Article

Philippine Populism: Local Violence and Global Context in the Rise of a Filipino Strongman

Alfred W. McCoy

University of Wisconsin-Madison, US.
awmccoy@wisc.edu

Abstract

To explore the overlooked role of political violence in global “populism,” the essay explores the rise of Rodrigo Duterte from long-serving mayor of a provincial city to an exceptionally powerful Philippine president. Using an analytical frame that juxtaposes localized violence with international influence, the essay examines not only the political dynamics that elevated Duterte to power but the tensions that are already circumscribing his authority after only a year in office. Application of this model to comparable cases could both highlight the parallel role of political violence in contemporary populism and indicate the forces likely to lead to its decline.

Introduction

After a century of mutable meanings that changed as academics focused on different continents or contexts, the term “populism” has recently been recast to encompass the nationalist, anti-globalization movements responsible for electoral upheavals in democracies worldwide. Speaking to an audience of policy experts at the Council of Foreign Relations in March 2017, Nikki Haley, UN ambassador for the proudly populist the Trump administration, trumpeted the “wave of populism that is challenging institutions like the United Nations, and shaking them to their foundations.” The UN was, she said, “basically a club” for privileged elites and its Human Right Commission was “so corrupt.” Just as the ambassador appropriated this label to lend coherence to a muddled foreign policy, so analysts have applied it to diverse movements without much consideration of its deeper meaning—particularly the frequent inclination to violence (Sengupta 2017; Fisher 2017).

Following the quarter-century of the globalization that came with the end of the Cold War, displaced workers around the world began mobilizing angrily to oppose an economic order that seemed to privilege corporations and political elites. Despite numerous economic studies to the contrary, just 19 per cent of Americans polled in July 2016 believed that trade creates more jobs. An earlier survey of public opinion in 44 countries found only 26 per cent of respondents felt trade actually lowers prices. Between 1999 and 2011, Chinese imports eliminated 2.4 million American jobs, closing plants for furniture in North Carolina, glass in Ohio, and auto parts and steel across the Midwest (Goodman 2016). As nations worldwide imposed a combined 2,100 restrictions on imports to staunch a similar loss of jobs, world trade started slowing and actually fell during the second quarter of 2016 for the first time during a period of economic growth since World War II (Appelbaum 2016).

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With a surprising speed and simultaneity, a new generation of populist leaders emerged from the margins of nominally democratic nations to win popularity and power by giving voice, often with violent or virulent inflections, to public concerns about the social costs of globalization. Across Europe, hyper-nationalist parties like the French National Front, the Alternative for Germany, and the UK Independence Party won voters by cultivating nativist reactions to these global trends. Simultaneously, a generation of populist demagogues gained popularity or power in democracies around the world—notably, Norbert Hofer (Austria), Marine Le Pen (France), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Geert Wilders (Netherlands), Vladimir Putin (Russia), Recep Erdoğan (Turkey), Donald Trump (United States), Narendra Modi (India), Prabowo Subianto (Indonesia), Thaksin Shinawatra (Thailand), and Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines) (Ashkenas and Aisch 2016).

To explain this elusive phenomenon, Indian essayist Pankaj Mishra recently observed: “Demagogues are still emerging, in the West and outside it, as the promise of prosperity collides with massive disparities of wealth, power, education, and status” (Mishra 2016: 46-54). Giving weight to those words, the Philippine economy grew by a sustained six per cent annually during the six years preceding Duterte’s 2016 presidential campaign, but the number of poor remained stubbornly unchanged. Just 40 elite Filipino families on the Forbes’ wealth ranking controlled 76 per cent of this growth, while a staggering 26 million poor struggled to survive on a dollar a day as development projects, accelerated by all this growth, were evicting many from their squatter shacks and subsistence farms (Agence France-Presse 2013; Sicat 2016; Yap 2016).

In analyzing the ideology that underlies the appeal of these demagogues, rhetoric scholar Michael J. Lee views populism as a movement that, above all, defines the national community by both “shared characteristics” and a common “enemy,” much like the Nazis excluded certain groups by “race.” Just as American prairie populists of the 1880s and 1890s once demonized banking, so their contemporary counterparts portray themselves as “systemic revolutionaries battling present perversions on behalf of past principles.” Finally, populist movements exhibit, Lee argues, a desire for “apocalyptic confrontation...as the vehicle to revolutionary change” through “a mythic battle” (Lee 2006: 357-64).

