

THE PHILIPPINES MYSTERY: RODRIGO DUTERTE'S POPULARITY

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ABSTRACT

Rodrigo Duterte won the Philippine presidency with a promise to violently crack down on drug dealers and drug users. Throughout his election campaign, he has threatened to bypass the judicial process and target anyone associated with drugs, especially the poor. As of 2018, 12,000 Filipinos have been killed due to his war on drugs. It is the poor that are suffering the most from human rights abuses as the police rarely crack down on drug users in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. However, Duterte remains popular in the Philippine, across the entire socioeconomic spectrum. Given his questionable human rights track record, how is this possible? I argue that Duterte enjoys high popularity among the poor precisely because of his drug policy, the rising nationalist sentiment, and his enthusiasm for federalism. I will also present policy suggestions for the governments of the United States and the Philippine on how they can help put an end to Duterte's war on drugs.

INTRODUCTION

Since taking office as president of the Philippine, Rodrigo Duterte has encouraged the Philippine National Police and Armed Forces of the Philippine to kill off all drug dealers and users with no judicial process. During the campaign trail, he threatened to take the law into his own hands by saying, "Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now, there is three million drug addicts. I'd be

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happy to slaughter them”.² Despite his unusual rhetoric, Duterte won the election with more than 40 percent of the vote.³ Before becoming president, he had been the mayor of Davao for over twenty years. Throughout his term as mayor, he ordered numerous extrajudicial killings of drug offenders by embracing a vigilante group called the Davao Death Squad, or DDS.⁴ This group, under the guidance of Duterte, carried out targeted killings against ‘serious criminals’. The DDS have assassinated more than a thousand people since Duterte entered the mayoral office in 1988.⁵ At present, after two years of Duterte’s presidency, more than 12,000 Filipinos have become victims of government sponsored extrajudicial killings.⁶ However, it is the lower class Filipinos who are suffering the most from human rights abuses since the police do not target middle- and upper-class citizens, even though some of them are drug users themselves.⁷ Despite this, Duterte remains popular among low income citizens, with an approval rating of 78 percent.⁸ How is Duterte able to maintain such high support given his policies that target the poor?

In this paper, I argue that Duterte remains popular among the lower income population because of his hard stance against drugs, the rise of nationalism in the Philippine, and his support for federalism. Using information gleaned from public surveys, past literature, and media reports, I show how Filipinos are willing to vote

² “Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte in quotes,” BBC News, September 30, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36251094>.

³ Mark Thompson, “The Early Duterte Presidency in the Philippines,” in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2017), 4.

⁴ Gina Apostol, “Meet Rodrigo Duterte: The Filipino Trump, Turned Up to 11,” *Foreign Policy*, May 09, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/09/meet-rodrigo-duterte-the-filipino-trump-turned-up-to-11/>.

⁵ Clare Baldwin and Andrew R.C Marshall, “As death toll mounts, Duterte deploys dubious data in ‘war on drugs,’” *Reuters*, October 18, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/philippines-duterte-data/>.

⁶ Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2018: Philippines Events of 2017,” *Human Rights Watch*, 2017, accessed January 03, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/philippines>.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, “The Killing Squads: Inside the Philippines’ ‘War on Drugs,’” *Human Rights Watch*, March 02, 2017, accessed August 02, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/02/killing-squads-inside-philippines-war-drugs>.

⁸ PulseAsia, “March 2017 Nationwide Survey on the Performance and Trust Ratings of the Top Five Philippine Government Officials,” *Pulse Asia Research Inc.*, March 2017, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://www.pulseasia.ph/march-2017-nationwide-survey-on-the-performance-and-trust-ratings-of-the-top-five-philippine-government-officials/>.

for a strongman candidate who disregards human rights and liberal democratic values.⁹ To stem the tide of Duterte's war on drugs, the United States can use its economic and diplomatic influence to put pressure on him and his associates. The Philippine Congress, Justice Department, and Ombudsman Office can start building a case against Duterte so that he can be prosecuted in a court of law.

The organization of this paper is as follows. In the first section, I present a historical overview of Duterte's past human rights abuses and a brief summary of the 2016 Philippine presidential election. Following this overview, I discuss the existing explanations as to why Duterte remains popular. Next, I present my own findings: that he remains popular because of his drug policy, rise of nationalist sentiment, and his support for federalism. Based on these findings I conclude the paper with policy solutions for the U.S., U.N., and the Philippine government on how to deal with Duterte's human rights abuses.

I. DUTERTE'S WAR ON DRUGS

Rodrigo Duterte's faulty human rights track record dates back to 1988 when he became the mayor of Davao, the biggest city on the island of Mindanao. When he became the mayor, the city was a hub for illegal drug trafficking, and was known as the "murder capital", due to extremely high murder rates.¹⁰ Before becoming the mayor, he was a city prosecutor and gained fame by going after corrupt police officers and politicians. Throughout his tenure, Duterte painted the politicians as corrupt individuals who needed to be rooted out, choosing himself as the man for the job.

