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Duterte's Mediated Populism

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Rodrigo Duterte's final miting de avance election rally in the capital's Luneta Park was a spectacular event, just two nights before the 9 May polls. Tens of thousands of supporters filled the venue, many sporting the controversial Davao mayor's red campaign colours; the sense of impending victory was palpable. Many had travelled all the way from Mindanao to take part. After a long series of warm-up acts, including songs from ~~popular~~ artists including the ~~legendary~~ POPULAR Mocha Girls, Duterte himself took to the podium, bragging about his libido and announcing to loud cheers that he would have the bodies of criminals thrown into nearby Manila Bay. As usual, the leading presidential candidate had little to say about policy specifics. Duterte's style was conversational and at times avuncular: his 80 minute speech was delivered not from a podium, but standing on a crowded platform among a group of his allies and close supporters, like a local boss figure hanging out with his barkada, or gang.¹

Despite —indeed partly because of— the ominous warnings sounded by incumbent President Benigno Aquino III, Duterte's vulgarity and plain-speaking struck a chord with voters across the socio-economic spectrum. The taxi-drivers were no surprise, but I was taken aback to find that academic colleagues at the University of the Philippines, the doctor who treated me for a cough, and even self-styled human rights lawyers were cheering on a candidate whose major campaign themes comprised valorizing his own masculinity, and solving policy problems through extra-judicial killing.

Across town at Plaza Miranda —scene of the notorious August 1971 political rally bombing in which nine people were killed, setting in train a narrative that provided

Ferdinand Marcos with a convenient pretext to declare martial law the following year—one-time front-runner Senator Grace Poe addressed a much smaller crowd.² The feisty adopted daughter of popular movie actor Fernando Poe, she topped the 2013 Senate polls, drawing on the same core demographic that had propelled Joseph Estrada into the presidency in 1998: the urban poor. But Poe’s presidential campaign was dogged by questions about her nationality (she had been a naturalized US citizen) and residency in the Philippines; amid rumours that she was a front for certain vested interests, her popularity plunged in the final weeks of the campaign, as Duterte’s lead grew.

By the time I reached the Quezon Memorial Circle in Quezon City, the Mar Roxas Liberal Party rally was already over —much like his doomed candidacy.³ Aquino’s motorcade passed me on the other side of EDSA; the President, himself the son of late president Cory Aquino, had strongly championed his 2010 rival to succeed him. Former Interior Secretary Mar Roxas was the son of Gerard Roxas, a prominent politician INJURED at Plaza Miranda, and the grandson of former President Manuel Roxas (1946–48). But sharing his last name with a major Manila boulevard was not entirely an electoral asset for Roxas, who found himself labeled as an elite trapo (traditional politician) who lacked the common touch, and whose stage presence was distinctly underwhelming.

I had flown to Manila directly from Seoul, where I was taking part in a workshop on “Mediated Populism” across Asia. For four days, we had compared a set of phenomena that could be found from Tunisia to Turkey, and from Hong Kong to Pakistan, including: the rise of “anti-politician” political candidates; the declining relevance of conventional political parties and campaigning; the centrality of TV-hyped super-sized personalities; the exploitation of voters’ fears and resentments; and the merger of election rallies and protest movements with media “events” and mass spectacles. Duterte’s Philippine presidential election triumph perfectly epitomized many of these trends.

The 2016 campaign came on the back of three less than stellar presidencies. Joseph Estrada (1998–2001), popular with the masses but despised by the elite and the educated middle class, had been driven from the presidency following a fresh wave of “People Power” that paved the way for a de facto military coup. Like Estrada, his successor Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–10) left office severely tarnished by

allegations of corruption. Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III (2010–16) is legendary for his attention to detail: when he spoke at Columbia University in September 2014, he took question after question from the floor, an aide passing him statistics and data summaries on every topic raised by the audience from a wheeled briefcase-turned-filing-cabinet.⁴ But despite presiding over a growing economy, Aquino failed to have his flagship Bangsamoro Basic Law passed by Congress, and so leaves Malacanang Palace with a mixed legacy.

