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## CRISIS AND CONSOLIDATION: FIVE YEARS UNDER THE SHADOW OF DUTERTISMO

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A stylized, high-contrast portrait of Rodrigo Duterte in shades of orange and red. The background features a sunburst or radial pattern. The title is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

# CRISIS AND CONSOLIDATION: FIVE YEARS UNDER THE SHADOW OF DUTERTISMO

Five years ago, Rodrigo Duterte won the presidency by promising stability and prosperity. But as his presidency enters its twilight months, Duterte's legacy is an economically shattered and even more unsafe Philippines. Under his watch, the country suffered one of the worst recessions as well as COVID-19 infection rates in Asia, while the so-called 'war on drugs' created a humanitarian catastrophe and further undermined the rule of law. Nevertheless, Duterte, and his brand of populist governance, are unlikely to disappear from the Philippine political landscape anytime soon. The enduring popularity and appeal of Duterte is his ability to combine two key elements. On one hand, he is the master of 'performative governance', namely the theatrical deployment of symbols, cutting-edge impression management, and emotionally-charged rhetoric that taps into the deepest (authoritarian) instincts of the Filipino populace. Beyond performative skills, however, there is also the element of political opportunism, most evident in Duterte's unabashed exploitation of the COVID-19 pandemic to further consolidate power. A shrewd politician, the Filipino president immediately turned an unprecedented crisis into opportunity by amassing emergency powers, imposing a military-backed lockdown, and unleashing a systematic campaign of repression against critics and the liberal opposition in a heavily 'securitized' political environment. The upshot is the consolidation of Dutertismo -- a distinct form of populism that combines politics of fear with performative governance -- as the ruling ideology of the state. Regardless of who wins next year's elections, and whether the 2022 elections will be as competitive and fair as the previous edition, Duterte's reign is expected to have major long-term consequences for the Philippine democracy for generations to come.





## Crisis as Opportunity

“You never want a serious crisis to go to waste,” advised long-time Chicago Mayor and former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel. “And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before.”<sup>1</sup> In many ways, this has been the motto of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who, ironically, promised an era of stability and prosperity when he ran for the country’s highest office in 2016. Time and again, the long-time Davao City mayor claimed that should he not become the country’s next leader, the Philippines was bound to face an apocalypse of chaos, crisis and cartels. Without providing any shred of evidence, but deftly tapping into the deepest fears of the electorate, he went so far as claiming that the country was on the verge of becoming a ‘narco-state’ like Mexico or, decades earlier, Colombia. Weeks before the fateful elections, Duterte boldly claimed. ‘I am your last card in the Philippines, if you don’t want a corrupt future president and a weakling.’<sup>2</sup> Five years later, he would make exactly the same claims in face of growing public discontent, telling his critics: “You’re just angry because I became President. You’re just angry because I did something for our country. You’re just angry because I did not allow our country to have gone to the dogs.” And, quite predictably, Duterte once again claimed that he, and he alone, stood between order and chaos: “I’m angry because I won’t allow our children to live in a narco-state. I’m angry because if I didn’t do anything, we would have been a narco-politics state.”<sup>3</sup>

If anything, Duterte used the same supposed rationale to justify an unprecedented bid for the vice-presidency in 2022 elections, even if this would potentially violate the spirit, if not letter, of the 1987 Constitution, which was specifically designed to avoid any dictatorship by allowing only a single, six-year-term in office. As top constitutional expert and

