

Philippines: Emerging cracks within the Duterte factions?

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On March 23, both houses of Congress passed the 'Bayanihan to Heal as One Act' granting President Rodrigo Duterte additional or special powers to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. Duterte signed it into law two days later, but declared that he was delegating most of his powers to various departments in government, save for two powers he reserved for himself. These are the power to direct the operation of private establishments, and the power to require businesses to prioritize contracts for materials and services necessary for the crisis. These are actually the coercive type of powers that Duterte wants to secure and monopolize for himself.

But now that he has got the emergency powers he demanded from Congress, Duterte has delegated the authority to a circle of officials. The delegation of powers to his subalterns represents the obvious: it is to free himself to attend to immediate concerns, which is primarily his health situation. Nothing is wrong with that. But to create a cordon sanitaire around himself would only confound the situation. If it is happening now, we would like to know who might be in the close contact with the president, i.e., those who are most likely to call the shots in the president's delegation of powers.

Factions within the Duterte regime

There are factions and factions within the Duterte regime. Duterte did not come to power through the support of an organized base, including a party base of his own. PDP-Laban, almost a disintegrating party before the May 2016 elections, adopted Duterte as the party's president close to the elections. Only after the May elections that a broader coalition with other traditional parties was formed, but it was clear that even Duterte himself did not consider PDP-Laban as his loyal base.

The core faction of the Duterte regime includes his loyal acolyte Bong Go, the Dutertes themselves, and former army and police generals handpicked to do his bidding and secure support from the police and the military. The Dutertes include daughter Sara, the current mayor of Davao City instrumental to the formation of Hugpong ng Pagbabago, a coalition of parties mostly based in Mindanao and the Visayas, which delivered a number of Congress representatives and local mayors to the Duterte administration during the May 2019 mid-term elections. Sara is perceived to be a contender for the presidential seat in the 2022 election, but Bong Go, Duterte's alter-ego, may be running too. The chief of the Philippine National Police, Archie Gamboa, came from Duterte's bailiwick in the Davao region. Former general Rolando Bautista, secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) – the main agency in charge of dispensing P200 billion assistance to poor families during the coronavirus crisis – served as the commanding general of the Philippine army under Duterte's administration. They are all in choice positions to be in the core circle around Duterte. However, not everyone in Duterte's cabinet is part of the core faction though. A case in point is defense secretary Delfin Lorenzana, a US-trained general, whose announcements usually contradict those of Duterte's.

Then there is the 'peripheral faction' represented by trapos and elite who support Duterte and abide

by his biddings. This faction includes the Marcoses, the Arroyos, the PDP-Laban machinery, the coalition parties that supported him in 2019, and the local warlords and trapos egging him to impose a trapo-led federalism in the country. What's common among this faction? These are clans who felt they were persecuted or were left out in the game by the previous political elite in power (those they call the 'Dilawan'). Duterte styled himself as a Godfather and dispensed favor to this faction by appointing them in position of power or handing them economic favor.

Will there be cracks within the Duterte factions?

The crack is likely to take place among the ranks of the peripheral faction, especially if they sense that they are being eased out of power and privileges (including access to the President) by the core faction. Recently, one of the Marcoses, Senator Imee, publicly lambasted the Duterte administration over its handling of the coronavirus crisis. Tension might be simmering over other issues such as the snag on Bongbong Marcos' recount bid for vice-presidency which is still on hold at the Supreme Court. (Bongbong might not be able to survive this one.)

There are no major differences between the factions today, but that doesn't mean there are no grumblings. Duterte has secured a large chunk of money out of the 'emergency powers' Act. It's ₱275 billion officially but it's now nearing ₱305 billion if the money handed over by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (₱25 billion more than the proposed amount) and the recent ₱5 billion 'loan' from World Bank are included. The disbursement of this money is centralized to Duterte and his core faction. Part of the 'emergency fund' may find its way to the 2022 presidential elections. This is going to be a contentious issue for all factions.

Then we have to account for the fact that Duterte has been losing popularity among the masses over blunders on the handling of the coronavirus crisis: the total lockdown, delay of food assistance, lack of PPE support to health workers, red tape and bureaucratic snags in allocating relief assistance, and others. The sign of the times is the recent protest at Edsa by the San Roque community which has not received food aid for more than two weeks. This is a spontaneous protest, and not one organized by the Left as Duterte tried to project it in his 'shoot them dead' pronouncement.

There will be more sporadic and spontaneous eruptions from time to time, coming from the most harassed, beleaguered and oppressed sectors, such as the health workers and the no-work, no-pay sectors whose families are starving during the lockdown. (The organized Left, with their mass organizations, should merge with this.)

As soon as Duterte loses control and loses popularity among the masses, the faction rift will erupt and a new realignment of ruling class forces will take place.

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P.S.

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