

A Letter to Brazil, From a Friend Living In the Philippines Under Duterte

Monday 29 October 2018, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 25 October 2018).

Brazil is on the verge of electing a Duterte-style fascist. What can the left do?

Dear friends:

I'm writing to you on the eve of your going to the polls to determine the future of your wonderful country.

I think it's no exaggeration to say that the fate of Brazil hangs in the balance. It's also hardly hyperbole to assert that the election will have massive geopolitical significance, since if Brazil votes for Jair Bolsonaro, the extreme right will have come to power in the Western Hemisphere's two biggest countries. Like many of you, I'm hoping for a miracle that will prevent Bolsonaro from coming to power.

When I visited Rio and São Paulo in 2015, I observed that the political rallies mounted by the opposition to then-President Dilma Rousseff contained a small but vocal fringe element calling for a return to military rule. Little did I suspect then that that fringe would expand into a massive electoral movement in support of a self-proclaimed advocate of strongman rule.

THE AMAZING TWINS

It's amazing to many of us here in the Philippines how similar Bolsonaro is to our president, Rodrigo Duterte.

Duterte has spoken about how he wished he'd raped a dead female missionary. Bolsonaro told a fellow member of parliament that she didn't deserve to be raped by him. Duterte has spoken in admiration of our dead dictator Ferdinand Marcos and decreed his burial at our heroes' cemetery. Bolsonaro has depicted the military rule in Brazil over three decades ago as a golden age.

A friend asked me a few days ago, only partly in jest, "Is there a virus going around that produces horrible boils like Bolsonaro and Duterte?" I thought about her metaphor and thought there was something to it, but rather than being the result of a communicable disease, I think that authoritarian figures emerge from internal suppuration in the body politic.

Before I go further on this, however, let me just give you a sense of what's happening in the Philippines, since this could very well prefigure Brazil's future if Bolsonaro gains power, as the polls now indicate, on October 28.

IS THIS YOUR FUTURE?

Our lovely Philippine president promised to “fatten the fish in Manila Bay” with the cadavers of criminals if he got elected.

He may not have delivered on his promises to improve the economic and social welfare of our people, like ending contractual employment or banning mining, but on this promise he has delivered: The number of the alleged drug users and dealers he’s murdered, mainly through extrajudicial execution, is between 7,000 and 20,000, the actual figure being toward the higher end.

Even if we just take the lower end, the number of those killed would place the Duterte anti-drug campaign as one of the most murderous enterprise in the recent history of Southeast Asia—with first place going to the Khmer Rouge genocide in the late 1970s, and second place going to the Indonesian military’s massacre of Communists and alleged Communists in the mid-1960s, both of which claimed hundreds of thousands of victims.

Underpinning Duterte’s anti-drug campaign is an eliminationist perspective based on the president’s view that *shabu*—the local term for meth—“would shrink the brain of a person, and therefore he is no longer viable for rehabilitation.” These people are the “living, walking dead,” who are “of no use to society anymore.”

Elsewhere, I have described Duterte’s approach as “blitzkrieg fascism,” in contrast to “creeping fascism.” In the latter, the fascist leader begins with violations of civil and political rights, followed by the lunge for absolute power, after which follows indiscriminate repression.

Duterte reverses the process. He starts with massive, indiscriminate repression—that is, the killing with impunity of thousands of alleged drug users—leaving the violation of civil liberties and the grab for total power as mopping-up operations in a political atmosphere where fear, coupled with a desire to cozy up to a strongman, has largely neutralized the opposition.

In the past 30 months, the president has removed the chief justice of the Supreme Court; achieved undisputed control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate; imprisoned his chief political opponent in the Senate and is about to imprison another; forced most of the media into self-censorship mode; gained the support of most of the rank and file of the military and the acquiescence of the high command; and put a third of the country under martial law. There’s been little outcry from the public on these moves; indeed, his popularity ratings remain quite high.

This last item, the continuing popularity of the president, leads me to the subject of what Brazil and the Philippines have in common.

One cannot explain the emergence of Duterte without taking into account the terrible disappointment with the record of the liberal democratic republic that came into existence with the ouster of Marcos in 1986.

A deadly stranglehold on the democratic process came about owing to several developments. One was the elites’ hijacking of the electoral process as a mechanism to compete among themselves while perpetuating their collective class rule over the people. Another was the combination of the absence of land reform and the imposition of Washington’s neoliberal structural adjustment policies, which produced continuing high levels of inequality and poverty.

When you add to this witch’s brew a third ingredient—the failure of successive administrations to address the crime problem—then it’s not surprising that more than 16 million voters, some 40 percent of the electorate, saw the tough-guy, authoritarian approach that Duterte had cultivated for 30-plus years as mayor of the southern frontier city of Davao as precisely what the country needed.

As the novelist Anthony Doerr said of pre-war Germans, Filipinos were “desperate for someone who can put things right.” Our middle class, it must be pointed out, was the sector that was most enthusiastic about Duterte, the same middle class that 30 years earlier had led the ouster of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

BRAZIL’S DREARY DESCENT

Brazil has experienced the same dreary descent into democratic crisis. Liberal democratic politics became mainly a means by which the entrenched elites protected their wealth and power.

