

“Is one of Asia’s oldest democracies rejecting its tradition of liberalism in exchange for a strongman who can restore self-esteem and bring order to a desperate nation?”

## The Power and Limits of Populism in the Philippines

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It has become a ritual: on the 8th of November each year, residents of Tacloban City on the island of Leyte in the Philippines congregate to pray in Holy Cross Memorial Park, a mass grave for victims of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. Haiyan was one of the strongest storms to make landfall in recent history, breaking all scientific intensity scales. The typhoon left over 6,000 people dead, many more missing, and more than four million homeless.

In the months and years that followed, as journalists, government officials, volunteers, and humanitarian workers packed up and left, disaster-affected communities—fishing villages, farmers, and the urban poor—complained that they had been forgotten as new tragedies took over the global conversation. Many felt abandoned. But not in November 2016.

On the third anniversary of the typhoon, recently elected President Rodrigo Duterte visited the mass grave to commiserate with grieving families and survivors of the disaster. He laid a wreath on one of the gravestones. Then he climbed up the steps of a makeshift stage in the middle of the cemetery, lifted his clenched fist, and bowed to the audience.

Despite the somber occasion, the president managed to deliver a signature Duterte speech. He dropped the “f-bomb” several times. He threatened to kill the man he had put in charge of post-disaster reconstruction if the official failed to deliver promised homes. In a lighter aside, he confessed to ogling the vice president’s legs at a cabi-

net meeting. Her skirt “was shorter than usual,” he explained—a punch line that drew laughter from an adoring crowd.

The president concluded his half-hour speech with an apology and a promise. “I ask for your forgiveness” for help that did not come fast enough, he told the survivors. “In the fullness of God’s time,” he added, “I will be back in December.” But he has not returned since.

Weeks after the visit, newly built homes were turned over to displaced families. “Duterte Speed” was printed in big, bold letters on a sign at an entrance to a housing relocation site. Another message, “Blessings of Change,” was painted on the wall of a row house, alluding to Duterte’s campaign slogan “Change Is Coming.”

### VISCERAL CONNECTION

Duterte’s Tacloban performance demonstrated the strongman’s multifaceted character. To be sure, he has gained global notoriety for hurling the epithet “son of a whore” at Barack Obama, Pope Francis, and former United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, among others. His signature campaign promise was to “kill all drug addicts,” which in practice has meant giving the Philippine National Police an unlimited mandate to go after suspects, resulting in congested jails and opening a killing season. Police and vigilante groups have gunned down thousands of people associated with the drug trade. And yet, to reduce Duterte to a vulgar politician with an illiberal worldview and a penchant for violence obscures the complexity of the political style that firmly anchors his grip on power.

He is crass and compassionate, a man of promises and a man of action, sexist but sensitive. He masterfully “flaunts the low,” a phrase the Chilean political scientist Pierre Ostiguy uses to describe

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how populists challenge the norms of high politics defined by respectable behavior. Leaders like Duterte emphasize sincerity and playfulness, like a guest at a dinner party who has had one drink too many.

Disrupting the tacit rules of sociability is a powerful political act that gathers together a constituency ready, willing, and able to support a controversial leader. Populism, after all, is a political relationship between the leader and the people. The power of populist leaders lies in their capacity to render certain constituencies visible—those who feel betrayed by a callous political establishment and suffer the psychological injuries of abandonment. Populists did not invent these constituencies. They have long existed, lingering in the background with their resentments and anxieties, waiting for a political moment when their grievances can be laid bare in the public sphere.

The people of Tacloban are typical of these constituencies. They felt that they were neglected after the storm by the administration of Duterte's predecessor, President Benigno (Noynoy) Aquino; they also felt disparaged by his government's apparent indifference to their grievances. A prime example of this is an incident that took place two days after Typhoon Haiyan ravaged Tacloban. A business owner appealed to Aquino to declare a state of emergency and deploy security personnel in the city because chaos was starting to unfold and he had been held at gunpoint by looters. The president retorted dismissively, "But you did not die, right?"

