

The Philippines in 2021

Twilight of the Duterte Presidency

ABSTRACT

In his last year in office, populist Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte faced the deadly surge of the Delta variant of the COVID-19 pandemic. His government continued to struggle with the health crisis despite implementing one of the most heavy-handed lockdowns in the world. In his final State of the Nation address, he trumpeted his administration's "war on drugs" and ordered the military to hunt communist insurgents and "shoot them dead." At the same time, he admitted that he has failed in his "war on corruption," the second plank in his 2016 campaign platform. His admission foreshadowed the biggest corruption scandal of his administration. The Senate uncovered evidence of financial misuse, particularly for supplies from Pharmally Pharmaceutical, a business formed just months before securing billions of pesos in government supply contracts. The controversy has eroded Duterte's popularity ratings, but he has retained high enough numbers to leverage political support in the upcoming 2022 presidential election and deflect impending International Criminal Court prosecution for his bloody drug war.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Duterte, pandemic, Philippines, populism

Rodrigo Duterte, the populist president of the Philippines, delivered his last State of the Nation address on July 26, 2021, amid the surge of COVID-19 cases fueled by the highly contagious Delta variant. As mentioned in last year's year-end review (Teehankee 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the populist legacy of the strongman president. His government has consistently fumbled in its handling of the pandemic despite implementing

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one of the most heavy-handed lockdowns in the world. Just like his fellow populists around the world, Duterte found it challenging to sustain an “us versus them” narrative against an existential threat like the virus. Indeed, the final year of the Duterte presidency is shaping up to be a battle of narratives on how to best exit the pandemic and plan for a post-COVID rebuilding.

The president enumerated his government’s achievements, particularly in massive infrastructure projects in the provinces and mass transportation in Metro Manila. However, he was quick to blame the pandemic for the dismal performance of the Philippine economy. At the same time, he trumpeted his administration’s “war on drugs” and ordered the military to hunt communist insurgents and “shoot them dead” (Galvez 2021). His government earlier attempted to forge peace with the world’s longest-running Maoist insurgency, led by the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People’s Army. But the peace talks, facilitated by the Royal Norwegian Government, broke down in 2017, and violent clashes resumed between the military and the insurgents. Duterte’s bloody war on drugs has resulted in the death of 7,000 individuals, mainly among the poor, and many were extra-judicial killings (Subingsubing 2021).

This was the longest State of the Nation address in the post-authoritarian period, at two hours and thirteen minutes (Mercado 2021). It was a combination of a prepared speech and ramblings peppered by his trademark profanities. The public sat through his valedictory, waiting for a message of hope that never materialized. At that same time that the president was speaking, weightlifter Hidilyn Diaz provided much-needed inspiration for the Filipino people, winning a gold medal in the Tokyo Summer Olympics. It was the country’s first gold in 97 years of Olympic competition (Saldajeno 2021).

THE DELTA SURGE

But also on that same day, Metro Manila experienced the start of a surge caused by the highly contagious Delta variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19. An average of 4,220 daily new cases was recorded by the Department of Health and the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases, which translated into a critical 30.22 new infections per 100,000 people. By mid-September, the total number of COVID-19 cases in the country reached 2,003,955, and the total number of

deaths, 35,000 (Bancroft 2021). The onslaught of the Delta variant has strained the country's already burdened health system and front-line workers. There was a steep rise in intensive care utilization, with 76% of ICU beds in Metro Manila occupied (Mateo 2021).

Duterte's dismal performance in handling the pandemic was highlighted as the Philippines appeared last in both Nikkei Asia's COVID-19 Recovery Index and Bloomberg's COVID Resilience Ranking. The Nikkei index ranks over 120 countries and regions each month on infection control, vaccination rollouts, and social mobility. A higher vaccination rate and fewer social-isolation measures help a country or region rank higher (Li 2021). Bloomberg's is a monthly ranking of the best and worst countries to be in during the pandemic. The Philippines scored poorly on all four of Bloomberg's metrics, and its vaccine coverage rate of 20% was the lowest of the 53 countries ranked.

