

MARCH 2019

SPARK[®]

the key link between IDEAS and ACTION

QUARTERLY
PUBLICATION
OF THE
ADRIInstitute

THE 2019 ELECTIONS:

DEMOCRACY,
DUTERTISMO,
AND THE
BATTLE

FOR
SUCCESSION

adrinstitute.org

THE 2019 ELECTIONS:

DEMOCRACY, DUTERTISMO AND THE BATTLE FOR SUCCESSION

The paper discusses the dynamics as well as the broader relevance of the Philippines's 2019 midterm elections. It argues that the upcoming elections are the most important in the country's history for two interrelated reasons. First, it will be the largest and most expensive in Philippine history, with more than 50 million voters expected to participate. And it's taking place amid a period of intensified structural transition, as the country seeks to cope with unique 21st century challenges, both endogenously (think of demographic summer and infrastructure deficit) and exogenously (think of Sino-American trade war), and take advantage of renewed opportunities as one of the brightest stars in the emerging markets. Second, the mid-term elections serve as a de facto referendum on Rodrigo Duterte's presidency, which has been unorthodox, disruptive, and at times even innovative. Amid widespread extrajudicial killings and systematic assault on the country's democratic checks and balances, the opposition hopes to mobilize opposition to what they view as nothing short of a creeping authoritarianism. Thus, Duterte's opponents and critics, including those in the liberal-democratic civil society, Catholic Church, and progressive-leftist circles, hope to check the forward march of "Dutertismo," namely the right-wing populist ideology of the incumbent leadership, which has openly questioned the foundational principles of the post-Marcos Philippine Republic.

Though still largely popular, garnering the highest approval rating by any sitting Filipino president halfway into their term in office, the upcoming elections will largely determine the latter half of his term. As he looks forward to cementing his legacy, Duterte is also looking at having sufficient political capital to push ahead with his consequential legislative agenda, most especially plans to restore death penalty, reduce the age for criminal liability and, above all, amend the Philippine constitution as part of a broader plan to shift the country's political system. Were the president's allies to dominate the upcoming elections, particularly the crucial race in the senate, Duterte will be in a unique position to upend the Philippine political system along his preferences and in his own image for generations to come. The meteoric rise of Bong Go, Duterte's taciturn and previously obscure chief aide and "utility man," poignantly underscores the momentum of the upcoming elections. Almost assured of a seat in Senate, Go is expected to serve as the whip in the senate, a legislative-executive liaison tasked with ensuring that the president's legislative agenda is embraced by majority of senators. Meanwhile, the midterm elections is also turning into a contest for selection of the president's successor, who will protect him from potential political harassment, if not legal prosecution, in the future. So far, his daughter, Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte, has emerged as the heir-apparent and the standard-bearer of the de facto administration party Hugpong ng Pagbabago (HNP). Unless the opposition pulls off an April surprise, the Philippines is heading towards long-term transformation in shadow of Duterte and Dutertismo.



Image credit: rappler.com

The Moment of Truth

“If voting changed anything, they’d make it illegal,” the feminist-anarchist Emma Goldman once memorably said.¹ Her semi-contemporary, Mark Twain, made almost an identical observation, stating, “if voting made any difference, they wouldn’t let us do it.”²

Both of them had ample reasons to be skeptical about the democratic process back then. Goldman, an avowed opponent of centralized authority and oppressive patriarchy, saw in American electoral process the perpetuation of the same patterns of exploitation, where white, privileged men, who were inextricably wed to the logic of retail politics within the framework of Darwinian capitalism, controlled the levers of power.

As the co-author of the *Gilded Age* (1873), Twain was an eloquent chronicler of American oligarchy, where a few conglomerates viciously exploited the working classes and dominated a hopelessly corrupt political system.³ He, nonetheless, underscored the necessity for a vigilant citizenry, since “[n]o country can be well governed unless its citizens as a body keep religiously before their minds that they are the guardians of the law, and that the law officers are only the machinery for its execution, nothing more.” A cursory look at American films, from *Gangs of New York* (starring Leonardo DiCaprio) to *Boardwalk Empire* (starring Steve Buscemi), reveals the utter corruptibility of late-19th century American democracy, where political office was essentially auctioned among mafia groups.

