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Demystifying Duterte's Populism in the Philippines

BY [IAPSDIALOGUE](#) on [FEBRUARY 22, 2017](#) • ([0](#))



Written by [Bonn Iuego](#).

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is drawing global media attention. This is mostly due to his [dirty mouth](#) and his deadly [war on drugs](#). Yet, there is something in the Duterte phenomenon that offers insights into a particular type of populist politics that has hit the Philippines.

Duterte-style populism cuts across classes, genders, generations, and the political

spectrum. The societal results of which are contradictions and conflicts. However, it remains to be seen whether Duterte's populism will deliver on the campaign promises that effectively mobilized popular sentiments against the shortcomings of the country's 30-year liberal-democratic regime.

A Heterodox Politician

Duterte won the election on 9th May, 2016 and officially assumed the presidency on 30th June. He can be considered as a *heterodox* politician with a partly traditional political background and a partly unorthodox political style. He is a 'traditional' politician in the sense that he is a veteran local political boss who has decoded the language and practice of power politics that have long defined Filipino political culture. He has perfected the skills for patronage politics, and learned the realities of money politics. Over the years, he has nurtured the capacity for coercion and violence through the use of guns and goons. Duterte is the undisputed elite in Davao City and has been for more than two decades. His belonging to an [influential political family](#) in the Visayas and Mindanao has exposed him to national-level political wheeling and dealing.

Combined with Duterte's traditional political background is his 'unorthodox' political style. He has displayed uncouth [public behaviour](#), [made vulgar speeches](#), and articulated [politically incorrect](#) statements. Yet, what is so unorthodox in Duterte as a Filipino politician is his bold criticism against the so-called 'establishments' in Philippine politics, society, and culture—namely, the [United States](#), the [oligarchical class](#), and the [Catholic Church](#).

Electoral Victory and Popularity

Duterte [won](#) more than 16 million votes out of the 42 million total votes cast for President. There are, of course, many interrelated issues that can explain Duterte's electoral victory. Yet, there are three factors that stand out as particularly pressing considerations for understanding his meteoric rise.

First, the *agential* factor suggests Duterte's team had a better campaign strategy than his rivals. Duterte's campaign messages touched on the most basic and fundamental issues in the country. They articulated and amplified a whole range of problems from day-to-day concerns like [heavy traffic](#) in Metro Manila, to grander problems of [inequality](#). Key campaign platforms on '[anti-corruption](#)' and '[law and order](#)' easily generated all-encompassing legitimacy, forging a big-tent coalition between different classes, genders, generations, and political affiliations. Such 'catch-all' politics had the effect of 'divide-and-rule' across sections of possible political opposition.

The campaign discourse on '[change](#)' echoed the popular *zeitgeist* against the status quo of elite rule, corrupt government, and societal disorders. Duterte's messianic message of 'change' beat his main rivals' discourse on '[continuity](#)' through the context of a country plagued with tremendous inequality, massive poverty, and a persistent culture of impunity.

Duterte's language, unconstrained by political correctness, resonates well with the 'dominant discourses' in Filipino society and culture, publicly expressing popular beliefs and opinions held deep in the psyche of most people. In particular, notions of machismo, sexism, violence, disregard for human rights, the desire for social order and the need for discipline among citizens. Outrageous comments automatically drew media attention, and even bad publicity proved to be an asset to the campaign.

Lastly, in a country recognized as the [world's capital](#) in the use of social networking, Duterte's campaign ruled the social media landscape as a tool to facilitate populist appeal and legitimacy. Duterte's camp succeeded in forming what social and political psychologists call '[groupthink](#)'. By using the most aggressive '[echo chamber](#)' in the online battle of '[confirmation biases](#)', Duterte won the online propaganda war through [creative memes and images](#) that carried short messages with high impact emotions.

The second factor that contributed to Duterte's ascendancy to the presidency is of an *institutional* nature. The Philippines has a first-past-the post plurality voting system. The results may not have been as favourable to Duterte if the country had a run-off or a two-round voting system. This is the same logic at play with Donald J. Trump winning the presidency under the US Electoral College. The rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe's parliamentary institutions has not been as fast as the surge of individual populists such as Trump and Duterte through their respective presidential systems.

