

Contentions and Contradictions

The Rise of Duterte's Authoritarianism with Fascist Tendencies Amidst the Hegemonic Crisis of (Neo)Liberal Democracy in the Philippines

Verna Dinah Q. Viajar

Introduction

The pandemic provided an opportunity for Rodrigo Duterte, then president of the Philippines,¹ to tighten his authoritarian grip on power. Aside from expanding his executive powers due to the health emergency crisis, Duterte encroached into the supposedly independent powers of the legislative and judicial branches of government. The Duterte government implemented a highly militarized national pandemic response further integrating the police and the military into politics and governance. After more than one year of constant lockdowns, the Philippines had the worst economic contraction in the Southeast Asian region and shed almost ten million jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Philippine Statistics Office 2020). Before 2020 ended however, Duterte's trust ratings rose to 91 percent in a survey conducted by Pulse Asia in September 2020. Many still believed in his bravado and charismatic personality despite his failures in governance and leadership. Even into 2021, the virus was uncontrolled, corruption scandals into medical supplies had erupted, and Duterte's weekly evening speeches contained mostly rants against his critics. As the Delta COVID-19 variant showed a resurgence in the country in mid-April 2021, the Duterte government focused more on silencing the opposition rather than finding economic and political solutions amid the health emergency.

As the Philippine presidential elections loomed closer in May 2022, new political constellations begin to take shape. A broad opposition movement comprised from the centre-left political groups that supported the previous Aquino government, independent business groups left out by Duterte's rent-seeking

1 This article was completed just as the Marcos government assumed office. The analysis into Duterte's legacy in terms of mode of governance and authoritarian practices remains relevant, as they contributed to the rise of the current Marcos-Duterte government.

business cronies, remnants of the Liberal Party, and progressive social movements (i.e. labour unions, professional groups, etc.), gravitated around the sitting Vice President, Leni Robredo. The right-wing religious groups, business groups with dubious track records, the remaining Marcos loyalists,² and corrupt traditional politicians threw their support towards Bongbong Marcos Jr., the son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., and Duterte's daughter, Sara Duterte, for president and vice president, respectively. Duterte earlier stated that he intended to stay in power by contemplating running for vice president in the elections to secure himself immunity from lawsuits. This is to subvert his accountability in the ongoing national and international investigations against his bloody war on drugs. In 2021, the International Criminal Court (ICC) through its chief prosecutor moved forward to investigate Duterte for crimes against humanity in the deadly drug war he started in 2016 (BBC 2021). Trumping liberal democratic institutions and ignoring the Philippine Constitution, Duterte projected himself as the bearer of truth without proof or evidence; his words and actions are beyond the law.

In this political moment rife with tensions, contradictions, but also possibilities, it is important to refer to sound conjunctural analysis based on on-the-ground experiences guided by a rigorous analytical framework. Conjunctural analysis is heavily identified with Stuart Hall in his work on cultural studies, who strongly argued that to get the analysis right, critical scholarship and social engagement should “seek to map an entire ‘totality of social relations at a given moment’” (Gilbert 2019). This paper utilizes this conceptualization of conjunctural analysis as “broadly defined as the analysis of convergent and divergent tendencies shaping the totality of power relations with a given social field during a particular period of time” (Gilbert 2019, 5). Subsequently influenced by this research track, this paper poses the following overarching questions in the hope that sound analysis of the present may inform the shape of the future: is Duterte's rise to power a historical aberration in the Philippines' political development as a democratic country? Did populist and strongman leaders, such as Estrada³ and Duterte, come to power due to an unfinished process of democratization in the Philippines? Was Duterte's electoral victory a reflection of a protest vote against a (neo)liberal democratic system that tolerated increasing inequality despite economic growth, but the vote tolerated an authoritarian populist leader? And in what ways is Duterte part of a worldwide trend for

2 Supporters of the late dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, whose son, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., won the presidency in the 2022 elections.

3 Joseph Ejercito Estrada, a former actor, served as president from 1998 to 2001, when he was ousted from office due to corruption cases. Indicted for plunder in 2007 and sentenced to lifetime imprisonment in 2007, he was later pardoned by former President Gloria Arroyo. Estrada was elected mayor of Manila City in the 2010 elections and then defeated in the 2016 elections.

the rise of authoritarian populist leaders standing in line with other authoritarian movements across the globe?

As the Philippine state under Duterte experienced political and economic crises exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper sheds some light on Duterte's authoritarianism which unravelled under pressure from the public and progressive movements, demanding accountability for the securitized pandemic response, massive corruption, the economic devastation, and the humanitarian and health crises. These processes deepened Duterte's authoritarian leadership as he tightened his grip on power against his critics, activists, and the political opposition, in general. This paper argues that Duterte's mode of governance embodied authoritarian-populist leadership with fascist tendencies, approached through Stuart Hall's initial coinage of authoritarian populism and deepened through the debates within the Frankfurt school on a critical framework of analyses. This research includes 'fascist tendencies' to characterize the Philippines' experience of authoritarianism drawing from Nicos Poulantzas's discussion on authoritarian statism and Antonio Gramsci's exposition of fascism. The analysis into Duterte's authoritarianism is contextualized within the country's political-economic structures which are embedded within the global neoliberal economic order. Duterte is not only a product of the Philippines' key historical and political moments but also exemplifies the hegemonic crisis of (neo)liberal democracy in the Philippines brought about by the contradictions and the authoritarian turn of neoliberalism on the global scale. This paper utilizes critical theories on neoliberalism, populism, and authoritarianism to interrogate the contradictions and contentions of Duterte's sustained populism in the context of strengthening fascist tendencies. This paper further examines the rise of Duterte through the Gramscian lens on the notion of hegemony.