With a similar emphasis on inclusion and exclusion, political scientist Jan-Werner Müller argues that “the tell-tale sign of populism” is leaders who “claim that they, and only they, represent the people.” That claim is “always distinctly moral” with the result that populists, once in office, purport to act in the name of the “real people” and “will not recognize anything such as a legitimate opposition.” As the “only authentic representatives of the people,” populist leaders build regimes “designed to perpetuate the power of the populists” (Müller 2016). Somewhat more succinctly, Cas Mudde defines current populism as “an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and that holds that politics should be an expression of ‘the general will’ of the people” (Mudde 2016). Taking that division further, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris argue that populism “emphasizes faith in the wisdom and virtue of ordinary people (the silent majority) over the ‘corrupt’ establishment,” while defining those ordinary people through “nativism or xenophobic nationalism, which assumes that the ‘people’ are a uniform whole” (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 6-7).

Although seemingly universal in depicting the way populist demagogues all rely on rhetoric with an implicit violence, these models omit the actual violence and its potent political symbolism (Fisher 2017). While populism might still be in its benign rhetorical phase in America and Europe, in less developed democracies populist leaders have learned to inscribe their power on the battered and bloodied bodies of their victims.

Even in societies that seemed as far apart as affluent America and the impoverished Philippines, similarly violent populist rhetoric recently carried two unlikely candidates from the political margins to the seat of power. As his insurgent crusade gained momentum, billionaire businessman Donald Trump moved beyond his repeated calls to fight terror with torture by promising that he would also murder women and children.

“The other thing with the terrorists is you have to take out their families, when you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families,” he told Fox News. “They care about their lives, don’t kid yourself. When they say they don’t care about their lives, you have to take out their families” (LoBianco 2015). In his first three months as president, Trump has fulfilled much of that promise with a drone blitz of unprecedented intensity on Yemen in March 2017 to destroy what he called a “network of lawless savages,” a strike by 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian air base, and detonation of the world’s largest non-nuclear bomb on a terrorist refuge in eastern Afghanistan (Blake 2017; Ferdinando 2017; Ackerman 2017; Lamothe 2017).

Campaigning in the Philippines on a similar law-and-order theme, Rodrigo Duterte, then the mayor of a remote provincial city, promised to kill drug dealers in violent language that sparked a surge of popular support and captured the palace by a wide margin of six million votes. “If by chance that God will place me there,” he promised at the start of his campaign, “watch out because the 1,000 [people executed while he was city mayor] will become 100,000. You will see the fish in Manila Bay getting fat. That is where I will dump you.” During his first six months in power after July 2016, President Duterte waged war on methamphetamine abuse in city slums marked by 7,000 extrajudicial killings, with many victims dumped on Manila’s streets as down payment on his promises of order (Human Rights Watch 2017: 3-4).

In the closest parallel to Duterte, in 2003 the Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra launched his “red shirt” populism with war on the country’s rampant methamphetamine abuse that prompted the police to carry out 2,275 extrajudicial killings in just 3 months, leaving most bodies where they fell as a tribute to his power (Human Rights Watch 2004: 9-12; Mydans 2003).

For over ten years, Russia’s Vladimir Putin, a likely progenitor of this recent resurgence of populism, has demonstrated his bare-chested power by a murderous campaign against serious opponents—including, a terminal spritz of polonium 90 for KGB defector Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006, shooting journalist Anna Politkovskaya outside her Moscow apartment that same year, a lethal dose from a rare Himalayan plant for banker Alexander Perepilichny at London in 2012, a fatal fusillade for opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in downtown Moscow in 2015, and four fatal bullets for defector Denis Voronenkov on a Kiev sidewalk in March 2017 that Ukraine called “an act of state terrorism.” While some of the killings were done with clever attempts at concealment, several prominent victims—the politician Nemtsov and the journalist Politkovskaya—were shot right in Moscow with a demonstration of force seemingly designed to amplify Putin’s aura and silence any would-be opponents (Kramer 2016, 2017).

In 2014, retired general Prabowo Subianto came close to capturing Indonesia’s presidency with a campaign theme of strength and order that resonated with some of the most luridly visible violence in that country’s fraught political history. Back in 1998 when the authoritarian regime of his then father-in-law Suharto was trembling at the brink, General Prabowo, as commander of the elite Kopassus rangers, staged the kidnapping-disappearance of a dozen student activists, the lurid rape of 168 Chinese women to incite racial violence, and the burning of 43 shopping malls, 1,026 homes, and 4,083 shops in Jakarta that left over a thousand dead (McIntyre 2005:187; Fabi and Kapoor 2014; Richburg 1998; Liljas 2014).