Finally, a third *structural* factor can be inferred from Duterte's popularity. Arguably, his electoral victory signifies the appeal of populism as a critique and protest against liberal democracy. In particular, Duterte's landslide election represents a protest vote against the economic developmental shortcomings and socio-political hypocrisies of the Philippines' liberal-democratic regime of the past 30 years. The so-called '[EDSA Republics](#)', composed of successive administrations that had governed since 1986 when the [People Power](#) uprising toppled dictator Ferdinand Marcos, are supposed to embody the democratic and developmental ideals of liberal democracy. As an alternative, Duterte presented himself as the strongman who will provide leadership by delivering the crucial values of security and freedom for the Filipino people.

Populism in Power: Conflicts and Dangers

If Duterte's supporters can be considered a 'populist movement', it is a political group composed of different social forces from various interest groups, class backgrounds, and individual orientations. However, after half a year as President, Duterte has made at least two major controversial and conflict-ridden political positions, namely: the [extrajudicial killings](#) of suspected traffickers and drug-users, and the [hero's burial of Marcos](#).

By now, Duterte's bloody 'war on drugs' has cost more than [7,000 lives](#) due to vigilante killings and legitimate police operations. Duterte has [denied](#) condoning these killings. Yet, even if these killings are not state-sponsored or state-orchestrated, Duterte's government must do something to stop them. Meanwhile, the burial of dictator Marcos to the heroes' cemetery on the 18th of November 2016 symbolised the perpetuation of the 'culture of impunity' in the Philippines and a significant advance for the Marcos family's long-term project of historical revisionism. At the same time, this moment is indicative of the failure of the People Power uprising that brought about the EDSA Republics. The political revival of the Marcoses has been made possible mostly because they remain wealthy. In plutocratic Philippines, economic wealth easily regenerates into political power.

The observed effects of these controversial issues are: the re-activation of the political opposition to Duterte, and division among his supporters. Though it can be said that Duterte is only being consistent in implementing his campaign promises, not all supporters of Duterte are in favour of his police-centric drug war and his pro-Marcos leanings.

For instance, those who voted for Duterte's losing vice presidential candidate Alan Peter Cayetano and the elected Vice President Leni Robredo are mostly critical of the Marcoses' historical revisionism, if not totally anti-Marcos. Those who voted Duterte for president and Ferdinand Marcos Jr. for vice president are the most aggressive Duterte supporters and Marcos loyalists who have right-wing, authoritarian and dictatorial tendencies. Duterte supporters from the far left are strong advocates for human rights and known enemies of the Marcoses. Moreover, according to the Social Weather Stations' [survey](#) conducted in September, 2016, while an overwhelming number of Filipinos expressed satisfaction with the Duterte government's campaign against illegal drugs, between 71 and 94 percent of Filipinos want drug suspects arrested rather than killed.

Duterte's politics have both the elements of left-wing and right-wing populism. He is a self-proclaimed 'leftist' and 'socialist', and has appointed left-leaning activists to his [cabinet](#). Yet, he does not have a socialist programme or a socialist party, and he does not belong to any leftist social movement. He is vocal about his

criticisms against the establishment institutions in the country. In particular, the US, the landed oligarchy, and the Catholic Church. He initially offered peace negotiations with the [communist rebels](#) and [Islamic separatist groups](#), but recently both processes have stalled.

So far, however, Duterte has shown more of a right-wing than left-wing populism. Prominent in his governance style and speeches are propensities for authoritarianism, the military mind, and active police action, as well as his fascination with Marcos era Martial Law. He also resorts to war or state violence, rather than painstaking social and economic reforms, to address root causes of the problems of rampant criminality and illegal drugs.

Social Change

[‘Change is coming’](#) is the political slogan of Duterte’s populist movement. It is understandable that Duterte’s main thrust is to address the corruption, criminality and illegal drugs trade in the country, but these are not the only areas where change must come. A transformation must occur that seeks to tackle the deeply entrenched problems in the Philippine society and culture, specifically:

- *the culture of violence (where conflicts are dealt with through aggression, physical harm, or death)*
- *the culture of impunity (where the rich, the influential, the politically-connected, and the powerful can get away from their crimes, if not exempted from punishment)*
- *the culture of machismo and sexism (where men subject women to inferiority and violence in act and in speech)*
- *the disregard for human rights (where the problem is not human rights in principle, but the absence of human rights in practice).*

The challenge is for President Duterte and his passionate supporters to choose to be part of the solution rather than to be defenders of these deep socio-cultural problems in the country. Moreover, the question to ask for the well-being of the Filipino people is not how long Duterte will remain popular, but how he can