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The 2016 Philippine Elections: Local Power as National Authority

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Patricio N. Abinales, professor in the School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the University of Hawai'i-Manoa, explains that "That phrase ["all politics is local"] could very well explain part of why 39% of voters chose Davao City Mayor Rodrigo R. Duterte as the 16th President of the Republic."

By now most Filipinos – at least those who diligently read about national and world affairs – would be familiar with the phrase “all politics is local” that the late American politician Thomas “Tip” O’Neill, Jr. used. That phrase could very well explain part of why 39% of voters chose Davao City Mayor Rodrigo R. Duterte as the 16th President of the Republic. They wrote his name down impressed with what Duterte had done to his city. Today most Filipinos see Davao as an oasis of peace and stability, with its population actively supporting the policies that Duterte crafted in the 23 years he was in power. This *localist mentalite* is what underpinned voters’ confidence in Duterte; not disappointment over President Benigno Aquino III or because corruption has become worse. Aquino III’s consistent 51% “satisfaction rating” dispels the first notion, and while corruption has long been part of political life, there is no evidence that Filipinos believe it has in fact gotten worse.

It is an entirely different matter when it comes to criminality. Most felonies are personal in nature since they affect individuals and families. Presidents steal to satiate their greed; they did not commit these wrongdoings in the name of the ruling class or their ethno-linguistic group. They are individualized offenses. Even “major crimes” like the January 25, 2015 massacre of 44 policemen in a botched raid to capture a Malaysian terrorist, and President Aquino’s seeming insensitivity to their deaths, were affronts Filipinos took personally. Those were “our” policemen whose deaths the President sullied by not being at the airport when their bodies were flown back home, preferring instead to grace the opening of a Japanese car plant.

The resolution of crimes is thus likewise personal. Filipinos have an enduring mistrust of the legal system. Judges can be bought, prosecutors bribed, and witnesses made to disappear. This is why to this day none of the Marcoses or their cronies is in jail. The only way to gain justice is to seek out the help of local Robin Hoods, trusted because they know how to dodge the system and act – often with impunity – outside the legal box.

Rodrigo Duterte fits the bill. His rivals flaunt their skills as national leaders worthy of succeeding Aquino III. Manuel Roxas III bragged about the managerial skills he learned at the Wharton School and in his time on Wall Street. Jejomar Binay boasted of how much his administration of the country’s financial center, Makati City, made him a better Vice President. Senator Grace Poe compensated for her lack of administrative experience by portraying herself as the one candidate who can unify all Filipinos. Each candidate entered the race with comprehensive programs of how they planned to

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move the nation forward under their presidency. Duterte, on the other hand, had no exhaustive national development programs, did not act presidential, was politically inarticulate, and delivered rambling campaign speeches littered with curses and death threats. He was, in the condescending opinions of Manila’s elite, the *promdi* (local slang for “provincial”) who can never comprehend the complexities beyond his “small town.”

Then the political wind changed directions. The more Duterte boasted about his record, the more Davao City’s successes started to become part of national conversations. More Filipinos were beginning to take a second look at this candidate from the South. They started to admire what Davao had become – a city that has metamorphosed from the nation’s political assassination center in the 1970s and 1980s to the safest in the country. If Duterte can do this to Davao, what can he do about the criminals of our other cities and towns?

Duterte’s charisma attracted his followers when tales began to spread of how he personalized his crusade and skirted the law to get criminals off the streets. His base of support broadened once urban elites appreciated that the mayor’s fanatic devotion to getting rid of criminals would be good for business. How he would go about this, whether legally or without regard for the law, is less of the elite’s concern.

As the campaign progressed, voting preferences shifted and in the week before the elections, Duterte was the most preferred candidate of the rich and the poor, young and old, the educated and the semi-literate, men and women, and urbanites and peasants. The results of the May 9th elections affirmed the survey results.

Policing a nation of 100 million is entirely different from keeping the peace in a city of 2 million. Davao became a safe zone because a ring of security outposts protects its perimeters. Firearms must be deposited with security forces before anyone – be he a communist, Muslim separatist, or warlord – is allowed into the city. Duterte has managed to keep criminals out of the city via a *modus vivendi*: the latter can do anything they like outside the city, but not on Duterte territory. Nonetheless, public response to his plan to crack down on drinking and late-night celebrations, ban smoking, and impose speed limits nationwide has been positive. But his vow to restore the death penalty by hanging and to give police shoot-to-kill powers has been met with resistance from human rights activists, lawyers’ groups, the Catholic Church, and the government’s own Commissioner on Human Rights.

Duterte has also promised an all-inclusive cabinet similar to that of Canada’s Justin Trudeau. So far he has nominated friends, lawyers, and sons of political families with tarnished careers. He has repeatedly warned that he is going to abolish Congress if it opposes his policies. Six of his first cabinet nominees rose to prominence by being elected to the legislature. The only nod towards the “progressive” side of Filipino politics was to offer four social-welfare related positions to the Communist Party of the Philippines. The latter welcomed the new president, hinted that it was considering the offer, then made a 180-degree turn and vowed to continue the armed struggle until the “fascist state” of this corrupted “semi-colonial, semi-feudal” country is overthrown.

Impish Filipinos have come up with a name for all of this: *same-old-same-old*.

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