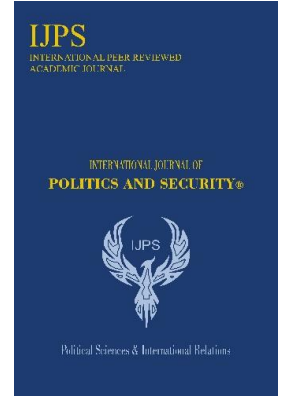


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## President Rodrigo Duterte and the Birth of Radical Democracy in the Philippines

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## President Rodrigo Duterte and the Birth of Radical Democracy in the Philippines

Christopher Ryan MABOLOC\*

### Abstract

*In this paper, I examine the radical approach to politics of President Rodrigo Duterte. I will trace the roots of this radicalism to the colonial history of the Philippines in which the Spanish colonizers instituted an elitist democratic system that engendered a deep social divide that has made the people of Mindanao felt betrayed by the capital. This politics of exclusion also gave rise to terrorism in the Southern Part of the country, the latest incident of which was the crisis in Marawi that has left the city devastated to the ground. Political analysts have always criticized the president's War on Drugs as anti-poor. However, Duterte has remained prominent due to his radical means toward governance. Previous administrations have been accused as lacking any political will. Duterte, on the other hand, has symbolized the strong will of a leader who possesses the charisma necessary to institute structural change.*

**Key Words:** Colonialism, Elite democracy, Radical politics, Rodrigo Duterte, War on Drugs

## Başkan Rodrigo Duterte ve Filipinlerde Radikal Demokrasinin Doğuşu

### Özet\*\*

*Bu makalede, Başkan Rodrigo Duterte'nin siyaset radikal yaklaşımı incelenmektedir. Bu radikalizmin kökleri, İspanyol sömürgeciler tarafından kurulan seçkin bir demokratik sistem nedeniyle Mindanao halkını başkent tarafından ihanete uğramış hissettiren ve derin bir sosyal bölünme yaratan içeren Filipinler'in sömürge tarihinde aranmaktadır.*

*Bu dışlanma politikası, ülkenin güney kesiminde terörizme de yol açmıştır. Bunun son örneği şehri yok eden Marawi'deki kriz olmuştur. Siyasi analistler Başkanın Uyuşturucu Savaşı'nı yoksul karşıtı olarak görüp eleştirmişlerdir. Önceki yönetimler ise siyasal irade göstermekte yetersiz kalmakla suçlanmışlardır. Duterte ise, yapısal değişimi başlatmak için gerekli karizmaya sahip güçlü bir lideri sembolize etmiş ve yönetimde uyguladığı radikal yöntemlerle hep ön planda kalmıştır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Seçkin Demokrasi, Sömürgecilik, Radikal Siyaset, Rodrigo Duterte, Uyuşturucu Savaşı

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## 1. Introduction

On the same day the Maute Group raised the ISIS flag in Marawi, a picture of the incident spread online and immediately became viral. The image, of course, caused alarm on the part of the public. Many thought that the country is under attack and that the whole of Marawi has been burned to the ground. The investigation of the military will reveal later that the Maute Group had months to prepare before the siege, and have stocked up on ammunition and supplies which has made it difficult for the AFP to neutralize them. A video was circulated that shows the group planning the siege in Marawi with Abu Sayyaf leader Ismilon Hapilon. The terrorist, who also carries a bounty of five million dollars in his head, was quiet during the whole course of the discussions. His face was stoic and there was an irreverent type of eerie silence in his aura that served as a premonition of bad things to come. All of these, captured in one video, and spread all over to millions of people by means of social media.

The two brothers, Omar and Abdullah, attended school at the local Protestant-run Dansalan College, which they burned during the siege. The brothers, documents reveal, were radicalized, after going to the Middle East. They were contract workers, but found the time to study Islamic theology. The Mautes are descendants of a Maranao clan, a local Muslim tribe, in Butig, Lanao Del Sur. Reports also indicate that the terrorist organization had a propensity for a “Taliban-style” justice system, espousing a puritanical notion of community that is absolutely antagonistic to non-Muslims. Inspired by the Islamic State (ISIS), the Maute Group brought with them an extreme and dangerous ideology, as demonstrated by their attack of the town of Butig that caused its ruin and the dislocation of local residents.