## FEATURES

## ON THE COVER

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# opportune crisis

former Commission on Elections (Comelec) chair Christian Monsod warned, “Clearly, it is an ingenious and insidious move to circumvent the Constitutional provision on reelection,” since any occupant of the Office of the Vice President is just one step away from assuming control of the Malacañang should the incumbent step down, get impeached or end up incapacitated. As Monsod, who was one of the framers of the 1987 constitution, explains, “The no-reelection provision should be interpreted as prohibition against holding the presidential office for more than six years”, although there is only one exception”, whereby, as in the case of former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who was “qualified to run for president” since she served fewer than four years as vice-president to President Joseph Estrada, who was ousted from office on the back of a ‘people power’ revolution barely three years into office.<sup>4</sup> In justifying his controversial bid for the country’s second highest office next year, Duterte claimed that the decision was based on his commitment “to continue serving the Filipino people and help lead the entire nation toward greater progress.” Once again, he mentioned challenges posed by proliferation of illegal drugs and, with greater emphasis, insurgencies as reasons behind his bid to retain power by all means necessary.<sup>5</sup> And yet, the predominant theme of his presidency is the surreal succession of crises, which both exposed the dearth of competence at the highest echelons of power as well as Duterte’s seemingly inexplicable popularity.

In his first year in office alone, the Filipino populist, who promised to turn his country into a giant “Singapore”, oversaw one crisis after the other. First came his shock-and-awe campaign against illegal drugs, which triggered a human rights catastrophe but ultimately failed to bring a single ‘big fish’ to justice. Months later came his fateful visit to Beijing, his first major foreign trip, where he announced “separation” from the United States to the consternation of his closest advisers and top cabinet members. Over the years, it became clear that China’s “pledge” of \$24 billion in investments was more fiction than fact. This was followed by the collapse of seemingly promising peace negotiations with communist rebels and their chief ideologue, Jose Maria Sison, Duterte’s former professor, as the defense establishment decried violent attacks by New People’s Army (NPA) rebel groups on the ground. Almost exactly a year into his term in office, so-called Islamic State (IS) affiliated fighters, led by the Maute brothers, laid siege on Marawi, the country’s largest Muslim-majority city. The crisis lasted for months, as scorched-earth urban warfare supplanted what initially appeared like a seamless counter-terrorism operation. Armed confrontations between security forces and the extremist militants devastated much of the historic city’s basic infrastructure and core neighborhoods. His almost slavish comments vis-à-vis China, despite the latter’s creeping invasion of Philippine waters, occasionally rankled the public but never significantly dipped his numbers.<sup>6</sup> And while the vast majority of Filipinos feared and opposed extrajudicial killings, overall support for his drug war remained steady throughout the years (See Figure 1). Throughout all these seeming mishaps, Duterte maintained high approval ratings based on authoritative surveys (See Figure 2).

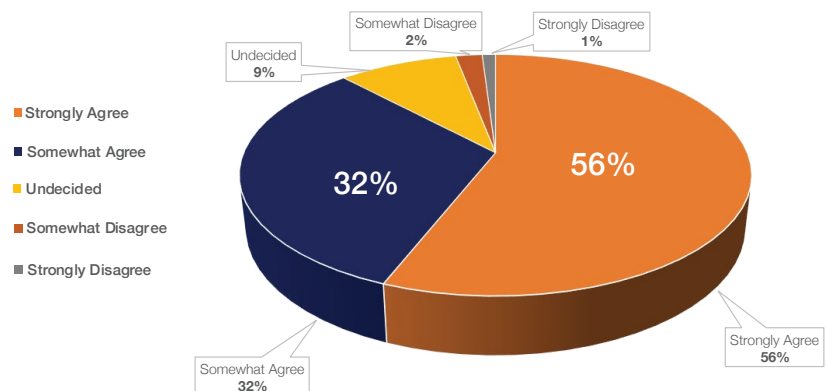
The 2019 elections, a supposed referendum on his presidency, created one of the largest, if not the largest, majorities for an incumbent, as Duterte allies dominated the bulk of elected offices. The opposition, for the first time since the end of World War II, failed to secure even a single seat in the Philippine Senate, while pushed to the margins across all levels of political representation. Encouraged by his unprecedented political victory, Duterte, going from strength to strength, pushed for, inter alia, draconian legislations, including the restoration of death penalty and reduction of the age for criminal liability. His most consequential policy advocacy, however, was the push for a federalized Philippines, which is consistent with his 2016 election promise of giving more power to the peripheries. Hailing from the long-marginalized island of Mindanao, and as the first Filipino president from the south, decentralizing power away from so-called “Imperial Manila” was always at the beating heart of the Duterte agenda. Soon, his administration mobilized a nationwide campaign, tapping into the full machinery of the state and local networks of patronage, in favor of “Phederalism” (Philippine federalism). The president assembled a Constitutional Commission, composed of leading legal experts and prominent social scientists, while his allies in the Congress and the ruling PDP-Laban (Partido Demokratiko Pilipino–Lakas ng Bayan) debated alternative versions of a new, federalized Philippines. But surveys made it consistently clear that there was no public clamor for a constitutional overhaul, while leading experts as well as civil society groups warned of a ‘trojan horse’ attempt to perpetuate Duterte’s term in office via seemingly innocuous legal reforms.<sup>7</sup>

