

[Working Papers Series: Populism in Asia 3]

**Contemporary Populism and  
Democratic Challenges in the Philippines**

**Francisco A. Magno (Jesse M. Robredo Institute of Governance)**

***Introduction***

Populism is not a novel event but a periodic one. It is a type of direct democracy that emerges when people sense that they are pushed to the margins by mainstream politics. Riding on the back of political discontent, populism gains traction and thrives amid an atmosphere of divisiveness cultivated by identity-driven politics. It focuses blame on certain domestic groups, countries, and international organizations for the ills of the nation. Populism is defined as a thin-centered ideology that delineates society into two homogeneous and adversarial groups – the pure people versus the corrupt elite. It insists that politics should express *la volonté générale* or the general will of the people.<sup>1</sup>

Given that populism is a recurrent feature of Philippine society, this chapter seeks to find out how the persistence of weak institutions, contemporary globalization processes, and the expansion of social media heighten the speed of transmitting populist ideas among the citizenry. It defines the key themes that are used in populist discourse and describes the demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds of populist leaders and supporters. This study examines the various social, economic, and political factors that gave rise to the current wave of populism. It also considers the challenges posed by populism to the values and institutions of representative democracy.

***Institutional Lens***

An institutional theoretical lens is appropriate to assess the role of weak institutions in fostering the rise of a populist leadership that promised to make up for the ineffectual performance of previous regimes. In this regard, institutions are framed in terms of enduring rules and organized practices embedded in structures of meaning and resources. These constitutive rules and practices stipulate appropriate behavior for specific actors under given circumstances. In this regard, structures of meaning provide the explanation and justification of behavioral codes while structures of resources foster capabilities for action.<sup>2</sup>

Populism castigates elites and formal institutions as inept and untrustworthy. It appeals to extravagant emotions and insists on extreme measures to address collective action problems. During the 2016 presidential

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<sup>1</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. "Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: Comparing contemporary Europe and Latin America." *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 147-174.

<sup>2</sup> Rod AW Rhodes, Sarah A. Binder, and Bert A. Rockman, eds. *The Oxford handbook of political institutions*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

elections, administration candidate Manuel Roxas II vowed to continue the reforms of the Aquino government. On the other hand, candidate Rodrigo Duterte blazed the campaign trail with the promise to shake up the political establishment if elected into office. In a national survey conducted prior to the elections, Filipinos were asked to identify the top five urgent national issues that distress them. Among those at the top of the list of problems that the people wanted the government to address were controlling inflation, increasing worker pay, reducing poverty, creating jobs, and fighting graft and corruption. Duterte's signature campaign to wage war against criminality came only in the sixth spot among the concerns of voters.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, then-candidate Duterte was able to frame criminality as the key topic in the presidential contest.

### ***From Mayor to President***

Unlike the other presidential candidates who made their marks on the national scene before seeking the highest office of the land, Duterte spent most of his political career as a local government official. As mayor, Duterte dramatically transformed Davao from being a cradle of insurgency during the martial law years into a progressive urban center in the post-EDSA period. He installed security outposts surrounding the city where militias had to surrender their weapons. He imposed a smoking ban in public places, ordained curfew hours, and enforced road speed limits. The Davao City Investment Code was passed and business processes and licensing systems were streamlined to ease the regulatory cost of doing business. The influx of investment was accompanied by the proliferation of high-rise condominiums and shopping malls in the city. In 2014, Davao's economy grew by 9.4 percent, outpacing the growth rate of other urban hubs.<sup>4</sup>

Duterte was certainly not the first city mayor to become president of the Philippines. Before notching a landslide victory in the 1998 elections, Joseph Estrada was a long-time mayor of San Juan City. However, the similarity ends there as Estrada had a more conventional climb to the presidency having been elected in national elections as a senator and vice president before occupying the highest office of the land. Duterte, on the other hand, had no prior experience in vying for an elective post with a national constituency prior to the 2016 elections. He had been mayor and vice-mayor, and served briefly as congressperson of the first district of Davao City from 1998 to 2001.

The route to national prominence through local politics that Duterte took is comparable to that of President Joko Widodo of Indonesia. Before he captured the presidency in 2014, Jokowi won the position of mayor of Solo in 2005 and governor of Jakarta in 2012. As local chief executives, both Duterte and Jokowi sought to enhance economic growth through reforms such as removing bureaucratic red tape to improve public performance.<sup>5</sup> They barged onto the national scene with the political narrative that the success of competitive cities governed by strong leaders could be brought up to scale and replicated throughout the entire nation.