This is relevant, precisely because the foundations of Philippine democracy were laid down by this kind of America,⁴ the so-called “Jacksonian democracy,”⁵ and brutally imposed by marooned soldiers



Image credit: rappler.com

FEATURES

03

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

The upcoming elections in the Philippines will be of a completely different nature: It will be the biggest, most polarized, and arguably the most consequential elections in generations

07

AN ENERVATED OPPOSITION

Duterte, however, still remains highly popular, reflecting growing public tolerance for reassertion of secular authority against traditional centers of power

14

CONCLUSIONS

The upcoming midterm elections are the most important in generations. First of all, they will serve as a barometer of whether Duterte's shocking rise to power was an aberration rather than the upshot of a fundamental shift in Philippine politics

ON THE COVER

Cover, title page and content page :
images from cnnphilippines.com, politics.favradiofm.com/pro-duterte-rally-sa-luneta-hindi-binalita-ng-media/, investvine.com and northboundasia.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard J. Heydarian

is a non-resident fellow at Stratbase ADR Institute, and a columnist for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, and a resident political analyst at GMA Network. He has authored close to 1000 articles on regional security issues, three authored books on geopolitics, and writes widely for regional and international publications. Parts of this paper were drawn from his earlier works for the US-China Focus and Straits Times, where he is a regular contributor.

11

THE HEIR-APPARENT

The fact that the de facto leader of the opposition is the current Philippine Vice President Leni Robredo only reinforces fears of political reprisal



CONTENTS

pervasive cynicism

from largely hillbilly backgrounds. Thus, it's unsurprising to see ubiquitous expressions of hopeless cynicism among many Filipinos, who often dismiss elections as a pointless ritual or an unnecessary hassle. One can repeatedly hear the same refrain: *"Pare parehas lang naman silang lahat, kahit sino ang manalo, ganun pa rin ang politika natin"* (whoever wins, they are all the same and so with our politics). But there are two fundamental problems with such pervasive cynicism and the appeal of a passive disposition.

First of all, cynicism is a recipe for stagnation, if not self-fulfilling disaster. As Theodore Roosevelt eloquently remarked,

*"The poorest way to face life is to face it with a sneer. There are many men who feel a kind of twister pride in cynicism; there are many who confine themselves to criticism of the way others do what they themselves dare not even attempt."*⁶

America eventually became the world's superpower (and still is), precisely because there were enough number of citizens, who discarded self-defeating cynicism in favor of transformative reform. In particular, the American middle class was the force behind the so-called Progressive Era reforms, which upended American politics.⁷

The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act (1883) laid down the foundation of a competent and professionalized civil service, dramatically reducing nepotism and political appointments, which served as a major source of corruption. What followed was a three-decade-long set of reforms, which ended the oligopolistic grip of conglomerates such as Standard Oil and ushered in an era of more widely shared prosperity and equitable democratic participation.

Genuine transformation is often the upshot of stubborn hopefulness, cautious idealism, and anger for justice among the mobilized sections of the society, specifically the politically-active middle class. Moreover, the upcoming elections in the Philippines will be of a completely different nature: It will be the biggest, most polarized, and arguably the most consequential elections in generations, if not the entire Philippine history. As Commission on Elections (COMELEC) spokesman James Jimenez told the author in February, more than 50 million voters are expected to decide the fate of as many as 18,000 posts.⁸

The Last Bulwark

The most important race concerns the Senate, where the soul of the Philippine democracy is at stake. After all, it's the upper house of the legislature that has served as an institutional check, albeit inchoate, on the excesses of the executive. In many ways, it has served as the last (civilian) bulwark against creeping authoritarianism in the country. The Philippine Senate has shut down proposals for constitutional change and proposed laws regarding restoration of death penalty and reduction of the age of criminal liability.

It has also launched several investigations into the ongoing drug war, which has claimed the lives of thousands of suspected drug dealers and user. The Senate has also acted

as a bulwark against unfettered reorientation of Philippine foreign policy, particularly the institutionalization of Beijing-friendly policies, including the entry of Chinese state companies into strategic sectors and critical locations, growing reliance on Chinese-led infrastructure investments for Duterte's "build, build, build" initiative, as well as the influx of Chinese workers and online casinos into the country.

Prominent legislators such as Senator Grace Poe, who is widely expected to top the senate race once again, have openly opposed any Chinese takeover of any "critical and strategic national asset."⁹ In the senator's resolution last month, she said that "there is a need to determine the adequacy of statutory, regulatory, and other legal frameworks for the ownership, control, and management by foreign corporations and entities of strategic industries that are vital for national security, development, and economy such as shipyard facilities," She made it clear that the "security and control over Subic Bay are paramount to the security of the [South China Sea]" and the Philippines' "sovereign rights and jurisdiction" in the contested area.