In Turkey, the Islamic populist Recep Erdogan has projected his personal power by staging a bloody repression of the Kurds in 2015 that displaced over 500,000 people and, since mid-2016, reacting to a threatened military coup by a purge of 50,000 officials, including 1,500 academics, 21,000 teachers, and 6,000 military. In Erdogan’s vision of his national community, the Kurds are a cancer within the body politic whose identity must be extinguished, much as his forebears eliminated the Armenians (Cumming-Bruce 2017; MacKinnon 2017).

Recounting such carnage under the banner of populism raises questions generally overlooked in media discussions of this phenomenon: Just what dynamics lie behind the urge toward violence that seems to propel such movements? Why does the virulent campaign rhetoric of populist political movements so often

morph into actual violence once a populist wins power? And why is that violence invariably aimed at enemies believed to threaten the imagined integrity of the national community (Fisher 2017)?

Combining Michael Lee's rhetorical model with the actual practice of populist politics offers a means to explore how virulent campaign rhetoric can readily become, once a populist wins power, endlessly escalating violence against enemies who somehow threaten the imagined integrity of the national community. At its heart, populism aspires to protect the nation by violent purges of pernicious alien influences, of differences determined by race, religion, or social status. This ingrained need for enemies infuses contemporary populism with a compulsion for conflict that can transcend actual threats or rational political calculus.

Close examination of just one example of this global phenomenon in the Philippines offers insight into the way that local political traditions can sometimes infuse this violence with potent symbolic meaning. During the Philippines' half-century of bloodstained elections, just two populists—Ferdinand Marcos and Rodrigo Duterte—won exceptional power by combining the high politics of great-power diplomacy and the low politics of performative violence, scattering corpses written upon and read as virtual political texts. By excising deviants from the moral community, both leaders seemed, by inscribing their power on their victims' bodies, to project power that commanded loyalty and, simultaneously, promised order that could lift ordinary Filipinos from poverty. Apart from identifying international influence and intimidating violence as two unappreciated dimensions of global populism, examination of this Philippine past and present offers us a glimpse of some dynamics that might slow a global movement that once seemed the wave of the future.

The Marcos Regime

Although now remembered as a “kleptocrat” who plundered his country with a shameless abandon epitomized by his wife's 3,000 pairs of shoes, President Ferdinand Marcos was in fact a brilliant populist skilled in the symbolic uses of violence. As his legal term came to an end in 1972, Marcos—who, like many populist leaders, saw himself as chosen by destiny to save his people from perdition—used the military to declare martial law and jail 50,000 opponents, including both the senators who had blocked his legislation and the gossip columnists who mocked his wife's pretensions (UPI 1983).

Yet during the first four months of his dictatorship, there was no official violence. Then just before dawn on January 15, 1973, Constabulary officers read a presidential execution order and strapped an overseas Chinese heroin manufacturer named Lim Seng to a post at a Manila military camp. As a battery of press photographers stood by, an eight-man firing squad raised their rifles. Replayed endlessly on television and in movie theaters, the dramatic footage of bullets ripping open the victim's chest was a vivid display of the dictator's power (Ocampo 2016). Lim Seng would become the only victim legally executed in the 14 years of the Marcos dictatorship, a deft populist appeal to his country's ingrained anti-Chinese racism and its abhorrence of the heroin abuse he propagated.

To placate the globe's great hegemon, Marcos used the issue of the massive U.S. military bases near Manila to win support for his authoritarian rule from three successive administrations, effectively neutralizing President Jimmy Carter's human rights policy (Bonner 1987: 205-11).

After a decade of dictatorship, however, the Philippine economy was collapsing from “crony capitalism” and the political opposition started to challenge the president's self-image as destiny's chosen one (Lohr 1984). To subdue the population, Marcos resorted to raw violence. His security squads conducted 2,520 “salvagings” (representing 77 per cent of the 3,257 extrajudicial killings during his dictatorship), with bodies scarred by torture dumped at public plazas or busy intersections so passers-by could read the transcript of terror in the stigmata (Reyes, Rachel A.G. 2016). In Manila with only 4,000 police for six million residents,

the Marcos regime deputized hundreds of “secret marshals” responsible for over 30 shoot-on-sight fatalities during the program’s first month, May 1985 (McCoy 2009: 405).