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<sup>3</sup> "Pulse Asia Research's September 2015 Nationwide Survey on Urgent National Concerns and the Performance Ratings of the National Administration on Selected Issues." *Pulse Asia*, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Ehito Kimura and Erik Martinez Kuhonta. "Duterte and Jokowi: do local politics apply?" (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner. "Indonesian politics in 2014: Democracy's close call." *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 50, no. 3 (2014): 347-369. DOI:10.1080/00074918.2014.980375

## *The Populist Appeal*

A survey of thirty-eight nations conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017 indicates that unrestricted executive power has a substantial number of adherents. In twenty countries, a quarter or more of those polled preferred an arrangement in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from the legislature and judiciary. This political trajectory is evident in countries where executives have extended or consolidated their power in recent years, such as the Philippines, Russia, and Turkey. The overpowering executive demonstrates a weakening of the system of checks and balance that is inherent in representative democracy. In the case of the Philippines, the survey finds that half of the population is favorably inclined towards strongman rule.<sup>6</sup>

Populist politicians bolt into power with the support of voters who feel left behind in the globalization game. Anti-elitism and xenophobia paint a conjoined picture of elites and outsiders as enemies of the people. Xenophobia brings together anti-globalization and anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe and the Americas that enhanced the visibility of strongman rule. Some form of Putinism may be at play in these unfolding events. In the Philippines, even President Duterte expressed strong admiration for the long-serving Russian president. Nevertheless, the rising stock of populist authoritarian leaders should not be attributed loosely to Russian influence. The reason behind this phenomenon can be traced to the fragility of democratic institutions in many countries, and solutions must be found at home.<sup>7</sup>

The growth of populism is anchored in the belief that the political system of representative democracy has failed the masses. It feeds on the notion that the elites orchestrated this elaborate system to accumulate private gains at the expense of the people. In this context, presidential candidate Duterte projected himself in 2016 as a crusader and an outsider who would battle the oligarchy and carry a cudgel for the people. While this form of populist rhetoric is fairly common, what differentiates Duterte was that he looked and sounded the part as an outsider who refused to follow the modalities of formal presidential bearing.<sup>8</sup>

Populism is characterized by a leadership style that deviates from the standards of high politics anchored on formal behavior. Adept at delivering very informal speeches using rough language and laced with hometown jokes before an adoring audience, populist politicians sought to project sincerity shorn of hypocrisy. Through such actions, a political base is cultivated that galvanizes a stable following for a non-conventional leader. The massive appeal generated by populist leaders comes from their ability to open the gates to certain sectors that were disregarded in the past and felt abandoned by the elite-controlled political establishment. They languished with their resentment kept under wraps. Silenced for a long time, the muted citizens found their voice through populism.<sup>9</sup>

Curato provides a good example of the neglected constituencies, especially the victims of the 2013 super typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban City. The high public approval rating for President Benigno Simeon Aquino III at that time suffered a reversal with the seeming absence of empathy by the national leadership for the survivors of the disaster. A key example cited was that of a business owner who appealed to the Chief Executive to declare a

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Wike, Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes, and Janell Fetterolf. "Globally, broad support for representative and direct democracy." *Pew Research Center* 16 (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Olga Oliker. "Putinism, populism and the defence of liberal democracy." *Survival* 59, no. 1 (2017): 7-24.

<sup>8</sup> Randy David. "Duterte, Trump, and Populism." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 5, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Nicole Curato. "Flirting with authoritarian fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the new terms of Philippine populism." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 1 (2017): 142-153.

state of emergency and deploy security personnel since mayhem had erupted in Tacloban City after the storm. However, he was rebuffed in no uncertain terms. This was strikingly different from then Davao City Mayor Duterte's response. With no fanfare, he deployed his city's emergency responders. While other politicians distributed relief goods with stickers that displayed their names and faces, Duterte's aid packages were generically stamped "from the People of Davao City." Three years later during the 2016 presidential campaign, banners with Duterte's image were displayed throughout Tacloban City, inscribed with a simple statement: "It's our turn to help him."<sup>10</sup>

### *The Drug War*

After being elected president of the Philippines in May 2016, Duterte delivered on his campaign promise to wage a drug war. He offered bounties for the bodies of drug dealers and guaranteed the police that they would be shielded from prosecution. From 2016 to 2018, around 4,500 people were killed either in police operations or suspected vigilantism. The killings sparked widespread condemnation from the United Nations and other international human rights organizations. Chris Beyrer, Professor of Public Health and Human Rights at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and an expert on the health implications of drug policy, registered his protest that "this is not the rule of law. People are being killed on the accusation or presumption that they are involved in the drug trade: that is a recipe for vigilante violence." In 2003, a similar policy action was pursued in Thailand through Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's war on drugs where more than 2,400 extra-judicial deaths were registered.<sup>11</sup>

