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EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

COMPETING INTEGRATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Erosion of Liberalism and the Rise of Duterte in the Philippines



This brief situates the rise and continued popularity of President Rodrigo Duterte within an intellectual history of Philippine liberalism. First, the history of the Philippine liberal tradition is examined beginning in the nineteenth century before it became the dominant mode of elite governance in the twentieth century. It then argues that “Dutertismo” (the dominant ideology and practice in the Philippines today) is both a reaction to, and an assault on, this liberal tradition. It concludes that the crisis brought about by the election of Duterte presents an opportunity for liberalism in the Philippines to be reimagined to confront the challenges faced by this country of almost 110 million people.

Lisandro E. Claudio, March 2019

INTRODUCTION

The election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 took many political commentators by surprise. At the time of the election, conventional wisdom held that one of three main candidates would win the election. Initially, the favored candidate was then Vice President Jejomar Binay, a pro-poor populist in the mold of former president Joseph Estrada (in office from 1998-2001). As a former mayor of Makati City, the wealthy business center of Metro Manila, Binay had set up a formidable electoral machinery that capitalized on Makati’s ties with other cities across the country. However, when Binay’s name was dragged through corruption hearings in the Philippine Senate, his favorability numbers dropped. The controversy paved the way for the emergence of Grace Poe—a first-term senator and daughter of the country’s most prominent action star turned presidential candidate—to emerge as the front-runner. Though always behind in the polls, few commentators dismissed the chances of President Benigno Aquino III’s anointed candidate, then interior secretary Manuel “Mar” Roxas from ultimately catching up. The endorsement of a popular incumbent president and the machinery of incumbency always matter in Philippine politics.

Duterte’s win was a product of a sophisticated campaign strategy. He entered the race late, thus slipping under the radar of public scrutiny, which insulated him from the mudslinging of the early campaign period. Binay’s opponents were focused on the corruption charges against him; Poe’s opponents questioned her citizenship (she had acquired and then renounced US citizenship); Roxas

was being blamed for mistakes that occurred during the Aquino administration. While all this was occurring in the foreground of media attention, Duterte was building a solid base of support through tireless local campaigning and through a vitriolic social media movement that demonized the Aquino administration.

Nevertheless, seen from a wider perspective, beyond simple strategy, Duterte's win must be interpreted amid a broad disillusionment with the dominant liberal-democratic tradition that the Aquino administration represented. This policy brief traces the history of Philippine liberalism in order to contextualize Duterte's systematic challenge to this tradition. While few commentators agree on the ideology/ideologies that Duterte stands for, few are in doubt that Duterte stands against liberal democracy.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Filipino nationalism was founded on liberalism. In the late nineteenth century, the first generation of Filipino nationalists—the generation of “*ilustrados*” (enlightened ones) who inspired the anti-Spanish revolution of 1896—articulated their critique of Spanish colonialism through the language of liberalism. The *primus inter pares* of the *ilustrados* was the novelist Jose Rizal, now considered the national hero of the Philippines. Rizal advocated liberal reforms in the colony such as a free press, freedom of association, freedom from arbitrary arrest, and respect for individual property rights. His writings and tireless efforts had a profound impact. The militant *Katipunan*, which launched the Philippine revolution, drew largely from the thinking of Rizal and the *ilustrados*. They were advocates of a free, liberal republic in Asia and in this regard, the Filipino nation can be seen as founded on liberalism. Nevertheless, the revolutionary project of the 1890s was to be still born, cut short by the violent American occupation of the country. However, certain American politicians and policymakers cultivated and supported liberal intellectuals in order to attract support for the colonial regime.

The Philippines gained independence from the United States in 1946, but, even prior to that event, liberal Filipino intellectuals had already risen to prominent positions in the colonial bureaucracy. Liberalism therefore became the key state-building ideology of twentieth-century Philippines. Yet, despite its prominence at the center of Philippine politics, this liberalism never spread into the margins of society. In other words, although the country's leaders and its educated class saw themselves as liberal, the rest of the country did not.

There are two reasons for this. First, the mass movements of the twentieth-century were largely socialist. Moreover, those that were not socialist were largely influenced by the Catholic Church, which did not, as a general rule, espouse liberal principles (of course, with a number of notable exceptions). Second, Philippine liberalism in practice inadequately dealt with issues of economic inequality, and hence it never attracted mass support or adherence.