Even the progressive President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva dared not put in place measures of social and economic reform, but tried to perform an end run with a state-financed cash distribution program for the poor, the Bolsa Família, which, while alleviating poverty significantly, did little to change Brazil’s status as one of Latin America’s most unequal countries. Also, through anti-democratic parliamentary shenanigans and judicial manipulation, the center and center right impeached Rousseff and made sure Lula would not again become president.

Corruption there has been as pervasive as in the Philippines, but here one cannot simply blame the right. One of the biggest disappointments for progressives, not only in my country but globally, was the way your Workers’ Party (PT), which had caught people’s imagination in the 1990s as an insurgent force against corruption, became itself enmeshed in corruption, notably the \$3.7 billion Petrobras kickback scandal, in which so many members of the PT were involved.

In this regard, a pro-PT friend told me during my visit to São Paulo, “The PT rose to power as a party known for our militant stance against corruption. Now we’re made to look as if we invented corruption.” I can understand his dismay, but the PT has only itself to blame. Engaging in corrupt practices, even when the aim is to gain votes to push progressive legislation in parliament, as some PT supporters justified it, ends up destroying the moral compass of a progressive party.

When you add to right-wing intransigence and the PT’s succumbing to the system’s pervasive corruption the failure to meaningfully address escalating drug-related crime, especially in Rio and other major cities, then Bolsonaro, like Duterte, becomes less of an enigma.

You know all of this, of course, but I simply repeat it to underline the fact that liberal democracy has lost the confidence of vast numbers of people in both our countries, and they have voted—or are about to vote—into power people who have essentially promised to end it. If there’s anything pro-fascist forces the world over have learned from Hitler, it’s that one can come to power through democratic means. But once in power, make sure you never provide the electorate with the opportunity to snatch it from you.

HOW DO WE RESPOND TO THE RISE OF THE EXTREME RIGHT?

How can the left respond?

The first line of defense for pro-democracy forces is to ensure that the extreme right doesn’t come to power. Having failed that, we now face the challenge of how to remove these forces from power—of course, through democratic means.

Allow me to propose some steps that we can take to regenerate the appeal of democracy.

First of all, the times call for a progressive politics that goes beyond demanding a return to the old discredited elite democracy, where equality was purely formal, to one that has as its centerpiece the achievement of genuine economic and social equality, whether one calls this socialism or post-

capitalism. This program must call for stronger state and civil society management of the economy—one that moves it beyond capitalism, with a strong dose of radical income and wealth redistribution, while championing democratic processes, secularism, diversity, and the rights of minorities.

Secondly, while a great many people, especially from the middle classes, share what we might call, to borrow a term from Antonio Gramsci, an “active consensus” supporting authoritarian politics, a great many of the poorer and more marginalized classes either keep the extreme right at arm’s length or limit their support to “passive consensus.” We must focus our counter-mobilization on these sectors.

Third, while we must strive to educate the public on the roots of crime and people’s participation in the drug trade in poverty and inequality, democrats must not be seen as insensitive to people’s concerns about crime. We may not agree with his solution, but we cannot ignore Thomas Hobbes’s insight that one of the reasons the state came into existence was in response to people’s desire for protection of their life and limb. Moreover, while it is the middle class that is most afraid of crime, it is the poor who suffer most from it.

Fourth, right-wing parties and personalities, like Duterte and Bolsonaro, are strongly misogynistic at a time when women’s struggles for their rights are on the ascendant throughout the world. So it is very critical that women in great numbers play a central role in the politics of the anti-fascist movement. Women, when mobilized, are one of the strongest bulwarks against fascism.

Fifth, many progressive and liberal personalities and parties that played key roles in the old liberal democratic political arena have been discredited, along with the liberal democratic system. The Philippine liberal icons Cory Aquino and her son Noynoy Aquino belong to the past, just like the PT figures Dilma and Lula. Thus, while we must construct broad coalitions, it is imperative that new faces, new political formations, and new ideas come to represent the progressive response to fascism. The youth, one must emphasize, are a central battlefield in this conflict, and we’re losing ground among them.

Let me end this missive by repeating what I told a recent conference on human rights here in Manila:

The world we are in today is one that is pretty much the same as in the 1930s, when forces of the extreme right are on the offensive and the fate of progressive democratic politics hangs in the balance. The last few years have buried Francis Fukuyama’s deterministic idea that liberal democracy was every country’s future, just as before Fukuyama momentous events buried the equally deterministic notion that socialism was the wave of the future. The future emerges from the clash of movements and ideas, one that is marked by great uncertainty and contingency. There is no guarantee that our side will prevail, but we will certainly lose unless we resist in a way that combines determination, passion, and wisdom.

In solidarity,

Walden Bello, Manila, Oct. 25, 2018

P.S.

- THE NATION. OCTOBER 26, 2018:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/brazil-bolsonaro-duterte-fascism-resistance/>

- This article is a joint publication of TheNation.com and Foreign Policy In Focus.
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