Since the time of President Quezon, politics in the Philippines has not been insulated from the submissive requirements of a patronage system that dates back to the Spanish period. Reynaldo Ileto says that Philippine politics is a patron-client affair.<sup>1</sup> Vicente Rafael explains that the “patron-client relationship stretches back to the Spanish conquest of the New World.”<sup>2</sup> The Spanish regime exploited the Filipino not only by way of tributes and forced labor, but by

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<sup>1</sup> Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1979), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1988), 147.



elevating the privileged class of mestizos called *principales*, the precursor to our modern day *politico*. During the Spanish era, the “bureaucrats who were then appointed to implement the new laws more often than not abused them.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the Filipino historian Renato Constantino, “the fact that the Americans were able to count among their supporters the many high ranking leaders of the revolution proved very useful to them, the collaboration of the ilustrados provided the Americans with a justification for the colonization of the Philippines.”<sup>4</sup> The elite among Filipinos who benefited from foreign rule are the ones who have hastened the subjugation of the islands. This pattern exists to this day where the reality is that the young and educated are employed by the oligarchy, thereby perpetuating the extractive economic development that has broadened the income gap between the rich and poor. In fact, the point of the matter is that it is the abuse of authority that has perpetuated this gap, one that goes back to the Spanish period. Rafael writes that the Filipinos then who were in positions of authority “hold over the lands in question is signaled by the Spanish word “poder,” which means “complete authority.”<sup>5</sup>

The American colonizers saw to it that the Filipinos will have that kind of government that will hasten the domination of the latter. What emerged later on is a system that remained largely feudal without any foundation on the ground for the equal representation of people in government. The participation in the government by Filipinos was limited to the influential few and intelligent *ilustrados* who had interests for self-aggrandizement. The will to live on the part of the masses has been thwarted by the kind of patronage practiced during the Commonwealth. This patronage system is not a modern day phenomenon. It can be traced back to the administration of Spanish authorities which can be simply summed up as the politics of exclusion. The power dynamics that caused the weakness of the political culture in the country exists to this day. Paul Hutchcroft and Joel Rocamora write:

*The logic of Philippine politics became driven to a very considerable extent by the politics of patronage: dividing the spoils among the elite and expanding the*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*, (Manila: Tala Publications, 1975), 236.

<sup>5</sup> Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, 164.



*quantity of spoils available to the elite as a whole. Local elite patrons used a variety of means – kinship, personal ties, and the offering of jobs, services and other favors – to build a clientele composed of those from the lower social classes which constituted a large vote bank.<sup>6</sup>*

The political reality in the Philippines is that public officials often belong to a higher class. They are seen as being in cahoots with rent-seeking businessmen who manipulate and extract from the blood and sweat of the poor Filipino. The problems of Filipinos cannot be solved because those whom the people have entrusted the power to govern have become a huge part of the problem. Structural injustices in our institutions systematically exploit and continually take advantage of the powerless. Where a state is dysfunctional and poorly governed, the element of favoritism, kinship, and personality-based politics will define the kind of relationship citizens will have with their public officials. The consequence is that ordinary people are deprived of the benefits of progress. In this regard, any linear and state-centric approach to nation-building will simply reinforce the latent and obvious injustices that the people have been subjected to. Any political reform that starts from the top will be meaningless given that most of those who are in positions of power are deeply entrenched in their old bad habits. For this reason, the radical ways of leading a country becomes desirable.

It is already settled that democratic institutions are established for the common interests of every citizen. State formation is intended to equitably share the material resources of the country. Yet, traditional politicians and transactional leaders actually do not want to rectify the corruption in the system because they profit from it. Thus, reform must begin from the bottom – the people themselves. But solidarity would be difficult to achieve since the sentiment of the poor is that they cannot trust their leaders most of whom are scions of the past oppressors of the Filipino people. The ruling elite in the capital, from the point of view of the poor, cannot become the touted as their saviors since the poor are the victims of the unjust socio-economic order brought about by those who rule them. If the political leaders that Filipinos have are nothing but those who come from ruling class, then the feeling from below is that the country

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Hotchkroft and Joel Rocamora, “Strong Demands and Weak Institutions: The Origins and Evolution of Democratic Deficits in the Philippines,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2003): 266.



will have failed to truly democratize its leadership.