Confronting public skepticism, civil society pushback, and fractious allies unable

## Satisfaction With Duterte’s War on Drugs (December 2016)

Figure 1

% of Adults



Note: Agreement with the test statement: “From the time when Rody Duterte became President, there has been a decrease in the drug problem in my area”

Source: Social Weather Stations

## Net Satisfaction Rating of Filipino Presidents (1988-2009)

Figure 2



\* Net Figures (%Satisfied minus % Dissatisfied) correctly rounded

Source: Social Weather Stations

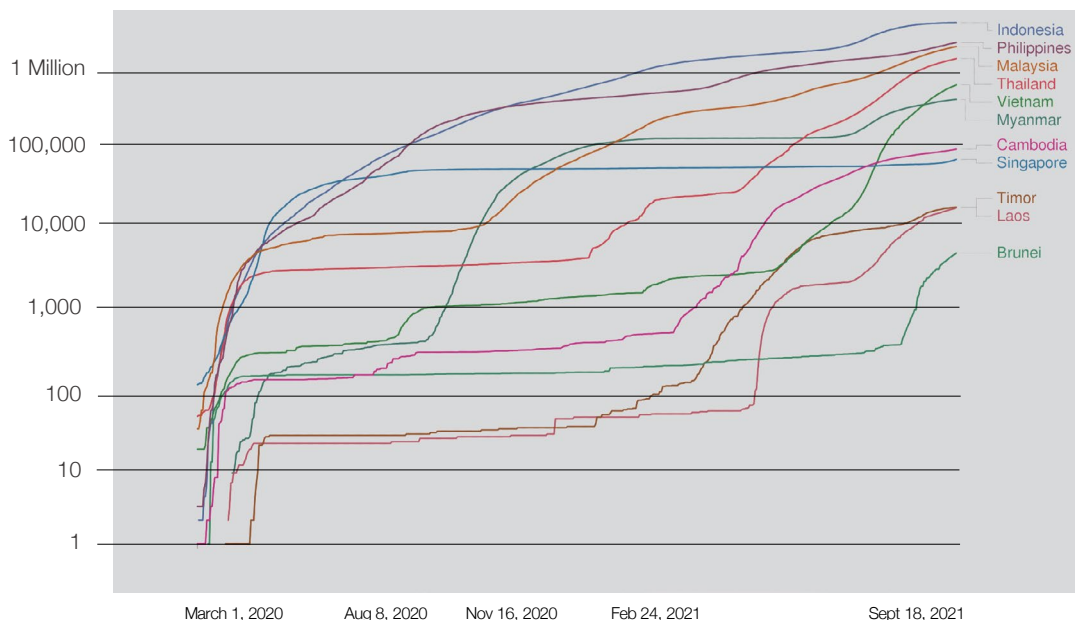
## The Naked Emperor

to agree on a single version of a new constitution, Duterte reverted to his 'revolutionary government' proposal, which would be repeatedly rejected by the Philippine defense establishment and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Duterte -- lacking strategic discipline, bereft of a real political party and grassroots movement on the ground, and overconfident of his own popularity -- failed to leverage his political capital to overhaul the country's political system. In contrast, populist peers in Turkey (Erdoğan), Hungary (Orbán), Russia (Putin), and Venezuela (Chavez) proved far more successful in translating their short-term political hegemony into long-lasting constitutional change. In short, Duterte proved as a less-than-competent strongman, since the establishment of a full-fledged authoritarian system demands a certain degree of discipline and strategic acumen on the part of a would-be autocrat.<sup>8</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic, however, would expose the paucity of Duterte's governance approach, as the country became a regional epicenter of the pandemic (See Figure 3) as well as suffered among the worst recessions and economic reversals in the world (see Figure 4). Yet, the same crisis also provided a unique opening for authoritarian consolidation. By exploiting widespread fear and desperation, and relying on well-worn performative antics, Duterte proved far more adept in turning crisis into opportunity.

Heading into the fateful year, 2020, the Duterte administration still had much to lean on. For voters and sections of the public, who didn't prioritize either human rights issues or patriotic credential of their leaders, the government's performance wasn't too bad after all. If anything, the country experienced a modicum of infrastructure build-up, especially in rural areas, as Duterte ramped up investments in the country's decrepit roads, bridges and public transportation system (See Figure 3). But a careful examination of economic fundamentals showed slowing growth, downward trend in Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), and lack of any meaningful transformation in either the agriculture or manufacturing sector. His theatrical assault on major conglomerates further eroded rule of law and rattled investor sentiment.<sup>9</sup> Despite Duterte's promise to