Duterte built his image as a hardliner against crime. Local human rights activists claim that Duterte's extrajudicial killing policy started during his second term, somewhere in the mid 1990s.¹¹ While Duterte has no direct link with

⁹ Sources were gathered from PulseAsia Research Inc, Social Weather Stations, The Philippine Statistics Authority and Human Rights Watch.

¹⁰ William Branigin, "Davao Known as Philippines' 'Murder Capital,'" *The Washington Post*, August 08, 1985, accessed August 02, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/08/08/davao-known-as-philippines-murder-capital/ce938055-0f5d-451c-9420-c2da95277dad/?utm_term=.3b2fd053a4af.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, "License to Kill", Human Rights Watch, July 13, 2017, accessed August 02, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/03/02/license-kill/philippine-police-killings-dutertes-war-drugs>.

the vigilante group DDS, he did encourage vigilante killings and bragged about personally killing a drug dealer himself. Moreover, he is known amongst the public as “The Punisher.”¹²

Actions by vigilante groups has led to high casualties among innocent civilians and people with minor criminal offenses.¹³ As a mayor, Duterte has been accused of sanctioning killings against petty criminals, such as a fourteen-year-old boy who stole a cell-phone.¹⁴ On the campaign trail, he presented Davao as an example of how he transformed the “murder capital” into a prospering city, with a rising middle class. He promised to expand the policy he initiated in Davao onto the national stage.¹⁵

Duterte’s policies, however, targeted the poor. Most of the victims of his anti-drug campaign were people in the low-income bracket, as they had the least amount of capital, which translated to a weak ability to influence his campaign.¹⁶ However, drug users come from all economic classes.¹⁷ According to news sources, drug users that were not in the low-income bracket usually got a warning from the police and were not persecuted with the same intensity.¹⁸ This was part of the reason why the middle- and high-income classes supported Duterte, because they received special treatment barred from the poor.¹⁹

Despite Duterte’s war on the poor, he ultimately won the presidency. His faulty human rights record was widely reported by the media. Duterte himself had presented clear intention to continue the drug policy that had harmed the poor as exemplified when he said, “Forget the laws on human rights. If I make

¹² Baldwin, *Reuters*.

¹³ Floyd Whaley, “Rodrigo Duterte’s Talk of Killing Criminals Raises Fears in Philippines,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/18/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines.html>.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *License to Kill*.

¹⁶ Jocelyn R. Uy, “Davao Rich Bankrolled Rody,” *Inquirer News Davao Rich Bankrolled Rody Comments*, June 09, 2016, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/789788/davao-rich-bankrolled-rody>.

¹⁷ Rappler, “EXPLAINER: How Serious Is the PH Drug Problem? Here’s the Data,” *Rappler*, August 27, 2016, accessed April 05, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/144331-data-drug-problem-philippines>.

¹⁸ Baldwin, *Reuters*.

¹⁹ Aries A Arugay, “The Philippines in 2016: The Electoral Earthquake and its Aftershocks,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2017, no. 1 (2017), 287.

it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as mayor”.²⁰ Therefore, it was surprising when Duterte won the presidency and received support from across the entire socioeconomic spectrum. Furthermore, he still remains popular among the poor, even though they are the direct victims of his gruesome anti-drug campaign. In the following sub-section, I discuss how the 2016 presidential election created a condition for Duterte to win by analyzing each candidates’ policy stance and personality traits.

2016 PHILIPPINE ELECTION

The 2016 Philippine election started out with Manuel Amanita Roxas II running against four other candidates: Jejomar C. Binay, Grace Poe, Rodrigo Duterte, and Miriam Defensor-Santiago.²¹ Roxas’ political resume was impeccable. He served in both the Lower House and Upper House, and held cabinet positions in three administrations, including under Benigno Aquino III. He had an Ivy League education and he was handpicked by Aquino III to continue his legacy. Roxas portrayed himself as a reasonable successor to Aquino III and tried to take advantage of the incumbent’s high popularity.²² In early polling, Roxas had high public approval rates and because of Aquino III’s popularity, it seemed that he was going to easily win the election. Roxas also spent the most on campaign advertisements, spending P774 million (\$15 million), and had a vast connection with traditional political powers, such as the Catholic Church.²³ However, Roxas proved to be a bad campaigner. While his performance in presidential debates was strong, he failed to connect with the people at his campaign rallies.²⁴ His close association with Aquino III proved to be a liability, as it meant that he was held accountable for Aquino III’s scandals

²⁰ “Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte in quotes”, *BBC News*.

²¹ Miriam Defensor-Santiago was diagnosed with cancer in 2014. Even though she officially registered as a candidate, she did not campaign much and passed away before the election.

²² Ronald D Holmes, “The Dark Side of Electoralism: Opinion Polls and Voting in the 2016 Philippine Presidential Election,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35.3 (2017), 18.

²³ Arugay, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 281; The Manila Times, “Roxas Top Ad Spender,” The Manila Times Online, January 05, 2016, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://www.manilatimes.net/roxas-top-ad-spender/237958/>.

