

The Philippines in the Eye of the Storm

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Where is this nation of a hundred million inhabitants heading to? The future doesn't seem rosy enough for people to hitch their hope on its government's myriad promises most of which have gradually whittled down to bubbles that simply burst in the air.

Poverty still dominates the informal settlements-squatters areas-in major cities where people generally lead scratch-and-peck existence in tightly packed neighborhoods because of the large-scale unemployment situation. Still, the most basic issue that continues to linger is, where is the next meal coming from?

Desperation has hit hard the poor city folks and resorting to illegal activities has become the easiest way out to survive. Leading among these is drug peddling mostly on a small-scale basis just to earn a small amount to feed the grumbling tummies of family members waiting in a makeshift shelter they call home. In many instances, pickpockets, snatchers, and petty hold uppers among others proliferate in the more populous areas of a typical city where people mill around particularly in places where commercial shops abound.

This is the Philippines, an archipelago in southeast Asia romantically described as "La Perla del Mar de Oriente"- "The pearl of the orient sea"-by its ancient denizens during the Hispanic colonization period of more than 330 years. From the point of view of seasonal tourists coming from the west, the Philippines is a tropical paradise with many of its world-class beaches punctuating the islands-both big and small-that constitute the length of its territorial jurisdiction from north to south. At least, the country has a bright side after all and may be given a boost from this perspective.

The truth of the matter is, Filipinos in general, are kindhearted, trusting, and hospitable to a fault. These particular qualities might be rarer in the city but more common in the countryside. In fact, it is reckoned as something wide-ranging among Filipinos to be uncritical "believers" even of unfounded promises with all the icings of a better future prospect. Most certainly, this is no more than a spin-off of an ethos chiefly characterized by unexorcisably deepset superstitiousness that borders on gullibility. And this explains why weird religious fellowships of the so-called charismatic-pentecostal evangelical variety have unrelentingly mushroomed in all corners of the country. The same gullibility is exploited very effectively in politics more specifically when elections are about to take place and the candidates' spin doctors start to concoct and prepare for their respective candidates' manipulative campaign lines to make up the contents of public meeting speeches and the lyrics of subliminal jingles promoting their candidacies.

Such naïveté is considered as the most definitive factor that led Filipino voters to put into power the present president of the country in the person of the long-time mayor of the

southern city of Davao on the exotic island of Mindanao, **Rodrigo Roa Duterte**, more popularly known by his gangland-sounding monicker, Digong Duterte. Practically unbeknownst to most Filipinos north of his turf, i.e., prior to getting elected as president, the past exploits of this southern warlord was popularly depicted by his loyal followers in a legend-like narrative that magnified and adored his hero-cum-saviour persona whose unique achievement of unprecedented magnitude was—according to their stories—the establishment and maintenance of absolute peace and order in his power domain allegedly through strict disciplinary measures.

While on the campaign trail, this Filipino “trapo” (traditional politician) forcefully delivered strings of spectacular and awe-inspiring promises never been spewed out by any presidential contenders of the past eras before a spellbound audience. The power-packed pledges expressed in the coarse and rugged lingo of a tough-talking “presidentiable” had an instant magnetic appeal to the pathos of the ordinary citizens who could automatically connect and identify with him. His utterances peppered with rounds of expletives at practically all points of emphasis were like palatable desserts to the politically immature mindset of the general Filipino electorate hoping for a seemingly ever-elusive panacea that would finally liberate the nation from the plagues of graft and corruption, economic underdevelopment, and debilitating crimes.

Thousands of his thrilled listeners were swept off their feet while listening to a sweeping statement that under his leadership the nationwide scourge of drug trafficking would be solved within a period of three months. Along with this promise was the assurance that crimes would significantly deteriorate to the point of extinction as peace and order was expected to prevail in the general condition of Philippine society.