This exchange retains a prominent place in the memories of disaster survivors. What use was a reformist administration, one that touted the achievements of good governance and accelerated economic growth, if it constantly denigrated people who were already suffering? Typhoon Haiyan was the black mark on Aquino's record. His leadership in that time of crisis fell short in both efficiency and empathy.

It also stood in sharp contrast to Duterte's response. At the time, he was the mayor of Davao City, 600 kilometers south of Tacloban, and had no obligation to help disaster victims there. However, with no fanfare he deployed his city's world-class first responders. He ordered the distribution of cash and relief goods with no questions asked, unlike other government agencies that had to go

through a painstaking process of documentation to comply with audit requirements. While other politicians vying for higher office distributed relief packs bearing stickers that displayed their names and faces, Duterte's aid packages were simply labeled, "From the People of Davao City."

The only time people heard from Duterte himself was in an interview with local journalists at the airport in Davao as he returned from Tacloban. He was holding back tears, his voice cracking, his speech rambling, strewn with curses. "I think God must have been elsewhere when the typhoon hit," he said. "I could not shout in anger because you cannot be mad at anybody there . . . People are walking like zombies, son of a bitch."

Duterte's speech does not appeal to the rational observer; its appeal is visceral. His tone is appropriate for a nation in crisis, for he gives voice to the frustration and anger felt by many. The historian Vicente Rafael describes Duterte's style as that of a "consummate storyteller," the kind who renders visible "the residues of an injured pride and a

frayed ego." It is no surprise that at the height of the 2016 presidential campaign, banners with Duterte's image were displayed everywhere in Tacloban, inscribed with a simple statement: "It's our turn to help him."

Among disaster survivors, campaigning for Duterte was regarded as a moral obligation. It was a form of reciprocity, not in the disempowering form of *utang na loob* (repaying the debt of gratitude), which serves as the moral code of patronage politics in the Philippines, but rather in the form of a welcome obligation that bolsters the self-esteem of marginalized people who feel they are in the position to put a deserving person in power.

There were accounts of poor communities raising funds to print Duterte T-shirts, tricycle drivers giving free rides to his supporters so they could attend his campaign rallies, and young people volunteering to "like" Facebook posts favorable to Duterte. These are some of the ways in which voters transgressed the established practices of electoral campaigning. While the poor are often used as pawns in the game of machine politics, this time many citizens—those who literally lost everything in the typhoon—felt they were in control of their political destiny as they pooled resources to elect the man who inspired them to get back on their feet.

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*Citizens' opinions of  
Duterte vacillate between  
affection and skepticism.*

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That Duterte returned to Tacloban six months after he won the presidency was even more meaningful to them. In doing so, he reinforced his mutual bond of obligation with the people.

## GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

Even as Duterte boosts the pride of those who have long felt disparaged by the political establishment, another defining characteristic of his rule has been his refusal to extend compassion to those he deems unworthy of a second chance.

The main targets of his wrath are drug addicts. In his telling, they are irredeemable junkies dependent on substances that “shrink the brain,” they “rape beautiful women,” and they are destroying the nation. Duterte describes the Philippines as a narco-state, despite his own Drug Enforcement Agency’s data showing that the rate of drug use in the country is half the global average.

His is not a class war, the kind of populism that punches up, but a war against the small fry, the kind of populism that punches down. It is a war that has left thousands of widows, orphans, and parents in grief, and many households without a breadwinner. There are hierarchies of misery in Rodrigo Duterte’s Philippines, where some forms of suffering are treated as more deserving of attention than others.