²⁴ Holmes, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31.

as well.²⁵ He started to slip in the polls as he championed to continue Aquino III's legacy.²⁶

As Roxas's support started to decline, other candidates were eager to capitalize on the fact but they found themselves also engulfed in scandals. Binay quickly gained traction among lower-income people with his pro-poor populist agendas, but was swept away by numerous allegations of corruption. One allegation involved his son who became the subject of a government investigation due to an accusation that he purposely overpriced a public project in Makati City.²⁷ As media reports piled on, Binay had a difficult time fending off these corruption charges and thus spent most of his campaign defending his son and his actions rather than promoting his agendas. Another candidate, Grace Poe, was also caught up in scandal. She enjoyed relatively high support among Filipinos but the issue of her citizenship became a big obstacle, going all the way to the Supreme Court.²⁸ The Supreme Court upheld Poe's case in March 2016, but by that time many Filipinos questioned Poe's qualification to be president.

Rodrigo Duterte entered the presidential race late and even when he did, he was not seen as a serious contender. However, by early 2016, the polls started to shift in his favor.²⁹ Duterte built his political career outside of Manila and became the first president to be from a Mindanao island.³⁰ Instead of relying on traditional sources of political power during his campaign for money and public influence such as local elites and the Catholic Church, he organized a grassroots campaign fueled by volunteers and active social media users.³¹ He stood out against the other candidates, who were viewed as traditional elite

²⁵ Aquino III's most controversial scandal was the Priority Development Assistant Funds scam, also known as the pork barrel scandal, that involved twenty-eight members of Congress. However, the administration only investigated those who were his political enemies, which led the public to believe that he was using this scam to rid of opposition legislators instead of coming up with meaningful reforms.

²⁶ Holmes, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31-32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁸ She became an American citizen in 2001 and renounced her U.S. citizenship in 2010. However, the Philippines has a 10-year continuous residency requirement to be a president.

²⁹ Holmes, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 21.

³⁰ Mindanao island is the poorest island in the Philippines, with poverty incidence rate above 35 percent. All of the past presidents in Fifth Republic of the Philippines were either born in Manila or from wealthier regions in the country.

³¹ Arugay, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 286.

politicians. Duterte took advantage of that sentiment and soon turned around the entire 2016 election by inserting himself center-stage. While other candidates struggled to find a good campaign message, Duterte's campaign platform was simple: drugs, drugs, drugs. His strong message to eliminate the prevalence of drugs in the Philippine by using the same method he used in Davao was influential among many people, especially towards the people in the low-income bracket who were victims of illegal drug trade.³² Duterte's stark remarks towards the United States made many nationalists happy and his call for federalism resonated with those outside of Manila, especially the poor. Duterte's populist campaign style and rhetoric was also favored by the poor. He constantly attacked traditional "elite" politicians by saying they were out of touch with common people and did not shy away from using swear words to criticize them, earning him the nickname, "trash-talking mayor".³³

Despite the late start in the presidential race, harsh rhetoric, and a dismal human rights record against the poor, Duterte gained support from all socioeconomic spectrum and won the election.³⁴ He has kept true to his campaign pledge by expanding the war on drugs, resulting in 120,000 dead low-income citizens. However, Duterte's approval rating among the poor is high at a consistent figure above 70 percent.³⁵ If his anti-drug policy is particularly harmful towards the poor, then why are they still supporting him?

II. ECONOMIC ARGUMENT

Scholars, such as Eric Vincent Batalla and some Western journalists have claimed that Duterte remains popular among the poor because of his populist

³² Nicole Curato, "Politics of anxiety, politics of hope: penal populism and Duterte's rise to power," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2017), 99.

³³ Duncan McCargo, "Duterte's mediated populism," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2016), 188.

³⁴ PulseAsia, "April 2016 Nationwide Survey on the May 2016 Elections," Pulse Asia Research Inc., April 26, 2016. Accessed March 28, 2018. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3b9qPFV1cRDUG5WanNMbFE4bFk/view>.

³⁵ Pulse Asia, "December 2017 Nationwide Survey on the Performance and Trust Ratings of the Top Philippine Government Officials and Key Government Institutions," Pulse Asia Research Inc., December 2017. Accessed March 29, 2018. <http://www.pulseasia.ph/pulse-asia-researchs-december-2017-nationwide-survey-on-the-performance-and-trust-ratings-of-the-top-philippine-government-officials-and-key-government-institutions/>.

economic agenda.³⁶ When examining the Philippine economy by using GDP growth, the state of the economy seems strong. The country's GDP has grown steadily at an average rate of 4.7 percent a year since 1992, and under Aquino III in particular, the average yearly GDP growth was 6.1 percent.³⁷ During Aquino III's administration, the country's score on the Corruption Perception Index has improved, along with its credit ratings, which led to an increase in foreign investment.³⁸ Despite the growing economy, Aquino III did not go far enough to address the poverty issue in the Philippine. While the poverty level has gone down, it has only decreased by two percent during his term and has not followed the general booming economic trend.³⁹ Even though the country has elected populist candidates before, such as Joseph Estrada, and reformists, such as Arroyo, all of them have failed to deliver their campaign promises of major reform. Aquino III was elected on a promise to lead a clean government, and through clean governance, his administration was going to be more efficient at reducing poverty.⁴⁰ His good governance strategy did not succeed, as his administration got caught up in numerous scandals and the poverty level has remained the same. With that broken promise, the poor turned towards Duterte, a strongman candidate who was outside the traditional political dynasty, which meant that he was less likely to be swayed by big business donors. Duterte was the poor's last hope to root out massive corruption in the government and implement his pro-poor economic agenda. Even though he never outlined the specific details of his economic policy, the poor believed that because of his background and connection with the poor, he would naturally lean toward an economic policy that was more favorable to the poor.⁴¹

