

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

The 2022 Philippine Elections: Religion and Politics amid Democratic Uncertainty

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As the May 2022 election approaches in the Philippines, many fear that, as Borja and Hecita recently put it in another ARDN briefing, the results will mark “a critical juncture in the history of Southeast Asia’s oldest democracy.”¹ Polls indicate significant leads for presidential aspirant Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr and vice presidential candidate Sara Duterte, a tandem many view as a threat to the legacy of the 1986 “People Power” revolution and liberal democracy in the country. Observers worry that civil society, the press, political opposition, and human rights protections will face further rollbacks, after the tumultuous term of current-President Rodrigo Duterte.

Religious leaders and networks were one part of the People Power coalition that brought down the Marcos dictatorship during democracy’s global “third wave.” The Roman Catholic Church, representing roughly 4 in 5 Filipinos, was central to this effort, and recent statements resemble the advocacy for democratic institutions in that period. Prominent Catholic leaders like Lingayen-Dagupan Archbishop Socrates Villegas have declared that the church “cannot be neutral when we talk about good or evil.”² However, while this role as moral defender of democracy remains important, there may be limits on religion’s role in preserving liberal democracy in 2022 and beyond. Changes in both the religious and political landscapes present new challenges to religious leaders hoping to serve again as democracy’s guarantors.

Religion and Philippine Politics from People Power to Daang Matuwid

In the three decades after the fall of Ferdinand Marcos’s regime in 1986, a rough consensus emerged over the political role of religion, and especially the Catholic Church, in Philippine politics. The post-authoritarian constitution announced the separation of church and state to be “inviolable,”³ but courts clarified that this would be a form of “benevolent secularism” which preserved extensive room for

¹ Borja, Anthony L. and Ian J. Hecita. 2022. “The 2022 Philippine Elections Primer: A Democratic Citizenship Perspective.” *ADRN Issue Briefing* March 4. <http://www.adrnresearch.org/publications/list.php?at=view&idx=236>

² Esmaquel II, Paterno R. 2022. “‘Church cannot be neutral about good or evil’ – Archbishop Villegas.” *Rappler* March 5. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/video-catholic-church-cannot-be-neutral-good-evil-archbishop-soc-villegas/>

³ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Philippines_1987?lang=en

what sociologist José Casanova calls “public religion.”⁴ Various government programs, from public health to education to disaster relief and response, involve close partnership with religious organizations, and religious leaders enjoy what Grzymala-Busse and Slater have termed “institutional access” to local and national politicians, the ability to influence policy informally via direct ties to elected officials and career civil servants.⁵ Cory Aquino owed a portion of her political rise to Manila’s Cardinal Sin in 1986, and her son, Bengino ‘Noynoy’ Aquino III, appointed clergy to his cabinet after his election roughly twenty-five years later.

When it comes to election season, this benevolent secularism is most visible in the close collaboration between religious networks and organizations working to strengthen electoral integrity. Domestic citizen election observation was tied to religious networks even in the last years of the authoritarian period, with the National Citizens’ Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) deeply embedded in religious networks, particularly tied to prominent Catholic institutions of higher education and business associations.⁶ Since that time, NAMFREL and the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) have continued to mobilize hundreds of thousands of local poll watchers, both in Catholic parishes and via other Christian and Muslim networks. Religious organizations are regular participants in good governance coalitions in partnership with organizations like the Legal Network for Truthful Elections (LENTE), and at times via programs tied to particular religious orders, such as the Jesuits’ *Simbahang Lingkod ng Bayan* apostolate. Combatting online disinformation, a major challenge in the Philippines and abroad, has become a new priority for many religious leaders in public statements during this campaign.⁷

Limits of Religious Influence?

This recent history may make it seem that religious networks are key guarantors of Philippine democracy during this troubled election season. To an extent this is true. Domestic citizen election monitoring will again take place in large part through religious mobilization, and various religious leaders have issued statements calling for morally upright candidates to serve the nation. But these initiatives are taking place in a new Philippines, changed both religiously and politically since the mythologized days of 1986.

Religiously, while the Philippines remains known (inaccurately)⁸ as “Asia’s only Catholic country,” the past several decades have seen pluralization of religious leadership that has challenged coordination in favor of liberal democracy. Some of this has taken place outside of the Catholic majority, as various evangelical and Pentecostal Christian communities have taken on prominent roles

⁴ On benevolent secularism, see Buckley, David T. *Faithful to Secularism: The Religious Politics of Democracy in Ireland, Senegal, and the Philippines. Religion, Culture, and Public Life*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016. For Casanova’s work, see Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

⁵ For application of this concept to the Philippines, see Grzymala-Busse, Anna, and Dan Slater. “Making Godly Nations: Church-State Pathways in Poland and the Philippines.” *Comparative Politics* 50, no. 4 (2018): 545-64.