In 2015, the Philippine Dangerous Drugs Board estimated the number of illegal drug users at 1.8 million out of a total population of 100 million. When Duterte assumed the presidency a year later, he declared that the country had more than three million drug users. Like other countries in the region, the Philippines has experienced a rise in the consumption of methamphetamines, locally known as *shabu*, in recent years. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime identified *shabu* as the top illicit drug threat in East and Southeast Asia. The seizure of amphetamine-type stimulants in the region quadrupled from eleven tons in 2008 to forty-two tons in 2013.<sup>12</sup>

In the first few months of the Duterte presidency, the anti-drug campaign led to the surrender of 800,000 drug users. They registered with the *barangay* (village government) and police authorities with the hope of receiving immunity from the killings and getting treatment for drug addiction. The number of people who surrendered caught the government by surprise because it lacked the infrastructure to assist so many people suffering from drug dependency. In 2002, the government repealed the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1972 and passed the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act, which focused less on law and order and more on preventing drug use and rehabilitating people with drug dependency, in line with globally accepted standards. However, while government officials maintain that drug use would be treated as a health problem, the country appears unprepared and unwilling to

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<sup>10</sup> Nicole Curato. "The power and limits of populism in the Philippines." (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Sophie Cousins. "Five thousand dead and counting: the Philippines' bloody war on drugs." *BMJ: British Medical Journal (Online)* 355 (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Sophie Cousins. "Five thousand dead and counting: the Philippines' bloody war on drugs." *BMJ: British Medical Journal (Online)* 355 (2016).

pursue that direction.<sup>13</sup> The death toll from the initial two years of the anti-drug campaign has already reached more than 4,500 based on estimates made by the Philippine National Police (PNP). In comparison, the martial law regime of President Ferdinand Marcos resulted in the death of 3,257 over a much longer period of fourteen years from 1972 to 1986.<sup>14</sup>

According to PNP data, the nationwide crime rate from July 2016 to June 2018 dropped by 21.48 percent compared to the same period from 2014 to 2016. A total of 1,040,987 crimes were reported from July 2016 to June 2018, lower than the 1,325,789 cases reported during the same period in 2014 to 2016. Crimes against persons like homicide, physical injuries, and rape also declined, except for murder which saw an increase of 19,210 or 1.5 percent from 2016 to 2018. The murder rate in Metro Manila soared by around 112 percent, or 3,444, from July 2016 to June 2018, which is significantly higher than the 1,621 murder cases reported between July 2014 and June 2016. This could be due to the vigilantism that emerged with the onset of the drug war. On the other hand, crimes against property like robbery, car theft, and theft went down by around 50 percent during the same period.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Social Media as a Battlefield***

Cyberspace has evolved into a battlefield for political engagement and contestation. Aside from official government sites, many cyber-troop teams manage fictitious accounts to cloak their identities and interests. This phenomenon is also depicted as a form of astroturfing where the identity of a sponsor or organization is depicted in terms of grassroots activism (Howard, 2003). In many cases, these fake accounts are bots that refer to bits of code that are programmed to connect with and imitate human users. Media reports indicate that bots have been widely utilized by state actors around the world. These include Argentina, Azerbaijan, Iran, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Syria, Turkey, Venezuela, and the Philippines. These bots are usually deployed to inundate social media networks with spam and fake news. However, not all governments make use of this type of automation.<sup>16</sup>

Social media is used by political actors to mislead the public through the use of fake accounts and artificially bloat the number of followers, likes, shares or re-tweets a candidate receives, fostering a false sense of popularity, momentum, or relevance. This was a tactic that the Australian Coalition Party used during the 2013 electoral campaign. Sometimes, when political parties or candidates use social media platforms as part of their campaign arsenal, these operations are sustained even after they assume the reins of government. In various countries, many of the keyboard trolls employed to spread propaganda during the election campaign are extended to continue distributing and amplifying messages to support the policies of the victorious coalition.<sup>17</sup>

The mob-like tendency of social media, and the way in which it makes certain information content and leader profiles acquire disproportionate visibility, can lend itself to this type of unifying mission of populist poli-

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<sup>13</sup> Sophie Cousins. "Five thousand dead and counting: the Philippines' bloody war on drugs." *BMJ: British Medical Journal (Online)* 355 (2016).