COVID-19 Cases in Southeast Asia (March 2020-September 2021)

Figure 3



Source: Johns Hopkins University, Our World In Data



confront even a “whiff of corruption”, the Philippines’ ranking in the global corruption perception index steadily declined over the year, ranking 115th in the world in the 2020 Corruption Perception Index report.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Duterte himself admitted the failure of his drug war, which didn’t produce any significant improvement in terms of overall law and order. If anything, with EJKs running at thousands, if not tens of thousands, the country seemed more unsafe than ever -- alienating foreign investors from both the West and Asia. In the Global Finance magazine “World’s Safest Countries” report in 2021, the Philippines was deemed as the ‘least safe’ nation – reflecting the utter failure of Duterte administration’s promise of establishing a giant “Singapore” under his watch.<sup>11</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, truly exposed the deficiencies of Duterte’s managerial skills as well as inherent weaknesses within his administration. In fairness, the Filipino president took the COVID-19 threat more seriously than many of his populist counterparts, some of whom stubbornly resisted wearing masks and imposing desperately-needed lockdowns. He also inherited relatively weak state institutions as well as a fragile healthcare system, among the worst rated in the world. But his management of the crisis would prove catastrophic. During the early phase of the pandemic, the president and top administration officials, including his health secretary, stubbornly resisted imposing travel restrictions on China. Mainland Chinese tourists and online casino workers poured into the country just as neighboring countries began to tighten travel restrictions. Up until the second week of March, Duterte seemed more interested in preserving warm relations with China and mockingly downplaying the COVID-19 threat.<sup>12</sup>

But once he realized the gravity of the crisis, almost two months into the pandemic, Duterte immediately moved towards the other extreme, imposing arguably the longest and strictest lockdown in the world. At one point, this led to shutting down of up to 75 percent of economic activity in the Southeast Asian country, which posted its worst economic performance on record in the second Quarter of this year.<sup>13</sup> Despite the Philippines’ relatively easy access to international financing, the Duterte administration’s economic recovery program proved too little and too late. The Philippine Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted almost 10 percent that year, the worst in Southeast Asia and a large drop from an average of 6 percent growth in the past decade.<sup>14</sup>