Background and Context: The Philippine Political Economy and the Rise of Authoritarianism

The Duterte victory in the 2016 presidential elections reconfigured the political forces in the Philippines, allowing the resurgence of the dislodged elites from the previous administrations and establishing new political and economic interests under Duterte. Known for his anti-establishment and irreverent persona, Duterte captured the hearts and minds—which translated into electoral votes—of more than 16 million Filipinos under the banner 'change is coming'. Possibly related to the famous 'winter is coming' quote from the TV series *Game of Thrones*, the Duterte win heralded the winter of 'yellow politics', dominated by the Aquinos and the heirs to the 1986 People Power democratic uprising.

The first president elected from Mindanao or the southern Philippines,⁴ Duterte has commanded majority support from this region given his 20-year stint as Mayor of Davao City. However, it became apparent that he remained a Marcos loyalist, just like his father who became a cabinet minister during the Marcos period, and the junior Duterte maintained control of the city despite political changes and leadership in central Manila.⁵ Within the first three months of his presidency, Duterte allowed the Marcoses to bury former president Ferdinand Marcos at the Heroes Cemetery in the face of widespread opposition. He then pardoned former President Gloria Arroyo from plunder (corruption) charges, and launched a violent drug war focused on the street-level rounding-up and arrest of thousands of suspected drug addicts and pushers without due process. Cases of extra-judicial killings (EJKs) continued to pile up among the petty drug dealers and users. However, fear and impunity have been pervasive; not only among petty criminals but more so among human rights and labour activists, the political opposition, critical media, and among the growing critics of the Duterte politics.

Duterte's strongman tactics, violent policies, and anti-human-rights positions likewise put the Philippines on the list of countries which have authoritarian and populist leaders in the ascendant. The Duterte regime (sometimes described loosely as *Dutertism*) expressed a strong political message that it would not tolerate dissent and critique. Those that have criticized Duterte have either received court summons on trumped-up charges, been maligned in the public media, or received death threats from anonymous armed groups. With his meteoric rise to power and sustained popular support until the mid-term elections in 2019, Duterte continued to consolidate loyalties from the military apparatus and the police, as well as from both newly-formed and traditional political dynasties.

In a patron-client relation characterizing the local regional politics, Duterte consolidated his fiefdom in the last 20 years as city Mayor of Davao. He terrorized activists and criminals alike in his city, the bringer of fear and nightmares for the cause-oriented, critical, and progressive activists. Duterte gained infamy from the rumoured Davao Death Squad (DDS), the vigilante group cleansing the Davao streets of petty criminals via extra-judicial killings. The nameless killings in Davao instilled fear among the petty criminals and those who oppose the status quo. In that fateful 2016 election period, Duterte was the wild card that left everyone guessing until the last moment when he won the presidential elections.

4 The second-biggest island, after Luzon, in the Philippines, Mindanao is commonly referred to as 'Southern Philippines'.

5 The people in Visayas and Mindanao would sometimes call it 'imperialist Manila' as a critique of the centralized government system seated in the heart of Luzon, Metropolitan Manila.

The 1986 Uprising against the Marcos Dictatorship

Duterte is a product of the country's historical moments, and the trends that led to his rise to power can be traced back to the unfinished People Power Revolution and the decades of the Marcos dictatorship. From the Left, the growing consensus on the reasons for the presidential victory and continued popularity of the Duterte government points to the disillusionment of the populace with the liberal democratic system. Walden Bello, writing in a 16 July 2019 statement for the group *Laban ng Masa* ("Fight of the People"),⁶ argued that the rise of Duterte became possible because of the people's disappointment in the failure of EDSA⁷ or the 1986 People Power promises of empowerment and equality (Bello 2019a; 2019b). The massive gap—between the rights-based, people's empowerment promises, to the reality of widening inequality and continued poverty—frustrated many, which translated into electoral votes for the charismatic and decisive strongman ruler. In Bello's words, a "great deal of the fact of why Duterte is popular is there has been a great deal of disillusionment with the system of liberal democracy here in the Philippines" (Bello 2019c).

The Philippines' People Power Revolution in 1986, a bloodless people's uprising, toppled the dictatorship and corruption of former President Ferdinand Marcos who ruled the country from 1965 to 1986. Marcos was initially elected in 1965 and sought a second term in 1969. Before his term ended in 1972, he had declared martial law, abolished the parliamentary house, and went on to rule with an iron fist for 20 years. Human rights violations, *desaparecidos*, and the repression of opposition figures, militant labour unions, and social movements characterized Marcos's dictatorial rule which at the same time robbed billions from Philippine coffers.

Marcos ruled amidst the rise of post-war 'strongman' leaders in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia's Mahathir, Indonesia's Suharto, and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, to name a few. The Cold War between the US and USSR contributed to the longevity of non-democratic governments as the superpowers jostled for influence in the region. In this period, the authoritarian governments became entrenched in the global political economic order characterized by a bipolar arms race. As the developing economies in the 'third world' strove to modernize along a capitalist and liberal development framework, they also became experimental laboratories to the neo-liberal turn of capitalist development through structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) enforced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank

6 The broad coalition of leftist organizations in the Philippines who opposed the Duterte administration.

7 Epifanio delos Santos Avenue was the site of two military bases and became the central point of the 1986 People Power Revolution, also referred to simply as EDSA or the EDSA Revolution.

(WB), and masterminded by the Washington Consensus. The dominance of neoliberal policies since the 1980s, through Reaganomics and Thatcherism, propelled the dominance of capital markets, systematically weakening organized labour and influencing ideas and culture towards capitalist competition and consumerism. The markets became unfettered under neoliberalism; many have been left behind.