Image credit: interaksyon.com/breaking-news/2018/07/09/130280/2019-senatorial-elections-preview-magic-12/

Meanwhile, Senator Emmanuel Joel Villanueva, former chief of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), who is widely seen as aligned to the administration, has led investigations into the influx of Chinese laborers into the country. “This is a matter of enforcing our own rules and regulations, not just for the protection of jobs for Filipinos, but also the protection of the rights of the workers regardless of nationality,”¹⁰ the senator, who leads the labor committee in the upper house, said during his late-February hearing, (Villanueva ran and almost topped the Senate race in 2016 on a campaign vow to facilitate more training and create more jobs for ordinary Filipinos), “If you are illegal, you have no right and you are not protected by laws. So, the bottom line is enforcement of laws to protect workers’ rights and our ‘Filipino First’ policy,” he added.

The independent Senator Panfilo Lacson, an ex-Philippine National Police chief, who is also seen as more aligned to the administration than against, also chimed in that there should be no special treatment for Chinese nationals. “No exception, please—Chinese, Japanese, Americans, even from planet Mars,” he added with a twist on the notion of illegal aliens. “Whatever the president says, I would rather that we give premium to Filipino workers by deporting foreign nationals illegally working here, and worse, taking away scarce job opportunities from our own countrymen,”¹¹ he added.

In early-2019, the Senate went so far as nixing a proposed \$400 million project between internal security agencies, led by the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) and the state-owned China International Telecommunication Construction Corporation (CITCC), for the installation of 12,000 surveillance cameras in major cities, including Metro Manila and Davao. Senate President pro tempore Ralph Recto openly opposed the project on the grounds that it poses “potential risks to national security or public interest,” given how “Chinese companies and individuals have also been allegedly involved in espionage and hacking activities over the recent years.”¹²

And this is precisely why the senate race in the 2019 elections is of paramount importance: Should President Rodrigo Duterte’s henchmen to dominate the race, the administration will be in a unique position to upend our political system for generations to come. Above all, this election is about whether the country wants to stand by its liberal constitutional values or seek to become an “illiberal democracy,” where a popular imperial presidency acts with fiat.

An Enervated Opposition

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte entered 2019 riding high in opinion polls, a surge in popularity that is buoying the electoral prospects of his political allies ahead of crucial mid-term polls later this year. The elections, scheduled for May 13, will serve as a de facto referendum on Duterte’s controversial rule and will

determine the balance of power in the legislature, crucial to advancing the tough-talking leader's agenda for the second half of his six-year term.

Despite another year of fiery rhetoric, including frequent verbal spats with the Catholic Church in the deeply conservative Christian nation and broadsides directed at critics of his policies, Duterte's approval ratings are on an upward trajectory again after falling off last year amid various controversies. This is astonishing, even by Philippine political standards. Without a doubt, Duterte is an unprecedented force of creative disruption, who has upended national and even regional politics. The most shocking aspect of his *novo-politics*, however, is his direct and often personal attacks against the Catholic Church hierarchy. Until recently, many experts would have considered this an act of political *harakiri* (suicide), given the tremendous influence of the religious organization in Philippine history.

Throughout centuries of Spanish imperial rule, the Church was the fulcrum of public life and an anchor of every day governance. The advent of American imperialism hardly changed the equation, since the new colonizers allowed the Catholic hierarchy to maintain much of its land and wealth. The principle of separation of Church and state also meant that the Catholic hierarchy could hold onto their vast resources without any taxation. The Church reached the pinnacle of its power during the 1986 "People Power" revolts against the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship, when the late Cardinal Jaime Sin called on ordinary Filipinos to join anti-regime protests. The Church also played a central role during the second "People Power" revolt in 2001, which deposed the corrupt populist administration of actor-turned-politician Joseph Estrada.