Yet the meaning of this performative violence was mutable, proving effective at the start of martial law when people yearned for order and counterproductive at its close when Filipinos again longed for freedom—a shift in sentiment that soon led to Marcos’s downfall in the first of those dramatic “people power” revolutions that would challenge autocratic regimes from Beijing to Berlin.

Duterte’s Violence

Like his role model Marcos, Rodrigo Duterte has gained his extraordinary power through juxtaposition of international diplomacy and local power. Yet unlike any of his predecessors, Duterte pursued his political career in local government as the long-serving mayor Davao City, which was the site of endemic violence that left a lasting imprint on his political persona.

After the communist New People’s Army made Davao its testing ground for urban guerilla warfare, the city’s murders doubled to 800 in 1984, including 150 police. To check the communists, the military mobilized criminals and ex-communists as vigilantes for a lethal counter-terror campaign (Lawyers Committee for Human Rights 1988: 23-25). Lending a lurid quality to this violence, the vigilantes’ spokesman Juan “Jun” Pala broadcast rants on local radio, saying: “Just one order to our anti-Communist forces, your head will be cut off. Damn you, your brains will be scattered in the streets” (Mydans 1987). When I visited Davao in 1987 to interview Jun Pala and investigate his death squad, this remote southern city had an air of desolation and utter hopelessness.

In this fraught conjuncture of national regime change and localized violence, Rodrigo Duterte, a member of the local elite, launched his political career as the elected mayor of Davao City in 1988—the first of seven terms that would keep him in office, on-and-off, for another 21 years until 2016 (Chen 2016). His first campaign in 1988 was hotly contested and Duterte won with only 26 per cent of vote, barely beating his rivals, including the vigilante radio host Jun Pala with 18 per cent (Gutierrez 1992: 146).

As mayor, Duterte reportedly mobilized his own vigilante group, the Davao Death Squad, which, starting in the mid-1990s, was responsible for many of the city’s 814 extrajudicial killings during the next decade, its victims dumped on city streets with faces wrapped bizarrely in signature packing tape (Chen 2016; Mogato 2016). Apart from liquidating criminals, the Death Squad also eliminated the mayor’s political rivals, including broadcaster Jun Pala who had parlayed his notoriety into a city council seat. For years leading up his assassination in 2003, Pala began his daily radio broadcast by saying: “This is Jun Porras Pala, who remains the voice of democracy in [Mayor Rodrigo] Duterte’s reign of terror. *Maayong buntag* [good morning]” (de Jesus 2016; Pulumbarit 2016).

Campaigning for president in 2016, Duterte pointed proudly to the hundreds of killings in Davao City and promised a drug war that would kill 100,000 if necessary. But there was also historical resonance to this violent rhetoric that lent political depth to his campaign. By praising Marcos, promising to bury his body in the National Heroes Cemetery, and supporting the campaign of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. as vice president, Duterte identified himself with a political lineage of populist strongmen epitomized by the old dictator (Gonzales 2016).

During his first six months in office, Duterte’s anti-drug campaign dumped 7,000 bodies onto city streets—sometimes with a crude cardboard sign reading “I am a pusher,” but often with their faces in the packing-tape wrap trademarked by the Davao Death Squad, much as Marcos’s salvaging victims showed the stigmata of torture (Villamor 2017a; Human Rights Watch 2017: 3-90). Although Human Rights Watch declared his drug war a “calamity,” a resounding 85 per cent of Filipinos surveyed were “satisfied,” apparently seeing

each body sprawled on a city street as testament to the president's promises of order (Reyes, Therese 2016; Human Rights Watch 2017: 26).

Diplomacy has been the other arm in Duterte's reach for unrestrained power. In the midst of rising tensions over the South China Sea between Beijing and Washington, he improved his country's bargaining position by moving away from the long alliance with America. At the 2016 ASEAN conference, Duterte reacted profanely to Obama's criticism of his drug war, saying bluntly, "your mother's a whore" (McKenzie and Liptak 2016). A month later, during a state visit to Beijing, Duterte publicly proclaimed "separation from the United States." By setting aside his country's recent slam-dunk win over China in a legal dispute about rival claims in the South China Sea, Duterte came home with \$22.5 billion in Chinese trade deals (Demick and Wilkinson 2016).