The first major challenge to Philippine liberalism was the authoritarian rule of President Ferdinand E. Marcos (in office from 1965-1986). In 1972, Marcos implemented martial law to perpetuate himself in office and centralize power through instrumentalizing the military, which he had carefully cultivated. He argued that his actions constituted a “democratic revolution from the center,” which sought to combat two extremes in Philippine society. On the left, he claimed to be fighting the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). On the right, he claimed that his regime was moving against the oligarchic families that dominated the economy.

Marcos's goals were ostensibly laudable, and they were even couched in the language of liberal democracy, leading one commentator to remark that the dictator may have been a “crypto-democrat” using authoritarian tactics. The reality however was that Marcos's “centrism” was a ruse. His anti-Communism, which exaggerated the Maoist threat, was a tactic to legitimize his regime in the eyes of the United States. And his targeting of the “oligarchy” was a hypocritical attempt to demolish his opponents and to prop up the cronies that were loyal to him.

During the Marcos period, the once traditional and entrenched Liberal Party rebuilt itself into a party of conscience and genuine opposition. It was one of the many groups that organized opposition to Marcos, yet the most prominent opposition force, however, was the Communist Party and its legal front organizations. In 1986, the Marcos regime fell after a peaceful revolt now called the EDSA “People Power” Revolution (EDSA, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, is Manila’s main thoroughfare and the site of the revolt). People Power 1 installed Corazon Aquino, the widow of opposition senator Benigno Aquino Jr., as president overthrowing Marcos who had cheated her in a rigged snap presidential election.

The so-called EDSA People Power Revolution was, in reality, a liberal democratic restoration led by the urban middle class, certain sections of the military, and the institutional Catholic Church, although the forces that supported it were much broader. It created the constitutional legal order that formally functions until today. Beyond regime change, however, the revolt launched a powerful mythology about Philippine politics. It was a narrative that emphasized middle class reformism, the prominence of the Catholic Church, and the Aquino family as saviors of democracy. Corazon’s son, Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III was elected president in 2010, largely using the tropes of 1986 and capitalizing on nostalgia for his recently deceased mother.

“Dutertismo” must be seen as a reaction to the system that the EDSA Revolution created. More than thirty years after the revolution, its promise of social renewal had yet to be fulfilled, causing disillusionment among voters. Duterte’s campaign was able to link the lethargy of the post-EDSA system in achieving meaningful reforms to a broader critique of liberal democratic values such as human rights. It was also able to use disillusionment with the “EDSA system” to tap into an authoritarian nostalgia that in recent years had manifested in increasing support for the Marcos family. In critiquing the EDSA system, Duterte was able to challenge previously trusted groups and individuals: the Catholic Church, the Aquinos and their allies in the Liberal Party, middle class reformists, the mainstream media, etc.

Paradoxically, despite his critique of traditional middle-class politics, Duterte’s support base is rooted in the Philippine’s middle class. During the post-EDSA period, this class had expanded and became less homogenous. It is this new, less-established, middle class that Duterte has successfully courted. From this initial base, Duterte’s support has grown to include the majority of Filipinos in various demographic groups. Because of Duterte’s popularity, he has been able to implement a brutal war on drugs that has led to thousands of extra-judicial killings of drug suspects, primarily in urban areas. Surveys show that, while 69 % of the population believe that extra-judicial executions are occurring, yet 92 % still express support for Duterte’s bloody campaign.

Filipinos can be seen therefore as endorsing mass murder. Thus, the crisis of Philippine liberal democracy under Duterte is therefore not only a crisis of political institutions, but a moral one. Albert Camus once claimed that a “crisis of humanity” is present in societies that callously endorse mass murder. To address this crisis, it is necessary to reintroduce liberal democratic norms in the Philippines. Political actors, however, should not assume that a liberal democracy is an end in itself. They need to imagine new forms of liberal democracy that may appeal to those who feel dispossessed and outside the middle class and the elite.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The history of Philippine liberalism shows that liberals are able to re-assess their programs and reconnect with new movements during times of crisis. Rizal and his cohort forged their liberalism amid the oppression of colonialism. During the Marcos period, the Liberal Party rebuilt itself as a defender of civil rights. A re-evaluation of liberal politics is already occurring under the Duterte administration. International organizations should nudge this process along by funding programs that allow Filipinos to rewrite and reassess what it means to be a liberal democrat in the Philippines. German foundations like the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation are leading the way in this regard. The EU should coordinate closely with these foundations.