³⁶ Eric Vincent C Batalla, "Divided Politics and Economic Growth in the Philippines," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35 (2016), 161; Richard C. Paddock, "Becoming Duterte: The Making of a Philippine Strongman," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2017, accessed March 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-president-strongman.html>; McCargo, *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 186.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁸ Maria Elissa Jayme Lao, "The Philippines in 2015: Slowly, on the Straight and Narrow," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2016), 267.

³⁹ Batalla, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 164.

⁴⁰ Teehankee, *Journal of Developing Societies*, 305.

⁴¹ McCargo, *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 186-187.

The problem with the economic argument is threefold. First, the economy was not the main focus of Duterte's campaign. His focus was on eliminating drugs and rooting out government nepotism. Duterte often linked illegal drug trade and use as an economic issue. When asked about his economic platform as a candidate, he said, "Before a city or province can really prosper, you have to establish order. So that the investors would be coming in, comfortable in their thoughts that there would be no corruption, that they are safe, and that their businesses will prosper".⁴² Duterte's rhetoric was that by killing off drug dealers, putting away drug users, and cracking down on illegal drug trade, small businesses could operate free from fear, leading to increase in foreign investment.⁴³ Duterte also shifted the political conversation to drugs and crime, which was part of his campaign strategy. Before he entered the race, the majority of Filipinos were concerned about the inflation, jobs, and healthcare.⁴⁴ A few months after Duterte had entered the race, he successfully shifted the people's attention to rising crime and drugs.⁴⁵ Second, when he did release his economic plan, it was vague and similar to the incumbent's policy. The very first point in his 10-point socioeconomic agenda was, "continue and maintain current macroeconomic policies, including fiscal, monetary, and trade policies".⁴⁶ Duterte wanted to continue Aquino III's economic policy, and his other nine points were not typical of a radical populist agenda. He called for an increase in foreign investment, free trade, and increased infrastructure spending. Some of his points did call for a fairer tax code and a better social safety net, but his policies lacked detail and were not that different from other candidates' economic platforms.⁴⁷ Third, there already was a populist presidential candidate who advocated for major economic reform and whose campaign promised more economic benefit for the poor, Jejomar Binay. He was known for his advocacy of welfare policies, such as free health care and his effort to eliminate income taxes for

⁴² Pia Ranada, "Duterte to Businessmen: Davao City Is My Exhibit A," Rappler, January 14, 2016, accessed April 11, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2016/119074-rodrigo-duterte-davao-city-exhibit-a>.

⁴³ Curato, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁶ GMA News and Public Affairs, "Duterte's economic team reveals 10-point socioeconomic agenda," GMA News Online, June 20, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/money/economy/570703/duterte-s-economic-team-reveals-10-point-socioeconomic-agenda/story/>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

low paid workers.⁴⁸ He was known by the public for his pro-poor agenda while Duterte was primarily known for cracking down on drug dealers and users. Even though Binay was never popular among middle- to high-income earners, he remained popular among the poor until the very end of his term.⁴⁹ If low-income wage earners had supported candidates just based on their economic agenda, Duterte should not have enjoyed strong support from the poor.

III. DRUGS, RISE OF NATIONALISM, AND FEDERALISM

To explain Duterte's popularity among the poor, we must look at other factors besides his economic agenda, which is not that much different from the previous administration. In this section, I discuss Duterte's drug policy, nationalist sentiment, and the Philippine unitary government that is unfavorable for the poor, to explain his popularity.

I argue that Duterte is popular among the poor because of his willingness to crack down on drug dealers and users, unlike any other presidents before him. As previously mentioned, Duterte never tried to hide his poor human rights records, and the Philippine media widely reported on his controversial anti-drug policy. He even encouraged violence when he campaigned around Manila's Tondo slums as illustrated when he said, "If you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself as getting their parents to do it would be too painful".⁵⁰ Even though his rhetorical style was unconventional, it managed to get his political message across to many voters. He had a passionate dislike of drugs, and many Filipinos believed that he would follow through because of his work in Davao. Those in the low-income bracket knew that there was going to be an increase in random searches by the police, as well as more law enforcement presence. However, many Filipinos, including the poor, approved of his anti-drug policy because of their personal experiences with drugs, and the negative impact drugs had on their families and communities.⁵¹ They recognized that illegal drugs were a serious problem and a contributor to the continuous cycle of poverty. Other

⁴⁸ Nicole Curato, "Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 1 (2016), 3.

⁴⁹ Arugay, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 281.

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch, *License to Kill*

⁵¹ *Arugay, Southeast Asian Affairs*, 287.

presidents before Duterte did not use as many resources and political capital to combat drug use.