According to the International Monetary Fund, the Philippines will suffer the worst growth decline in the world over the next five years, followed by India. Despite the worsening economic crisis, however, Duterte stubbornly insisted





that lockdowns will continue until effective vaccines arrive en masse, especially from his strategic partners of China and Russia.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, he continuously lambasted Western pharmaceutical companies, refusing to make advance payments for potentially more safe and effective vaccines from tried-and-tested suppliers. To make matters worse, Duterte's rule coincided with decreased investment in public health as well as cynical politicization and hysteria over mass vaccination.<sup>16</sup>

The Filipino president also encouraged a generalized climate of incompetence by, among others, constantly backing his cronies amid massive corruption scandals in the public health and insurance-related agencies at the height of the COVID-19 crisis. His overreliance on former generals and policemen to handle the key aspects of the public health crisis, from contact tracing to vaccine purchase, didn't

AT THE HEIGHT OF LOCKDOWNS, DUTERTE'S ALLIES BEGAN (1) ISSUING A FLURRY OF SUBPOENAS AGAINST ONLINE NETIZENS CRITICIZING GOVERNMENT POLICIES; (2) SWIFTLY PASSED A CONTROVERSIAL AND VAGUELY-DEFINED ANTI-TERRORISM LAW, WHICH COULD POTENTIALLY CRIMINALIZE POLITICAL DISSENT; (3) EFFECTIVELY SHUT DOWN THE COUNTRY'S LARGEST MEDIA NETWORK, ABS-CBN, BY REJECTING ITS FRANCHISE RENEWAL; AND (4) SUCCESSFULLY ORCHESTRATED THE CONVICTION OF MARIA RESSA, AND THE "RED-TAGGING" CAMPAIGN AGAINST PROGRESSIVE AND LEFT-LEANING GROUPS.

help either.<sup>17</sup> The upshot is among the worst outbreaks and COVID-19 related death rates in Asia, a crisis exacerbated by Duterte's failure to secure effective and large doses of vaccines until the middle of 2021.<sup>18</sup>

According to the international medical journal, the Lancet, the Philippines ranked in bottom third of a global survey, 66th out of 91 countries, in terms of managing the crisis. A whole host of other indices by Bloomberg, Nikkei Asia and Lowy Institute would similarly describe the Philippines a regional 'laggard' in terms of economic recovery as well as management of the pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the Filipino president proved extremely successful in not only preserving his political capital, but even expanding

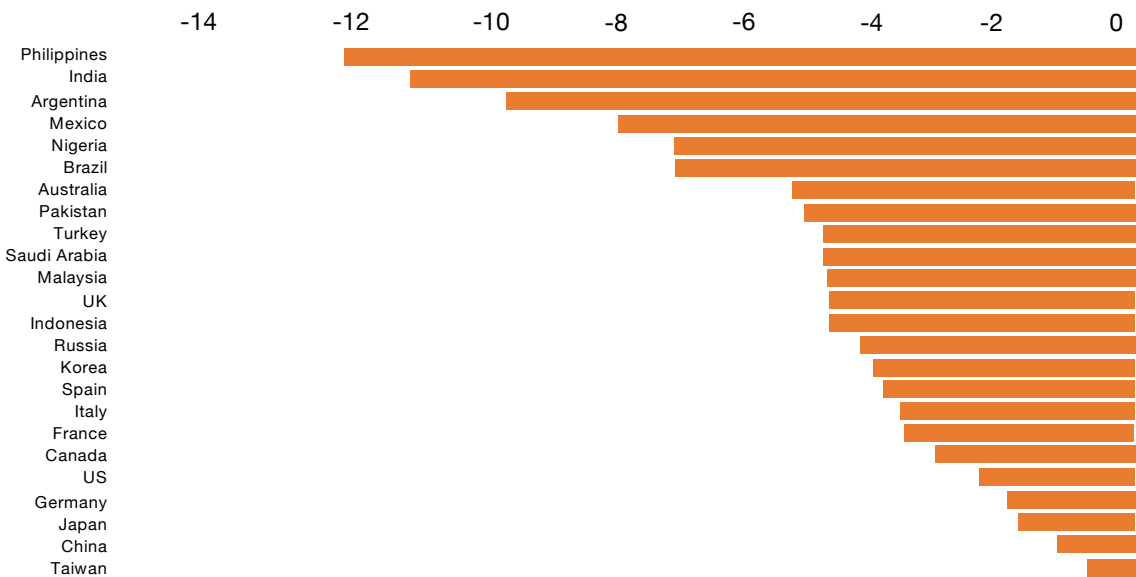
it in face of brazen mismanagement and incompetence, which would be on full display during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing economic crisis in the country.

