continues to operate.

Beyond the shores of the Philippines, Duterte's words are taken seriously. Stung by the European Union's strong criticism of his war on

drugs, Duterte said his country could live without the EU and its aid. Explaining his decision to snub an invite to an EU-Asia summit early this year, Duterte said, "I've been invited by the EU, that stupid organization. I said, for what? ... So you get to insult me? I will use whore-speak on you too." The Philippines has formally rejected at least \$7 million in EU aid for sustainable energy projects. In 2017, when Duterte entered his second year in office, growth in foreign direct investments was substantially lower than the previous year, falling from a 41 percent increase to just over 21 percent.

Duterte has shown he is above scrutiny and criticism, above established norms, and above the institutions that have facilitated such norms. But he wasn't born yesterday. Since the rebirth of democracy in 1986, the Philippines has chosen its leaders in a pendulum style—electing a boring, no-nonsense general in 1992, and a swashbuckling, irreverent, and womanizing movie actor in 1998. In 2004, another actor with no political experience almost made it to the presidency, and when he didn't, he accused his rival of cheating.

Saddled with a slow and inefficient bureaucracy, deprived of basic services such as public hospitals and resilient roads, and burdened by public officials who dip into government coffers to support their lifestyles, Filipinos claim they want honest public servants but also want quick fixes to seemingly intractable problems. They've ousted two corrupt presidents, after all, yet national economic and democratic gains continue to be set back by a political system of patronage; a business environment that benefits the connected and the elite; a legacy of crime, insurgency, and rebellion; and an electoral process captured by those who have the gold, the goons, and the good looks.

Duterte, having managed a city that dealt with all that and thrived, promised to fix things his own way. Read my lips, he said. And his words killed. ●