Even though crime in general was trending downward, Duterte greatly exaggerated drugs and crime data to stoke fear among the public.⁵² This fear-driven method worked well amongst middle- and high-income earners. Under Aquino III's administration, crime rate decreased more than 20 percent but the crime level was still higher than its surrounding neighbors, such as Thailand and Cambodia.⁵³ The low-income voters were willing to give up their civil rights in exchange for security, which they viewed as a critical stepping stone out of poverty.⁵⁴ With other candidates, they were not willing to make such a compromise. Duterte, however, received the votes of the poor because he painted the picture of an imminent breakdown of society due to drugs, and presented himself as the only leader who could prevent it. This dichotomous rhetoric was what kept Duterte popular and it is also the reason why he still is. Moreover, many Filipinos welcomed his strong rhetoric because they thought that he was going to strike fear into drug dealers and force them to come out from the shadows.⁵⁵ For Western readers, it is difficult to imagine anyone trading away his or her own fundamental human rights in exchange for security. However, human rights in the Philippine do not enjoy the same status they do in more advanced liberal democratic countries. Human rights are viewed as a right for those who can afford them.⁵⁶ Given the ubiquity of this notion among the poor, they presumed they would not lose much by supporting Duterte for president. The poor never enjoyed the same political and civil rights as those in middle- and high-income brackets, but what they lacked was security.⁵⁷

Duterte also remains popular among the poor because of the rise of nationalism across the Philippine and his ability to use that nationalist sentiment to rewrite the Philippine foreign policy playbook. The recent resurgence of nationalism

⁵² Curato, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 100.

⁵³ Baldwin, *Reuters*; Nation Master, "Countries Compared by Crime Crime Levels. International Statistics," NationMaster.com, accessed March 29, 2018, <http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/stats/Crime/Crime-levels>.

⁵⁴ Arugay, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 288.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁵⁶ Carolina G Hernandez, "The Philippines in 2016," *Asian Survey* 57, no. 1 (2017), 139.

⁵⁷ Pauline Eadie, "The Philippines, Duterte, and the Undeserving Poor," IAPS Dialogue: The Online Magazine of the Institute of Asia & Pacific Studies, April 03, 2017, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://iapsdialogue.org/2017/02/21/the-philippines-duterte-and-the-undeserving-poor/>.

had been brewing among many Filipinos for some time.⁵⁸ The history of the Philippine is heavily riddled with domination by colonial powers. Filipinos had to live under Spanish rule, then became an American colony, and during WWII, were subjugated by imperial Japan. After gaining independence, many Filipinos rightly felt that they were still under the heavy influence of the United States. The former colonizer has dictated many of the Philippine's foreign policy stances and even domestic economic policies.⁵⁹ Past presidents, such as Fidel Ramos, Corazon Aquino, and even Ferdinand E. Marcos pursued economic and foreign policy agendas that were friendly to the U.S. To this day, there are U.S. naval bases in the Philippine despite the efforts of previous Filipino politicians to get rid of them.⁶⁰ However, with recent aggression from China, specifically ignoring the United Nations rulings and building man made islands in the South China Sea, Aquino III's administration accepted a new military agreement with the United States that leaned in favor of U.S. interests.⁶¹ Many Filipinos long to be fully independent from foreign influence and they view continued American military presence as unfair and humiliating to their country.⁶² Enter Duterte.

Duterte ran an anti-foreign influence campaign, which appealed to the public. At one point, he publicly showed contempt towards the U.N. and the U.S. by calling then-President Obama, a "son of a bitch."⁶³ He voiced support for separating from the U.S. both economically and militarily by railing against EDCA and making \$24 billion worth of funding and investment deals with China.⁶⁴ When the U.N. accused the administration of violating basic human rights on the basis of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which

⁵⁸ Julio C Teehankee, "Duterte's Resurgent Nationalism in the Philippines: A Discursive Institutional Analysis," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2017), 71.

⁵⁹ Julio C Teehankee, "Duterte's Resurgent Nationalism in the Philippines: A Discursive Institutional Analysis," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2017), 72-73.

⁶⁰ Emily Rauhala, "With China pressing south, U.S. ships return to the Philippines' Subic Bay," *The Washington Post*, May 06, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/with-china-pressing-south-us-ships-return-to-the-philippines-subic-bay/2016/05/05/6ce6750a-1139-11e6-a9b5-bf703a5a7191_story.html?utm_term=.339dfce05e85.

⁶¹ The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) gives the U.S. military access to five Philippine bases and the U.S. can build their own facilities as well.

⁶² Teehankee, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 83-85.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch, *License to Kill*.

⁶⁴ Arugay, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 289-290.

the Philippine signed in 1986, Duterte responded by threatening to leave the U.N. ⁶⁵He said, “I will prove to the world that you are a very stupid expert.”⁶⁶ Many Filipinos do not see his rhetoric as degrading towards the country’s international standing. Instead, they are view it as standing up to American imperialism and powerful international organizations.⁶⁷ As of 2018, Duterte has not visited the United States, nor has he shown any interest in doing so. Instead, Duterte has forged an independent foreign policy strategy.