The truth is that deep structural injustices have resulted to the economic divide in Philippine society. This type of antagonism is a consequence of the reality of political exclusion that deprives a sector the actual opportunity to become part of the decision-making processes on policies in the state. It is not an overstatement to say that massive corruption does not only point to the acute weakness of the electoral culture. It also reveals the sheer failure of institutions to safeguard the rights and freedoms of people. The disintegration of Philippine society into a “we” and “they” for results to the impoverishment of the lives that people have. But more than that, there is real class prejudice existing the country. Most professionals so often mock the poor for their perceived lack of discipline and those who live in urban centers undermine the intellectual aptitude of provincial graduates. The poor are viewed as parasites, dependent on their government. In fact, many wrongly believe that only the educated class in the metropolis possess the real power of reason because it is said that the *probinsyano* have nothing but their endless complaints about their being victims of government neglect. This type of political prejudice is nothing short of oppressive. It is brought about the ill and evil effects of post-colonialism which has defined the Filipino people’s way of life and the manner by which they see themselves.

## **2. Nation-States and Radical Politics**

The politics in the Third World, including the Philippines, is about the vision of establishing that just or egalitarian society. There is, in this respect, a concern for the rights of the disadvantaged who have been perpetually oppressed. The reason for any attempt at radical reform, of course, is that particular inequalities, especially in the economic and social status of people, are unjustified. This has bred Duterte’s leftist attitude. The politics involving the “left” was conceived during the *French Revolution*, referring to the seating arrangement in the *Estates General*, which those who sat on the left were favorable to the establishment of the republic and support for secular values. Leftists, who are often branded as radical, advocated changes and reforms, and soon thereafter, it became a label for a Marxist type of revolution. This is



important since Duterte has considered himself a progressive. He has endured having embraced this principle, even with all the political divergence, breaking points, and splits in the country after the EDSA revolt.

Radical democracy, according to the Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, is about the reality of contestation and the openness to antagonism.<sup>7</sup> The meaning of every struggle, in this way, cannot be uniform. Democracy is diverse. It can be said that the Philippines as a nation has that collective interest in its progress and peace, but Filipinos remain divided in their heart and soul in terms of how this might be achieved. As such, conflict and antagonism will always play a particular role in the type of governance in a country. The notion of a homogeneous society is to be discarded, although social institutions are functional but not utopian in terms of goal. Being a functioning democracy, in fact, is the malady bedeviling the Filipino nation. Yet, Filipinos did not create this problem. The root of this particular truth, appears to be historical rather than cultural. Rafael explains:

*This privilege implied that the kind, as the patron of the Church, was an exemplary Christian. His position as patron resulted from his prior submission to another patron, God. The enforcement of his rule was a function of his obedience to God's rules, the exercise of his privileges, and his recognition of his obligations to the Father.*<sup>8</sup>

History and context, in this respect, is crucial in understanding how a society works. There cannot be a singular concept of freedom or even independence. The meaning of being one nation, in fact, cannot proceed from the rationalizations in the public sphere. It is something that is founded in the history of common folks and the way they view this history. Mouffe, thus, clarifies that in a radical democracy, the logic of identity of the state dissipates. There is no longer one universal approach, although this also means the exclusion of those who do not belong to the state. For instance, the usual monologue on a universal concept of human rights appears to be weakened by Duterte's uncompromising insistence of the state's justified use of violence against its enemies in order to protect the interest of the public.

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<sup>7</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Liberalism and Modern Democracy," in *Democracy and Possessive Individualism*, ed. Joseph Carens, (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, 147-48.



The bone of contention is that the Western conceptions of human rights neglect the strong claims of community. People often find themselves possessing an identity by virtue of their set of common beliefs or convictions, shared understandings, culture, and values. The politics of the common good, in fact, may run counter to the concept of individual freedom. This is so because modern liberalism has disregarded how the particularity of cultures may come to affect the people's political life. The life of citizens cannot be abstracted nor separated from the dimension of their communitarian soul. Nation-building as the unfolding of history in political movements is something that the atomism of liberals has never really paid attention to.