Like previous elections, the 2016 Philippine presidential race was driven largely by competing narratives: Whose story could best captivate the imagination of voters? In 2010, Aquino had won a surprise victory, deploying the narrative of building upon his recently-deceased mother’s legacy. Cory’s own presidency had been forged through her story of personal suffering under Marcos, following the assassination of her husband Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino II in 1983, on the tarmac of the Manila airport that now bears his name.

Duterte’s main slogan was “Change is Coming” —but this was no Obama-like evocation of the audacity of hope. The word “Change” was invariably paired on Duterte posters with a clenched fist, more resembling a threat than a promise. Other slogans included the rousing “Go, Go!” the idealistic “One Voice, One Nation” and the more ambiguous Tagalog “Tapang at Malasakit” (courage and devotion) —all accompanied by the ubiquitous fist. A huge billboard endorsement from a Protestant sect read: “The Kingdom of Jesus Christ supports Duterte on fight against drugs, criminality and corruption. Guard our VOTES, Guard over FUTURE”. Days before the election, Duterte was also endorsed by the influential Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) sect, courted by all major candidates in the belief that INC’s 1.7 million voting members would cast their ballots en bloc. By contrast, elements of the dominant Catholic Church were strongly opposed to Duterte —allowing him to claim he was challenging the prevailing order.

Duterte won over many swing voters with his straightforward, no-holds-barred performance in televised debates. His “Change” and “courage” image was that of a fearless pugilist, single-handedly taking on the forces of darkness. This narrative drew on the Davao mayor’s reported links to vigilante groups credited with killing dozens or even hundreds of drug-dealers.⁵ While Duterte’s responses to questions about vigilante

connections were ambiguous and contradictory, he clearly relished his reputation as a ruthless anti-crime candidate. But while Duterte talked equally tough on corruption, he became embroiled in controversy on the subject of his own bank accounts.⁶

At the core of Duterte's image were two closely interwoven themes: authenticity and masculinity. His authenticity was a challenge to the high-class backgrounds of both incumbent Aquino, and Aquino's anointed candidate Roxas. Duterte delighted in code-switching between Tagalog and English; the Philippine Daily Inquirer dubbed him the "trash-talking mayor" for his constant swearing in both languages. Duterte did not hesitate to curse anyone and everyone—even Pope Francis himself, whom he called a "son of a whore".⁷ He flaunted his crudity as a marker of his maleness, boasting of his womanizing,⁸ claiming that he wished he had raped an Australian missionary,⁹ and after the election catcalled a female reporter at a press conference.¹⁰

His "One Voice, One Nation" slogan referred to Duterte's background as a Manila outsider, with a twenty-year career as mayor of Davao, the Philippines' third largest city. In the classic mode of the anti-politician politician, Duterte sought to distance himself from the discredited politics of the capital city, exploiting voter frustration with the country's dysfunctional Senate and Congress, and disappointment with recent presidents. Many of those I met in the week before the election were quick to head off criticism of their pro-Duterte leanings: "We tried presidents who were schooled, intelligent but we are still in the same situation"; "It's not that I really like him, but..."; "At a time like this, we really need a good dose of ...". Such comments reflected a growing nostalgia for the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos (1965–86), especially the supposedly disciplined "heyday" of martial law, now viewed by many—quite erroneously—as a period of economic prosperity and social harmony.

This Marcos nostalgia was also seen in the tightly fought vice-presidential race. The Philippines has an unusual electoral system in which voters select the president and the vice-president separately, with the result that mortal political enemies may win office together. In 2016, Duterte's ostensible running mate Alan Cayetano, who had played a key role in persuading the Davao mayor to join the presidential race, was soon marginalized: poster campaigns all over the country urged voters to pick Bongbong Marcos, son of the late president, to serve alongside Duterte. Bongbong's election would

have symbolized the political rehabilitation of the Marcos dynasty, and paved the way for a contested re-writing of modern Philippine political history.

