

OPINION

Philippines: The burning question is not if Duterte will go, but how

Sunday 23 August 2020, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 23 August 2020).

'Even Duterte's usually aggressive DDS true believers and paid trolls are confused and defensive in their comments, or are simply keeping quiet, waiting desperately for the wind shift that will never come'

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This is the way the world ends

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Not with a bang but a whimper

- T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* (also known as the Swan Song of Rodrigo Duterte)

The fix that President Rodrigo Duterte is in now illustrates the truth in the saying that the best laid plans of mice and men are often unraveled by the least expected event.

The asteroid from Wuhan

In the case of the beleaguered occupant of Malacañang, the equivalent of the asteroid from outer space was COVID-19, which threw him from the high horse he was riding in triumph after the midterm elections of 2019, which his partisans swept at all levels.

COVID-19 has exposed the gross incompetence of a small-town mayor flung to the presidency by an electoral insurgency with few qualifications for higher office. But just as devastating to Duterte's legitimacy as the public health catastrophe and the economic crisis that it has spawned has been the glaring contrast between the priority he assigned to pursuing the war on drugs, passing the Anti-Terror Act, and seizing ABS-CBN, when the clear priority for the rest of us was containing the rampaging COVID-19, which, as of writing, has infected nearly 174,000 Filipinos and killed close to 2,800.

To people who have seen neighboring countries like Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam successfully limit infections to a few thousand and deaths to a handful through comprehensive containment programs, the revelation of Duterte's incompetence could not have come in a more shocking way. The hundreds of thousands blinded by his gangster charisma in the last 4 years have had the scales fall from their eyes and are now asking themselves how they could possibly have fallen in love with a person whose only skill was mass murder. Even Duterte's usually aggressive DDS true believers and

paid trolls are confused and defensive in their comments, or are simply keeping quiet, waiting desperately for the wind shift that will never come.

The unraveling

A man who had projected a bigger than life image has been cut down to size, and he knows it. He knows that the real message of the recent Supreme Court ruling that unreasonable searches and seizures in the war on drugs are a violation of the Constitution is that the justices he has been so contemptuous of are no longer afraid of him. He knows that when the opportunist par excellence Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo comes out and tells the public that they should be patient with the president since his task is a “difficult” one, her real intent is to signal Duterte that she is thinking of jumping ship and that he better come up with a better deal than the one they have now.

Panic has now seized him. This is the only explanation for his screwball declaration of war against the frontline healthcare workers who were simply asking him for a comprehensive strategy to contain COVID-19. Growing desperation can be the only reason for his cursing the country and giving it the obscene middle finger salute during his late night show last Monday for what he rightfully perceived as the erosion of support for his war on drugs.

Popular support, expressed in electoral results and surveys, was what propped him up and encouraged his arrogance in power. With that disappearing, the question now is not if he will go but how he will leave.

Here are some more than plausible scenarios for his departure.

One is that he is overthrown in a military coup. People might say that this is improbable since he has filled his cabinet with generals. What they forget is that coups are usually launched by colonels and junior officers who are not only ambitious but, like all of us, have families and friends that are suffering from the pandemic and its economic consequences and the lack of any strategy to deal with the catastrophe. Indeed, to preempt such a “colonels’ coup” and preserve the chain of command, some of the generals who now swear fealty to Duterte to his face might themselves be tempted to make the first move.

A second scenario is an EDSA 4, where a critical mass of citizens takes to the streets to demand Duterte’s ouster and, faced with the impossibility of putting down a popular insurrection as in 1986, the police and the AFP either declare themselves neutral or join the people.

A third scenario is that Duterte hangs on till the elections but is a lame duck in virtual detention in Malacañang, unable to control events, with his allies fighting among themselves to succeed him but also trying to distance themselves from a rotten presidency as they face massive popular repudiation in the polls.

Of course, barring death from natural causes, probably the best option for Duterte is the fourth scenario, that is, to resign now – what I call, borrowing from T.S. Eliott, the “whimper option.” That way he still might be allowed to live out his last days in Davao and save his buddy Xi Jinping from spending for his board and lodging in Beijing, like the US did hosting the Marcos gang in Honolulu. Resignation would also assure him that he will not go out feet first, an option this cruel man did not offer the 27,000 people that were subjected to extrajudicial execution under his bloody watch.

Of course, resignation will not save him from being handed over to the International Criminal Court in the Hague. But he may draw some comfort from the fact that the ICC does not give out death

sentences.

As for who will succeed Duterte and how the succession could take place, that is, of course, an extremely important issue, but one that is best deferred to a future essay.

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P.S.

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