### Performative Governance and Authoritarian Consolidation

In 2020, Duterte's approval ratings even improved, making him potentially the most popular head of state in the world. How is this even possible? Is there a reasonable way to understand the enduring popularity of the Filipino leader? One way to understand this is to look at how Duterte, like all consummate populists, derives and preserves hi political capital based on

### Long-term Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Figure 4



Percentage-point decline in growth forecast between 2019 and 2025

Source: Financial Times, International Monetary Fund

a distinct form of 'performative governance', namely the theatrical deployment of symbols, cutting-edge impression management, and emotionally-charged rhetoric that taps into the deepest (authoritarian) instincts of the Filipino populace.<sup>20</sup>

The late scholar of populism Ernesto Laclau aptly used the term 'empty signifier' to describe this phenomenon, whereby populists utilize intense, affective connection to masses and carefully-curated political fiction to trump facts and physics of actual governance.<sup>21</sup> Add to this, a formidable propaganda machine powered by an organized army of online trolls, pro-Duterte influencers and professional networks of disinformation, which have proactively weaponized social media platforms to intimidate and denigrate critics and opposition throughout the past four years.<sup>22</sup>

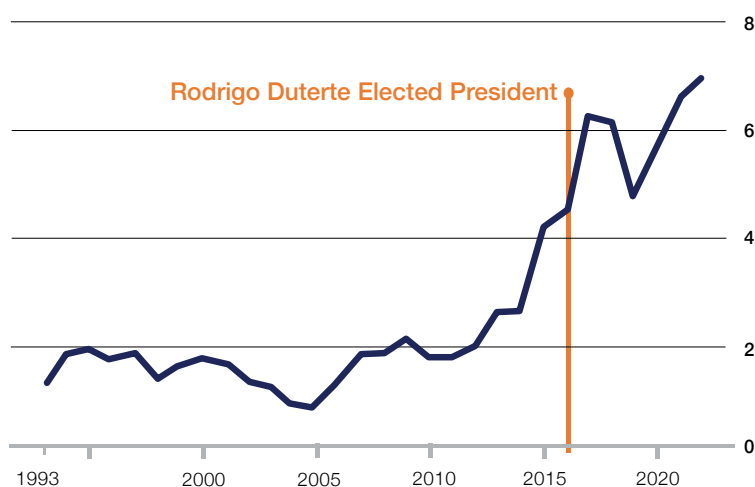
Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that foreign powers, most especially China but likely even Russia, have aided Duterte's propaganda machine. Not to mention the Filipino president's 'warm rapport' with his populist counterpart in the White House, President Donald Trump, who reportedly even backed the scorched-earth drug war that has allegedly claimed thousands of lives in the Philippines. In him, the Southeast Asian country stumbled upon a new ideology of authoritarian populism altogether, better known as "Dutertismo."<sup>23</sup>

Beyond performative skills, there is also the element of unabashed opportunism, especially in a climate of fear. A shrewd politician, the Filipino president immediately turned an unprecedented crisis into opportunity by amassing emergency powers, imposing a military-backed lockdown, and unleashing a

“President Duterte has set a dangerous precedence by seamlessly creating a “state of exception” --amassing extraordinary powers, freezing normal politics, circumventing normal constitutional procedures, and demonizing political opposition in the name of public safety.”