The 1986 People Power Revolution in the Philippines, when millions mobilized along the EDSA, was perceived as being among the leading moments of democratization in the region. However, Filipino political analysts argued that the People Power Revolution remained unfinished because the revolutionary government⁸ led by the first woman president, Corazon Aquino, did not institute transformative and structural change but instead moved towards the “swift restoration of the old liberal elite” (Heydarian 2021). Many perceived that there were not enough transformative policies to counter “predatory political dynasties” wherein the country’s economy would remain captured by oligarchies. “As a result, the Philippines, even in subsequent periods of high economic growth, struggled to create truly inclusive development—thus sowing the seeds of long-term discontent, which is fueling authoritarian populism nowadays” (Heydarian 2021). The win for the dictator’s son, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., in the 2022 Philippine presidential elections is a setback in the democratization process after the Marcos dictatorship. The current political economic turbulence in the Philippines, with traces of historical revisionism and institutional amnesia, coincides with rising inequality, a cyclical macroeconomic crisis, and poor labour conditions.

The Philippine Political Economy since the Marcos Dictatorship

In the last 30 years, the Philippines further integrated into the global neoliberal economic order, initially taking on protectionist economic policies through import substitution in the 1960s and then moving towards industrialization alongside Japan (Viajar 2009). The country’s economic development strategy shifted to export-oriented and a reliance on foreign direct investment towards the beginning of the 1970s, and coupled with Marcos’s authoritarianism, plunder, and crony capitalism, the Philippines began to sink into debt. By 1981, the Philippines became one of the first countries to implement SAPs under the IMF towards the liberalization of the country’s core economic sectors such as agriculture, finance, and trade (Viajar 2009). However, whilst the neighbouring Southeast Asian countries became emerging industrial economies, the Philippines developed into a service economy,

8 Led by former President Corazon Aquino, the widow of opposition leader Benigno Aquino, assassinated in 1983. They were the parents of Noynoy Aquino, who himself was president between 2010–16.

a labour-exporting country, and remained a middle-income economy in the region. Marcos first promoted the labour export policy, establishing an institution to deploy Filipino workers to all corners of the world—the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA)—to avoid social unrest due to high unemployment rates during the dictatorship.

The Marcos regime left such a huge debt for the succeeding governments that since the early 2000s, debt servicing has been taking up 40 percent of the country's gross domestic product (World Bank 2003). Poverty incidence, even though it decreased from 23.3 percent in 2015 to 16.7 percent in 2018, and income inequality, at 21.6 percent in 2015 despite economic growth, have remained significant problems in the Philippines in the last few years (Philippine Statistics Authority 2020). Inequality in the Philippines remain high. The country's Gini index, the measure of income distribution, has never gone below 40 percent⁹ on the index in the last 20 years, measuring 46.2 percent in 2001, 42.2 percent in 2012, 40.1 in 2015, and 42.3 in 2018 (Oxford Business Group 2018; World Bank 2003). The Asian Development Bank 2017 Report mentioned that income inequality in the Philippines is increasing, and equality is not rising in line with GDP growth (Oxford Business Group). With the ongoing effects of the pandemic and the ensuing contraction of the economy at 9.5 percent, poverty and inequality are expected to get worse (Reuters 2021)

The Authoritarian Turn of Neoliberalism

The authoritarian turn of neoliberalism foreshadows the rise of right-wing populist and authoritarian leaders across the globe (Boffo et al. 2019). Neoliberalism as a set of policies, structures, and arrangements that extol the dominance of the 'free market' has far-reaching political, economic, and social ramifications. Neoliberal economic policies promote the primacy of liberalization coupled with privatization and deregulation that signal the minimal role of the state. Such political-economic arrangements promote competition above all else, hyper-consumption, and individualism in the socio-cultural realms. Extolled as the framework of accumulation that can guarantee wealth for the majority, the contradictions of the neoliberal capitalist order arise when only a select few benefit from the wealth generated and the reconfiguration of the state so that it becomes weak and strong at the same time: the authoritarian practices of the governing elite express a strong state by mobilizing its military and police apparatus to restrict freedoms and dissent; in

9 A higher Gini Index indicates higher inequality, with 0 percent representing perfect equality and 100 percent representing perfect inequality. With a Gini Index of 40 percent, the Philippines is among those with the highest levels of inequality in Southeast Asia.

turn, the civil and democratic institutions of the state are weakened in the process. Neoliberal globalization was facilitated through the state despite the reduction of its economic role, giving rise to international bodies tasked with facilitating liberalization, privatization, and deregulation through the World Trade Organization (WTO), the IME, the World Bank, and many others. Saddled with inherent contradictions, the neoliberal framework engendered widespread inequalities and discontent from the many who have been left behind. But what ushered in the authoritarian turn of neoliberalism according to Marco Boffo, Alfredo Saah-Filho, and Ben Fine (2019) was the “*political paradox of neoliberalism*” which “concerns the disintegration of neoliberal democracy under the weight of its own internal contradictions” (2019, 261). The state, despite its diminished economic role, counter-intuitively facilitated the “financialized modalities of social reproduction and individualistic subjectivity” (ibid.). The crises of neoliberalism from financialization, starting in the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and followed a decade after in the US and European financial crisis of 2008–09, further cemented the coercive practices of the state to discipline consent from those discontented with neoliberalism.