<sup>14</sup> Rambo Talabong. "PNP's Drug War Death Toll Tops 4,500 before SONA 2018." *Rappler*, July 23, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Maan Macapagal. "PNP: Crime Rate Drops, but Murder Rate up in 2 Years." *ABS-CBN News*, July 20, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard. "Troops, trolls and troublemakers: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation." (2017).

<sup>17</sup> Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard. "Troops, trolls and troublemakers: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation." (2017).

tics. This was exhibited in the viral results obtained by populist memes that celebrated the personality of candidates especially in the political campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders during the 2016 United States presidential elections. The personality and celebrity element of social media supplies a reference point around which a crowd can congregate. Social media provides a platform where millions of disaffected individuals, otherwise deprived of common organizational ties, can meet up as an online crowd and multiply the power of each of its members.<sup>18</sup>

### ***The Rising Tide of Populism***

Globalization has had mixed effects, producing winners and losers. It has been pointed out that globalization benefited exporters, transnational corporations, international banks, and the professional sectors that thrive in bigger markets. In China, millions of farmers made the transition from farmers to workers in the export-led manufacturing industry. On the other hand, globalization also deepened the rifts that divide capital and labor, urban and rural areas, sunrise and sunset industries, mobile professionals and local producers, and elites and ordinary people (Rodrik 2018).

Globalization allowed people to fall into the cracks. This provided an opening for critics to blame liberalism on both the domestic and international fronts, including rules-based and rights-based governance, as the culprit. If there is an ideological anchor in the wide varieties of democracies in the world, it is more social democratic and solidarity-based rather than neo-liberal. In this regard, democratic systems become sustainable when combined with inclusive development and social protection. Democracy and the rule of law could be seen as fostering both freedom and development.<sup>19</sup>

Who would be the bearers of the general will of the people in terms of the capacity to wield a vision that transcends particular wills and sectional interests? Trends indicate the diminishing influence of political parties in social and political life. Membership and trust in political parties have plunged. The role of parties as formal institutions for interest representation and aggregation has weakened in the face of personality-based politics. What is occurring is a process of individualization where political leaders become more receptive to appeals to the people that bypass established parties and other intermediary institutions.<sup>20</sup>

Populism thrives in economies featuring high levels of inequality and sufficiently weak political institutions. These enable the rich elite, or segments of the elite, to have a disproportionate influence on politics. Voters often distrust politicians and believe that they may adopt the rhetoric of redistribution, leveling the playing field, and defending the interests of the common citizen. However, they end up pursuing policies that are skewed towards the interests of the elite. This makes it valuable for politicians to signal to voters that they are not captives of narrow elite concerns. Given the high levels of inequality in many societies, political platforms built on redistribution are not surprising. Nonetheless, populist rhetoric and policies may cause harm rather than help the majority of the population.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo. "Social media and populism: an elective affinity?." *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 745-7

<sup>19</sup> G. John Ikenberry. "The end of liberal international order?." *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7-23.

<sup>20</sup> Rogers Brubaker. "Why populism?." *Theory and Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 357-385.

<sup>21</sup> Daron Acemoglu, Georgy Egorov, and Konstantin Sonin. "A political theory of populism." *The Quarterly Journal of Econom-*

An example of a populist policy in the Philippines is the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (Republic Act No. 10932) that was passed in 2017. The law mandates the state to draw from the public coffers to cover the tuition fees of students enrolled in 112 state universities and colleges (SUCs), seventy-eight local universities and colleges, and all technical vocation education and training programs registered under the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) starting in the 2018-2019 school year. In addition to the provision of free school fees, there are also affirmative action programs for indigenous people, persons with disabilities, and students from public high schools and depressed areas. It also allows students who have financial capacity to opt out of the free higher education provision or even contribute a specific amount to their higher education institution of choice.

The provision of tuition subsidies for everyone enrolled in SUCs harbors negative effects. The subsidy will be financed through general taxes. In this regard, all taxpayers, whether or not they have family members who take advantage of free tertiary education will have an obligation to pay for those who study in SUCs. This would also discourage efficiency because those who were not considering tertiary education previously may now find tertiary education appealing and be more likely consume this good to a greater extent than they would if they were required to pay. Moreover, those who are willing and capable of paying for tertiary education will begin transferring the resources intended for tertiary education to other expenses. This constitutes an unnecessary loss of private investments at a crucial time when the country needs resources to fund strategic expansion in tertiary education.<sup>22</sup>