After his police tortured and killed a South Korean businessman on the pretext of a drug bust, the president was forced, in January 2017, to call a sudden halt to the killing (Villamor 2017a). Like his role model Marcos, however, Duterte's populism contained that insatiable appetite for violence that soon forced a resumption of his drug war. Within weeks, bodies were again being dumped on the streets of Manila, and the drug war's death toll soon passed 8,000 (Mogato 2017).

Meaning of Violence:

The study of these Filipino strongmen past and present reveals two overlooked aspects of this ill-defined phenomenon of global populism: i.e. the role of performative violence in projecting domestic strength and a complementary need for diplomatic success to show international influence. By seeing how skillfully they balance these critical poles of power, we can speculate about the political fate of populist strongmen in disparate corners of the globe.

In Russia's case, Putin's projection of strength by the murder of his domestic opponents is matched by unchecked aggression in Georgia and Ukraine—a successful balancing likely to extend his autocratic rule for foreseeable future (Economist 2016). In Turkey, Erdogan's harsh repression of ethnic and political enemies is complicating both his bid for entry into the European Union and his alliance with the United States against Islamic fundamentalism—diplomatic barriers that could ultimately slow his bid for unchecked power (Kingsley 2017; Aydintasbas 2016). In Indonesia, ex-general Prabowo Subianto failed in the critical first step of building a domestic base because his call for order resonated discordantly with a public who could recall his earlier bid for power through eerie violence that roiled Jakarta with hundreds of rapes, fires, and deaths (Bachelard 2014; McIntyre 2005: 187; Croft-Cusworth 2014).

While Duterte's weak military limits the outlets for his populist violence to police killings of poor street dealers, President Trump knows no such limits. Should Congress and the courts check the virulence of his domestic attacks on Muslims, Mexicans, or other imagined enemies, then the president can readily resort to violent military adventures in Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, North Korea, or the South China Sea in a bid to recover his populist aura of overweening power. Populism's need for that "apocalyptic confrontation" and "mythic battle" might well lead the Trump administration's "systemic revolutionaries" far beyond even their most virulent rhetoric into an endlessly escalating cycle of violence against foreign enemies, using any weapon that comes to hand, whether drones, special operations forces, fighter bombers, naval armadas, or nuclear weapons. If any of those more protracted interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria produces future U.S. casualties or complications, then his popularity and power could suffer.

In the Philippines, the Duterte administration seemed caught in a similarly taut juxtaposition between domestic strength and diplomatic maneuver. Just six months after his dramatic tilt toward Beijing, Duterte made a sharp correction in an apparent bid to placate a restive military not shy about intervening in the political arena. In March 2017, his defense minister Delfin Lorenzana, a career officer who had played a

key role in developing the current military alliance with America, sounded the alarm about Chinese naval explorations on Benham Rise, a resource-rich area inside Philippine waters (Department of National Defense 2017; Magosing 2017). When Duterte insisted he had granted Beijing permission, both his defense and foreign secretaries objected openly, prompting one legislator to file an impeachment petition (Viray 2017; Cepeda 2017; Heydarian 2017). Seeking to still the damaging controversy, Duterte soon surprised critics by ordering his military to strengthen their forces on islands in the South China Sea claimed by the Philippines. “Duterte has faced massive backlash over his appeasement-sounding remarks over Benham Rise and Scarborough Shoal,” explained one Filipino analyst (Villamor 2017b). Further weakening the Philippine position and augmenting the aura of crisis from Manila’s perspective, the Trump administration, during its first three months in office, curtailed all U.S. naval patrols within twelve miles of Chinese-occupied islands in the South China Sea, including the politically sensitive Scarborough Shoal (Cooper 2017).

During his first year in office, Duterte’s deft balancing of international maneuvers and local bloodletting had at first made him seem a latter-day Philippine strongman (BBC 2016). But whipsawed between domestic demands to defend the country’s maritime claims and diplomatic pressures to accommodate China’s presence in the South China Sea, Duterte’s power seemed to wane somewhat and could, in the future, quickly crumble (Heydarian 2017). If public opinion tires of his spectacle of violence, as it once did of Marcos’s, President Duterte’s de facto abrogation of his country’s claims to the South China Sea’s rich fishing grounds and oil reserves could risk a popular backlash, a military coup, or both (Dillow 2016; Greer 2016).

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