While the Philippines can be described as one of several countries exemplifying the global trend of rising populism, it is exceptional in its popular support for a self-confessed mass murderer. A man who literally called for genocide against drug addicts still enjoys robust approval ratings two years into his term, rising to a new high of 88 percent in a June 2018 Pulse Asia poll (though his numbers subsequently dropped amid controversy in the majority-Catholic nation over a June 22 speech in which, deriding the concept of original sin, he asked, “Who is this stupid God?”). This is the case despite the death toll from the government’s brutal antidrug campaign having exceeded 6,000—as many lives as Typhoon Haiyan claimed, if not more. Meanwhile, the predominantly Muslim city of Marawi in the southern Philippines was reduced to rubble by airstrikes in a 2017 military campaign to free it from a terrorist group linked to the Islamic State. And inflation has risen to a nine-year high.

The sociologist Walden Bello describes Duterte as a “fascist original.” He commenced his rule with a “maximum program” of extrajudicial killings, then began steadily curtailing civil liberties. Bello

predicts that this trajectory will end in the imposition of a dictatorship by means of “mopping-up operations in a political landscape devoid of significant organized opposition.”

The political scientist Nathan Quimpo, on the other hand, has revived the term “national boss rule”—once used to characterize the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos—to describe the scaled-up use of “death squads” as front-line forces in Duterte’s drug war. Framing the drug issue as a matter of national security gives Duterte a free hand to use coercion and violence to maintain power, following the same practices he and members of his family employed in their decades-long reign as local bosses in Davao City.

While Tacloban offers a positive narrative of a citizenry reclaiming self-esteem through a controversial leader, this narrative must be scrutinized against the backdrop of the bleak realities of Duterte’s rule. Has the Philippine public been captured by the dark spell of a charismatic leader? Is one of Asia’s oldest democracies rejecting its tradition of liberalism in exchange for a strongman who promises to restore self-esteem and bring order to a desperate nation? How can Rodrigo Duterte get away with presiding over mass murder?

## VARIETIES OF DENIALISM

Denialism is one popular explanation. In his new book *Duterte Harry: Fire and Fury in the Philippines*, the British journalist Jonathan Miller begins with a quote from Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*: “We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.”

“For Filipinos who keep their heads below the parapet,” Miller adds, “life just goes on.” Filipinos are well aware of the heavy death toll from the drug war but remain enthralled by the president’s antics and outbursts.

As some observers saw it, ignoring was an important part of the bargain that transformed Davao City from the Philippines’ murder capital into a relative paradise of peace and order. The Filipino public intellectual Red Tani likens the situation in Davao City to Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” which is about a city whose health and happiness depend on the torture of an innocent child in a windowless room.

In light of Human Rights Watch’s investigation of Davao City, published in 2009, Tani’s comparison of Duterte’s old stomping ground to Omelas is

not far off the mark. Victims of death squad killings in Davao included children as young as 14 who were accused of being petty criminals and members of street gangs. According to some estimates, the death toll from 1996 to 2015 topped 1,400 in the city of 1.4 million people. In hearings held during a Senate investigation, a retired police officer publicly confessed to personally killing “about 200 people” as a member of the Davao Death Squad, a vigilante group allegedly formed by Duterte when he was mayor.

Human Rights Watch found that friends and relatives of death squad members, along with journalists, activists, and government officials, were aware of the *modus operandi* of these vigilantes. But local officials categorically deny that there were any death squads.

For his part, Duterte, in a 2015 episode of his weekly television program, boasted, “I am the death squad.” According to some observers, this was not to be taken literally: he was just being sarcastic and taunting human rights activists, challenging them to find evidence linking him to the killings. Bragging about his killing sprees has been a recurring theme of Duterte’s rhetoric: he has said that he stabbed someone when he was a teenager and that he killed three people when he was mayor. His spokespersons, however, claim that this is all just his playful language, not an actual admission of guilt.

As for the broader public, many appear willing to turn a blind eye to reports of Duterte’s human rights violations. This may be due partly to fear, but it is also arguably a recognition that there are trade-offs when a country enters a social contract with a man who has made it clear that he is willing to kill for the sake of peace and order.