⁶ See for example Youngblood, Robert L. *Marcos against the Church : Economic Development and Political Repression in the Philippines*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990; Hedman, Eva-Lotta E. “Mapping the Movement: Namfrel in Six Philippine Cities.” *South East Asia Research* 7, no. 2 (1999): 189-214.

⁷ Moses, Paul. 2018. “Fake News, Murder & the Philippine Bishops.” *Commonweal* February 13. <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/fake-news-murder-philippine-bishops>

⁸ In purely demographic terms, Timor-Leste is more overwhelmingly Catholic than the Philippines. The Philippines contains significant religious minorities, particularly Muslim and non-Catholic Christian denominations.

through gleaming megachurches and extensive media presences.⁹ Even within the Catholic majority, pluralization is a reality. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) may speak for the bishops as a group, but individual members of the clergy at times adopt their own stances, for instance the 500 men and women religious who formally endorsed candidate Leni Robredo in February 2022.¹⁰ The lay founder of the Catholic charismatic El Shaddai movement, which claims several million members, in contrast endorsed Marcos and Duterte in the same week.¹¹

Politically, this pluralization has led some to question the political heft of religious elites. Even before the controversial Duterte presidency, many Catholic leaders were surprised when Noynoy Aquino prioritized a Reproductive Health Law that the CBCP long opposed. He pressed it through the legislature, and clergy denouncing those they dubbed *Team Patay* [Team Death] in the subsequent election seemed to have little effect.¹² Duterte has an even more contentious relationship with the CBCP. As his campaign surged in 2016, the then-CBCP president denounced candidates showing “indifference if not dislike and disregard for the Church,” speaking of Duterte in all but name.¹³ Yet Duterte romped to victory. His signature “war on drugs” has left thousands dead and attracted further condemnation from many religious leaders. While congregations have provided localized protection, the campaign continued and Duterte’s popularity remained largely intact.¹⁴ He lobbed populist attacks at “hypocritical” religious critics throughout his tenure, and in the process garnered support from smaller but politically significant religious denominations like the *Iglesia ni Cristo*.¹⁵

Doubts about religious influence, especially from the country’s Catholic bishops, have played out on the 2022 campaign trail. Without naming the Marcos candidacy directly, the CBCP’s pre-election pastoral letter in February 2022 denounced “radical distortions in the history of Martial Law,” and called on Filipinos to “stand up for truth.”¹⁶ Some individual bishops, and more clergy, have appeared in public with pro-Robredo groups. But the ultimate effect remains unclear. In keeping with precedent, the CBCP will not endorse a particular candidate, and some bishops have even warned clergy against using the pulpit for endorsements.¹⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Marcos camp has complained that Catholic clergy are “meddling” in politics, while happily receiving the endorsement from other religious leaders. But even another prominent candidate, Manila Mayor Francisco ‘Isko’ Moreno, has claimed to be ‘offended’ that churches might be used to directly rally voters for a

⁹ See for example Cornelio, Jayeel Serrano. "Jesus Is Lord: The Indigenization of Megachurch Christianity in the Philippines." In *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia*, 127-55: ISEAS Publishing, 2018.

¹⁰ Dagle, Robbin M. 2022. “More than 500 priests, nuns endorse Robredo for president.” *Rappler* February 15. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/priests-nuns-endorse-robredo-for-president-2022/>

¹¹ <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1554734/velardes-endorsement-of-marcos-jr-personal-not-representative-of-whole-el-shaddai-says-bacani>

¹² Dionisio, Eleanor R. "Catholic Partisanship in the 2013 Elections: 'Churchifying' Democracy or Democratizing the Church?." *Philippine Sociological Review* 62 (2014): 11-40.

¹³ Buckley, David T. 2016. “Can the Catholic Church work with the Philippines’ new president?” *America: The Jesuit Review of Faith & Culture* June 23. <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/dutertes-tough-talk>

¹⁴ Brooke, Steven, David T Buckley, Clarissa C David, and Ronald U Mendoza. "Religious Protection from Populist Violence: The Catholic Church and the Philippine Drug War." *American Journal of Political Science* Forthcoming (2021).

