

# Philippines - Duterte 2 Years on: Destructive, Divisive, and Despotic

Statement on the 3<sup>rd</sup> State of the Nation Address (SONA) 2018

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*United Peoples' SONA on July 23 2018 by Maria Tan/Rappler*

When Rodrigo Duterte won the presidency in 2016, some even among the left toyed early on with the idea that a “maverick” president could just be what the country needed to stir things up, and jolt us from almost 30 years of elite-dominated rule.

Months prior to the 2016 elections, surveys pointed to the following issues as most urgent and pressing for the Filipino people: controlling inflation, increasing workers’ pay, fighting graft and corruption, creating more jobs, and reducing poverty. When Duterte was elected, there was an expectation, especially from the 16 million Filipinos who voted for him, that a “strongman” could finally fix the problems and deliver on these urgent demands. That was the great gamble of 2016. People took the risk with Duterte, hoping that he would deliver.

In 2017, Focus came out with a Policy Review on *Dutertismo* [1], looking at how Duterte’s campaign promises and pronouncements have been translated into policies. The initial signs did not point to a substantive shift towards a more pro-poor development agenda.

We found out that the overall economic policy of the Duterte administration remains largely pro-market, pro-corporate, and neoliberal. Despite his strongman posturing, Duterte has taken a hands-off approach to economic policies, choosing to let the so-called economic managers run the show. The flagship program is infrastructure, via what has been dubbed “Build, Build, Build” – an 8 trillion-peso infrastructure investment plan that has been promoted as a strategy to spur economic growth, particularly in the peripheries – in Visayas and Mindanao. Yet a look at the initial list of projects show that Luzon would still get a lion share of the investments.

On agriculture and agrarian reform, Duterte’s agenda was described as schizophrenic and riddled with contradictions. Populist promises in favor of the poor and marginalized in the countryside on the one hand show a strong bias in favor of agribusiness on the other. There were no clear thrusts for the completion of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program, which reached its 30<sup>th</sup> year of implementation last June. Duterte called for the passage of the National Land Use Act, but it remains to be seen whether this long-overdue piece of legislation would finally pass Congress, and in a form that would move us towards the protection of our country’s dwindling agricultural, and even forest lands from massive conversions. Against the backdrop of a struggling small-holder rural economy,

compounded by among other issues the recent lifting of the quantitative restrictions on rice, a land management system that caters to the expansion of corporate investments in the countryside will be detrimental to the survival of our food producers. In addition, Duterte also urged Congress to pass the Coconut Trust Fund Bill, a promise still pending since he became president, but his government has done little to address the various technicalities lodged by Marcos cronies that continue to hamper the actual disbursement of the 75 billion-peso fund to farmers.

On the environment, we raised the issue over the kind of environmental governance that is underpinned by what we call a *Laban at Bawi* style, where one step forward is coupled with two steps backwards. We saw this clearly in the sacking of Gina Lopez as Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Secretary, and how in the end the corporate interests prevailed.

On the social agenda, we saw more of the same business as usual with continued emphasis on human capital development, thereby raising the same concerns over privatization of social services like health, and declining public investments in social services like housing. The impacts of rising inflation, particularly on food prices, has also been made worse with the implementation of the Tax Reform and Acceleration for Inclusion, or the TRAIN Law. Despite broad criticism, the government is poised to push for the second phase of this regressive tax program.

And on the War on Drugs, which remains the flagship program of Duterte, we saw tragically how this has really been a war against the poor.

We interrogated the highly touted independent foreign policy of Duterte and while we saw a definite pendulum swing from one established superpower to an emerging one, it remained unclear whether that shift would serve the interests of Filipinos and the nation in general.

Two years on and as we heard Duterte's 3<sup>rd</sup> State of the Nation Address (SONA), we continue to see in the unfolding events - in government policies and actions - the real nature and leanings of this administration that validate many of our earlier assertions. It is becoming clearer that we have right now in the Philippines under Duterte a destructive, divisive, and despotic presidency.