Subsidized college education would deepen income inequality. If it is not targeted to serve the poor, who usually have lesser qualifications, they will lose out to students with better backgrounds who often come from more affluent households. In the context of other equally important policy priorities, the additional budget to implement the free college tuition program will undoubtedly take away resources from the K-12 basic education program, infrastructure, agriculture, drug rehabilitation, national security, and other high-priority and pro-poor development programs. It would be unwise to just ignore this effect given present initiatives to further increase taxes to prevent the deficit from further escalation. There is a need to recover some of the cost of public service provision and to choose carefully and exercise caution in the deployment of subsidies as a policy tool. Populist expenditure policies are worrisome because of how the value of targeting is downgraded, and consequently how they neglect the legitimate needs of the poor.<sup>23</sup>

Another populist policy is the Free Irrigation Service Act of 2017 (Republic Act No. 10969). The law exempts all farmers from paying irrigation fees for landholdings of eight hectares and below. The measure also nullifies all unpaid irrigation service fees and corresponding penalties, as well as loans and past due accounts and corresponding interests and penalties of the irrigator associations from the records of the National Irrigation Administration. President Duterte raised the salary of the police during his first year in office. Rather than legislate the pay increase through the General Appropriations Act, an Executive Order was issued that increased the combat

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*ics* 128, no. 2 (2013): 771-805.

<sup>22</sup> Aniceto Orbeta Jr. and Vicente Paqueo. "Who Benefits and Loses from an Untargeted Tuition Subsidy for Students in SUCs?." *PIDS Policy Notes* No. 2017-03, 2017. Quezon City: Philippine Institute for Development Studies.

<sup>23</sup> Aniceto Orbeta Jr. and Vicente Paqueo. "Who Benefits and Loses from an Untargeted Tuition Subsidy for Students in SUCs?." *PIDS Policy Notes* No. 2017-03, 2017. Quezon City: Philippine Institute for Development Studies.

duty pay of the police from PhP 340 to PhP 3,000 a month and the combat duty pay of soldiers from PhP 500 to PhP 3,000 a month. On top of this, the police and soldiers will benefit from a big increase in combative incentive pay from PhP 150 a day or a maximum of PhP 1,500 a month to PhP 300 a day or a maximum of PhP 3,000 a month.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Erosion of Independent Institutions***

Populism can use an electoral mandate to decimate independent institutions that are considered bedrocks of liberal democracies like the courts and the free media. Populism might lead to political tribalism, which derails civil discourse and prevents political consensus.<sup>25</sup> The substitution of global democratic norms with authoritarian practices would mean more elections in which the incumbent's success is a matter of course. It would lead to more media spaces that are flooded by propaganda mouthpieces that sideline the opposition while presenting the ruler as omnipotent, tough, and committed to the welfare of the nation. It would mean state control over the Internet and social media through both censorship and active manipulation that promotes pro-regime messages.<sup>26</sup>

The free press is faced with tremendous challenges in the age of populism. In 2018, the government barred online news platform Rappler from covering Palace press briefings and other presidential events, citing the ruling of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). The regulatory agency revoked Rappler's registration papers for violating foreign ownership rules. However, the SEC said the online news site may still continue with its operations pending its appeal to the courts.<sup>27</sup> The government also threatened to block the renewal of the franchise to operate of the media outfit ABS-CBN. The franchise is set to expire in 2020. House of Representatives Bill No. 4349 seeking to renew the franchise granted to ABS-CBN for 25 years is still at the committee level.<sup>28</sup>

President Duterte also threatened to abolish the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) during a press conference that followed his second State of the Nation Address in 2017 as he continued to defend the police and armed forces amid allegations of human rights violations. The CHR is an independent office created under the 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines that is tasked with investigating all forms of human rights violations involving civil and political rights.<sup>29</sup>

The House of Representatives voted to give a budget of PhP 1,000 to the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) for 2018. During the House budget plenary debates in September 2017, at least 119 lawmakers voted to approve the P1,000 budget for the CHR. Only thirty-two lawmakers voted against it. The decision of the House to erase the agency's budget from the proposed PhP 649.484 million down to PhP 1,000 was the result of House Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez making good on his word to give the Commission, which has long been critical of the administration's war on drugs, a measly budget which would render it ineffective in its operations in 2018.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ana, Filomeno Sta. Jr. "Populism, the Bad and the Good." *Yellow Pad*, Action for Economic Reforms, December 20, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Claes H. De Vreese, Frank Esser, Toril Aalberg, Carsten Reinemann, and James Stanyer. "Populism as an expression of political communication content and style: A new perspective." *The international journal of press/politics* 23, no. 4 (2018): 423-438.