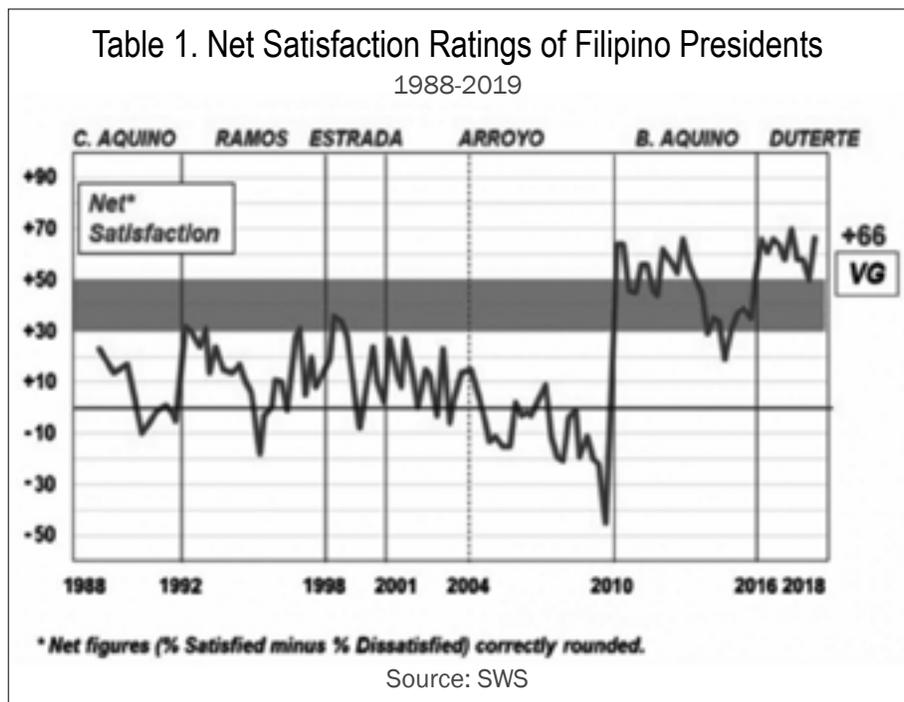
But Duterte has also benefited from some long-term shifts in Philippine socio-political landscape. In the past decade, the influence of the Catholic Church has been on the wane, partly due to the rise of well-organized and politically active evangelist groups that have won the loyalty of millions of 'born again' Filipinos and act as 'swing states' during elections. The Catholic authorities also suffered a political defeat during their showdown over the controversial Reproductive Health (RH) bill, which was passed under the previous administration and sanctioned the state-provision of contraceptives to indigent families.

The episode underscored an emerging schism between former allies, namely the middle class-supported liberal democrats (led by Aquino) and the Church hierarchy, who jointly deposed the Marcos and Estrada presidencies. In a way, Duterte has pushed this burgeoning schism to its logical conclusion, taking on both liberals and the Catholic Church. In fact, Duterte has maintained cordial relations with both former president Estrada and the Marcoses, especially Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son of the former dictator. This is more than just a case of the-enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend political formula. It's almost personal to him. On many occasions, Duterte has claimed that a priest sexually harassed him during his early youth.¹³

He often accuses the Church of lacking the moral ascendancy to preach the Gospel and chide the transgressions of the laymen. In fact, Duterte has challenged both the

ideology of liberal democrats and the catechism of the Church. Duterte's vexation with the Catholic hierarchy intensified amid open spats over his scorched-earth drug war. Catholic priests have accused Duterte of conducting an inhumane campaign, which lacks foresight and Christian spirit of redemptive forgiveness. To Duterte's consternation, the Church has criticized his anti-drug policy as a de facto 'war on the poor,' since the vast majority of drug-related deaths involve the poorest Filipinos. Last December, a visibly exasperated Duterte went so far as declaring, "these bishops – kill them, those fools are good for nothing. All they do is criticize."¹⁴

The Church has criticized his rhetoric, while raising alarm bells over the recent spate of killings targeting priests by unidentified gunmen.¹⁵ Since last year, four priests were killed across the country, some during the performance of the Holy Mass. In response, Archbishop Socrates Villegas urged Duterte to "stop the verbal persecution" against Catholic officials, since these can "unwittingly embolden more crimes against priests." Church leaders have complained that, "they are killing our flock. They are killing us, the shepherds. They are killing our faith. They are cursing our church,"¹⁶ The battle lines are increasingly drawn ahead of the upcoming midterm elections, with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) recently declaring, "we have no intention of interfering in the conduct of State affairs. But neither do we intend to abdicate our sacred mandate to guide the society towards the right path."¹⁷ Archbishop Romulo Valles went so far as calling on devout Catholics to "conquer evil with good," while indirectly warning Duterte that, "the freedom of expression does



not include a license to insult other people's faith, especially our core beliefs." They openly challenged "the direction" of Duterte's drug war, which involves "mostly poor people being brutally murdered on mere suspicion of being small-time drug users and peddlers while the big-time smugglers and drug lords went scot-free."

Duterte, however, still remains highly popular, reflecting growing public tolerance for reassertion of secular authority against traditional centers of power. The Filipino president has also survived other controversies, including rising local and foreign criticism of his "war on drugs" campaign, where thousands of drug suspects have been killed since mid-2016. While the policy has raised international concerns of possible crimes against humanity, including an initial review of the campaign by the International Criminal Court at The Hague, it has resonated among certain local constituencies for its purported tough approach to crime.¹⁸ A survey by local pollster Social Weather Stations (SWS)

conducted between December 16-19, 2018 showed that Duterte has a 74% satisfaction rating, with a "very good" net approval rating of 60%. Those marks were higher than any of his predecessors at this stage of their presidencies.

