

## Constructed Loyalty and Political Denial: A Theoretical Analysis of Duterte's Diehard Support Base

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*The continued loyalty of the Diehard Duterte Supporters (DDS) despite the incarceration of **former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte** by the International Criminal Court (ICC) presents a compelling case for examining the intersection of populism, charismatic authority, and cognitive dissonance in contemporary political behavior. Rather than functioning as conventional political support, this phenomenon reflects a patterned resistance to empirical evidence and institutional accountability that can be better understood through established theoretical frameworks in political sociology and social psychology.*

From the standpoint of populist theory, Duterte's enduring appeal aligns with what Mudde (2004) describes as a "thin-centered ideology" that constructs politics as a moral struggle between a virtuous "people" and a corrupt "elite." Within this framework, legal and institutional challenges, such as ICC proceedings, are reframed not as legitimate accountability mechanisms but as instruments of elite persecution. Laclau (2005) further emphasizes how populist movements consolidate support through the construction of antagonistic political identities, allowing followers to interpret criticism as an existential threat rather than a substantive claim requiring evaluation.

Weber's theory of charismatic authority is also useful here. Charismatic authority rests on the attribution of extraordinary qualities to a leader, generating emotional bonds that supersede legal-rational norms (Weber, 1922/1978). In this context, Duterte's symbolic elevation among segments of his supporters, including acts of reverence toward his image, can be interpreted as a form of quasi-sacralization. Such authority structures are deeply resilient because they rely on belief systems that are not easily displaced by institutional or empirical challenges.

Cognitive dissonance theory, as developed by Festinger (1957), helps explain the persistence of support despite substantial allegations of wrongdoing. When confronted with disconfirming evidence, individuals experience psychological discomfort that motivates them to restore internal consistency. This is often achieved not by revising beliefs but by rejecting or reinterpreting contradictory information. Empirical extensions of this idea, such as Taber and Lodge's (2006) work on motivated reasoning, show how individuals selectively process information in ways that reinforce preexisting attitudes and contribute to epistemically closed communities.

The communicative behavior associated with DDS supporters can also be situated within the literature on affective polarization and discursive delegitimization.

Iyengar et al. (2012) describe how political divisions increasingly acquire an emotional dimension, fostering hostility toward out-groups. In this dynamic, the use of confrontational rhetoric, including insults and dismissive language, reinforces in-group cohesion while excluding dissenting perspectives. Such patterns erode the conditions necessary for deliberative democracy, as outlined by Habermas (1984), where rational-critical debate is central to legitimate public discourse.

Moral disengagement theory further clarifies how supporters reconcile their continued allegiance with allegations of human rights violations. Bandura (1999) argues that mechanisms such as moral justification, displacement of responsibility, and minimization of harm enable individuals to maintain a sense of ethical coherence while supporting contested actions. In this framework, the defense of Duterte does not necessarily reflect a rejection of morality, but rather its restructuring within a loyalty-centered ethical system.

Importantly, these dynamics are not limited to grassroots supporters. Political actors within state institutions, including members of the Senate and other branches of government, often reproduce similar narratives and strategies. This reflects what Müller (2016) describes as populist behavior among elite actors, where institutional roles are used to amplify narratives of persecution and resist accountability. The convergence between mass and elite support strengthens the durability of these belief systems and extends their influence into formal governance structures. Taken together, the DDS phenomenon illustrates how populism (Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004), charismatic authority (Weber, 1922/1978), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006), affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012), and moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) can interact to produce deeply entrenched political loyalty. This convergence not only insulates belief systems from empirical scrutiny but also challenges the capacity of democratic institutions to uphold norms of accountability and rational discourse.

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*Featured image: Former president Rodrigo Duterte attends an inquiry on his administration's war on drugs at the House of Representatives on Nov. 13, 2024. The House Quad Committee on Wednesday (Dec. 18) recommended the filing of crimes against humanity charges against Duterte, Senators Christopher Lawrence Go and Ronald Dela Rosa, and other police officials in connection with the alleged extrajudicial killings (EJKs) during the previous administration's drug war. (Photo courtesy of House of Representatives Press and Public Affairs Bureau)*

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