However, according to Ian Bruff (2014) the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism began in the late 1970s during the golden days of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, when the state became complicit to the “free market” by suppressing “general societal discontent”, crushing trade unions and leftist movements, and paving the way for widening socio-economic disparities. Bruff particularly cited Stuart Hall (1979) and Poulantzas (2014) who presciently coined the terms “authoritarian populism” and “authoritarian statism” following the strengthening of neoliberalism in the early 1970s. These debates on the notion of authoritarianism were further traced back by Jeremiah Morelock (2018) to the Frankfurt School referring to authoritarian populism as “the pitting of ‘the people’ against ‘elites’ in order to have the power to drive out, wipe out, or otherwise dominate Others who are not ‘the people’” (Morelock 2018, xiv). Taken separately, the concept of ‘authoritarianism’ refers to seeking “social homogeneity through coercion”, while ‘populism’ refers to “defining a section of the population as truly and rightfully ‘the people’ and aligning with this section against a different group identified as elites” (ibid.). Bruff (2014) however, considering Hall’s (1979) and Poulantzas’s (2014) arguments, contends that authoritarianism should not be viewed only as “the exercise of brute coercive force” but as “the reconfiguring of the state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent” (Bruff 2014, 115).

Through the emergence of populist leaders, the rise of far-right politics or right-wing social forces characterized by “nationalist, racist and xenophobic tendencies” in the West (Stewart 2020, 1208), has been linked as a challenge to the “liberal social and cultural norms” expressed through “multiculturalism, universal human rights and multilateralism” (ibid., 1212). There has been no shortage of

authoritarian or ‘strongman’ leaders in the Southeast Asian region since the Cold War, still seen today with the current authoritarian-populist leaders. During the Cold War, the 1960s–1970s saw the strongman rule of Marcos in the Philippines, Suharto in Indonesia, Hun Sen in Cambodia, Mahathir in Malaysia, and the constant military rules in Thailand and Myanmar/Burma.

The proliferation of authoritarian leaders in the region, even with functioning democratic institutions such as electoral politics, has reshaped the meaning and forms of democracies in Asia. The term ‘illiberal democracies’ has even emerged in this region, referring to “democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been re-elected or reaffirmed through referenda ... routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms” (Zakaria 1997, 22). In the recent past, the rise of a ‘new wave’ of populist-authoritarian leaders in the post-Cold War period, such as Thaksin in Thailand, Duterte in the Philippines, and military rule in Thailand and Myanmar, can be linked to neoliberal globalization and capitalist transformation in the region (see Bello 2021). Neoliberalism has been embedded in the Southeast Asian region since the oil crisis in the early 1970s, putting a majority of the economies in the region in perpetual ‘debt crises’. Chained to the conditionalities of the IMF/WB, the countries in the region were among the first implementers of SAPs steeped in neoliberal policies such as the privatization of public assets, the ‘opening up’ of markets, trade liberalization, fiscal austerity, etc. Whilst some countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand followed the export-led, ‘state-led development’ framework from the ‘Asian tigers’ (i.e. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), wherein the state has a significant economic role, these divergences from the neoliberal playbook were accommodated (Springer 2017). This paper intends to show how neoliberalism has become linked to fascist practices and dimensions.

Deconstructing Duterte: A Gramscian Perspective on Duterte’s Authoritarian and Fascist Tendencies¹⁰

Based on the regional and international context under neoliberalism, Duterte is not only a product of the country’s historical and political moments such as the unfinished democratic People Power Revolution that ousted the Marcos dictatorship, but

10 Some portions of this section are excerpted from the book chapter entitled “Duterte, COVID-19, and populist-authoritarianism in the Philippines: Contentions and contradictions”, submitted to the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Manila Office for forthcoming publication.

also of the colonial legacies of the Cold War¹¹ and the embeddedness of neoliberalism in the Philippine economic-political structures. Duterte won the 2016 presidential elections as a ‘dark horse’ candidate propelled by popular discontent over the ineffective governance of previous governments elected under liberal-democratic institutions. In the 2016 exit polls conducted by the Social Weather Stations (SWS), Duterte garnered the votes from the wealthy and middle classes with 26 points over the next presidential candidate in class ABC, a 17-point lead in class D, and only a 7-point lead in class E (ABS CBN 2016). Duterte also garnered a 28-point lead among college graduates prompting political analysts to say that the “higher the class, the more the appeal of Duterte ... The more the schooling, the more the appeal of Duterte” and that “Duterte’s popularity among the country’s wealthy and middle classes indicated the emergence of a counter-elite challenging the old elite” (ABS-CBN 2016).

Duterte’s popularity also captured the new middle class, those that benefitted from recent economic growth and from working abroad, seeking quick solutions to everyday issues such as crime, drugs, and the horrendous traffic. Campaigning under an anti-elite and anti-establishment message, and at the same time critiquing persistent socio-economic inequalities, Duterte swept the electoral stage with his slogan ‘change is coming’. In his campaigns, he promised to single-handedly solve all problems (i.e. crime, corruption, drugs, etc.) within just a few months of being in office. More than 16 million Filipinos believed his rhetoric, entertained by his self-styled bravado and charismatic language. However, after five years of his being in office, the persistent problems—corruption, drugs, crime and traffic—which Duterte had promised to eradicate remain, and have even intensified. A shrewd warlord and politician, Duterte became the bane of the fractured elite who had benefitted from the now-challenged (neo)liberal democratic system.