Delivered before a massive multitude of rejoicing supporters like an echoing thunder of a powerful commitment emanating from the heart and soul of an uncompromising patriot was the pledge that he would never ever allow China to take over the Spratlys [a group of small islands in the West Philippine Sea] for they are within the territorial jurisdiction of the Philippines. And should they try to aggressively occupy and covet even one of them as their own, he would ride a jet ski carrying a Philippine flag on a pole and plant it there to assert the fact that these islands are the Philippines’. He punctuated his speech with the likelihood that he could lose his life while doing it but it didn’t matter for, at his age, he wished to give his life as a martyr for the cause of his country.

Another sweet piece of grandstanding that drew reverberating cheers, whistles, and ovation from the captivated assemblage of his almost fanatical adherents was when he announced that graft and corruption in government would meet its final end under his administration and a new era of good governance truly serving the Filipino people’s interest would be inaugurated right on the very first day of his presidency.

Contractualization of commercial and industrial urban workers would meet its death throes once he assumed office was a sincere-sounding pronouncement that lifted the hearts of workers with new hope for its realization was expected to finally give them secured tenure in the workplace.

An outward pledge that prices of basic food commodities would surely be brought down under his presidency so that no poor Filipino would ever get hungry drew an immense accolade from the poor sector of Philippine society.

Within a long litany of campaign promises—and there were a lot of them—the aforementioned ones are deemed the most crucial. True, a few of those not mentioned have already been fulfilled with some degree of importance attributed to them. Nevertheless, they are not considered as pivotal as the ones we have identified above.

And the moment of truth came. Rodrigo Roa Duterte—the erstwhile warlord mayor of the southern city of Davao—was finally elected for a 6-year term as the 16th President of the Republic of the Philippines.

Sad to say, none of the overriding promises mentioned above have ever been realized until this point of time. In fact, Duterte even attenuates their importance to a level that matches nonsense jokes in his typical cuss-word-filled, garbled speeches that always draw laughter from his fanatical supporters. To divert the attention of the audience from the real issues, it is part of his routine to attack his political opponents with sarcastic lies delivered like shaggy-dog stories that don't even pass the standard of a comedy bar. Nevertheless, his fanatics don't fail to swallow them hook-line-and-sinker topped with hearty laughter and rounds of applause.

Job contractualization is alive and kicking. It has, in fact, been stronger than before as big-time business owners who profit a lot from their manipulative style of hiring workers have mastered Duterte's weaknesses and won him over to their side—an absolute realization that he is not on the workers' side but a promoter of labor exploitation.

Prices of basic food commodities have spiked as more taxes have been imposed on them by the government. In this situation which is worse than before, the people's economic condition has not gotten any better at all. Poor Filipinos have become poorer and their future, more uncertain. They feel betrayed and their powerlessness can never create for them better alternatives to improve their lot.

In the corridors of power, graft and corruption have continued to flourish. This president who vowed in his campaign speeches to lead a clean government devoid of past scums and rubbish has reneged and reneged miserably on his promise to rid the government of unscrupulous characters. In one notorious news headliner, he did not only exonerate an erring high government official—who happened to be his close ally—found guilty in the irresponsible performance of his duties; he recycled him and transferred him to another department where he was given a position rank higher than the previous one where he fumbled. Contrary to this, the more critical and thinking ones have either been relegated to insignificance or kicked out into ignominy.

Image on the right: A combination of Ferdinand Marcos (left) and Gloria Arroyo (right).



Worse than this was the way he welcomed on a “red carpet,” so to speak, hardcore corrupt political personalities condemned by past administrations: The likes of the ill-famed **Imelda Marcos** who is supposed to be in prison; former President **Gloria Macapagal Arroyo** who was ordered to be released after having been in detention pending the official filing of the criminal cases of graft and plunder; Senators **Ramon Revilla, Jr** and **Jinggoy Estrada** who were also released from prison despite the ongoing court trials where they had also been indicted for graft and plunder. Besides all these, Duterte has been very open in associating himself with disreputable political deceivers like former Senators **Ferdinand Marcos, Jr**, and the nonagenarian **Juan Ponce Enrile**. And to appease the Marcos family, he even penned an executive order to allow the remains of the former dictator **Ferdinand Marcos** be interred at the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Heroes’ Cemetery).