**Destructive.** The death toll from the Duterte's War on Drugs continues to rise. Official estimates put the number of deaths in drug-related police operations reaching 4,500 a few days before the 3<sup>rd</sup> SONA. Evidence-based research on the anti-drug campaign revealed that while it is difficult to get precise numbers because no complete casualty list exists, the "casualty count since mid-2016 has been estimated to be (over) 25,000. In addition to those deaths from police operations, there are over 22,000 'homicides under investigation' that may be linked to drugs." [2] In his 3<sup>rd</sup> SONA, Duterte pronounced, "The illegal drugs war will not be sidelined. Instead, it will be as relentless and chilling, if you will, as on the day it began."

According to the latest report of Global Witness and the Guardian newspaper, "48 defenders were killed in the Philippines in 2017—the highest number ever documented in an Asian country." [3]

The government's 148-day assault and aerial bombardment of Marawi in 2017 to fight the Maute terrorist group has led to the deaths of over a thousand people, the displacement of over 300,000, and inflicting a total damage estimated to be over 11 billion pesos.

The environment and the commons are also under threat of being obliterated by massive infrastructure investments, particularly those tied up with extractives. In his 3<sup>rd</sup> SONA, Duterte once again stressed the destructive impacts of mining, citing the gold mining in Mt. Diwalwal in Mindanao as the country's worst example of environmental pillage. But we have heard this warning to mining companies from Duterte before, yet nothing concrete has come out of the rhetoric. The

Alternative Minerals Management Bill remains in limbo and with the closure orders issued on big mining companies reversed, we see once again the same balancing act between corporate interests and the populist rhetoric on environmental protection, rather than an actual step towards safeguarding the country's waning environmental resources.

On climate change, Duterte highlighted "improving resiliency and reducing vulnerabilities against natural disasters." Earlier this year however, Duterte inaugurated the 420 MW Aboitiz coal plant in Pagbilao, Quezon, and announced plans for a 1000 MW coal plant in Sual, Pangasinan as well as a 670 MW Luna coal plant in La Union. Duterte's penchant for cheap and dirty energy to supposedly address the power generation gap is another step backwards to our country's mitigation efforts, and the shift to renewable energy.

Duterte also said in his SONA, "Our improved relationship with China does not mean that we will waver in our commitment to defend our interests in the West Philippine Sea." But Duterte's pivot to China has made the Philippines strategically and politically vulnerable to the Chinese agenda and debt-trap diplomacy. Falling into overdependence on Chinese investments and loans would not only cripple the Philippines' attainment of a self-reliant and independent national economy, but also destroy communities with their encroachment into critical areas, such as what is happening in the Cordillera in Luzon, Boracay in the Visayas, and Marawi in Mindanao.

Public institutions like the Commission on Human Rights, and the office of the Ombudsman, have been criticized and maligned publicly; judicial independence has been compromised with the removal of Chief Justice Sereno via quo warranto.

**Divisive.** Duterte has been a divisive rather a unifying leader. Duterte's reckless rhetoric has further widened the divisions and sown hatred and animosity among Filipinos. We have witnessed his incessant attacks against anyone expressing dissent. Those not supporting the deadly War on Drugs are labeled drug-coddlers; anyone criticizing the government is labeled a terrorist. Duterte's tirades against the Catholic Church and his "God is stupid" remarks have not only alienated the Catholic faithful and raised broader concerns over religious intolerance, but have also encouraged violent attacks against the clergy. Three priests have been killed in broad daylight in the last 6 months.

The push for Charter Change and Federalism is also causing further division even within Duterte's own circles. The dramatic change in the House Leadership with the election of former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo replacing Duterte's party mate Pantaleon Alvarez brought the political infighting and power grabs into public view. The push to amend the Constitution and put in place a new federal system is being done without public support. Surveys show that a majority of Filipinos reject the shift to a federal system of government and that only 2 out of 10 Filipinos want the 1987 Constitution revised at this time. But even more insidious is the way the government is pushing for a neoliberal constitution under the mantle of Federalism. Both the proposals from Duterte's party, PDP-Laban, as well as the Bayanihan Federal Constitution drafted by the Consultative Committee would amend the so-called "nationalist provisions" of the constitution to pave the way for a more pro-corporate development agenda.

