

Brief Remarks on the Duterte Presidency - "If we have learned anything from politics, it is that good intentions can easily be corrupted by absolute power"

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"Fascism is authoritarianism with a heated mass base, the appeal to which makes everything possible. Is Duterte fascism? It is certainly an aggressive populism. And Duterte is an authoritarian figure who is ready to tear up the law and the constitution, as he is doing right now. Rather than classify Duterte, let me just say that fascism comes to different countries in different forms, and the campaign against drug pushers and users may be the form in which it is coming to the Philippines. In this connection, denying some classes of people basic human rights, as Duterte does, puts all of us on the slippery slope that could end up with this denial being extended to other groups, like one's political enemies or people that "disrupt" public order, like anti-government demonstrators or people on striking for better pay. Remember that candidate Duterte threatened to kill workers who stood in the way of his economic development plans and made the blanket judgment that all journalists who had been assassinated were corrupt and deserved to be eliminated."

I am very happy to be on the same panel as Profs Rafael, Abao, Curato, and Heyderian, colleagues who are on the cutting edge of research and writing in their respective fields.

Well, after the glacial pace of the previous administration on Yolanda rehabilitation and the Metro-Manila traffic problem, we finally have an administration that is on schedule on what it promised to deliver. However, killing hundreds of suspected drug dealers and users in order to rid the country of crime in a record three to six months' time is not exactly the same as a fast pace in redistributing parcels of land to agrarian reform beneficiaries or increasing the average speed of vehicles in EDSA. There are many, however, who don't see the difference and are cheering the president on.

What I'd like to do in this brief intervention is:

- Address the relationship of Rodrigo Duterte's ascendancy to the liberal democratic republic that emerged from the EDSA Uprising in 1986;
- Analyze Duterte's special relationship to the masses;
- Figure out if he is a fascist; and
- Discuss the worrying lack of political opposition to Duterte.

The Duterte Presidency as a Break with the EDSA Republic

I am not the only person who has written on Duterte's electoral victory as a sharp break with the liberal democratic regime that came into being with the EDSA Uprising in 1986—and let me just say that the reference in the seminar's title to "the wake of EDSA" is entirely appropriate.

While the demarcation line between the EDSA Republic and its successor may not be as dramatic as that separating the martial law regime from EDSA, it is nevertheless clear: an electoral insurgency that propelled to the presidency a figure whose campaign was marked by a provocative repudiation of the substance and discourse of liberal democracy that have served as the ideological scaffolding of the EDSA system. Central to this ideology have been the liberal values of human rights and due process that were institutionalized in the 1987 Constitution, which crystallized the ideals of the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship.

Duterte's appeal to large numbers of voters lay precisely in his sneering dismissal of these values.

The turn to illiberalism was undoubtedly promoted partly by the fear of many citizens that the liberal democratic state could no longer protect their lives and limbs from criminals, drug pushers, and the police. It stemmed likewise from a widespread perception that due process, far from ensuring justice, had turned into a system of protection for the wayward, the corrupt, and the powerful.

But one must also count as a central explanation for Duterte's success the popular disillusionment with the kind of democracy that the EDSA Regime delivered. The EDSA Uprising and its aftermath had promised a representative democracy more responsive to the masses, with the 1987 Constitution even institutionalizing a party-list system aimed at ensuring representation of the marginalized sectors. True, the EDSA Republic did bring back electoral competition, but it was principally among elite dynasties that could afford the enormous costs of political advertising and massive vote-buying. Duterte's electoral victory was, in fact, a defiant repudiation of the EDSA regime's corrupt electoral circus, relying as it did mainly on a mass electoral revolt, in contrast to the Big Money-backed traditional candidacies of Mar Roxas, Grace Poe, and Jejomar Binay.

Despite its political shortcomings, the EDSA regime would probably have retained a significant amount of support had it delivered on the economic front. It would be an understatement to say that the EDSA system failed to translate its promise of delivering less poverty, more equality, and more social justice into reality. And for the lower classes that rallied around him, Duterte's main appeal stemmed not only from his vow to rid their communities of drug pushers and users but also from his populist pledge to shake up an economic system whose rules and practices had condemned them to permanent marginalization.

Duterte's relationship with the masses

I disagree with analysts who claim that Duterte's electoral victory was the product of a clever public relations campaign. If ever there was a campaign marked by improvisation, this was it. From the decision to run to slogans to financing, there was a catch as catch can quality to the Duterte campaign.

Duterte was an event waiting to happen. There was a great deal of discontent out there, but when it became known that he was considering a run for the presidency, that was the trigger that activated thousands who spontaneously took to the internet and the media to support him, oftentimes in a very aggressive fashion. One can say that Duterte and his supporters found each other, and have been in love and synergy since then.