The survey also marked a six point increase from the previous quarter and brought Duterte's annual average approval rating for 2018 to a respectable 54%, though the rating was five percentage points lower than in 2017. Moreover, Duterte's popularity is rising across all constituencies. This approval rating was up a whopping 22% year on year, in Metro Manila 21% among rich and upper middle classes, and 20% among the poorest classes, the survey showed. His highest approval rating, however, was among college graduates, hitting 65% and marking an 11% increase from the previous quarter. Duterte faces a referendum in better form, at least in terms of approval ratings, than any of his predecessors (See Table 1).

That brought cheer to Duterte's presidential palace. "The palace welcomes the results of the (SWS) survey...These results registered an uptick in all socio-economic classes," presidential spokesman Salvador Panel said in response to the survey. "We thank the Filipino people for their continued support for the president as such only motivates us to unceasingly work harder and serve them better as we aim for the best for the Philippines and its people." A separate survey, conducted in mid-December by Pulse Asia, similarly showed public sentiment swinging in Duterte's favor. It showed his approval ratings were up six points quarter on quarter, reaching a new sky high of 81%.

Historically, Filipino presidents have received a holiday boost at end of the year opinion polls, as Christmas and New Year festivities temporarily soften political divisions. But, there were likely other factors at play in Duterte's new popularity surge, including the public relations coup scored from America's return in December of the iconic Balangiga Bells. Duterte had called strongly and persistently for the return of the bells, which were taken as war booty during America's colonial occupation of the country.

Duterte has also apparently ridden out a surge in inflation that surveys showed were hitting the country's poor—and by association, approval ratings—the hardest. After seven consecutive months of rising inflation, which reached a ten-year high of 6.7% last October, commodity prices have more recently begun to stabilize. After heavy imports of food commodities, which played a major role in the spike in prices of basic goods, inflation eased to 6% in November and is expected to ease to below 5% this year.¹⁹ The president's rising ratings are boosting his political allies, including those running for seats in the 24-member Senate.

Duterte's long-time ally and special assistant Christopher Lawrence "Bong" Go has enjoyed the biggest jump in recent opinion surveys, surging to within striking distance of the 12 seats up for grabs in the senate race ahead of the elections campaign. Go's posters and billboards have recently become ubiquitous across the country, often showing him alongside the president who serves in the portrayals as *tatay* (father) and Go as *kuya* (big brother) of the nation. Recent surveys also show that other key Duterte allies, including former police chief Bato Dela Rosa, Imee Marcos, Koko Pimentel, and Pia Cayetano are also in strong positions to win Senate seats. Meanwhile, the opposition seems to be struggling with limited resources, including lack of volunteers and on-the-ground machinery.²⁰

Courage of Hopelessness

Drawing on Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's poignant insight that "thought is the courage of hopelessness,"²¹ Slavoj Zizek became one of the most ardent supporters of the Syriza movement in Greece. The radical-leftist populist movement, which came to power in 2015 amid the complete societal meltdown

in Greece, desperately sought to save the besieged nation from inter-generational bankruptcy.²²

What was unfolding was nothing short of a Greek tragedy on a national scale. Over the past decade, Greece became arguably the first "First World" country to suffer a tragic descent into "Third World" chaos and despair. Of course, many ridiculed the Syriza-led government's ill-fated efforts to renegotiate the terms of debt-payment with Brussels. And in the end, the forces of status quo triumphed through a humiliating rejection of the Syriza-led government's proposals. The Greek government was forced to painfully abandon²³ its maverick finance minister, the economist-cum-rock star Georgiou "Yanis" Varoufakis, and accept the European Union's harsh terms of payment. But as Zizek points out, it wasn't Syriza's naiveté (and misplaced faith in the better nature of fellow European countries) that was at fault. Instead, it was how the "ruling ideology mobilizes... [an] entire arsenal to prevent us from reaching [any] radical conclusion" to our perennial problems, which transcend orthodox solutions.²⁴

In many ways, a similar situation is taking hold in the Philippines, except the ones in trouble are not only the radical leftists, but also the liberal-democrats. A look at the latest (February 24-28) senatorial race survey,²⁵ the most important in decades, suggests that the opposition (liberal and progressive) might end up getting only one of its bets into office (see table 2). Former presidential candidate Roxas, a multiple-time cabinet secretary and senate race valedictorian, may just have to settle for the last few slots in the "Magic 12", which will

likely be populated by the most controversial figures in political history. The pitiful state of the opposition, so far, reflects the tightening grip of the administration on the Philippine body politic. It also reflects the determination of Duterte to consolidate his legislative agenda and pave the way for a favorable successor, who will protect him and his legacy.

