

Philippines - Duterte's Tight Grip over Local Politicians: Can It Endure?

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The major trend in central-local relations in the Philippines under the regime of President Rodrigo Duterte has been the capacity of the presidential palace to exert a very tight grip over local politicians—arguably the tightest since the martial-law dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos (1972-1986).

This trend has emerged even as Duterte has done strikingly little to advance the reforms that many local politicians have been keen to champion. He abandoned the federalism agenda which he had touted in the lead-up to his presidential campaign in 2016, and which had been eagerly supported by local government coalitions. In addition, the president backpedaled in delivering a financial windfall to local governments as promised in a landmark 2019 Supreme Court ruling on the primary national revenue sharing program. This decision, known as the Mandanas ruling, is the only major win for local politicians since Duterte came to power. Yet its implementation has been conveniently pushed out to the very end of his term in 2022.

If Duterte has failed to deliver, why do so many local politicians remain beholden to him?

Our report outlines the combination of old and new schemes employed by Duterte to ensure his effective grip on local structures throughout the archipelago. These strategies highlight the president's predilection for authoritarian rule and successful consolidation of political power at the centre.

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Since his election in 2016, Duterte has positioned himself as a powerful patriarchal boss who proves decisive and unapologetic in shielding and vindicating those loyal to him, including those allegedly involved in high-level scandals. The guarantee of political protection, along with the dispensing of material benefits, creates a potent incentive for local politicians to curry favour with the president and seek to be included within his broad political coalition. Equally powerful is Duterte's propensity to demonise and attack those who have opposed him, including former allies who have fallen out of favour. And, contrary to the expectations of many seasoned political observers, Duterte's charismatic hold seems to remain very potent well into the latter half of his administration.

One of Duterte's mechanisms for exerting control over local politicians is the longstanding practice of dispensing large quantities of presidential pork to localities. These patronage resources, handed out with high levels of executive discretion, have been considerably enhanced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Aside from being a grandmaster in this well-established practice, Duterte has also employed four other key means of exerting control over local politicians. These techniques are largely unprecedented in scope and character.

Active intervention in local electoral politics, targeting those who dared oppose him. As a rule, Duterte's enduring popularity meant that those running for gubernatorial or mayoral office in

the May 2019 midterm elections frequently scrambled to obtain his political endorsement. This proved to be the most critical currency for winning, and most of his endorsed local candidates emerged victorious. There is, however, at least one major exception to this rule. In Cebu City, Mayor Tomas Osmeña had earned the ire of the president. Given the strength of the mayor's local electoral machine it was likely doubtful that Duterte's personal endorsement of his local allies would be sufficient to topple Osmeña. There are well-documented reports of police harassment of Cebu City local candidates not aligned with the president, including checkpoints placed outside the mayor's home and operations in the city's upland areas seeking to undercut support for Osmeña. According to insiders, this police intervention may have played a critical role in the electoral outcome, and—after three decades in which he was frequently the dominant figure in Cebu politics—Osmeña was ousted by Duterte's ally. While Osmeña appears to have been the most prominent target of the palace in the 2019 mid-term election, it seems that targeted verbal attacks and public shaming tactics were not uncommon elsewhere. As explained by investigative journalist Miriam Grace Go, “the pattern...of local officials getting killed weeks or months after being cited in the drug list or cursed by the President in his speech” can have a strong influence on electoral dynamics. “If the President doesn't like you, it's like the death sentence to your candidacy.”

Killings of mayors and other local politicians as part of his so-called “war on drugs.”

Duterte's tight grip on local political structures is also advanced by his effective deployment of intimidation. The centerpiece of his presidency is known as the “war on drugs” campaign, which has involved the killing of thousands of people. More than two dozen local officials have been assassinated since 2016; one of the most recent—in December 2020—was the mayor of a town south of Manila who had been put on the president's ‘narco-list’. The climate of fear under Duterte's regime has reshaped power dynamics between the centre and localities, with far less room for manoeuvre at the subnational level. For nearly five years, local politicians have had to confront fearsome examples of what happens to those who fall out of favour with the presidential palace.

Withholding funds from barangays (villages and urban wards) in support of a reinvigorated anti-communist counterinsurgency campaign. Duterte's political machinery is further bolstered by his huge influence over the country's security forces, both the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP). In what was viewed as “pork for the generals” [1], the 2021 budget allocated a staggering P16.44 billion (roughly USD342 million) for Duterte's National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). Notably, the funds for this anti-insurgency task force were lodged under the P28.82 billion Local Government Support Fund allocated to barangay projects. The NTF-ELCAC, created by the president in 2018, now manages the funds, and those barangays deemed infiltrated are only able to access the fund once the NTF-ELCAC certifies that their jurisdictions are cleared of insurgency. With the task force's direct intervention in barangay affairs, this fund is seen as a tool not just to try to end the insurgency but also to control barangay leaders.

Issuances of ‘Show Cause Orders’ as part of a very substantial ramping up of national government supervision over its subnational units. Under the Duterte regime, particularly since retired Philippine Army General Eduardo Año took the helm of Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) in 2018, one can observe the enhanced use of “Show Cause Orders” (SCOs) against local officials facing accusations or complaints of having acted improperly or illegally. Within a given deadline, they must explain why no administrative cases should be filed against them. Failure to do so leads the Office of the Ombudsman to file an automatic administrative case against the local officials concerned; criminal charges may also be filed as appropriate by the National Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice. DILG's use of SCO's has intensified throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, as local governments have been called out on various violations of quarantine protocols and directives issued by the national government.

As our report surveys the numerous ways that President Duterte wields his power, it is clear that he has greatly entrenched his control over local structures and that many subnational politicians seem to acquiesce to their own subjugation. The president has proven to be highly adept not only in the standard game of dispensing patronage resources but also in offering political protection to those loyal to him—and in vilifying those who oppose him.

Attention now turns to the May 2022 elections, where Duterte will seek to promote the victory of his chosen successor, whomever that may be. Toward this goal, Duterte will want to ensure that his current grip over local politicians can be sustained and that they will support the candidate he chooses to back. As long as he maintains his high levels of popularity, assisted by threats of coercion (both implicit and explicit) against those who dare cross him, Duterte will continue to be able to reach into local bailiwicks throughout the archipelago to tamp down any significant threat of opposition—while also offering valuable support to those who have flocked to his camp. If Duterte succeeds in getting his anointed candidate elected, it is quite possible that many of his extremely effective strategies of presidential control over local politicians could endure into the next administration.

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P.S.

• New Mandala - 19 Feb, 2021:

<https://www.newmandala.org/dutertes-tight-grip-over-local-politicians-can-it-endure>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/duterte-eyes-fund-for-anti-communist-task-force>