Radical democracy, indeed, maintains that the political cannot and should not be limited to any rational discourse because to do so is to tie politics to the narrow limits of rationality. A rational consensus for Mouffe ignores the value of passion in the political. The role of political philosophy, she argues, is not to decide the meaning of liberal concepts, but it is to give the interpretations to these concepts.<sup>9</sup> The normal way of doing things will not work in a society like the Philippines where the lives of people appear abnormal. For this reason, the clamor for a strong leader who is politically decisive, or even one who by-passes systems, becomes clear. Any politician who will not do what is needed because one is restrained by policies or the law for that matter is considered a weakling. Filipinos, in this respect, are not really against shortcuts if the same can bring actual results and immediate benefits, especially for one's personal ends. The masses often look up to the politician like some kind of a demi-god who will solve their problems.

Graham Taylor thinks that "the nation state played a central role in the maintenance of fixed and of stable political cultures and stable identities around universal and essentialist categories."<sup>10</sup> Policies, for instance, mean something to people who are governed by reason and thinking. But in the end, it is what the politician does in a very personal way that ultimately appeals to the masses. In poor societies like the Philippines, nation-building does not follow that path so patterned after successful economies because there remains the stigma of colonial

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<sup>9</sup> Mouffe, "Liberalism and Modern Democracy," 190.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Taylor, "The End of the Nation State: The Disarticulation of Power and Identity," in *The New Political Sociology*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 55.





oppression which influences the ill feelings and attitude of new leaders and their people against their former masters, and who, in their consciousness, cannot be truly trusted given decades or even centuries of exploitation and abuse.

Duterte has so effectively decentered and disarticulated political power in the country by reaching out to the sentiments of the people. He is out there to tear apart the old tradition where government authority is conveniently found at the center. This is the kind of new radicalism that Filipinos right now find themselves in. And with it, what comes next are a daily dosage of vitriolic speeches, live news about summary killings, political maneuverings and mudslinging, or a plethora of harsh criticisms and angry pronouncements, all of which make manifest the separation between politics and the normative rules of morality. But we need to examine the roots of Duterte's radical approach to leadership. We have to analyze the context with which such a means toward absolute control may be made possible. Filipino society is at that point in history in which the polarization that is unfolding has reached unprecedented proportions, if one were to judge the same from online provocations and disagreements. Where will this new order lead Filipinos? And is this the kind of change that we so desire as a people?

### **3. Political versus Moral Discourse**

The type of democracy Filipinos practice is aptly characterized by strong demands and weak institutions.<sup>11</sup> In sum, according to Hotchcroft and Rocamora, all politics in the country is defined by its patronage system.<sup>12</sup> Political patrons, financed by the oligarchy, often coerce poor voters to put into office their protégés. Coercion may not be necessarily by force or violence, but through subtle goods which deprive voters of an intelligent choice. In turn, political patrons influence those who are elected to return the favor. They all enlarge their power to influence policies by putting into positions of authority the person who will protect their business interests. The poor electorate, on the other hand, have become the expendable collaterals, and are never a meaningful participant in the political exercise. The above, indeed,

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<sup>11</sup> Hotchcroft and Rocamora, "Strong Demands and Weak Institutions," 262.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



is the standard explanation as to why the Philippines has suffered for a very long time and suggests why Filipinos are still dominated by an elite ruling class that is actually a stranger to the reality of the lives of people in the margins.

Perhaps, most Filipino politicians are conscious of their duty and commitment to the people. However, their offices are compromised by the fact that they have to enforce state policies against benefactors who finance one's ascent to power. The problem of extreme poverty, while inherently economic, is to a large extent political. Since politics is about the use of power, then the way power makes itself felt in the economic and social dimensions must be studied. From a democratic point of view, government authority must give preference to the disadvantaged. But since Filipinos do not have a real democracy, power, it can be said, has been misused and abused to benefit a chosen few. The exclusion of the voices from the margins, the perpetuation of a neo-colonial regime, and the reality of a semi-feudal socio-economic order all demand for drastic political reform that must be initiated by a leader who is not afraid to bring change at the expense of his own political capital.

The rise of Duterte to power is often attributed to the disenchantment of the Filipino masses. The ruling elite in Philippine society have failed the masses for years. The actual problem with the Filipino brand of democracy is that it has been reduced into the pursuit of personal interests. Bereft of any ethical content, social policy in the country has become a radical instrument for exclusion. Politics in the archipelagic nation has been mostly pure rhetorical, but characteristically empty in substance. Duterte knows that the real challenge of the present administration is to fully exonerate itself from the same political malady that dogged its predecessors. While it has been suggested by some statistical data that the socio-economic conditions of Filipinos may have improved during the second Aquino regime, still various problems have taken the center stage, all of which erased from the minds of the people the purported gains of the former administration.