<sup>26</sup> Michael J. Abramowitz and Sarah Repucci. "Democracy beleaguered." *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 128-142

<sup>27</sup> Dharel Placido. "Duterte Says He Merely Followed SEC Ruling in Blocking Rappler." *ABS-CBN News*, February 22, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Pia Ranada. "Duterte: If It Were Up to Me, No ABS-CBN Franchise Renewal." *Rappler*, August 3, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Tricia Macas. "Duterte to CHR: You are Better Abolished." *GMA News*, July 25, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Marc Jayson Cayabyab. "House Gives Commission on Human Rights P1,000 Budget for 2018." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, September 12, 2017.

Lawmakers from the lower House later decided to give the agency a budget of PhP 537 million following a meeting with CHR Chair Jose Luis Martin Gascon during the third and final reading of the proposed 2018 national budget. On the other hand, the Senate approved in October 2017 a budget of PhP 693 million for the agency. The Senate version was higher than the house version by PhP 156 million. It includes a PhP 28.5 million allocation for the Human Rights Victim's Memorial Commission.<sup>31</sup>

The Office of the Ombudsman is another independent agency that earned the ire of the presidency. It is a constitutional body with the mandate to investigate and prosecute public officials accused of crimes, especially graft and corruption.<sup>32</sup> In July 2018, the Office of the President ordered the dismissal of Overall Deputy Ombudsman Melchor Arthur Carandang over his partisanship in investigating the presidential family's wealth. Aside from his separation from public service, Carandang was also slapped with the forfeiture of retirement benefits and perpetual disqualification from holding public office. The ruling, signed by Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea, said Carandang was accused of violating the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees (Republic Act No. 6713) when he disclosed or misused confidential information in order to give an undue advantage to Senator Antonio Trillanes IV who filed a plunder complaint against the president.<sup>33</sup>

### *Silencing Critics*

Critics of the Duterte presidency have been silenced either through detention, removal from office, or the use of public derision. In September 2018, President Duterte said in a speech before the Filipino community in Jordan that detained Senator Leila de Lima is not a prisoner of conscience. He maintained that De Lima is involved in the illegal drug trade and is not politically persecuted. The senator has been detained in the PNP Custodial Center since February 2017 on charges that she benefited from the drug trade in the New Bilibid Prison during her tenure as Justice Secretary under the Aquino administration. De Lima is a staunch critic of Duterte of the President's anti-drug war.<sup>34</sup> She has petitioned a Muntinlupa City court to disqualify thirteen convicts as witnesses in the drug charges she is facing. The inmates do not qualify as witnesses since they have been convicted of drug trafficking, murder, homicide, kidnapping and robbery. De Lima argued that witnesses who are convicted of crimes with moral turpitude violate the law on state witnesses.<sup>35</sup>

In a special en banc session, the Supreme Court voted eight to six in May 2018 to declare Maria Lourdes Sereno's appointment as Chief Justice invalid. The case against Sereno stemmed from a number of allegations, including her failure to file her Statement of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth (SALN) for certain years as a public officer, that were originally consolidated in impeachment charges brought before Congress. However, even before Sereno could be tried by the Senate in impeachment proceedings, Solicitor General Jose Calida lodged a petition for *quo warranto* with the Supreme Court. The petitioner argued that *quo warranto* is available as a remedy even against impeachable officers. The Supreme Court denied with finality in June 2018 Sereno's motion for reconsid-

<sup>31</sup> Abner Mercado. "Senate Approves 2018 Budgets for CHR, DPWH." *ABS-CBN News*, October 10, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Tricia Macas. "Duterte to CHR: You are Better Abolished." *GMA News*, July 25, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Eimor Santos. "Palace Sacks, Penalizes Overall Deputy Ombudsman Carandang." *CNN Philippines*, August 1, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Llanesca Panti. "Duterte: De Lima Deserves to be in Prison," *GMA News*, September 7, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Robertzon Ramirez. "De Lima Wants 13 Convicts Disqualified as DOJ Witnesses." *The Philippine Star*, September 20, 2018.

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President Duterte described Vice President Leni Robredo as weak when it comes to strategy. In the face of health issues, Duterte stressed that he will not hand the presidency to Robredo during a speech before members of the Philippine Military Academy Alumni Association in October 2018. Under the Constitution, the Vice President shall become the President to serve the unexpired term in case of death, permanent disability, resignation, or removal from office of the President. On previous occasions, Duterte claimed Robredo was not suitable to be the next head of State. Instead, he declared his preference for losing Vice Presidential candidate Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as his successor.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Marginalizing the Opposition***