During the campaign period, Duterte spouted progressive policies, anti-elite rhetoric, and anti-establishment imagery. His penchant for talking in the vernacular, and his humorous speeches, earned him a popular following among the old, the young, and those in between across different social classes. Sections of the radical and progressive Left, such as trade union groups, joined his mostly middle-class and conservative support base. Duterte himself came from a political and well-off family, his father once having been a governor in Cebu Province during the Marcos dictatorship. Despite his affluent background, Duterte preferred to have friends on the streets, mixing with the *lumpens* in his neighbourhood and integrating the personality of the street-smart kid and the foul-mouthed neighbourhood bully. Duterte’s gangster-type personality has earned him a cult following from

11 Until 1991, the Philippines had maintained huge military bases in Pampanga and Subic in exchange for military and economic support to the Philippines; this is now among the legacies of the Cold War.

the non-elite, anti-establishment crowd. He followed his father's political career as Mayor of Davao City in Mindanao province, taking office in 1988 and ruling for 30 years (BBC 2019). Many were blindsided during the elections, as some segments of the elite thumbed their noses and considered him insignificant when it came to the likely winner of the presidential elections.

Duterte's win sent the Left and progressive groups scrambling to analyse what had happened. When he started baring his authoritarian and fascist tendencies through a series of securitized policies and a crackdown on the Left, many Filipino political analysts debated with each other to try to explain Duterte's rise to power. There were many analytical approaches offered (see Curato 2017) to understand Duterte's form of authoritarianism, such as through the lens of an institutional approach; a personality analysis; and a counter-revolutionary approach. This paper focuses on the debates in the Left on how to analyse Duterte's rise to power, geared towards the search for counter-strategies. Bello (2019) discussed Duterte as a counter-revolutionary of the liberal-democratic order, one who "has excelled in the political improvisation characteristic of skilled counter-revolutionaries like Hitler and Mussolini" (2019, 128). Bello also argues that Duterte is a fascist original, one who is not concerned for "ideological purity" and who does whatever it takes to "defend the nation" (*ibid.*, 129).

Disagreeing with Bello, a splinter group from the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the Partido Manggagawa (PM, Workers' Party), linked with the Fourth International socialist movement, believe that Duterte is not a fascist but a reactionary and a counter-revolutionary of the liberal-democratic movement (Manggagawa 2017). Their main contention against Bello's analysis is that Duterte cannot be a fascist leader due to his lack of a popular movement that is mobilizable. Duterte may have employed social media trolls during his campaign, but they are not organized as a movement. Defining Duterte as a fascist would also force leftist groups to consider armed struggle as a counter-strategy. Since the electoral system is still open for contention, leftist and socialist groups like PM still consider the parliamentary struggle as a counter-strategy option. The CPP and its above-ground allied groups have become the targets of Duterte's bloody red-tagging campaign. Duterte's anti-communist campaign mobilizes the police and the military to weed out communists at the village level. A huge chunk of the national budget has been allotted, more than 16 billion pesos, to the anti-communist task force called the National Task Force to End Local Communist Insurgency (NTF-ELCAC). As the CPP views all state leaders as fascists—based on the ideological view that states are inherently instruments of oppression—henceforth the strategy is to smash the state.

From a different perspective, prominent political analyst Joel Rocamora, who led a popular democracy movement in the 1980s–1990s, has the view that Duterte's populism remain strong but follows the 'demobilized' populism wherein the people

are restricted from participating in policy formulation and decision-making (see Rocamora 2020). The popular democracy movement in the 1980s promoted direct participatory democracy wherein ordinary people have voices in governance and the determining of policies that affect their lives and livelihoods. Rocamora analyses Duterte's form of authoritarian rule from the personality perspective, focusing on Duterte's personality formation as a neighbourhood gangster, which characterizes and legitimizes his authoritarian governance. On the other hand, Charmaine Ramos (2021) traces the roots of the neoliberal developmental trajectories of neoliberalism in the Philippines as the root of understanding the emergence of a new wave of "populist politics" with "authoritarian practices" in the return to strongman rule in the Philippines. According to Ramos (2021), the three decades of neoliberal economic expansion have enabled populist politics and the return to strongman rule "as a logical outcome of the neoliberal project of depoliticization, as much as it is a reaction, as suggested in extant literature, to the failures associated with neoliberal economic doctrine" (Ramos 2021, 10).

This paper's contribution in examining Duterte's form of authoritarianism utilizes Gramsci's (1971) notions of hegemony and fascism to argue that Duterte's authoritarian bent embodies fascist tendencies based on Poulantzas's (2014) concept of authoritarian statism. Understanding authoritarianism as dominance, Poulantzas utilizes Gramsci's usage of hegemony which refers to 'leadership' or 'dominance', and the power of ideas, values, and beliefs in a particular historical moment over a particular political-economic context. In looking at Duterte's authoritarian leadership with fascist tendencies, Gramsci's notion of hegemony seems apt, which says that it is about "political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class" (Bates 1975, 352). Gramsci's analysis reflected the struggle to understand how people can support an irrational fascist political movement, ending up with the most rational analyses of his time and with his analyses geared towards finding a counter-hegemonic strategy and action (Adamson 1980). Useful insights for the understanding of the state under Duterte can also be gleaned from Poulantzas's concept of authoritarian statism, which approaches the analysis of the state corresponding to the phases of capitalism as a state in crisis. Against the backdrop of the expansion of neoliberalism, "fascistic elements or tendencies appear" within the state in crisis (Poulantzas 2014, 209). Authoritarian statism "also involves the establishment of an entire institutional structure serving to prevent a rise in popular struggles and the dangers which that holds for class hegemony" (*ibid.*, 210).