Duterte provided large numbers of people a voice. His railing against corruption and poverty, his obvious disdain for the rich—the coños as he called them—and above all, his coming across as “one of you guys” acted as a magnet to workers, urban poor, peasants, and the lower middle class.

But he not only served as a voice; he provided a “liberating” alternative discourse to those who felt that the dominant liberal democratic political discourse of the EDSA Republic did not speak to them. The Duterte discourse did not buy into liberal values and liberal democratic discourse, and it was one that seemed to take perverse delight in peppering talks with cuss words, like “putang ina” or “son of a bitch,” and calling people who irritated him “*bakla*” (gay) or “*coño*” (cunt), his special term for people coming from elite families. I don't know what to call this discourse and style, but Jose Maria Sison might not be far off when he called it the “*butangero*” or roughneck style.

Is Duterte a fascist?

Duterte would not be as confident in his attack on the universality of human rights and the state's duty to ensure due process to suspects were he not supported in his extreme views by many if not most of those who voted for him. Duterte feels he has a blank cheque to disregard the law, and he is encouraged in this behavior by the rabid support he gets from many supporters who copy his aggressive style in expressing their views in the media and on the internet.

This dangerous synergy between the Leader and his followers is normalizing the denial and ridiculing of human rights and due process.

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The Opposition

Finally, on the opposition. One of the most astonishing developments of the last two months has been the virtual disappearance of the opposition in Congress. The collapse has been total: in my count, there are only seven genuine members of the opposition or minority in the House, while in the Senate, there are three members of the minority who still have to prove their opposition credentials. The rest have joined the majority, some out of belief, some out of loyalty to Duterte, some to get committee chairs, access to presidential funds, and good appointments for their followers, some out of misguided sense of being more effective as “a loyal opposition,” and perhaps some out of fear of presidential retribution.

Perhaps the most breathtaking event was the shameless stampede of the former ruling party, the Liberal Party, to the camp of the man they depicted as a “dictator” during the election campaign. In this regard, remember that the Liberals presented themselves as the party of reform over the last 15 years. Not even waiting for a decent interval, Senator Franklin Drilon, formerly the Senate president, led the rush to Duterte in the Senate, while former Speaker Sonny Belmonte led the defectors in the House. What was even more shameless was that then President Aquino gave his blessings to the rush of his party-mates to join his nemesis at a meeting in Malacanang, his reason being that the party and its members had to protect their interests under the new administration. I imagine that protecting former Budget Secretary Butch Abad and himself from prosecution for their role in the DAP scandal was one of these “party interests.”

The collapse of the political opposition is very worrisome since the country badly needs an opposition under the new dispensation. Let me explain.

The president’s campaign and his program were driven by his depreciation of human rights and due process. There is a fundamental political cleavage in the country between those who support his views on human rights and due process and those opposed to them. Thus those of us who consider human rights and due process as core values cannot but find ourselves in strategic opposition to this administration.

Being in opposition does not mean denying the legitimacy of the administration. It means recognizing the legitimacy conferred by elections but registering disagreement with the central platform on which it was won, that is, the control of crime and corruption not through the rule of law but mainly through extrajudicial execution and violation of due process. In this regard, it is certainly great news that two members of the Senate, Senators Lila de Lima and Risa Hontiveros, have delivered privilege speeches courageously expressing their disapproval of the presidential policy of extrajudicial executions, with Senator de Lima’s plea to stop the killings being a especially powerful one. But since they disagree with the central policy platform of the administration, what are they doing in the majority? Should they not instead be in the opposition, where they would not be constrained in their criticisms of the policy and can provide exemplary leadership to the citizenry?

With the disintegration of a viable opposition in the House and Senate, the unpredictable posture of the Supreme Court, and silence in the bureaucracy (with the notable exception of the Commission on Human Rights), it becomes imperative that civil society must become the central locus of opposition.

Opposition does not mean total opposition. It means critical opposition, whereby one may support positive legislative measures proposed by the administration even as one maintains a strategic opposition to it owing to its violation of one’s core values and principles. In short, one should definitely support measures such as agrarian reform, an end to contractualization, institutionalization of the freedom of information, and the phasing out of mining, for these are

progressive measures that can only redound to the welfare of society and the environment. But fundamental rights are fundamental rights, and since these basic rights are threatened by the philosophy and politics of the current administration, then one must stand strategically in opposition to it even as one supports its measures that enhance people's social and economic welfare.

Defense of one's core values, however, is not the only reason for being in opposition. The existence of a strong opposition is the best defense of democracy, for nothing more surely leads to the dismantling of democracy than the concentration of power. In this regard, we believe the president when he says that he has no intention of remaining in power beyond 6 years. But, if we have learned anything from politics, it is that good intentions can easily be corrupted by absolute power. Paradoxically, the best way we can help President Duterte keep his promise is to provide him with a vigorous opposition.

Thank you.

Walden Bello