As part of that new strategy, Duterte began a pivot toward China, a radical break with decades of pro-U.S. policies.⁶⁸ Throughout the campaign, he regularly disagreed with mainstream foreign policy experts and other presidential candidates by signaling his intent to forge closer ties with China while keeping them at bay in the South China Sea.⁶⁹ By doing this, Duterte showed to Filipinos, the Chinese and the world that he was not going to be held hostage by the status quo. Instead, the Philippine was going to pursue its own independent foreign policy, free from American influence or that of any other foreign power. He demonstrated his willingness to have an independent foreign policy by visiting China in 2016, where he announced closer economic ties with China.⁷⁰ After this highly publicized meeting, Chinese authorities granted Filipino fishing boats rights to catch fish in the disputed sea area, which satisfied nationalists who wanted better, but perhaps not cosy relations with China.⁷¹ According to recent polling data from Social Weather Stations, Duterte secured a 15 point increase in foreign relations approval ratings among low-income Filipinos between September 2017 and December 2017.⁷² In that period, Duterte announced a major investment deal with China in

⁶⁵ Karen Lema and Manuel Mogato, “Philippines’ Duterte threatens to quit U.N. after drugs war censure,” Reuters, August 21, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-duterte-un-idUSKCN10W05W>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Teehankee, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 82.

⁶⁸ Arugay, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 290.

⁶⁹ Germelina Lacorte, “Duterte Tells China: Build Us a Railway and Let’s Set aside Differences for a While,” Inquirer Global Nation Duterte Tells China Build Us a Railway and Lets Set aside Differences for a While Comments, February 26, 2016, accessed March 29, 2018, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/137093/duterte-tells-china-build-us-a-railway-and-lets-set-aside-differences-for-a-while>.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 290.

⁷¹ Ibid., 290; Lacorte, Inquirer Global Nation; Teehankee, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 85.

⁷² Social Weather Stations, “Fourth Quarter 2017 Social Weather Survey: Net Satisfaction Rating

the Philippine telecommunication market and met with President Trump during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.⁷³ His aggressive effort to have an autonomous foreign policy is a welcome sign for many Filipinos, especially the poor.

Duterte also enjoys high popularity among the poor because of his advocacy for federalism, which will devolve power from the capital city, Manila. The idea of Filipino federalism is not new. When the constitution for the First Republic was being drafted there were calls to divide up the country into three to ten federal states.⁷⁴ Support for federalism was popular among Filipinos because the country is made up of several big islands. Giving more power to federal states would have made governing more localized. However, because of the impending fight with the Americans, people agreed that unifying the country was crucial. This led to many resources and power being concentrated to the area around the capital city.⁷⁵ In 1935, a new constitution was drafted when the Philippine became a commonwealth of the United States. Naturally, the new constitution was modeled after the American one, with a few key differences such as a unitary system of government, as opposed to the federal system of the U.S.⁷⁶ The new constitution further concentrated power in Manila and in the central government, instead of providing more local autonomy. After Marcos' ouster from the Presidency in 1986, the new government formed a commission to draft a new constitution. This was the last time the Philippine could have adopted federalism, but those who wanted major reforms failed to get their voices heard. There were other prevailing issues such as land reform, military

of the Duterte National Administration Rises to Record-high "Excellent" 70," Social Weather Stations, January 17, 2018, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20180117160545>.

⁷³ Andreo Calozzo, "Duterte Invites China to Enter Philippine Mobile-Phone Market," Bloomberg.com, November 20, 2017, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-20/duterte-invites-china-to-enter-philippine-mobile-phone-market>; Richard C. Paddock and Felipe Villamor, "Duterte Warms to Trump, but Keeps His Focus on China," The New York Times, November 12, 2017, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/12/world/asia/trump-duterte-philippines-killing.html>.

⁷⁴ Elyzabeth F Cureg, and Jennifer F. Matunding. "Federalism Initiatives in the Philippines", 178.

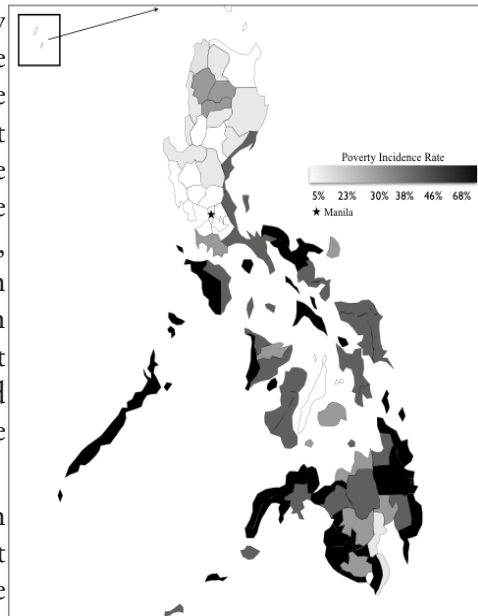
⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

base rights, and presidential emergency powers.⁷⁷ The newly drafted constitution ended up being similar to the 1935 version, but the issue of federalism did not fade away among Filipinos. In 1991, Congress passed the Local Government Code, which was supposed to expand the authority of local governments, but its implementation has been mediocre.⁷⁸ This attempt to decentralize did not work, as local governments still lacked resources and had little say in tax collection.