“There will be collateral damage,” said one representative of the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which has expressed full support for Duterte’s drug war. The president’s chief economic adviser has described killings of drug suspects as a “necessary evil in pursuit of greater good.” Some scholars place this argument in the context of a broader debate about values and democracy in Asia: whether collective prosperity is considered of prime importance and takes precedence over individual rights.

This logic manifests itself in various forms in Tacloban. Families who moved to new homes in the northern part of the city complain about the lifting of the curfew imposed in the aftermath of the typhoon because fistfights break out after

several rounds of beer among neighbors who do not yet know each other well. In an interview in November 2016, one mother confided that she wished troublemakers on the street corners would get “a dose of Duterte,” explaining that men high on crystal methamphetamine cause anxieties for young women returning home at dawn after working night shifts.

When pressed what she means by a “dose of Duterte,” she clarified that she only meant “disciplining the scoundrels,” not killing them. She too finds Duterte’s language to be playful, saying that he is “amusing to listen to,” but his words should not be taken literally. “He’s just instilling fear in the people,” she added, suggesting that what Duterte says and what he does are two separate things. In such cases, support for the president through denialism is not a case of turning a blind eye but rather assuming that he does not really mean what he says. After all, how could the man who saved their lives after the typhoon order the murder of his own people?

## CONDITIONAL SUPPORT

Meanwhile, others who continue to support Duterte are not in denial. Their support is negotiated, conditional, and contingent.

It is easy to depict Duterte’s supporters as a “basket of deplorables,” to borrow Hillary Clinton’s phrase describing some of Donald Trump’s voters. *Dutertards*—short for “Duterte’s retards”—is a favorite epithet deployed on social media by critics of the president against his supporters, drawing a caricature of a personality cult that by their account is the foundation of his support. This insult has proved popular with Duterte’s critics because it allows them to assert their intellectual superiority over a mob of “patriotic trolls” who they assume have difficulty comprehending that Duterte is running the nation into the ground.

This caricatured view of Duterte’s supporters misses the nuances of the president’s popularity. While it is certainly true that there are diehard Duterte loyalists who share fake news and defend the president’s sexist statements and brutal drug war, realities on the ground vastly differ from the conversations taking place online.

Polling data on views of the drug war provide evidence to support this observation. A Social Weather Stations survey in June 2017 found that a large majority of Filipinos (90 percent) think it is important to keep drug-trafficking suspects alive—an indication that most reject the idea that

extrajudicial killings should be a matter of government policy. Moreover, 60 percent of respondents said only poor people are being killed in the drug war, while 63 percent said they believe that those who surrender to the police are killed anyway. Polls have also found that nearly three-quarters of Filipinos (73 percent) worry that someone they know will be a victim of an extrajudicial killing. Finally, half of poll respondents disagree with the president's view that those engaged in the illegal drug trade are incapable of changing their ways.

These findings suggest that the president's still relatively high approval ratings do not mean Filipinos have offered unquestioning support for his policies. Instead, the public's moral judgments about drugs are vastly different than Duterte's, as expressed in his pronouncements. There is, in other words, space in public opinion to contest his narrative about the drug war.

The challenge, however, is to find leaders willing to put their political careers on the line by acting on these concerns. One cautionary tale is the case of the nation's former human rights commissioner, Senator Leila De Lima, who has been jailed since February 2017 on trumped-up drug trafficking charges after leading investigations into Duterte's death squads in Davao and his national drug war.

So is there no accountability? Does Duterte's popularity exempt him from public scrutiny? Ethnographic research in Tacloban belies this impression.

Some members of the adoring crowd that applauded Duterte's speech at the site of the mass grave also belong to community-based organizations that are monitoring the government's delivery of promised services to disaster-affected communities. Whether it is laying pipes to connect relocation sites or setting up programs that offer alternative livelihoods to fishermen who can no longer go to sea after being traumatized by the tsunami-like storm surge that accompanied the typhoon, working on the quotidian challenges citizens face gives them a lens that enables them to see through broken promises.