Using an institutional theoretical lens, this study considered how weak institutions aided the rise of contemporary populism. Institutions are conceived as enduring rules and organized practices located in structures of meaning and resources. Political parties play a crucial role in fostering democratic linkage. They are the agents of representation in contemporary democratic systems.<sup>38</sup> Substantive representation requires consistency between the policy preferences of voters and the policy positions that political parties adopt. In addition, it is also important that political parties listen to their voters with regard to the policy issues they emphasize in democratic societies.<sup>39</sup>

In Philippine politics, it is common for elected officials to join the mass exodus to the party of the new Chief Executive after every presidential election. Given the absence of strong policies on political turncoatism, many elected legislators jumped to the party of President Duterte and allied parties after the 2016 elections. This changed the complexion of the leadership structure and the assignment of legislators to powerful Committee positions in the House of Representatives. For instance, the opposition Liberal Party was seriously depleted when members jumped to join the administration camp. Even the lone LP seat on the Commission on Appointments (CA) became precarious following the transfer of five House Members from the LP to the ruling Partido Demokratiko Pilipino-Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban) in May 2017. This reduced the number of LP lawmakers in the House from thirty-two to twenty-seven. The House leadership gives a slot in the House contingent to the CA for every party that consists of at least twenty-four legislators.<sup>40</sup>

The existence of an opposition ensures the existence of a functioning democracy as it serves to restrain the ruling coalition in the exercise of power. In the long run, the active competition between the administration and opposition parties contributes towards forging democratic norms and rules.<sup>41</sup> Hence, it is a cause for alarm when the administration coalition sought to control even the selection of the Minority Leader in Congress. In August 2018, a majority of the 292-member House of Representatives voted to retain Rep. Danilo Suarez as leader of the minority bloc to end the fierce rivalry for the post. Administration lawmakers from the majority coalition ex-

<sup>36</sup> "SC Upholds Quo Warranto Ruling, Voids Sereno's Appointment as Chief Justice," *UNTV News*, June 29, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Nathaniel Mariano and Rio Araja. "Duterte: Leni Weak; VP: No Need to Hit Me." *Manila Standard*, October 6, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Russell J. Dalton. "Party representation across multiple issue dimensions." *Party Politics* 23, no. 6 (2017): 609-622

<sup>39</sup> Jae-Jae Spoon and Heike Klüver. "Do parties respond? How electoral context influences party responsiveness." *Electoral Studies* 35 (2014): 48-60.

<sup>40</sup> Mara Cepeda. "If LP Exodus Continues, Party Loses Commission on Appointments Seat." May 21, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset. "The indispensability of political parties." *Journal of democracy* 11, no. 1 (2000): 48-55.

pressed their support for Suarez through a voice vote after House Majority Leader Rolando Andaya Jr. moved to recognize him as the Minority Leader. However, the victory of Suarez was questioned by Rep. Romero Quimbo of the Liberal Party and Rep. Eugene de Vera of the ABS Party-list, both of whom vied for the post. They argued that Suarez properly belongs to the administration coalition having voted for Rep. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to unseat Rep. Pantaleon Alvarez as Speaker of the House of Representatives in July 2018.<sup>42</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Populism has always been around in the Philippines. Its presence is heightened or muted based on the confluence of actors and events that affect the political system. The framers of the 1987 Philippine Constitution sought to establish the foundations of a representative democracy that would bar the return of authoritarianism. Hence, the fundamental law is replete with features to ensure a system of competitive elections; checks and balances among the executive, legislature, and judiciary; respect for civil and political rights; and independent oversight agencies that promote accountability. However, there is a wide disparity between what is envisioned under the democratic Constitution and the actual exercise of democracy. The democratic gap lies in the failure to set up strong institutions to make representation work for the people.

Using an institutional lens, the study considered how weak institutions aided the rise of contemporary populism. The absence of strong political parties carrying well-defined platforms of governance prevents the institutionalization of political contestation based on policy differentiation. In this regard, political parties become mere vehicles for the election of candidates into office instead of being substantive agents of representation. When parties underinvest in policy research and political education, personality-oriented elections are routinized and become the norm. Citizens become less meticulous in scrutinizing the plans and programs of the leaders they choose to run the affairs of the state. Democratic systems are marked by the compatibility between the policy preferences of voters and the policy positions taken by leaders. For example, in a survey conducted by Pulse Asia a few months before the 2016 elections, fighting criminality ranked only sixth in the list of most urgent national concerns. Yet, then-candidate Duterte was able to frame criminality as the key topic in the presidential contest.<sup>43</sup>