The idea of federalism is especially popular among the lower classes because they see it as the right path to bridge the income gap. Stronger local government would be able to distribute resources more effectively across the country and improve transportations and education systems, resulting in significant benefits for those in the low-income bracket.⁷⁹ A federal system would also allow local governments to enact their own tax code without being required to give up most of their resources to the central government.⁸⁰

The issue of unequal wealth distribution becomes clear from the fact that the majority of poor Filipinos live outside of the Manila region (see Figure 1).⁸¹ Because of the extreme wealth gap, people living outside of the capital region call the central government, “imperial Manila.”⁸² This illustrates the disconnect



⁷⁷ Ibid., 180.

⁷⁸ Timberman, *Journal of Democracy*, 138.

⁷⁹ Jose V Abueva, “Towards a Federal Republic of the Philippines,” *Journal of the Integrated Bar of the Philippines* 27 (2001), 1.

⁸⁰ Marlon Ramos, “Only federalism will bring lasting peace, says Duterte,” *Inquirer News Only federalism will bring lasting peace says Duterte Comments*, November 30, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/849221/only-federalism-will-bring-lasting-peace-says-duterte>.

⁸¹ Cai U. Ordinario, “MAP: The poorest provinces in PH,” *Rappler*, September 25, 2013, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/business/27276-poorest-provinces-philippines>.

⁸² Gideon Lasco, “Imperial Manila,” *Inquirer Opinion Imperial Manila Comments*, December

between the central government and the problems of the poor. Having been a mayor of Davao, which is located at the poorer southern end of the Philippine, Duterte knows personally the disadvantage of the current unitary form of government. He has publicly endorsed federalism on the campaign trail and promoted it as a way to reduce poverty.⁸³ For low-income Filipino's, Duterte's unapologetic endorsement of federalism was a welcome change from traditional candidates who did not specifically address a major change in government structure. Duterte was viewed as a true anti-establishment candidate who could bring real change. He invoked "imperial Manila" during campaign speeches when he said, "It [a unitary system] is an excuse for them to hang onto power in Imperial Manila. They have always been there in one single office, running the Philippine".⁸⁴ Duterte also built his political career outside of Manila, while all past presidents and most presidential candidates started their political career in the capital and this background made his statement on federalism all the more authentic in the eyes of the poor. He was not pushing for federalism just to gain votes, but because he knew the pain inflicted by unitary system and genuinely wanted to enact change. His public statements on the current form of government resonated with the sentiment of Filipinos living in poverty. Duterte never released a detailed economic plan, but proposed federalism as a plan to deviate from the status quo and spread wealth across the country. Even though many candidates offered change from the status quo, Duterte was the only one who called for a radical shift to federalism in order to bridge the ever-widening income gap.

IV. CONCLUSION

Duterte remains popular among low-income Filipinos because of his anti-drug policy, strong nationalist sentiment, and his advocacy for federalism. Even though it is mostly the poor that are being deprived of their fundamental human

28, 2015, accessed March 29, 2018, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/91545/imperial-manila>.

⁸³ Pia Ranada, "Duterte: Federalism allows regions to keep most of their income," Rappler, March 07, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2016/124985-duterte-federalism-regions-income>.

⁸⁴ Agence France-Presse, "Duterte looking to destroy 'Imperial Manila'," Inquirer News Duterte looking to destroy Imperial Manila Comments, June 28, 2016, accessed August 02, 2017, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/792839/duterte-looking-to-destroy-imperial-manila>.

rights, to them, human rights are a luxury that they cannot afford. Another notion that the poor find appealing is that the Philippine, under federalism, will witness the spread of wealth across the country instead of having resources concentrated around Manila. Although many candidates have called for federalism in the past, Duterte was the only one who strongly advocated for it in the 2016 election. The Philippine has a long history of being colonized by foreign powers and even today many feel that the U.S. has too much influence over the country. Duterte's stance against the U.S. and the U.N. shows that he is willing to stand up for the interests of the Philippine. He is viewed as a true anti-imperialist. Duterte's political style, which called for governance with discipline was also popular among the poor because they were tired of seeing corrupt elite politicians staying in office. Duterte delivered an effective campaign message to bring back order and eliminate drugs. Even though the people in low-income brackets were going to be affected the most by human rights violations, drug use was a problem for them too. Duterte's strong energy and determination continues to pay off, as he manages to get approval ratings of 78 percent among the people below the poverty line while bodies of dead drug users are being laid out in the slums. The United States, the United Nations, and the Government of the Philippine should not stand idle while Duterte is implementing his controversial anti-drug policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U.S., THE U.N. AND THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT

The international community should put pressure on Duterte's administration to be more transparent about his drug war and urge him to end it. Imposing economic sanctions on the Philippine will only backfire, as it would hurt working-class Filipinos, especially the poor. Recognizing Duterte's stance on drugs as one of the reasons he remains popular and knowing that the common perception in the Philippine is that human rights are luxury rights, the international community should not enact sanctions that will hurt working-class Filipinos. These policies would only persuade workers to support Duterte. Therefore, more targeted sanctions and policies should be implemented.