Duterte's rise to power came at a time of hegemonic crisis in the Philippine political economy. This is reminiscent of the Gramscian perspective of "revolutionary politics" (Adamson 1980), that political moment pregnant with change, when a hegemonic crisis occurs. In the Philippine context, the hegemonic crisis refers

to the crisis of the (neo)liberal democracy that still regurgitates a semblance of electoral democracy but devoid of genuine participatory governance. The broken system exemplified by the prevalent corruption of political leaders, the widening income and social inequalities, and rising middle-class fear of criminality all fuelled the discontent and the search for change. Duterte captured the imagination of discontented citizens by posing as an anti-elite and anti-establishment figure who would bring the wind of change. According to Gramsci, a hegemonic crisis happens when the ruling class fails to completely dominate or uses force to dominate (i.e. through war), until such time that a broad mass movement puts forward demands and seizes a particular political moment (Adamson 1980). In such a hegemonic crisis, the political field becomes open and “a violent solution led by ‘charismatic men of destiny’” may provide the alternative to achieve a “static equilibrium during a hegemonic crisis” (Adamson 1980, 628). Without any strong challenge from other social forces (i.e. the moderates or conservative elites), Gramsci likened the change towards fascism to ‘Caesarism’ which “refers to a political intervention by some previously dormant or even previously unknown political force capable of asserting domination and thus of restoring a static equilibrium during a hegemonic crisis” (Adamson 1980, 628). In this political moment, according to Gramsci, the fascist takeover may emerge through “the sudden creation of a single heroic figure, or it may be the gradual and institutionalized outcome of a coalition government” (Adamson 1980, 628). The contention of political forces in a crisis of hegemony and the incomplete transformation of new political structures that cannot yet be created have produced a vacuum within which a charismatic leader with fascist tendencies, like Duterte, emerged to fill the void.

Duterte’s Authoritarianism with Fascist Tendencies

This paper contends that Duterte’s populist-authoritarian rule embodied fascist tendencies. These fascist tendencies can be characterized through the increasingly interventionist state through a heightened economic role or the strengthening of the executive according to Poulantzas’s authoritarian statism. The fascist tendencies that appear may also be seen in the presence of support from an organized people’s movement; the heightened role of the military; and the persecution of a particular sector or group in society, as seen in Duterte’s Philippines in the persecution of drug addicts in the bloody war on drugs. Empirically, Duterte’s populist authoritarianism with fascist tendencies is manifested along five dimensions with implications for the role of the state, the military, and the police; its impact on state institutions (i.e. Congress, political parties, electoral bodies, etc.); on the freedom of the press; on the economy, how it is being transformed or untransformed during authoritarian times; and on repression of dissent and people’s resistance.

Under Duterte's populist-authoritarian rule, the people were 'demobilized' or excluded from participating in the political process which would determine their future and the future of their communities. Most policies were framed from the top and enforced upon the people. The state policies under Duterte were insulated and removed from the concerns of the people. The state has continued its neoliberal and capitalist developmental trajectory with no significant change in macroeconomic policies or change in the redistributive capacity of the state. Duterte, however, expanded the role of the executive to even encroach on the powers of the legislative and judicial branches of government. In August 2021, Duterte attacked the Commission on Audit (COA) to refrain from auditing the financial management of government agencies. The COA had found billions of anomalous procurements of medical supplies from agencies headed by Duterte executive appointees.

In terms of the economy, it has remained untransformed from its neoliberal economic trajectory under authoritarian times. Duterte would remain hands-off in reforming the neoliberal economic structures of the country to address inequality. He mostly spewed rhetoric against the economic oligarchy, but remained submissive to his allied neoliberal economic masterminds running the economy. His government focused more on allotting increased funds for its anti-communist drive at the village level rather than managing the macroeconomic policies of the country. Over one year into the pandemic, the Philippine economy under Duterte was in freefall, debt had ballooned, and dependence on China's investments was increasing. The devastation of the Philippine economy will be felt in the years to come, bringing hardships to many Filipinos and widening further inequality in the country. The working class have been hit the hardest as unemployment reached an all-time high of 9.8 million jobs lost after a year and a half of intermittent lockdowns.

The role of the military and police was more expansive during the time of Duterte than during the tenures of any other Philippine presidents. The armed apparatus of the state—the police and the military, which possess the legitimate use of state violence—were deployed strongly against Duterte's critics to repress dissent, the enforcement of the deadly drug war, and the implementation of the harsh restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the Duterte government, the military and the police were at their most influential, with around 59 ex-military personnel being part of Duterte's executive cabinet. Policies which aimed to fight against communist movements and drugs were both the top priority issues of the government and are also the identified enemies of the military and the police. Based on our history of military and police interventions in politics, as they were politicized during the Marcos dictatorship, successive Philippine presidents must appease the military and police when they take office. In the post-Marcos dictatorship period, the military staged more than a dozen coups d'état in an attempt to wrest power from civilian authority during Corazon Aquino's presidency. The military and the police withdrew their support from former President Joseph Estrada

which led to his ouster in January 2001, dubbed the Philippine People Power II. He was later incarcerated and convicted of plunder. Duterte showed the most extreme kind of appeasement by integrating the military and the police into the government.

The wider influence of Duterte's authoritarian policies as head of the executive branch structurally weakened other state institutions, such as the political, economic, and social institutions affected by increasing corruption and the non-meritorious appointment of Duterte loyalists. Under Duterte's authoritarian mode, critical media are under attack. Duterte and his minions in Congress succeeded in shutting down one of the largest independent broadcast networks (ABS-CBN) in the country in the middle of the pandemic. The people's resistance against repression and the critiquing of Duterte's pandemic response and authoritarian policy actions (i.e. the drug war, the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020) during the health crisis steadily rose, both online and offline. But the narrowing of freedoms and democratic spaces under Duterte restricted popular dissent against authoritarianism. The spate of killings of activists and arrests of critics even during the pandemic multiplied the risks for the opposition movement. More than 65 percent of Filipinos perceive that "it is dangerous to publish anything critical to the administration" based on a survey conducted in November 2020 and published in 2021 (Mercado 2021).