The Philippines also implemented one of the world's most draconian lockdowns. Its flight capacity, which indicates how far air transport has recovered, is 74% lower than in 2019, and its borders remain closed to travelers. Yet the Philippines also underperformed in COVID containment. While the cases per capita are less than a fifth of what vaccine leader Israel has seen, the Philippines has the second-worst positive test rate in Bloomberg's ranking, at 27% (Bloomberg News 2021).

As expected, Duterte's government downplayed the negative assessments of its performance. Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said that the Bloomberg report was not a surprise because "rich countries hoard life-saving vaccines, while poor nations wait for trickles" (Gita-Carlos 2021). Meanwhile, National Task Force Against COVID-19 chief implementer and vaccine czar Carlito Galvez Jr. defended the country's pandemic response efforts: "The data used by Nikkei only covered the month of September wherein the Philippines was at the height of its fight against the highly transmissible Delta variant, while cases in other countries were going down" (Philippine News Agency 2021). Soon after, the government found itself defending its pandemic policies along with allegations of massive corruption in the handling of COVID funds.

WHIFF OF CORRUPTION

The Philippines was ranked 115th out of 180 nations in Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perception Index. It scored only 34 out of

a potential 100 points. In 2019, it was 113th; and in 2018, 99th (Dela Peña 2021). The “war on corruption” was the other central plank of Duterte’s 2016 presidential campaign. He vowed to put an end to government corruption within three to six months if elected president. “Not a whiff of corruption,” he warned officials and government agencies after winning the presidency (Ranada 2016). Yet, after five years, this appears to be another broken promise. In 2019, deputy ombudsman Cyril Ramos projected that the government had lost PHP 670 billion (USD 13 billion) to corruption in 2017 and PHP 752 billion (USD 15 billion) in 2018—a total of PHP 1.4 trillion (USD 28 billion) in two years. He estimated that corruption costs the government 20% of its annual budget (Dela Peña 2021).

In his last State of the Nation address, President Duterte admitted that corruption was “endemic in government” and said that “nobody can stop corruption unless you overturn the government completely” (Dela Peña 2021). His admission foreshadowed the biggest corruption scandal of his administration, which was investigated by a Senate blue ribbon committee. The Commission on Audit has issued a report identifying “deficiencies” in the Department of Health’s usage of PHP 67.3 billion (USD 1.3 billion) in the fight against COVID-19, including PHP 41 billion (USD 800 million) transferred to the Procurement Service–Department of Budget and Management (Buan 2021). According to the commission, the fund transfer was not documented, resulting in a delay in the distribution of critical medical supplies for pandemic response. The commission’s report prompted the Senate to dig deeper, and it then uncovered evidence of financial misuse, particularly for supplies from Pharmally Pharmaceutical, a business formed just months before securing billions of pesos in supply contracts (Dela Peña 2021). The Pharmally scandal has become the most prominent allegation of corruption against the Duterte administration. It has begun to fray the president’s otherwise smooth populist veneer.

DUTERTE’S POPULARITY DROPS

According to Pulse Asia’s September survey, the Duterte administration’s approval rating for combating graft and corruption has dropped by 12 percentage points since June. Despite this, Pulse Asia noted that public perception of the current leadership “remains positive,” as evidenced by high ratings in the handling of nine issues: fighting crime, assisting calamity-hit areas,

protecting overseas Filipino workers, promoting national peace, assisting those who lost jobs or sources of income, enforcing the rule of law, halting the spread of the coronavirus, halting environmental degradation, and fighting corruption (CNN Philippines Staff 2021).

Duterte's rating in the Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey peaked in November 2020 before plummeting nine percentage points as of June 2021. His satisfaction rating fell by nine percentage points in May 2021, from 84 percent in November (nine months earlier). His net satisfaction rating (satisfied minus unsatisfied) dropped by double digits for the third time from November 2020 to May 2021 (Ranada 2021b).