Duterte knows that political discourse is different from moral discourse. He too understands that politics is not about negotiations and agreement, but power and the effective use of persuasion. It can be said that the emphasis on the affective sentiments of the people in



pursuing the solutions to social problems, or his use of very vulgar and non-conventional language in communicating to national and international stakeholders, and the maverick approach in terms managing foreign relations, are just some of the obvious instances where the President attempts to break away from tradition. Right now, in this post-colonial approach, the opposing poles in our political landscape will remain in chaos as one competes over the other for supremacy and relevance. However, what is quite clear is that the present administration has actually succeeded in obliterating the opposition, taking away from it any form of relevance, as indicated by the high trust ratings that the President still maintains.

But it can be argued that Duterte has succeeded where Aquino failed, not in terms of policy or political will, but in the then-mayor's strategy of appealing to the sentiments of the masses. It is Duterte's way of communicating with them, often with deeply the felt passion that has won him the people's trust. By focusing on the affective sentiments of the masses, Duterte has effectively portrayed himself as that caring father figure. Duterte is the image of a firm and principled parent who must protect his children from danger. This danger, of course, obviously refers to criminality on the streets. While people might not have rejected their belief in universal values, their attitude towards politics is that it must be able to serve the poor masses, who are often the victims of the oppressive regime of the country's old ruling class. Aquino and Roxas, in this regard, have simply become the antagonists in Duterte's mythic journey to Malacanang. Duterte, in this respect, is the anti-thesis to the old guards – the political elite in the capital and its economic oligarchs.

The criticisms against Duterte are borne out of the way he addresses public issues and the way he handles the problems of the country. He deals with them like the way a mayor does. He speaks not from the point of view of policy but on the basis of his connection with the people. In this way, he can be perceived to be less circumspect and notorious in terms of his responses that for political analysts, would require in-depth brainstorming and discussions. The judgment, in this respect, that the president is against human rights or that he does not respect others, is simply due to his critics' infatuation with elitist democracy. In fact, despite the enormous resources poured in the campaign and the massive political capital of Aquino, his patron, the



administration candidate Roxas still lost the election due to the confluence of factors that include his lack of charisma and his inefficient handling of the Yolanda disaster relief operations.

In fact, the President is also playing well the card of cultural and political hegemony to his advantage. This is not to suggest that he has the wrong political motives in doing so. But what is obvious is that he has been able to consolidate all his power in order to protect himself from any political threat from those who may have actual plans to challenge his position at the top. First, he has done so by forming a super coalition in Congress and next, by visiting all the major military camps and establishments in the country. This can only mean one thing – Duterte is a politician who knows how to please his people, but at the same time, he is also that master strategist in terms of maintaining his grip into power.

The liberal position on political issues require dialogue and a consensus in order to address issues in a broader context. Duterte does not seem to believe this. As a pragmatist, he knows that he must serve those who voted for him. With this, the prejudices of Filipinos against each other do not just come from political demarcation lines – they are deeply rooted in the hegemonic regional divide. For most Filipinos, Manila evokes images of high rise structures, elite schools, of flyovers and very horrendous traffic, while Mindanao where Duterte comes from, is often associated with the Moro rebellion, the rural life and indeed, massive poverty. In this way, politics has only become that existential burden in the never-ending search for happiness of a people. Duterte is a cunning politician. He knows what the common people wants and he also dances to the tune of what angers them.

#### **4. The Other Story behind Duterte's War on Drugs**

Two people on a motorcycle, which is often described as riding in tandem, emerged from the dark. In an alley where four young were having a drink, an assailant armed with a 9mm Beretta approaches one of the boys and shoots him in the head. The young man is down and the attacker escapes. In a poor community somewhere in the City of Caloocan, the police were to serve the court issued warrant of arrest. Suddenly, there was an exchange of fire. After the smoke is clear, five young men lay dead on the ground. "Nanlaban," which can be loosely



translated as “fought back,” is often the standard explanation given to the media by authorities. The term has found itself in the mainstream consciousness of Filipinos, often the subject of parodies on TV and online.