Duterte won the 2016 presidential election with 16,601,997 votes —just over 39 per cent of the popular vote. Roxas and Poe polled over 9 million votes each, while almost 7 million went to two minor candidates, incumbent vice-president Jejomar Binay (5.4 million) and long-time Senator Miriam Defensor Santiago (1.5 million). Had Binay and Santiago dropped out, the result would have looked rather different; had Roxas and Poe also been willing to join forces at an early stage, as Aquino had urged in the final days of the election, Duterte might have lost: far more people voted against him than for him.

In the closely fought vice presidential contest, Bongbong Marcos took an early lead, but was ultimately defeated by around a quarter of a million votes. The victor was Leni Robredo, a congresswoman, social activist and lawyer whose politician husband had been killed in a 2010 plane crash. She made headlines on 8 May by making the ten hour road trip to vote in her home province by public bus —her own compelling statement of authenticity and humility.¹¹ Robredo proved far more attractive to voters than her erstwhile running mate Mar Roxas, and is well-placed for a future presidential bid. But Duterte has since announced that he will be giving Bongbong and not Robredo a cabinet position — suggesting he fears Robredo’s runaway popularity could pose a threat to his standing.

The 2016 Philippine presidential elections came thirty years after the “People Power” movement that toppled the authoritarian Marcos regime. The debates about that much-analyzed episode continue to this day: was 1986 a lasting and progressive political transition; or simply the restoration of what the late Benedict Anderson famously called “cacique democracy”, in which a small number of elite families controlled the Philippines like a “well-run casino” [Reference here please on the relevant work of Anderson]?¹² The Duterte victory, like that of Estrada in 1998, demonstrates that Philippine electoral politics are now extremely dynamic and unpredictable. In an era of mediated populism, the candidate with the best-told narrative is well-placed to win media attention, and ultimately voter support. Roxas, the trapo/oligarch with no compelling personal story, was never in with a serious chance. The heroes of the hour were Robredo,

who came across as authentic and caring, and above all Duterte, with his image as the tough outsider intent upon implement change. Whether these narratives will survive their transition to Malacanang Palace remains to be seen.

NOTES

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¹ “Rodrigo Duterte's speech during his miting de avance”, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2ujrIjHSaM>>.

² “Grace Poe miting de avance”, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EK4NQnrJdZM>>. Poe’s speech starts at 3.40

³ “Mar Roxas miting de avance”, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9Zk4YSv3Ws>>. Roxas begins speaking at 3.27.

⁴ The author moderated this event on 23 September 2014.

⁵ See Floyd Whaley, “Rodrigo Duterte’s Talk of Killing Criminals Raises Fears in Philippines”, New York Times, 17 May 2016, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/18/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines.html?_r=0>.

⁶ See Reynaldo Santos, ‘Duterte SALNS don’t match alleged bank accounts’, Rappler, 29 April 2016, available at <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/131167-rodrigo-duterte-bank-accounts-saln>

⁷ A video compilation of Duterte’s campaign crudities is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=letTTI_KT0Q>.

⁸ Pia Ranada, “Rodrigo Duterte: Yes, I'm a womanizer”, Rappler.com, 30 November 2015, available at <<http://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2016/114416-rodrigo-duterte-womanizer>>.

⁹ “Rodrigo Duterte: Philippines presidential candidate hits back as rape remark sparks fury”, ABC News.com, 18 April 2016, available at <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-18/rodrigo-duterte-hits-back-back-as-rape-remark-sparks-fury/7333532>>.

¹⁰ “Duterte Catcall GMA News Reporter Mariz Umali”, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MLGdL6w2ag>>.

¹¹ “DJ Yap, Leni Went Back the Way She Came, By Bus”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 9 May 2016.

¹² See Benedict Anderson, “Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dream, New Left Review, I/169, May-June 1988.