Philippine Infrastructure Spending as Percentage of GDP

Figure 5



Source: The Economist

systematic campaign of repression against critics and the liberal opposition in a heavily 'securitized' political environment. The upshot is the consolidation of Duterteismo, a distinct form of populism that combines politics of fear with performative governance, as the ruling ideology of the state.<sup>24</sup>

Eager to avoid public backlash and pre-empt liberal opposition, the Filipino populist wasted no chance to tighten his grip on the country's key institutions. Beginning in late-March, Duterte swiftly secured a succession of emergency powers from the Philippine Congress, which is dominated by the president's allies. The new powers allow the president to, among other, mobilize public and private resources for combating the COVID-19 crisis in a more centralized and effective fashion. But it also granted the government extraordinary powers to clamp down on 'disinformation' as well as billions of dollars in supplementary funds with limited legislative oversight. Duterte turned crisis into opportunity by utilizing the ongoing state of emergency to bludgeon the opposition and consolidate power.<sup>25</sup>

At the height of lockdowns, Duterte's allies began (i) issuing a flurry of subpoenas against online netizens criticizing government policies; (ii) swiftly passed a controversial and vaguely-defined anti-terrorism law, which could potentially criminalize political dissent; (iii) effectively shut down the country's largest media network, ABS-CBN, by rejecting its franchise renewal; and (iv) successfully orchestrated the conviction of Maria Ressa, a prominent journalist and leading Duterte critic, on dubious

charges. Soon, Duterte's allies also ramped up a "red-tagging" campaign against progressive and left-leaning groups, reviving Cold War era McCarthyism in the Southeast Asian country.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, the government leveraged stimulus funds to create a vast network of patronage, as millions of impoverished Filipino families became increasingly reliant on government handouts. This partly explains why Duterte's approval ratings jumped up to as high as 91 percent in the third quarter of this year, just when the government issued a new package of financial assistance and loan reprieve to its citizens.<sup>27</sup> With surveys largely drawing on urban poor communities, which tend to be the epicenter of EJKs as well as highly dependent on government aid during the pandemic, it's hard to discount the element of fear as another explanation for Duterte's seemingly inexplicable rising popularity. And widespread anxiety and fear tends to also strengthen the hands of leaders, who present themselves as father figures that supposedly provide stability amid chaos.<sup>28</sup>

## The Day After Duterte

The paradox of Duterte's reign is how power constantly exposes weakness. A protracted COVID-19 crisis presented the incumbent a unique opportunity to shape the contours of the upcoming presidential elections. For instance, Duterte's legislative allies pushed for the extension of the 2020 emergency budget until December 2021, just a month before

the formal commencement of 2022 elections -- giving Duterte immense leverage to determine the specific range of fiscal allocations and strategic projects, which could unduly favor his preferred successors and allies in the next elections.<sup>29</sup>

The incumbent will also have extraordinary control over COVID-19 vaccine distribution as well as the financial assistance to vote-rich, yet financially-challenged constituencies. Not to mention, the incumbent's power in shaping the circumstances of the elections itself, including the budget for the enfeebled Commission on Elections, as well as selection of preferred groups to handle the logistics of automated elections.<sup>30</sup> As one opposition group put it, "the timing of the release of funds may be used or exploited by those who wish to top up their campaign kitties come the 2022 elections."<sup>31</sup>

Ahead of the 2022 elections, the president looks in a particularly dominant position. While presidential daughter Sara Duterte has been leading surveys of potential contenders in next year's elections, the president himself has topped surveys of potential contenders for the second highest office next year. The Duterte-Duterte tandem, therefore, seems like the team to beat, especially when one considers the resources and nationwide machinery at the disposal of the incumbent. Yet, it's precisely this pre-elections dominance, which has sowed the seeds of potentially fatal division and bitter infighting within the ruling establishment.