Duterte, who was then a prosecutor, was appointed to the position of Vice Mayor after his mother Soledad refused the invitation of Cory to the same post shortly after the latter had assumed power in Malacanang. In 1988, Duterte first won the mayoralty race against Zafiro Respicio. He inherited a Davao that was ripe with insurgency, with Sparrow Units of the guerilla New People’s Army (NPA) targeting both civilians and the uniformed personnel of the Integrated National Police in the urban center of the city, notably in Agdao, which was then famously known as “Nicaragdao.” The mayor’s no-nonsense style changed the political climate in the city by instituting discipline and public order.

Alysson Jaggar writes “the word terrorism was introduced only in late eighteenth century France when Robespierre initiated a Reign of Terror that was meant to deter counter-revolutionary critics. Between 1793 and 1794, thousands of French citizens were executed, mainly by the newly invented guillotine.”<sup>13</sup> The former broadcaster Juan Porras Pala, himself a victim of assassination, often described the Duterte regime in Davao as a “reign of terror.” This is significant since Duterte himself admits that a leader must be a terror to the few who are a threat to the majority. It is worth nothing that terror in its original use had a political context. In fact, the vile threats of Duterte, and the sentiment of civil society on his War on Drugs, manifest the feeling of fear and insecurity on the part of some although the majority who views the president as trustworthy think that Duterte is doing what is right, even if it is at the expense of human rights.

“I will kill you,” which Duterte is fond of saying, evokes very threatening images, the like of which will make the poor Filipino think first before doing anything that is against the law. The masses, who seldom read, are a visual people, and they only have the TV and the radio as their primary source of information. Their lack of moral and intellectual sophistication imply

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<sup>13</sup> Allyson Jaggar, “What is Terrorism, Why is it Wrong? And Could it ever be Morally Permissible?”, In *Journal of Social Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2005): 202.



that they are used to shouting matches and to foul language in their well-knit villages, which also means that Duterte's manner of speaking becomes effective because of this social dynamics. But this catchphrase also encapsulates Duterte's philosophy in preserving the common good. Intimidation, in this respect, is one of the instruments that the president believes will deliver public order.

Every single day, people are a witness to the "theater of execution" on the streets, but they have remained apathetic to the malevolence of such a dark spectacle. Murder now assumes a moral role – the protection of the public. In fact, the people will ignore the evil around them because they are actually benefiting from it. They find no reason to confront it. Many among us who are silent and useless are a party to a terrible crime. People are guilty of abandoning the ideals of democracy, which is anchored in the rule of law. The killing of the powerless in the streets sometimes will make one believe that people are living in a world that no longer knows what is truly human. Still, people will continue to discriminate against these victims, who are labelled as "salot ng lipunan" or a menace to society.

Most of the victims of the summary executions belong to poor families. But the majority of the Philippine population support and think that they will continue to benefit from Duterte's War on Drugs. While there are surveys which suggest that many are not in favor of extra-judicial killing, a vast majority however, will find it hard to distinguish between the legal enforcement aspect of police work and the use of violence. Since Duterte assumed the presidency, the official count on the number of lives lost in relation to the War on Drugs now stands at more than 13,000. But it is worth nothing that there has not been a universal uproar against the summary executions. Gaspar says that those from the clergy who oppose the war on drug seemed like "voices in the wilderness."<sup>14</sup> In a country such as the Philippines where the vast majority would rather remain in the safety of their private homes, such is not really unexpected.

But as Karl Gaspar asks, have Filipinos "coalesced together as a people with a common

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Gaspar, "An Attempt at Dissecting the Presidency of Rodrigo Duterte", In *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (2018): 6.



vision of what should be the ethical and moral framework of the republic?”<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, it is not only the people from Mindanao who showed their uncompromising support for Duterte’s War on Drugs. Those who belong to classes A, B, and C, who comprise the higher class, the rich, and educated in Philippine society, elected the then-mayor to the highest position of the land. The appeal of Duterte goes beyond his charismatic person. Max Weber has particularly exposed the emergence of leaders who will defy the legal-rational aspect of democratic governance by means of the sheer appeal of their personality. But in the case of Duterte, the latent benefit that the rich segment of the population gets from his vitriolic style and harsh policy against criminality and drugs determine both the level of approval people have.