Nonetheless, the controversial president remains popular. In contrast to his three predecessors, Duterte has maintained an approval rating above 75% for most of his term, according to Pulse Asia. And SWS has not reported a net satisfaction rating for Duterte lower than +45, which is considered "excellent." For comparison, former president Benigno Aquino III's net satisfaction rating once plummeted to +11. The last time SWS issued such ratings was in December 2019 (Ranada 2021a).

Many political pundits have struggled to explain Duterte's populist resilience. Two viable explanations have emerged. The first, according to SWS fellow Geoffrey Ducanes, is the "fear factor," or how much is motivated by the fear of expressing dissatisfaction, such that what is observed is not genuine satisfaction. The second is social desirability bias, which makes survey respondents fudge their responses. A list experiment conducted by Yuko Kasuya (Keio University), Hirofumi Miwa (Gakushuin University), and Ronald Holmes (De La Salle University) found that Filipinos who believed their neighbors supported Duterte were more susceptible to this social desirability bias. For Jose Ramon Albert, a senior research fellow at the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, the Social Amelioration Program (the government's pandemic financial support) contributed to the high satisfaction ratings, since it covered 75% of households across the country (Albert 2021). But for most diehard Duterte supporters, he continued to embody their *tatay* (daddy): the strict father of the nation, with only the interests of the Filipino people at heart (Teehankee 2021). The concurrent national and local elections scheduled for May 2022 will test whether Duterte's residual popularity is enough to carry his preferred candidates to victory.

ROAD TO THE 2022 ELECTIONS

The political temperature in the country has started to rise with the filing of candidacies for national and local positions for the 2022 elections. Given the hyper-presidential single-term nature of Philippine politics, much attention was given to the candidates who hope to replace the outgoing president. Duterte himself has a lot at stake, since he needs to ensure the election of a trusted political ally who will protect him from impending International Criminal Court prosecution for his bloody “war on drugs” (Smith 2021).

His daughter and touted successor, Davao City mayor Sara Duterte, decided to file her candidacy for vice president despite topping all the early presidential surveys. The incumbent party, the Partido Demokratikong Pilipino–Lakas ng Bayan (Philippine Democratic Party–People’s Power) faced a major schism between those loyal to Duterte and a faction led by senator Aquilino “Koko” Pimentel III, son of the party founder, senator, and anti-Marcos leader Aquilino “Nene” Pimentel Jr. The Pimentel faction endorsed the candidacy of Senator Manuel “Manny” Pacquiao, an internationally renowned world boxing champion with a powerful rags-to-riches story (Escosio and Mercado 2021). The Duterte faction named Senator Ronald “Bato” Dela Rosa and Senator Christopher “Bong” Go as its candidates for president and vice president, respectively. The former used to be chief of the Philippine National Police and the leading implementer of the “war on drugs”; the latter is Duterte’s former assistant and protégé (Cupin 2021). However, Go withdrew his candidacy for vice president and opted to run instead for president under the *Pederalismo ng Dugong Dakilang Samahan* (Federalism of Great Blood Organizations).

Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., the only son and namesake of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, failed in his bid for vice president in 2016. In the run-up to the 2022 presidential elections, he initially entered into negotiations with Sara Duterte. When she opted not to run, Marcos took the opportunity to declare his candidacy. Sara Duterte then agreed to run as his vice-presidential candidate. A Marcos–Duterte victory in 2022 would place the Philippines in a complete political cycle with an authoritarian resurrection.

After failing to unify the non-administration political forces, vice president Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo also decided to run for president (Cepeda 2021). As the opposition leader, she endured political insults and persecution from Duterte and his online trolls (Lalu 2019). Despite her office’s limited

budget, she managed to help medical front-liners and communities affected by the pandemic. In an effort to rebrand the opposition, her followers replaced yellow, which has been the symbol of anti-Marcos democratic struggle, with pink, the new color of hope and struggles against the threat of authoritarian revival (Jugo 2021).