The PDP-Laban Party has once again splintered along competing factions, with former-ally-turned-critic Senator



Emmanuel Pacquiao openly opposing the push for a Go-Duterte tandem next year while contemplating his own bid for the presidency. Even more astonishing is the seemingly genuine outrage of Sara Duterte at the proposed tandem, notwithstanding Senator Christopher Go's denial of any bid for the presidency next year. Just weeks before the filing of candidacy for the 2022 elections, it's not yet clear whether Sara Duterte will run for office at all, and whether the president himself has settled on an anointed successor.<sup>32</sup>

Taking a page out of Russian President Vladimir Putin's playbook, Duterte has always seemed interested in establishing his own version of "tandemocracy" in the Philippines, namely running under a trusted aide whenever constitutional term limits kick in. The prospect of political blowback, if not prosecution by the International Criminal Court (ICC) and sanctions by Western nations, over his human rights record is clearly a major motivation behind Duterte's bid for staying in power by all means necessary. But long-term protégé, Senator Go, has struggled in the surveys, while presidential daughter, Sara Duterte, has shown genuine interest in, if not organizational mobilization for, the top office.<sup>33</sup>

Though popular and well-resourced, the dithering Duterte camp has undercut its own structural advantages and electoral momentum, thus benefitting top rivals, especially the Marcoses, who are bent on returning to the Malacañang, and rising stars such as Manila Mayor Francisco Moreno Domagoso, who has been beating the president in his own populist game.<sup>34</sup> While Duterte has been adept in amassing political capital and maintaining his popularity, he has once again struggled in maximizing his advantages, providing an opening for rivals, including former allies, who are also eyeing the presidency next year. Regardless of who wins next year's elections, and whether the 2022 elections will be as competitive and fair as the previous edition, Duterte's reign is expected to have major long-term consequences for the Philippine political system.

First of all, Duterte has set a dangerous precedence by seamlessly creating a "state of exception" — amassing extraordinary powers, freezing normal politics, circumventing normal constitutional procedures, and demonizing political opposition in the name of public safety. The ensuring climate of fear and intimidation has only reinforced Duterte's ability to maintain his grip on state institutions and preserve high approval ratings, especially when there is little incentive for people to express negative views towards the government. Future Filipino leaders with authoritarian tendencies have a rich playbook to drawn from.<sup>35</sup>

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the unprecedented economic crisis has led to widespread immiseration among the Philippine populace, creating

further cycles of social dependency and ideological radicalization, as well as political patronage and corruption at the expense of democratic deepening. A major victim will be the Filipino middle class, which played a central role in the 1986 and 2001 "People Power" protests, which toppled the deeply corrupt Ferdinand Marcos and Joseph Estrada administration.<sup>36</sup>

Historically, the middle classes, demanding greater political representation and effective governance, played a crucial role in the so-called "Third Wave" of democratization, which toppled authoritarian regimes across the post-colonial world. But as countries such as Chile, Thailand and Turkey have shown in the past decades, period of economic distress and instability could also reinforce reactionary, authoritarian tendencies among sections of the middle class.<sup>37</sup> Under duress and demoralized after decades of underperforming reformist politics, the Filipino middle class could become ever more enthusiastic for authoritarian leadership in the coming years.<sup>38</sup> Five years ago, Duterte promised stability and prosperity, yet his legacy will largely be an impoverished and even more unsafe Philippines. Yet, neither Duterte's long string of mishaps, nor the potential victory of more reform-minded rivals in next year's elections, will likely undercut the appeal of Dutertismo and mitigate its long-term impact on the Philippines' beleaguered democracy.

**DOH  
SRA at  
MAT  
ibigay sa  
lahat ng  
Health  
Workers**

**MCHEA**

**DOH  
SRA at MAT  
ibigay sa lahat  
ng Health Workers**



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