### **5. Political Struggles in the Philippines (1898-1986)**

As what was stated at the outset, Manila-centric voices have longed ruled the Philippines, thereby suppressing the differing opinion of those who dwell in the peripheries, especially on those matters pertaining to Mindanao. For Filipinos, Manila has become the ideological center in the manner by which the Philippines comes to be understood. And for this reason, Muslim Mindanao has remained in the peripheries. This results to a double type of injustice – historical and economic. This is what Mouffe means by an “agonizing pluralism.”<sup>16</sup> For it is the victors, not the vanquished, who write the history of a nation. Even a great revolution is defined by a special class of people, who will then exclude and simply consider as bandits anybody who does not belong to this meta-narrative. This hides, for instance, the true struggle of the people.

Duterte sees his rule as the political struggle of the masses. But there is a perceived bias with the very way his critics and the Western media portray the former mayor. This prejudice can be traced to the politics practiced in the country in its post-colonial period. After Spain ceded the territory to the Americans in 1898 just for 20 million dollars, most Ilustrado politicians, who are characterized as those who have attained high education, dominated the political scene and defined how the affairs of the state must be conducted. These landed and high profile politicians included such personalities as Pedro Paterno, Manuel Quezon, Sergio

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>16</sup> Mouffe, “Liberalism and Modern Democracy,” 189.



Osmena Sr., and Manuel Roxas. The caliber and breeding of these leaders served as the standard for the national leadership. During the revolution against Spain, the movement known as *La Solidaridad*, which also counts Jose Rizal, Marcelo Del Pilar, and Miguel Lopez Jaena, as its famous members, became the most prominent representation of Ilustrados in Philippine society. Those names have been erected in the pedestal of Philippine history, worshipped as intellectuals, and idolized by the country's youth.

In the contemporary period, the office of the president is alien to the personalized approach of local politics that the likes of Duterte has been accustomed to. President Ramon Magsaysay, the man of the masses, brought Malacanang to the Filipinos, but he died while in office. The emphasis on laws and policy reforms, for instance, make a public figure an impersonal representation of the national office. On the other hand, the kind of politics practiced in most towns and in the rural regions bring out the elements of communal solidarity and the strength of family ties between the politician and his constituents. Duterte, it can be said, follows the same pattern and offers the same kind of leadership. More so, his appeal to the masses is due to his message that his government is the continuation of the old struggle against imperialist interests or the hegemonic relation between empire and slaves that has persisted to this day.

Since the time of the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, the weaknesses of the Philippine state are obvious, given its inability to deliver basic services to the people, initiate the equitable distribution of wealth, and promote the cause of peace. In fact, Philippine democracy is one that is marked by the weakness of its institutions due to an age-old patronage system.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary Filipino society, it is also observed, lack discipline and its decrepit government offices are like shadows in the dark that have forestalled the advance of young people who continue to look for some meaning and relevance amidst all the poverty and the injustices suffered by the poor. It is for this reason that a charismatic leader such as Duterte can easily win the sentiments of the masses, who are fed up by the ineptitude of the elitist brand of governance

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<sup>17</sup> Hotchcroft and Rocamora, "Strong Demands and Weak Institutions," 259.





during the past Aquino regime.

But it can be argued that what the state needs is not an iron-fisted president but functional institutions and the respect for the rule of law. The political culture in the country has remained so immature. For this reason, there is plausibility in the idea that the president is a product of the same old tradition of politics in the country. Local politicians, given the patronage system practiced at their level, control the masses through very subtle ways. This enables the politician to project a certain level of invincibility. Yet, it should be the case that in any modern democracy, no person should be above the law, including the president.

Filipinos must solve their age-old political dilemma. The nation is torn between the idea of liberal democracy and the need for discipline and radicalism. It is not a question as to whether or not they should gamble their future on a man like Duterte. Rather, it that cruel choice between strengthening their public institutions or letting the present regime fall into the ravine by means of its radical ways. President Duterte holds as his most important virtue what the two former Aquino regimes did not possess – political will. The task at hand, therefore, is to capitalize on this virtue in order to effect social transformation in the country. It is crucial for Filipinos to have the right attitude and make the mature discernment if it must pursue a truly democratic path.