The Heir-Apparent

“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,” William Shakespeare warned²⁶ in Henry IV (1600). Despite his skyrocketing popularity,²⁷ reaching more than 70 % in recent months, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is increasingly finding himself in a perennial dilemma, which haunted many of his predecessors. And that is the prospect of facing political persecution, if not legal prosecution, for real and perceived misdeeds once he leaves office in 2022. Thus, the

forthcoming midterm elections in May are, above all, about the selection of Duterte’s likely successor, who will protect him against the very fate that bedeviled his predecessors.

There are few countries in the world where political transitions are as treacherous for the incumbent president. Over the past two decades, all former Filipino presidents faced imprisonment (Joseph Estrada), protracted pre-trial incarceration (Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo), or the constant threat of criminal investigations and non-stop political harassment (Benigno Aquino). For the past half-a-century, no Filipino president has been able to place his or her

Table 1. Net Satisfaction Ratings of Filipino Presidents
1988-2019

<i>Base: Likely Voters, 100%</i>			
	Aware	Voting for	Rank
POE, GRACE (IND)	99	67.5	1
VILLAR, CYNTHIA (NP)	100	61.0	2
GO, BONG GO (PDPLBN)	96	53.0	3-5
ANGARA, EDGARDO SONNY (LDP)	97	52.2	3-5
LAPID, LITO (NPC)	99	49.0	3-7
CAYETANO, PIA (NP)	95	47.0	5-7
DELA ROSA, BATO (PDPLBN)	98	44.6	5-8
BINAY, NANCY (UNA)	98	40.5	7-10
ROXAS, MAR (LP)	99	39.8	8-12
BONG REVILLA, RAMON JR. (LAKAS)	96	36.8	8-13
MARCOS, IMEE (NP)	96	36.0	9-14
PIMENTEL, KOKO (PDPLBN)	94	35.6	9-14
ESTRADA, JINGGOY (PMP)	98	33.9	10-15
TOLENTINO, FRANCIS (PDPLBN)	87	32.1	11-15
AQUINO, BENIGNO BAM (LP)	95	30.4	13-17
EJERCITO, ESTRADA JV (NPC)	96	27.6	15-18
OSMEÑA, SERGE (IND)	93	26.7	15-18
ENRILE, JUAN PONCE (PMP)	97	25.2	16-18
MANGUDADATU, DONG (PDPLBN)	52	12.5	19-21
MANICAD, JIGGY (IND)	61	11.9	19-22
COLMENARES, NERI (MKBYN)	62	9.7	19-23
ONG, DOC WILLIE (LAKAS)	51	9.1	20-25
AGUILAR, FREDDIE (IND)	89	7.3	21-27
DIOKNO, CHEL (LP)	39	6.9	22-27

Source: Pulse Asia

anointed successor in power. This is fundamentally because of the high anti-incumbency bias of Philippine electorate during each presidential elections,²⁸ whereby the voters tend to wildly swing between opposite types of statesmen. This partly explains why, for instance, the Southeast Asian country has seen on almost cyclical shift between two types of leaders, namely technocratic-reformists and populist-strongmen, in its contemporary history.²⁹

Among all contemporary Filipino presidents, Duterte seems most vulnerable to political reprisal, if not legal punishment, once he steps down from power. Though the Philippines recently withdrew its membership³⁰ (March 17) from the International Criminal Court (ICC), senior officials could still face, under Article 127.2 of the Rome Statute, investigations

and potential prosecution amid the reported death of thousands of suspected drug dealers under Duterte's scorched earth drug war.³¹ The ICC applied the same rule when Burundi became the first country to withdraw from the ICC amid an ongoing investigation into charges of crimes against humanity.

Duterte's authoritarian ways, including imprisonment³² (De Lima), or threat of (Trillanes),³³ opposition senators and the ongoing crackdown on hostile media outlets and personalities, has crystallized a determined opposition,³⁴ which is composed of liberal politicians, human rights activists, Catholic Church leaders, and progressive groups. Theoretically, the opposition can tap into the anti-



Image credit: filipinotimes.net/news/2019/02/19/sara-duterte-declines-possible-presidential-run-2021/

incumbency bias of the electorate in the next presidential cycle. This opens the possibility for a hostile successor, who could not only rescind the Philippines' withdrawal from the ICC, but also abet investigations and, even, potential prosecution of officials in the Duterte administration.

The fact that the de facto leader of the opposition is the current Philippine Vice President Leni Robredo only reinforces fears of political reprisal. Robredo could run for the top office down the road and will constitutionally replace Duterte under extreme circumstances, including incapacity or extra-constitutional displacement of the incumbent, as was the case in 1986 (against Ferdinand Marcos) and 2011 (against Joseph Estrada).

This is why it's crucial for Duterte to cement an imperial presidency and, accordingly, lay down the foundation for a favorable political transition once he steps down from office in 2022.