Later along the way, stories of corruption, abuse of power, and strings of murder to silence his enemies while he was the sitting mayor of the southern city of Davao gradually came out to the open as some courageous city dwellers gave their discrete confessions to “camouflaged” independent international journalists who entered the city despite possible risk considering that the Duterte family is still in total control of the city having his daughter Sara as its mayor and his son Sebastian as the vice-mayor. Well, Davao City is not only a bastion of nepotism but a barony ruled by a dynasty.

Now that Duterte is the president of a nation, we are no longer talking of a warlord controlling a city bailiwick but of a “kingdom” where an elected president has the schizophrenic notion that the whole country is his own and it is not even necessary for him to carry the title of a “king” as long as he has all the power to act like one. By virtue of this self-imposed power, he has betrayed the nation as he blew into smithereens his patriotic commitment to protect the West Philippine Sea islands claimed by China as its own. He treacherously abandoned his vow to fight tooth-and-nail the illegal incursion of the Chinese military on any of those islands.

In a drastic turn of events, he was in the news standing side-by-side with the Chinese President Xi Jinping trying to win the favor of the latter for what he called “a historical rapprochement beneficial to the overall progress and stability of Philippine economy”. Simply put, he has sold his country.

What follows afterward are events detrimental to the general condition of the Filipino people, particularly the Philippine local business scenario. Allowing the presence of Chinese business enterprises to flourish in the country is one seriously disempowering circumstance for local business endeavors. Moreover, letting the massive influx of Chinese construction

workers to the country to constitute the major labor force in many Chinese-financed infrastructure projects in various parts of the country is a hard-hitting slap on the face of thousands of skilled Filipino construction workers employed overseas to earn higher wages to give their families a better life.

Chinese tourists have been coming in and going out on a regular basis and some enterprising businessmen among them have even taken control of some tourist resorts which they have declared exclusive so that only Chinese tourists are allowed to enter and to get the best possible accommodation. This whole situation has actually alienated Filipinos in general. One big-time enterprise they started and has been flourishing enormously in the Philippines with all the blessings of the rabid Sinophile Philippine president is the Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) nominally under the jurisdiction of the legal entity called the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR).

As a policy, POGOs only cater to foreign gambling aficionados mainly Chinese—not to the locals. By and large, POGOs have created a situation that indiscriminately allows thousands of Chinese tourists to enter the Philippines. The detrimental aftermath of Chinese tourists, construction workers, and gamblers freely entering the country at any moment is the exacerbated rise of Covid-19 infection when the pandemic hit the Philippines. And no one is to blame but the government of Duterte that has gone docile and subservient to the whims and wishes of aggressive Chinese exploitative forces.



The area designated as “West Philippine Sea” is the slightly darker blue area west of the Philippines.
(CC BY 2.5)

In this connection, we want to know what has happened to Duterte’s affirmation on the campaign trail that should the Chinese try to aggressively occupy even one of the West Philippine Sea islands and claim it as their own, he would ride a jet ski carrying a Philippine flag on a pole and plant it there to assert the fact that these islands are the Philippines’. In a press conference where someone reminded him about it, he simply parried the question and casually dismissed it in jest as an ordinary campaign stunt and should have never been taken literally and seriously. As a disparaging comment, he even insultingly called those who believed what he said STUPID.

Now the Philippines is at the behest of Chinese business and economic magnates with all the Chinese-financed infrastructure projects and business enterprises. On top of these undertakings, loans equivalent to trillions of dollars are in the pipeline to finally give the country to China’s absolute control. And on this basis, Duterte was not joking when in a speech he said without mincing words, “I wish the Philippines would just become a province

of China so that Filipinos could at last live in prosperity.”