His flip-flopping on foreign policy issues is also causing confusion and division. Rather than taking advantage of the nascent interest created by his campaign promise of charting an independent foreign policy, Duterte has instead dabbled in sly hedging games, boldly announcing an economic and military "separation" from the country's erstwhile colonizer yet kowtowing to an emerging global power, further fueling geopolitical rivalry in the region. His administration's "two-track and quiet diplomacy" with China has further undermined Philippines' sovereignty; his cavalier approach to the simmering territorial and maritime disputes in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea has also divided the nation. These divisive stances are reflected even in domestic policy. Duterte's

“wars” - against drugs, against vagrants, against Moros, against Lumad - are not leading to long term solutions the country so desperately needs.

**Despotic.** It is all about him. As the country’s chief diplomat, Duterte has taken a “nobody has the right to lecture me” stance as the basis of governance. Rather than engaging and striving towards a democratic, principled, strategic, and truly independent foreign policy that pursues the best interests of the Philippines and its people, he has alienated allies, and attacked institutions like the United Nations and the European Union. Under Duterte, the Philippines has turned its back on international human rights commitments like the Rome Statute, causing the withdrawal of the Philippines’ membership in the International Criminal Court (ICC). Instead of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination being the paramount considerations, despotism and tyranny have become the linchpins of Duterte’s touted “independent” foreign policy.

Duterte acts as if his presidency is a license to commit various forms of violence against women - to actual encouragement to shooting them in the vagina (if they are rebels), to bluntly saying he will not appoint women to position of power (as they are weak and indecisive), to attacking high profile women who are vocally in opposition to his programs and policies (Vice President Leni Robredo, Chief Justice Serreno, and Ombuds Carpio and Senator Leila de Lima). As a president, he has to be made accountable to the state’s acts of violence against women, and for institutionalizing and normalizing misogyny in our society. The #BabaeAko campaign to fight this behavior in social media and then crossing over to street protests and mobilizations has now become a key flank opposing this regime.

Two years on and we see a government riddled with controversy, losing popular support at home and credibility abroad, failing to get its act together under Duterte to address the urgent demands of its people. Inflation has been rising and there has been a lot of unease over the rising costs of food and basic goods and the stagnation of wages. Graft and corruption persists while the masses continue to struggle for a life of dignity. Duterte continued with his tirades against human rights defenders when he uttered in his 3<sup>rd</sup> SONA “Your concern is human rights, mine is human lives.” He is deliberately pitting human rights against human lives as if “human rights” do not encompass the right to life—a life of dignity. Clearly the intention was to continue the false narrative that he has articulated before, that human rights defenders are only concerned with the rights of drug addicts and criminals, and not the rights of the victims of violent crimes. Demonization of human rights and human rights defenders have become the hallmark of this administration.

The silver lining in an otherwise gloomy scenario is the unprecedented forging of unity among the progressive forces. This started with the historic workers’ mobilization that happened on May 1 this year, and repeated on a much larger scale in the recent United Peoples’ SONA on July 23, where we saw the coming together of various movements around the call to reject Duterte’s Charter Change, and to fight dictatorship.

We are now beginning to see cracks within the administration. The tussle for the House leadership; talks of splits within and exodus of members from the administration’s PDP-Laban party; members jostling for position in preparation for the 2019 elections; and the disagreements within the administration and its allies over the No Election scenario and positions on term extension are all fodder for a more tense and potentially explosive political environment.

The challenge for the broad forces is how to sustain this unity, strengthen opposition forces, and consolidate a political movement from the ground up that would articulate and build alternatives to destructive, divisive and despotic politics.

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### Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 41969), [Focus Policy Review: Philippines one year after - Unpacking Duterteism](#).

[2] The Drug Archive:

<https://www.drugarchive.ph/post/26-the-drug-killings-who-what-where-when-how-master>

[3] At What Cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017. Global Witness. July 2018.

<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/at-what-cost/>