Conclusion: The Search for Counter-Strategies

Duterte's populist-authoritarian rise in the Philippines occurred not only due to the Philippine's key historical and political moments but also exemplified the hegemonic crisis of (neo)liberal democracy in the Philippines brought about by the contradictions and the authoritarian turn of neoliberalism from a global perspective. As part of the country's colonial legacy, the Philippines has been integrated into the global neoliberal economic order since the post-war period, inheriting political-economic and social relations and structures exacerbated during the debt crisis, and by the SAPs since the 1970s. The Philippines experienced authoritarian rule during the Cold War period under the Marcos dictatorship, but democratization processes under the neoliberal economy have advanced since the late 1980s. However, despite the existence of electoral processes, a genuine political and economic democracy has not been achieved under neoliberal capitalist structures. Social and economic inequalities continue to hound the Philippine political economy giving rise to broad discontent. The Left remains fragmented, and the mainstream and centrist elite continues to dominate the political structures. In the last few years of intense neoliberal hegemonic crisis, the right-wing and self-serving conservative forces have captured the discourse of change against (neo)liberal democratic

structures in the country. Debates within Philippine leftist movements have been rife in the last five years on how to approach the return of authoritarian rule and right-wing populist politics in the Philippines.

Parliamentary struggle, both in the electoral terrain and on the streets, remain on the table for leftist and progressive movements as a counter-strategy. Significant challenges, however, have hampered a unified opposition movement composed of a broad-based alliance among left-wing, centrist, and progressive forces with the increasingly narrow democratic spaces and attacks on critics and activists under the Duterte regime. A segment of the radical left has been continuing to espouse armed struggle in the countryside for more than five decades, but without success. However, their above-ground radical organizations attained more success in the parliamentary struggle. The political elite in the country remain fragmented based on their various differing examples of self-interest or along progressive and democratic lines. The economic elite can be characterized along the lines of rent-seeking business modality in profit-making and/or the entrepreneurial or professional business modality. There are, however, no illusions that the primary interest of the economic elite in the Philippines coincides with that of the national and transnational capital class who wish to profit from the neoliberal economic order. In the Philippines, the economic and political elites are not mutually exclusive; they may be fragmented but they move along the political and economic realms. Along these lines, the Philippine state is a site of contention and an arena of struggle. Despite the amalgamation of different interests characterizing the modern state and as an instrument for capitalist interests, the state remains a site for struggle within the neoliberal economic order. The imperative towards the search for counter-strategies involves the careful examination of the relations of production, and how they give rise to social forces and shifts in class relations that contend in the formation of the state. It is at this political and economic juncture that the Philippine Left and progressive social forces are crucially important, crafting their bases of unities and rethinking counter-strategies in order to achieve an alternative vision of change, counter to Duterte's populist-authoritarian rule and the return of the Marcos rule.

References

- ABS-CBN (2016), "More millennials voted for Duterte, exit poll shows", 14 May, available at <https://news.abs-cbn.com/halalan2016/focus/05/14/16/more-millennials-voted-for-duterte-exit-poll-shows>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Adamson, W. L. (1980), "Gramsci's Interpretation of Fascism", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 41, no. 4 (Oct–Dec), pp. 615–33, University of Pennsylvania Press, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2709277>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.

- Bates, Thomas (1975), "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 36, no. 2 (Apr–Jun), pp. 351–66.
- BBC News (2019), "Rodrigo Duterte profile: The provocative but popular Philippines strongman", 22 May, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-36659258>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- BBC News (2021), "Philippines drugs war: ICC prosecutor seeks full investigation", 15 June, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57477802>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Bello, W. (2019a), *Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Bello, W. (2019b), "GISING NA, MAG-ISIP NA, LABAN NA, BAYAN", *Facebook*, 16 July, available at <https://www.facebook.com/walden.bello/posts/1015676819388932>. Last accessed on 1 August 2022.
- Bello, W. (2019c), "Ruthless Philippine President's High Popularity Is the Result of Failed Democracy", *The Real News Network*, 16 July, available at <https://therealnews.com/ruthless-philippine-presidents-high-popularity-is-the-result-of-failed-democracy>. Last accessed on 1 August 2022.
- Bello, W. (2021), "Neoliberalism, Contentious Politics, and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia", *Crisis of Neoliberal Globalization and the Nationalist Response*, edited by B. Berberoglu, pp. 92–115, New York and London: Routledge.
- Boffo, M., A. Saad-Filho, and B. Fine (2019), "Neoliberal Capitalism: The Authoritarian Turn", *Socialist Register*, vol. 55, pp. 247–70.
- Bruff, I. (2014), "The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism", *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 113–29, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2013.843250>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Campani, G., and M. Pajnik (2017), "Democracy, post-democracy and the populist challenge", *Understanding the Populist Shift: Othering in a Europe in Crisis*, edited by G. Lazaridis and G. Campani, London and New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. 179–96.
- CNN Philippines Staff (2020a), "Duterte approval rating rises to 91% amid pandemic, Cayetano suffers drop – survey", *CNN Philippines*, 5 October, available at <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/10/5/Duterte-approval-trust-rating-COVID-19-September-2020-Pulse-Asia-survey.html>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- CNN Philippines Staff (2020b), "P19B NTF-ELCAC fund stays in Congress-approved budget", *CNN Philippines*, 10 December, available at <https://www.cnn.ph/news/2020/12/10/P19-billion-NTF-ELCAC-stays-Congress-ratified-budget.html>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Cordero, T. (2021), "PSA: 9.8M Filipinos laid off from March 2020 to March 2021 – PSA", *GMA News*, 6 May, available at <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/mo>