2. It is no longer enough to simply “understand” the populist mentality that animates Duterteism. Studies that examine Duterte’s populist constituencies are already prevalent. What the Philippines needs are interventions that clearly take a stand against a populist regime that justifies mass murder.
3. International institutions and organizations must not in any way legitimize the Duterte administration. Instead, these organizations should continually be in coordination with democratic legislators, local officials, and civil society organizations seeking to counter it.
4. Because the president and the vice president of the Philippines are elected separately, Vice President Leni Robredo of the Liberal Party is the *de facto* leader of the opposition. The grassroots reforms that she seeks to implement are worthy of support. Moreover, she represents a potential rebranding of liberal democratic ideas in the age of Duterte. Her old party mates from the Aquino administration appeared out of touch while Robredo herself represents a liberalism that can speak the language of the lower class. Surveys have shown that she appeals to poor voters.
5. Much of the Duterte administration’s vitriol has been unleashed through social media, particularly through Facebook. Programs that address social media literacy are very important in the Philippines. It is essential to support groups and organizations that combat fake news and promote liberal democratic principles. It is also important to support mainstream media, in particular critical outlets like *Rappler.com*, which are being persecuted by the Duterte administration.
6. Duterte’s killing spree has led many poor families to lose their primary breadwinners. Livelihood support for these families is an urgent need.
7. Careful documentation of the drug killings needs to be undertaken in order to one day prosecute Duterte and his henchmen for crimes against humanity. Indirect support for Filipino human rights activists in amassing this evidence is a moral imperative.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA) is an interdisciplinary research project that studies multiple forces affecting regional integration in Southeast Asia and the challenges they present to the peoples of Southeast Asia and its regional institutional framework, ASEAN.

CRISEA innovates by encouraging ‘macro-micro’ dialogue between disciplines: global level analyses in international relations and political economy alongside socio-cultural insights from the grassroots methodologies of social sciences and the humanities.

Coordinated by the Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) with its unique network of ten field centres in Southeast Asia, the project brings together researchers from seven European and six Southeast Asian institutions, with three objectives:

1. Research on regional integration

Multiple internal and external forces drive regional integration in Southeast Asia and compete for resources and legitimacy. CRISEA has identified five ‘arenas of competition’ for the interplay of these forces, investigated in the project’s five research Work Packages. It further aims to assess the extent to which they call into question the centrality of ASEAN’s regional model.

2. Policy relevance

CRISEA reaches beyond academia to engage in public debate and impact on practitioners in government and non-government spheres. By establishing mechanisms for dialogue with targeted audiences of policymakers, stakeholders and the public, the project furthers European science diplomacy in Southeast Asia and promotes evidence-based policymaking.

3. Networking and capacity-building

CRISEA reinforces the European Research Area (ERA) in the field of Asian Studies through coordinated EU-ASEAN academic exchange and network development. It connects major

research hubs with emerging expertise across Europe and Southeast Asia. CRISEA also promotes participation of younger generation academics in all its activities, notably policy dialogues.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Competing Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA)
COORDINATOR	Yves Goudineau, EFEO, Paris, France, yves.goudineau@efeo.net .
CONSORTIUM	Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient – EFEO – Paris, France University of Hamburg – UHAM – Hamburg, Germany University of Naples l'Orientale – UNO – Naples, Italy Institute of Social and Political Sciences – ISCSP - Lisbon, Portugal University of Lodz - UL – Lodz, Poland University of Oslo – UiO – Oslo, Norway University of Cambridge – Cam – Cambridge, UK Chiang Mai University – CMU – Chiang Mai, Thailand The Centre for Strategic and International Studies - CSIS – Jakarta, Indonesia Ateneo de Manila University – ADMU – Quezon City, Philippines University of Malaya – UM – Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences – VASS – Hanoi, Vietnam The University of Mandalay – MU – Mandalay, Myanmar
FUNDING SCHEME	H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation of the European Union – Research Innovation Action (RIA) – Europe in a changing world, Engaging together globally
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BUDGET	EU contribution: €2,500,000.00
WEBSITE	www.crisea.eu
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FURTHER READING	Claudio, Lisandro E. 2017. <i>Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking the State in 20th-Century Philippines</i> . Singapore: NUS Press. Curato, Nicole. 2017. “Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism.” <i>Journal of Contemporary Asia</i> 47 (1): 142–53. Curato, Nicole, ed. 2017. <i>A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency</i> . Quezon City: Bughaw. Heydarian, Richard Javad. 2017. <i>The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt Against Elite Democracy</i> . Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. Thompson, Mark R. 2016. “The Early Duterte Presidency in the Philippines.” <i>Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs</i> 35 (3): 3–14. _____. 2016. “Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines.” <i>Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs</i> 35 (3): 39–68.