Populism thrives where citizens look at strong leaders more favorably than strong institutions. The Philippines belong to the group of countries identified in a 2017 survey done by the Pew Research Center where a quarter or more of those polled preferred an arrangement in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from the legislature and judiciary. The overpowering executive demonstrates a weakening of the system of checks and balance that is inherent in representative democracy. In Philippine politics, it is common for elected officials to jump onto the presidential bandwagon after national elections. In the post-2016 election period, a mass exodus to the party of the new President ensued. Given the absence of strong policies on political turncoatism, many elected legislators transferred to the party of President Duterte and allied parties to avail themselves of choice congressional committee positions. The authoritarian tendencies of populism are reinforced when the ranks of opposition parties are decimated through party switching. This results in the diminished independence of

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<sup>42</sup> Delon Porcalla. "It's Final: Danilo Suarez is House Minority Leader." *The Philippine Star*, August 8, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> "Pulse Asia Research's September 2015 Nationwide Survey on Urgent National Concerns and the Performance Ratings of the National Administration on Selected Issues." *Pulse Asia*, 2015.

the legislature from the executive.

Populism rides on the crest of strong electoral support to erode independent institutions that are important in a functioning representative democracy. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was removed without going through the impeachment procedures stipulated by the Constitution. Independent agencies such as the Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the Ombudsman that monitor the behavior of state officials were threatened with budget cuts and dismissal of their key officers. Media outfits that ran critical stories of the government were met with lawsuits and risked losing their franchises to operate.

Rather than political parties, media has become the main platform for generating political support in the age of populism. This explains the sensitivity of populist leaders to media criticism. Modern populism is occurring in the context of the mediatization of politics where public support is cultivated through both mainstream media and social media. The populist manner of political communication is marked by simplification, dramatization, confrontation, and negativity. Given their autonomy from the disciplinary norms, representative mechanisms, and policy discipline provided by political parties as intermediary institutions, populist leaders usually exercise immense discretion in going directly to the people in addressing their concerns.

While democratic norms and principles may be written in the Constitution, the case for democracy has to be demonstrated by providing avenues and mechanisms for citizen voices and participation in policy development and monitoring. Aside from improving democratic processes and practices, the case for democracy has to be made in the minds of the broader public. Citizens may have to be convinced that deficits in performance and accountability can be remedied through democracy and the rule of law rather than banishing rules-based governance away.<sup>44</sup> The threat to democracy has intensified amid the crisis of public knowledge. The enormity of this crisis is exhibited in the proliferation of fake news and alternative facts in media spaces. In a highly connected digital world, the spread of misinformation either for profit or propaganda has diminished the authority of the mediating institutions that generate and share knowledge, including universities, science, and the press.<sup>45</sup>

The role of knowledge institutions, including universities, research organizations, and policy think tanks in developing new content to educate the new generation of citizens for democracy and rules-based governance is valuable. Media is tasked with performing the critical task of ensuring integrity, credibility, and comprehensiveness in providing mechanisms for information and knowledge dissemination. On the other hand, political parties should be strengthened as representative institutions to aggregate interests, produce evidence-based policies, and foster adherence to rules-based governance. Support for a rules-based system is nurtured through interdependent civic and knowledge practices and institutions.

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<sup>44</sup> Francisco Magno. "Fostering Rules-Based Governance at Home or Abroad," *Philippine Star*, August 24, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Rogers Brubaker. "Why populism?," *Theory and Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 357-385.

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- **Francisco A. Magno** teaches Political Science and Development Studies at De La Salle University (DLSU). He is the Founding Director of the DLSU Jesse M. Robredo Institute of Governance. He served as the President of the Philippine Political Science Association from 2015 to 2017. He finished his PhD in Political Science at the University of Hawaii.

This series of reports was compiled as a part of Asia Democracy Research Network's joint research project on Populism in Asia. The research for these reports was conducted entirely by EAI's partner think tanks in Asia, including East Asia Institute, Academia Sinica/Asian Barometer, Jesse M. Robredo Institute of Governance, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs, Society for Participatory Research in Asia, King Prajadhipok's Institute, Academy of Political Education, Yangon School of Political Science, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Indonesian Institute of Sciences and Pakistan Institute for Legislative Development and Transparency.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

This publication and other EAI reports can be found on our website, [EAI Working Papers]. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the East Asia Institute.

"Contemporary Populism and Democratic Challenges in the Philippines"  
979-11-88772-90-2 95340      Date of Issue: 16 July 2019

Typeset by Jinkyung Baek

For inquiries:  
Jinkyung Baek, Research Associate/Project Manager  
Asia Democracy Research Group  
North Korea and National Security Research Group  
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209)      j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute  
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,  
Seoul 04548, South Korea  
Phone 82 2 2277 1683      Fax 82 2 2277 1697