First, the U.S. State Department and the Treasury Department should work together to come up with a list of the names of those who hold high positions in Duterte's administration. Those individuals would include some military officers and government officials who have links to the anti-drug campaign, such as the chief of the Philippine National Police, Ronald dela Rosa. The list should also

include those who have significant financial connections to Duterte. With that set of names, the State Department and the Treasury Department can enact targeted sanctions and freeze their assets. The sanctions should remain in place until Duterte recognizes that his drug policy is unsustainable and starts to roll back his policy. Second, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) should cease military training exercises with the Filipino army or ban officers who are tied to the drug war from participating in those exercises. The DOD should also restrict sales of arms and military hardware to the Philippine because the equipment can be used to aid Duterte's drug war.⁸⁵ The DOD and the Philippine armed forces have a close relationship, and pressure from the DOD could make Philippine military personnel less inclined to participate in Duterte's drug war. Third, the U.N. Human Rights Council should open up an investigation on Duterte's drug war. However, this seems very unlikely since the Philippine is on the Human Rights Council.⁸⁶ Also, any investigation by the U.N. will be seen as foreign political influence by the Filipinos.

There should also be a domestic effort to investigate the president. The Philippine Congress should open their own investigation into Duterte and his anti-drug policy, which has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings. First, they should hold hearings and start collecting data and statements from victims' families. They should also pressure the Department of Justice to nominate an independent prosecutor with no ties to the administration to start building a case against those who are linked to extrajudicial killings. The police chief should be the main focus of the investigation because he has most likely sanctioned these killings. By going after high officials, more government functionaries might come forward with information in exchange for reduced or no jail time. To effectively gather testimonies from the victims' families and government officials, the Department of Justice should offer a witness protection program.

⁸⁵ The U.S. provided \$127 million worth of military aid to the Philippines armed forces in 2016, which was part of the EDCA. This aid package included small arms sales, which were used in Duterte's war on drugs. For more detail, see Manuel Mogato, "As Alliance Wavers, U.S. Says Gave Philippines Big Annual Defense Aid Boost," Reuters, December 23, 2016, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-usa/as-alliance-wavers-u-s-says-gave-philippines-big-annual-defense-aid-boost-idUSKBN14C0QA>.

⁸⁶ Unlike the Security Council, each member in Human Rights Council has equal voting power. Since many nations in the council has faulty human rights record, such as the Philippines and China, it is unlikely the council will pass a resolution to investigate Duterte.

Duterte's staunch critics in the Senate, including journalists, are afraid to go after him because of his threat of government investigation against them.⁸⁷ By gathering testimonies and data, Congress can build a case for an impeachment, if there is a case to argue that Duterte has committed an impeachable offense. Even if he does not get impeached, once out of office, he can be tried as a civilian at a later time. In the end, he needs to be held accountable. Second, the Philippine Ombudsman Office should also investigate the police, military, and government officials who are linked to extrajudicial killings. If the Ombudsman Office wants to show that human rights are not just reserved for the rich, they should start prosecuting human rights abusers regardless of their level of income. Also, if the Department of Justice offers a proper witness protection program, the Ombudsman Office can start a public awareness campaign to encourage the victims' friends and families to come forward and report on government abuses.⁸⁸ After Duterte's presidency ends, the Philippine Congress, Department of Justice, and the Ombudsman Office can work together to bring a case against him. If Duterte and his allies go unpunished, future presidents will follow Duterte's precedent and grotesquely abuse their power. Third, Congress can pass legislation to put more funds into drug treatment centers and harm reduction services. By increasing funds to drug treatment centers, Congress is providing a long-term solution to curb drug usage. Congress can also invest more funds into the prison system, which badly needs expansion due to overcrowding. While this solution does not address Duterte's drug war directly, prison conditions in the Philippines are unacceptable, with local prisons ranking as third most overcrowded in the world.⁸⁹ Since Duterte took office, the number of prisoners has only increased. The current prison conditions are inhumane and Congress should lead their reform.

The concern is that Rodrigo Duterte will enter history books as an unpunished individual. He might have earned enough votes to be the president, but that should not exempt him from crimes against humanity. The U.S. State, Treasury, and Defense Departments should target specific individuals who are tied to extrajudicial killings. The Philippine Congress should work alongside the Department of Justice and the Ombudsman Office to build a future case against

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch, License to Kill.

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch, License to Kill.

⁸⁹ Andrew R.C. Marshall, "Philippines drug war turns a teeming jail into a haven," Reuters, November 08, 2016, accessed July 30, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-drugs-prison-idUSKBN13320W>.

Duterte so when the day comes to arrest him, the facts will overwhelm the public's opinion. By showing that human rights apply to everyone and that human rights abusers are punished with the same seriousness as for any other crimes, the Filipino public will have more faith in human rights, and will think twice before electing a leader with a poor human rights record.

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