By all accounts, Duterte's allies are set to dominate the forthcoming elections. This is no surprise since historically administration bets leverage the president's popularity as well as the vast apparatus of the state to edge out the opposition. The midterm elections, so far, has created two major winners. One is Duterte's longtime chief aide, Bong Go, who experienced a meteoric rise in the survey rankings. From virtual obscurity back in 2016, he is now among the top three candidates for the 12 Senate seats up for grabs. Go's rise epitomizes Duterte's power, determination to ensure long-term protection, as well as, viability of his political project.

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, DUTERTE'S ALLIES ARE SET TO DOMINATE THE FORTHCOMING ELECTIONS. THIS IS NO SURPRISE SINCE HISTORICALLY ADMINISTRATION BETS LEVERAGE THE PRESIDENT'S POPULARITY AS WELL AS THE VAST APPARATUS OF THE STATE TO EDGE OUT THE OPPOSITION.

The former presidential aide's transformation began early last year, launching his de facto senate campaign ahead of everyone else.³⁵ Within a short span, the camera-shy, taciturn courtier turned into a media-savvy budding politician attended several radio interviews within few days. In January, his team released a series of pictures depicting Go riding a jetski and rescuing troubled residents after Tropical Storm Vinta hit his hometown of Davao. What followed were a deluge of his pictures across social media, depicting the presidential aide providing assistance to citizens in need across the country. Go, in a Duterte-style fashion, promised to bring about genuine change and uplift the poor and disenfranchised Filipinos.

His blitzkrieg suffered a temporary setback when he was accused of personally intervening in a high-profile naval acquisition deal,³⁶ which eventually forced him to testify in the Senate over allegations of undue interference and abuse of power. Duterte, however, quickly came to his rescue, effectively endorsing him for the senate in a public speech, where he told his aide: "That is your golden opportunity to become senator; I think he wants to run for senator, then okay." Shortly after, Presidential Communications Secretary Martin

Andanar floated a set of campaign slogans, ("Gorabels 2019") and jingle ("Wake me up, before you go, go..."), for Go's impending senate campaign.³⁷ Agriculture Secretary Manny Piñol, who predicted a top 5 finish for the presidential aide, openly described him as a "bridge between Senate and Palace" should make it to the upper house of the legislature. The following month, Go's senate campaign took off with a major speech, as the guest of honor, during an event hosted by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). This coincided with Go launching his own collection of official photos at the Malacañang presidential palace, while his team released the "Ready Set Go 2019" campaign slogan, which, according to an official press release, was tantamount to "the launch pad for (Go's) senatorial run." His team also released the "A Ready Get Set Go" email address.

Once in the senate, Bong Go, who is now comfortably within the winning circle in the race, is expected to act as the chief liaison between the Senate and the Malacañang, ensuring that Duterte's legislative agenda will push through. Among Duterte's most ambitious plans are to revise the Philippine constitution and create a new political system, which reflects his preferences and interests. He may soon have the super-majority support in the

Philippine legislature to fulfill his goal. The other major winner of the elections is his daughter, Sara, the founder of what is now the de facto ruling party, Hugpong ng Pagbabago (HNP). Though she shunned a run for senate in favor of mayoral re-election in Davao, Duterte's daughter is largely seen as the most prominent figure in the ongoing elections, leading the rallies and campaign sorties of the administration bets.

She has also accompanied the president during major diplomatic events, ranging from official visits to China and Israel as well as serving as the de facto First Lady during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to the Philippines. At once, Sara has positioned herself as a shadow foreign secretary, First Lady, standard-bearer of the ruling party, feisty mayor of a major city, kingmaker in the Congress (i.e., selection of house speakers), and Duterte's heir-apparent.

As Duterte's spokesman Salvador Panelo bluntly put it, "In fact, there is even a movement launching her to be the next president."³⁸ If the current political momentum persists, one could imagine a formidable Sara Duterte-Bong Go ticket to succeed Duterte and protect his legacy. Absent a robust challenge from the opposition, the midterm elections could very well hand Duterte a crucial opportunity to consolidate power unlike any of his contemporary predecessors. The stakes couldn't be any higher, for the upcoming elections could forever change the fate of the Philippines' fragile democracy.

Conclusions

The upcoming midterm elections are the most important in generations. First of all, they will serve as a barometer of whether Duterte's shocking rise to power was an aberration rather than the upshot of a fundamental shift in Philippine politics. It's not only a referendum on Duterte's unorthodox, authoritarian populism, but also a telltale of the political zeitgeist in the country and beyond. Moreover, they will determine whether the Filipino president will have sufficient support, particularly in the all-powerful Senate, to push ahead with his ambitious legislative agenda, most especially the plan to amend the 1987 Constitution and establish a new form of government, most likely presidential-federalism.