Not disconnected to what has so far been happening in the Philippines now under the manipulative spell of China is the seemingly unending inflow and proliferation of illegal drugs whose main sources are in China. Duterte miserably failed in his promise to end the scourge of illegal drugs within three months. Employing an honest-to-goodness approach to the illegal drug problem might really be unrealistic to finish it in three months. But to have the problem still around and to find it getting worse after three years is already unimaginable if the people in government are seriously attending to it.

The Duterte government’s approach has been terribly inaccurate, to say the least as instead of running straight after the big-time drug lords—most if not all of whom are Chinese—it has targetted small-time drug pushers and users in impoverished areas of major cities. What makes the whole operation terroristic in nature is the so-called authorities are not in the business of arresting illegal drug offenders; they are murdering them even in full daylight and in the presence of terror-stricken community dwellers. Based on a UN investigation report that came out on Democracy Now (June 5, 2020)

“ . . . [T]ens of thousands of people in the Philippines may have been killed since mid-2016 as President Rodrigo Duterte unleashed a “war on drugs,” giving police the power to arrest people and use lethal force with near impunity. The U.N. report points to top government officials as instigators of extreme violence, and a pattern among police of planting evidence in dozens of murders to suggest officers were acting in self-defense. Among the dead are over 70 children; the youngest victim was just 5 months old.” (1)

The Philippines is in the worst of times as the government has intentionally turned its eyes away from the worsening problems spawned by the presence of big-time drug lords in the country. The matter has gone so agitatingly worrisome after the more sensible and thinking Filipinos monitored and followed up the situation that occurred at the Manila International Container Port (MICP) on 7 and 8 August 2018 when 1,600 kilos of smuggled shabu (methamphetamine) worth 15. 3 billion pesos was found concealed in magnetic scrap lifters by agents of the Bureau of Customs (BoC) and the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA). The haul was missing the following day and nowhere to be found. (2)

Nobody could really unravel such a mystery quite easily but we can however come up with a circumstantial scenario considering that it was too big a case in the stark presence of authorities like the BoC and the PDEA to simply vanish in thin air.

One bigger mystery that continues to linger in the minds of critical Filipinos is why has the Duterte government not been running after big-time drug lords? This question could very consistently connect with the unending illegal drug problems in the Philippines.

Now in the time of Covid-19, instead of putting more serious attention to the pandemic, the government has used the legislature to pass the Anti-Terrorism Bill whose main features could be turned into an instrument of state terrorism. In this sense, the Anti-Terrorism Bill is consciously designed to terrorize the segment of Filipino people that are more critical of the inefficiency and corruption of the Duterte government.

Eminent economist and mentor at the prestigious University of the Philippines, Professor Solita Collas-Monsod recently commented:

“I am afraid that this bill, which lends itself to even more abuses (because it gives the police more power and penalizes them less) will be the start of a reign of terror—not terror by non-state actors, striking fear among the populace, but terror by the government, as in the Reign of Terror in France in 1870.” (3)

In the final analysis, one concrete description can sum up what has been happening in the Philippines today: The country is in the eye of the storm under the leadership of a fascist president whose unilateral ambition is to oppress and terrorize the nation he has deceived and opted now to sell to the devil.

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Notes

(1) Democracy Now (June 5, 2020)

https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/5/headlines/un_reports_thousands_killed_with_impunity_in_philippines_war_on_drugs?fbclid=IwAR240EMN7N7MYBAJaQ1KFMt5vKBSBIUYsulyaxABcofsAsCzKluBjdq-4bc

(2) “TIMELINE: ₱11B-worth of shabu slips past PH customs days after ₱4.3B worth of shabu was intercepted”, CNN Philippines (October 26, 2018)

<https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/10/26/timeline-shabu-smuggling-magnetic-lifters.html> ”

Magnetic lifters contained 1.6 tons of shabu – PDEA” by Jairus Bondoc, Philippine Star Global (October 17, 2018)

<https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2018/10/17/1860621/magnetic-lifters-contained-16-tons-shabu-pdea>

(3) Philippine Daily Inquirer . . . Inquirer.net, (June 6, 2020)

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