¹⁵ *The Philippine Star*. 2016. “It’s Duterte-Marcos for Iglesia ni Cristo.” May 5. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/05/05/1580114/its-duterte-marcos-iglesia-ni-cristo>

¹⁶ David, Pablo Virgilio S. 2022. “The Truth Will Set You Free (John 8:32).” *Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines* February 25. <https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/the-truth-will-set-you-free-john-832/>

¹⁷ Lalu, Gabriel Pabico. 2022. “Cebu archbishop to priests: Don’t use pulpit to campaign for poll bets.” *Inquirer* February 11. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1553577/cebu-archbishop-to-priests-dont-use-pulpit-to-campaign-for-poll-bets>

particular candidate.¹⁸ This seems a long way from Cardinal Sin's call for protesters to rally in the streets against the Marcos dictatorship.

Impacts and Implications

So where does this leave the likely role for religious organizations, particularly the Catholic majority, in stabilizing democracy in the Philippines? And what comparative lessons might this hold for the troubled future of democracy in other corners of Asia and beyond? Three stand out. All operate quite differently than directly calling supporters into the streets in the latest installment of People Power.

First, religious influence is local. While headlines naturally gravitate to declarations from national clerical leaders, the political influence of religion is strongest where it crosses levels of analysis, from local to national to even international networks. In research on the Philippine drug war, for instance, coauthors and I find strong localized effects of religious congregations in protecting communities from violence, even though, at the national level, the drug war raged throughout Duterte's term.¹⁹ This is precisely why domestic citizen observation efforts, both in the Philippines and elsewhere, are so commonly tied to grassroots religious infrastructure.²⁰ Religion's ability to strengthen democratic institutions should be strongest when initiatives draw on these sorts of dense localized networks.

Second, speaking out in defense of democracy may strengthen religious authority, but also introduce internal division. Research from a variety of scholars has demonstrated that religious involvement in politics can generate backlash when religious leaders are seen to be looking out for narrow self-interest rather than the common good of society.²¹ However, advocating for free and fair elections may represent a form of public religion that actually rebuilds the moral authority of religious leaders. In recently collected data, for example, coauthors and I find that criticizing human rights abuses associated with the Philippines' drug war strengthened the moral authority of religious leaders in the minds of Catholic Filipinos. Revitalized advocacy in defense of democracy could plausibly have a similar effect. With that said, our data also indicates some resistance to these interventions among some non-Catholic Filipinos.

Third, on a less optimistic note, religion is not immune from the forces challenging democratic consolidation. Religion, especially in combination with conspiratorial beliefs, has become a central factor predicting support for illiberal political violence in the United States.²² In the Philippines, illiberal forces have rallied under the banner of a populism that features a heavy dose of anti-elite politics. Because organized religion, especially the Catholic Church, is closely tied to broader patterns of political and economic authority in the country, these anti-elite attacks have fallen

¹⁸ Gonzales, Cathrine. 2022. "Isko Moreno tells candidates: Don't use Catholic church for campaign rallies." *Inquirer* March 05. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1563846/isko-moreno-tells-candidates-dont-use-catholic-church-for-campaign-rallies>

¹⁹ Brooke, Steven, David T Buckley, Clarissa C David, and Ronald U Mendoza. 2021. "Religious Protection from Populist Violence: The Catholic Church and the Philippine Drug War." *American Journal of Political Science*.

²⁰ Montevecchio, Caesar. 2019. "CENCO Statement on Elections." *Catholic Peacebuilding Network* January 07. <https://cpn.nd.edu/news-events/news/cenco-statement-on-elections/>

²¹ Grzymała-Busse, Anna. 2015. *Nations under God : How Churches Use Moral Authority to Influence Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Hout, M. and C. S. Fischer. 2002. "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations." *American Sociological Review* 67: 165-90.

²² Armaly, Miles T, David T Buckley, and Adam M Enders. 2022. "Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks." *Political Behavior*: 1-24.

squarely on religious leaders as well. This helps explain why Duterte has paid limited political cost for rhetoric attacking clergy in one of Asia's more devout countries.²³ Pope Francis seems aware of this challenge, particularly when encouraging global bishops to be “shepherds with the smell of the sheep.”²⁴

Religion was not the sole cause of third wave transitions to democracy in places like the Philippines, although it did play an essential role. As democratic institutions face challenges in the Philippines and beyond, religious leaders and networks retain capacity to play a part in strengthening elections and civil liberties. However, they must respond to a new political reality in which myths of the 1980s provide incomplete guidance. ■

²³ For more on religion, anti-elitism and populism, see David T. Buckley, Steven Brooke and Bryce Kleinstaubert, “How Populists Engage Religion: Mechanisms and Evidence from the Philippines,” *Democratization*, Forthcoming.

²⁴ Gomes, Robin. 2021. “Pope to priests: Be 'shepherds with 'the smell of the sheep.'” *Vatican News* June 7. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-06/pope-francis-priests-students-church-louis-french.html>

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