Among the top contenders for the presidency is Francisco Domagoso, popularly known by his screen name, Isko Moreno. The young, first-term mayor of the country's capital, Manila, he was a minor television and movie actor in the late 1980s to mid-1990s. He has served as a three-term city councilor and two-term vice-mayor, and in 2019 defeated former-president-turned-Manila-mayor Joseph Estrada. In a way, Moreno's political ascent paralleled that of Estrada, except that Moreno genuinely came from the ranks of the poor (Talabong 2019). In three years, Moreno was able to turn around the dismal delivery of public service in Manila left by Estrada's two terms. Unlike other actor-politicians, Moreno has pursued advanced executive courses at Harvard and Cambridge (Masigan 2021). With his youthful dynamism and good looks, Moreno hopes to be the youngest president to be elected since the authoritarian period.

Senator Panfilo "Ping" Lacson has the most political experience among the presidential contenders. He has been credited with cleaning the ranks of the Philippine National Police as its chief from 1999 to 2001. He has served as a cabinet member in two presidential administrations and has had three terms in the Senate, where he earned a reputation for exposing corruption in government. A former general, he ran unsuccessfully for president in 2004 (Talabong 2021).

Lastly, labor activist Leody de Guzman will be the first socialist to run for president in recent Philippine history. He offers the most ideological platform among the candidates. However, the labor movement has been weakened by years of neoliberal economic policies (Ronquillo 2021), and it has not been able to deliver votes for national elections.

In a sudden turn of events, president Rodrigo Duterte filed his candidacy for the Senate despite his repeated statements that he would completely retire from politics after his term ends in 2022. Apart from losing legal immunity when he becomes a regular citizen, Duterte might face prosecution for crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court (Palatino 2021). While the 1987 constitution bars him from reelection as president, he is not prohibited from seeking other elected positions.

CONCLUSION

Rodrigo Duterte rose to power by riding the wave of popular anger and frustration toward the ruling elite's failure to institute socioeconomic and political reforms. The 2022 presidential election can be seen as a referendum on the six years of his populist presidency. His disruptive style has upended the country's international relations, upset big business and women's organizations, alienated the influential Roman Catholic Church, and mismanaged the government's pandemic response, resulting in one of Southeast Asia's highest case rates and a damaged economy.

He leaves a legacy of illiberal politics that has repudiated the liberal reformist order established after the fall of the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. His presidency has paved the way for a wave of authoritarian nostalgia gravitating around the candidacy of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Amid continued uncertainties in the government's plan to escape the pandemic and revive the economy, there is a yearning for quick fixes offered by strongman rule. This does not bode well for the health of Philippine democracy.

Addendum, January 2, 2022

In a last-minute twist in the country's evolving political drama, Duterte's protégé, senator Bong Go, decided to withdraw his candidacy for the presidency. In the post-Marcos period, this will be the first time an incumbent administration did not field a candidate for president. Moreover, Duterte also withdrew his candidacy for the senate. Political pundits are speculating as to whether he will transfer his support to another candidate against the emerging front-runner, Bongbong Marcos. Duterte has called Marcos (the son of the late dictator and the running mate of his daughter, Sara Duterte) a "weak leader" and insinuated that he is addicted to cocaine.

Meanwhile, Marcos has emerged as the early front-runner in the presidential election. In an October survey by Social Weather Stations, Marcos was preferred by 47% of respondents. In December a survey by Pulse Asia put it at 53%, and another by Octa Research put it at 54%. If he manages to hold on to this lead, he will become the first majority president elected since his father's ouster in 1986. It would also be the height of historical irony if on the 50th anniversary of the declaration of Martial Law by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972, his son were to occupy the presidential palace.

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