Immediately after Duterte's speech, members of an activist group called People Surge, evidently frustrated that they did not get a chance to engage in dialogue with the president as members of his staff had promised, talked to the media instead.

They called on to Duterte to hold officials accountable for typhoon deaths that they said were avoidable.

"We will soon find out if Duterte was just singing *harana* [a love song]," said one tricycle driver in a November 2017 interview. "He's a badass. I like him. But we know if we are just being taken for a ride." It had been a year since Duterte visited Tacloban. The driver conceded that he was starting to worry that the enormous challenge of rebuilding a devastated city was just too overwhelming even for a president who portrays himself as always in control.

"At least he's entertaining," another tricycle driver said as he joined in the banter, "unlike other politicians who are too stiff—they shake hands with people and then splash their hands with hand sanitizer when they think no one is looking."

This conversation demonstrates how citizens' opinions of Duterte vacillate between affection and skepticism—between asking critical questions and making do with the best that Philippine politics

has to offer. There is a range of mundane ways in which those who campaigned for the president express their conditional support, from keeping track of how many promises he made during his first State of the Nation address have been kept, to

making use of a newly launched hotline—the Citizens' Complaint Center—by calling the number 8888 to report corrupt bureaucrats and overpriced goods in grocery stores.

These small acts test the extent to which their felt personal connection to the president translates into concrete responses. They are everyday demands for accountability by a public that questions whether the president is really looking out for them. They illustrate how support for Duterte is negotiated in everyday practice.

## IN THE MARGINS

If you only hear one voice, you are not listening enough, feminist scholars often say. This reminder is helpful in recognizing the different viewpoints that underpin public support for Duterte's controversial regime.

Populism is a multifaceted story. Its realities are not captured by a singular narrative of a demagogue playing on the fears of a desperate citizenry. Support for Duterte is a product of a broad church, not a personality cult. Within this church are anx-

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ious, ambivalent, skeptical, denialist, and engaged citizens who find their voice—not all the time but occasionally—in a man who can lay bare their hidden injuries and sense of abandonment in the public sphere. Populist promises, however, have a shelf life. As populist leaders transition from campaigning to governing, their alluring rhetoric runs up against its limits.

In 2018, the second year of Duterte's six-year term, a series of missteps has started to corrode the stature of what was once a confident regime. Duterte's campaign promise to end unfair labor practices has encountered resistance from the business community as well as from his own cabinet ministers. His tax reform law has made basic commodities even more unaffordable. Peace negotiations with Maoist rebels have been stalled by botched cease-fire agreements. Duterte's threat to feed UN human rights rapporteurs to the crocodiles when they came to investigate the drug war met with the disapproval of nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of Filipinos.

Even the disaster-affected communities in Tacloban once again are starting to feel that they have been abandoned. Their new homes continue to receive rationed supplies of water and erratic flows of electricity from dodgy solar panels. Thousands remain homeless. "Change scamming" is an expression increasingly heard

in these areas—a subversion of Duterte's slogan "Change Is Coming."

In July, Duterte's third State of the Nation address drew the biggest protests yet. Leftists, liberals, student activists, feminists, and religious organizations banded together to demand accountability from what they consider to be a murderous regime.

This made for a stark contrast with the response to Duterte in his first year in office. At that time, the question for political observers was whether anyone would burn him in effigy, given that progressive movements had opted to ally with the first Filipino president who claimed to be a socialist. Today, the protest movement against Duterte, much like his base of support, appears to be taking on the character of a broad church in which groups clash with each other over their core beliefs but nevertheless march together against the administration's policies.

What do these developments say about the state of Philippine democracy? One certainty is that it remains vibrant and contested but is enacted outside the state. An important lesson from the dark era of Ferdinand Marcos's authoritarian rule is that when tyrants seek to concentrate power in the center, resistance grows in the margins. Societies, ultimately, prove to be stronger than strongmen. ■