The rise of Duterte into power is nothing accidental. It is a consequence of the failures of elite democracy that has for a very long time enjoyed the benefits of progress but has alienated the masses. The Aquino regime served under the pretext of moral change, but the same cabals in the halls of Congress maintained the grip into power. Local dynasts remained unchecked and those who had the trust of the former president continued in their abusive ways and vested interests. In fact, public office in the country can be summed up in one word – self-serving.

But if we are to return to where we started, the reality of terror in our times might require a country to take that cruel measure in order to protect the interests of the public. The lack of a political will on the part of a leader has dangerous consequences. It is for this reason that there



is some form of virtue in the manifest will-power of the president. Terrorists have become more sophisticated in the ways and planning. Indeed, a society who does not have a strong leader might collapse and fall into the hands of terror organizations who can easily take advantage of the obvious weakness of nation-states. The threat of terror is real. In this sense, people must trust themselves and strengthen their solidarity if they are to win against those who seek to wreak havoc in the lives of innocent human beings.

The above position does not and cannot exonerate Duterte from the alleged human rights violations his regime might have committed due to his hardline stance against criminals. What this thesis is trying to point out is that, given the realities of our times, the survival of nation-states can only depend on those leaders who possess the resolve to reform the basic structure of society even if the same individual will have spent all of his political capital. Anything less would catapult any given country into chaos, and its public order shattered. In this regard, Duterte's promise of change should be viewed from the optimistic perspective that his radical approach to leadership will truly bring about reforms in the country's weak institutions and their mode of governance.

## **Conclusion**

The rise of Rodrigo Duterte is often attributed to the sheer failure of Ilustrado politics in the country. The promise of change during the second Aquino regime and the mere restoration of elite democracy by the Cory government has resulted to the disillusionment of the Filipino masses. Due to the obvious disappoint felt by the majority and the frustrations of those in the capital, state and politics in the Philippines have laid the very foundation for a radical type of leadership. This very background paved the way to the vitriolic speeches of the current president and the virulent social media campaigns of his propagandists. While his War on Drugs have clearly manifested some sort of disrespect for the rule of law and the open denial of human rights, the Filipino people appear to trust the president because they actually benefit from his ruthless campaign against criminality.



But the social and political conflict in the Philippines will not soon go away. This is because of the entrenchment of the Filipino people in a colonial nostalgia that has morally divided Filipinos for so long. Philippine history is a history of hegemony. Indeed, while the president's unsmiling radicalism is not the greatest threat to the freedom of the Filipino people, he is proud to have been a divisive figure. The lack of unity among Filipinos, hence, is the real problem. Duterte's language of dissent and the way he takes advantage of the affective sentimentality of the people cannot hide the fact that Filipinos as people, are a victim of a colonial logic and that Duterte has found the ripe occasion to exploit this.

The Philippines is not a mature democracy. The reason for this, as shown by the preceding explanations, is that we have not fully achieved that unified vision as a nation. It is important that each and every Filipino will be given the opportunity to flourish and live the good life. The quality of one's standard of living is reflective of the respect people have for each other. Human freedom, in this regard, can only be achieved in the ability of persons to achieve the life they so desire. The problems of the Filipino people are structural in nature. Our lack of economic progress means that there is a need to reform our political institutions. More than the need for a single man to carry the burden for the whole country, the right thing to do is transform Philippine society by strengthening its democratic processes.

The weakness of our basic institutions manifests our lack of unity of people. Institutional decisions and strategic directions are based on the choices made by those in authority to whom the electorate entrust political power. As such, it matters how people choose their leaders and those who will formulate policies that will affect their life-situations. Filipinos must be empowered to exercise their political will in electing good and competent leaders. It is beyond question that the development of modern nations draws from the fundamental principles of democratic governance and dialogue. Political maturity and economic progress are interrelated.

Filipinos should resort back to the normative standard of reasonableness that characterizes the meaning of democracy. Radicalism is not a license to commit any moral wrong. The idea of a radical democracy cannot be used to bypass or destroy political relations nor seek to dissolve social institutions. To do so is some form of autocracy, and to use force in so doing is tyranny. To be an authentic democracy means that the people are mature enough to



distinguish right from wrong. It is the moral worth of persons that determines for all how to live in a civilized world. The sacrifice of our democratic ideals is unacceptable because it can only mean the irreparable loss of our basic liberties.

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