- ney/economy/786448/psa-9-82m-filipinos-laid-off-from-march-2020-to-march-2021-psa/story. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Curato, N. (ed.) (2017), *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Gilbert, J. (2019), "This Conjuncture: For Stuart Hall", *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, vol. 96–97, pp. 5–37, available at <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/730832>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Gramsci, A. (1971), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, New York: International Publishers.
- Gutierrez, J. (2020), "Court Finds Evidence of Crimes Against Humanity in the Philippines", *The New York Times*, 15 December, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/15/world/asia/philippines-duterte-drugs-icc.html>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Hall, S. (1979), "The Great Moving Right Show", *Marxism Today*, January, pp. 14–20.
- Heydarian, R. (2021), "Why the Marcos brand remains popular", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 26 October, available at <https://opinion.inquirer.net/145623/why-the-marcos-brand-remains-popular>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Laforga, B. M. (2020), "Philippines to be SE Asia's worst performer this year", *BusinessWorld*, 11 December, available at <https://www.bworldonline.com/philippines-to-be-se-asias-worst-performer-this-year/>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Laforga, B. M. (2021), "Philippine GDP shrinks by record 9.5% in 2020", *BusinessWorld*, 29 January, available at <https://www.bworldonline.com/editors-picks/2021/01/29/341581/philippine-gdp-shrinks-by-record-9-5-in-2020/>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Manggagawa, Juan (2017), "Duterte is reactionary, counter-revolutionary (to the EDSA revolution), but not fascist – on Walden Bello's definition of a "fascist leader", *International Viewpoint*, 10 December, available at https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5262&fbclid=IwAR17a1NrUSWt4_lGnZosYuSHwd2Lvvr-ZIGCwjoEtP9eJjGwr2CVD6UFseU. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Mercado, N. A. (2021), "65% of Filipinos believe it's 'dangerous' to publish anything critical of administration – SWS", *Inquirer.net*, 19 March, available at https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5262&fbclid=IwAR17a1NrUSWt4_lGnZosYuSHwd2Lvvr-ZIGCwjoEtP9eJjGwr2CVD6UFseU. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Morelock, J. (ed.) (2018), "Introduction: The Frankfurt School and Authoritarian Populism – A Historical Outline", *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, London: University of Westminster Press, pp. xiii–xxxviii.
- Oxford Business Group (2018), "Income inequality remains an issue in the Philippines, despite robust economic expansion", *The Report: Philippines 2018*, available at <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/lifting-all-boats-government-works-address-persistent-inequality>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.

- Philippine Statistics Office (2020), "Updated 2015 and 2018 Full Year Official Poverty Statistics", 4 June, available at <https://psa.gov.ph/poverty-press-releases/nid/162559>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Pobre, Addie, and Cathrine Gonzales (2017), "Looking back at EDSA 11: The political paths of Estrada and Arroyo", *Rappler*, 17 January, available at <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/158523-look-back-edsa-ii-joseph-estrada-gloria-arroyo/>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Poulantzas, N. (2014), *State, Power, Socialism*, London: Verso.
- Ramos, C. G. (2021), "The return of strongman rule in the Philippines: Neoliberal roots and developmental implications", *Geoforum*, vol. 124, pp. 310–19, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.04.001>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Reuters (2007), "TIMELINE: Recent coups and attempted coups in the Philippines", 29 November, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-unrest-idUSSP31116220071129>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Reuters (2021), "Pandemic pushes millions in Philippines into poverty", 17 December, available at <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/pandemic-pushes-millions-philippines-into-poverty-2021-12-17/>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Rivas, Ralf (2020), "NTC orders ABS-CBN to stop operations", *Rappler*, 5 May, available at <https://www.rappler.com/nation/259974-ntc-orders-abs-cbn-stop-operations-may-5-2020>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Rocamora, J. (2020), *Impossible Is Not So Easy: A Life in Politics*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- See, A. (2021), "Rodrigo Duterte Is Using One of the World's Longest Covid-19 Lockdowns to Strengthen His Grip on the Philippines", *Time*, 15 March, available at <https://time.com/5945616/covid-philippines-pandemic-lockdown/>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Springer, S. (2017), "Neoliberalism in Southeast Asia", *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Development*, edited by A. McGregor, L. Law, and F. Miller, Abingdon: Routledge, available at <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315726106-3>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Stewart, B. (2020), "The Rise of Far-Right Civilizationism", *Critical Sociology*, vol. 46, nos. 7–8, pp. 1207–20, available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0896920519894051>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Talabong, R. (2021), "Mapped: Davao wins big in NTF-ELCAC's P16.4-B barangay program", *Rappler*, 12 February, available at <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/mapped-davao-wins-big-national-task-force-end-local-communist-army-conflict-barangay-program>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- World Bank (2003), "World Development Indicators 2003", Washington, DC: World Bank, available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/13920>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.

- Viajar, V. Q. (2009), "Implications of Economic Globalization on Labor Market Policies: A Comparative study of the Philippines and Indonesia", *Philippine Political Science Journal*, vol. 30, pp. 89–122, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01154451.2009.9723518>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.
- Zakaria, F. (1997), "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 6 (Nov–Dec) pp. 22–43.
- Zamora, F., and P. Tubeza (2017), "Duterte hires 59 former AFP, PNP men to Cabinet, agencies", *Inquirer.net*, 27 June, available at <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/908958/duterte-hires-59-former-afp-pnp-men-to-cabinet-agencies>. Last accessed on 3 August 2022.