

Philipines: The urban legend that was Soling Duterte

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It is that time of the year again, the period around the Edsa People Power anniversary, that the recurring line gets regurgitated. The worn-out line goes that Rodrigo Duterte's family should be ashamed that their matriarch Soledad Duterte was an anti-Marcos crusader.

Pundits just love to fortify their arguments by saying that the late Mrs. Duterte led the Yellow Friday movement in Davao city leading to the ouster of the Marcoses in February of 1986. A [television documentary](#) was even written in 2017 lionizing Mrs. Duterte as the heroine of the anti-Marcos resistance in Davao city.

That was only the partial truth. Our appreciation of facts is at a low norm when it is only the partial truth that sates our provision of knowledge.

The worn-out line comes partly from Duterte insider loyalists like Patmei Ruivivar (Duterte's chief of staff at Davao city hall for years) who loves to point out that Davao city was the center of Marcos opposition in Mindanao when it was not. In one event the previous year 2023, Ruivivar and her group coined the slogan "[Before there was Edsa, there was Claveria](#)," alluding to the city's main street named after Spanish governor general Narciso Claveria, seemingly implying that Edsa began in Davao city.

That exaggeration is farthest from the truth.

What was the whole truth?

Mrs. Duterte was in fact linked to the Yellow Friday movement of Davao city. Most accounts begin correctly. She indeed joined the protests. Right after the Ninoy Aquino assassination in August 1983, Mrs. Duterte was one of the convenors of a group that called itself "Katawhan" (Cebuano for "the people"). It was an anti-Marcos protest group not unlike many others that had arisen in many parts of the country. Echoing the tumult of events in Manila before and after the snap election of February 7, 1986, it was this group that organized weekly mass actions known as the Yellow Friday movement in Davao city.

Proof of her prominence was the fact that when Cory Aquino called for local elections in 1988, many endorsed her to run against Cory's appointed officer in-charge Zafiro Respicio, but she declined. Instead she offered her son Rodrigo to run for the position.

Carefully take note that at this point in time, contemporary accounts vest her with the image of a "staunch anti-Marcos fighter." In fact, the 1988 local elections was, in all honesty, her chameleon stage. She endorsed the group that backed her son Rodrigo's candidacy for mayor. Who was this group? It was the Nacionalista Party of Marcos loyalists led by her husband's Cebuano relative Alejandro Almendras. Yet the Soledad Duterte hagiographies omit that significant turning point.

Then came the year 1990. Her Yellow Friday group had morphed into the “Pulso ng Bayan.” [On December 28, 1990](#), Mrs. Duterte issued a statement that signified her break from supporting Cory Aquino. Davao city’s Mindanao Times New Year 1991 issue published her full statement:

“The country is facing the worst economic crisis that has fallen on us, Filipinos. Never in history did we ever have the series of calamities from disastrous typhoons to destructive earthquakes which flattened many of the buildings in Luzon. The highest price of the fuel we ever have which never happened even during the 20 years of Pres. Marcos has finally brought us down to economic ruin.”

“While we do not blame you Pres. Aquino for all these happenings but it is now a fact that we need a leader who can maneuver to the right direction to save the country from economic collapse.”

“We are therefore appealing to you as a kind President to step down and let Vice President Laurel carry the work of nation building. He has been in public service for quite a long time. We shall experience a new hope to a new leader until the election of 1992.”

“Pres. Aquino, if you pity the poor in our midst, now is the time to show your benevolence. Give way to one stronger than you to face the trials. Today’s condition is indeed too difficult for you to handle. Even now, many leaders refused to accept positions in your cabinet. This may be a sign that your people [have] lost confidence in your administration.”

“Madame President, please save our country for the sake of the new generation to come after us. This honorable act of yours will be a good Christmas gift to us. Tomorrow may be too late.”

But Mrs. Duterte’s tomorrow was not late. In fact, she had already jumped ship over to the Marcos side in 1988, because that was the political backing for her son Rodrigo’s foray into politics. Self-preservation from family ties mattered more to her. A decade later, Rodrigo coalesced with Erap Estrada’s Laban ng Masang Pilipino (LAMP). She too supported that.

The Duterte family, the matriarch included, was never a family of reformists. Writers miss out that essential truth. In the 1967 elections, even when her husband was in the Marcos cabinet, Mrs. Duterte run for Davao city vice mayor. Dynastism was already in the family blood.

It was believed that Vicente Duterte lost for congressman of Davao del Sur in 1967 because both Almendras and Marcos withdrew their support for him. Why did Almendras betray his cousin Vicente Duterte? Almendras blamed Mrs. Duterte for secretly tying up politically with an Almendras archenemy. This was a family with your typical run-of-the-mill turncoat politics, backstabbing, and political compromises.

When the present-day Dutertes rule Davao city as their personal fiefdom, Mrs. Duterte claimed the same entitlement and I knew this from personal experience. Sometime 2010, the National Committee on Museums of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts tasked me to do a technical assessment of the Davao city government’s Museo Dabawenyo. My attention was directed to one door leading to a museum gallery. It sported an object that had nothing to do with the exhibition. It was a framed photo of the so-called Holy Shroud of Turin. I turned to the museum curator and said flatly that this was not integral to the exhibition. His reply stunned me. He said they couldn’t remove that because it is the private devotion of Soledad Duterte. She was not dead yet at that time (she died in 2012).

The next time someone again glorifies her, know that they miss out on the truth - Soledad Duterte was *trapo* as a traditional politician can be.

Her politics was self-serving and transactional. Quite frankly, it was rotten to the core. The fruit of

that is her son and grandchildren. The last laugh is Rodrigo's. Next time someone sings hosannas to his mother, he exactly knows what political transactions she had maneuvered herself into.

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