If Duterte's allies successfully dominate both houses of the legislature, then the president will be in an unprecedented position, perhaps for the first time since 1971, to upend Philippine democracy and reorient its destiny for decades to come. So far, survey results, and anecdotal evidence from the election dynamics on the ground, suggest that the midterm elections are a resounding victory for Duterte and his allies, most especially two persons within his inner circles: former presidential aide, Bong Go, who is a leading candidate in the senate race, as well as presidential daughter

and Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte, who is the de facto standard bearer of the ruling party, Hugpong ng Pagbabago (HNP), and emerging as the president's heir-apparent.

Eager to cement his legacy, and ensure long-term protection from potential political reprisals in the future, Duterte is placing his political capital (and the steamroller of the state apparatus) behind his allies. As things stand, Duterte may step down from power in 2022, but the Duterteism ideology,³⁹ namely illiberal populism, will likely transcend his tenure in office unless the opposition forces manage to crystallize into a robust counterforce and check the administration's forward momentum in the last stretch of the midterm elections, and, in three years' time, successfully tap into anti-incumbency sentiments to advocate an alternative liberal-democratic vision, which appeals to majority of the populace.

references

¹ Clive Maxfield, "If voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal," *EE Times*, March 19, 2012, https://www.eetimes.com/author.asp?section_id=28&doc_id=1285961#.

² John Whitehead, "If Voting Made Any Difference, They Wouldn't Let Us Do It," *Huffington Post*, August 5, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-w-whitehead/if-voting-made-any-differ_b_11298512.html.

³ Mark Twain and Charles Warner, *The Gilded Age*, (California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

⁴ Benedict Anderson, "First Filipino," *London Review of Books* 19 no. 20 (1997):22-23, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v19/n20/benedict-anderson/first-filipino>.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

⁶ Maria Popova, "Theodore Roosevelt on the Cowardice of Cynicism and the Courage to Create Rather Than Tear Down," *Brainpickings.org*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/04/30/theodore-roosevelt-arena-cynicism-critic/>.

⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

⁸ "REPLAY: FYI with Richard Heydarian: Interview with Comelec Spox. James Jimenez," *Youtube* video, 1:12:58, posted by "GMANews," February 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zs6GD-Z2le0>.

⁹ Darryl John Esguerra, "Poe wants probe on possible Chinese takeover of Hanjin in Subic," *Inquirer.net*, January 23, 2019, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/172716/poe-wants-probe-on-possible-chinese-takeover-of-hanjin-in-subic>.

¹⁰ Macon Ramos-Araneta, "Allies score government policy on Chinese workers," *Manila Standard*, February 26, 2019, <http://manilastandard.net/news/top-stories/288717/allies-score-government-policy-on-chinese-workers.html>.

¹¹ Vanna Elaine Terrazola, "Senators disagree with Duterte's position on illegal Chinese workers,"

Manila Bulletin, February 25, 2019, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/02/25/senators-disagree-with-dutertes-position-on-illegal-chinese-workers/>.

¹² Javier Ismael, "Recto seeks probe of 'Safe PH,'" The Manila Times, January 28, 2019, <https://www.manilatimes.net/recto-seeks-probe-of-safe-ph-project/498083/>.

¹³ Germelina Lacorte, "Duterte names priest who allegedly molested him as teen," Inquirer.net, December 4, 2015, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/744824/duterte-names-priest-who-allegedly-molested-him-as-teen>.

¹⁴ Paterno Esmaguel II, "Duterte said kill the bishops – and his word became flesh," Rappler, February 28, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/news-break/in-depth/224537-duterte-word-became-flesh-kill-bishops>.

¹⁵ Paterno Esmaguel II, "More Catholics outraged by killings of priests," Rappler, June 18, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/205165-catholics-outrage-filipino-priests-killings>.

¹⁶ Paterno Esmaguel II, "They are killing our flock. They are killing us shepherds," Rappler, June 11, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/204692-archbishop-villegas-statement-killing-nueve-ecija-priest-richmond-nilo>.

¹⁷ John Nery, "Like sharp daggers: Bishops respond to Duterte," Inquirer.net, January 29, 2019, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/119183/like-sharp-daggers-bishops-respond-to-duterte>.

¹⁸ Neil Jerome Morales, "Philippine survey shows big support for Duterte's drugs war," Reuters, October 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-drugs/philippine-survey-shows-big-support-for-dutertes-drugs-war-idUSKBN1CLOFM>.

¹⁹ Lawrence Agcaoili, "Inflation forecast to ease to 4% in 2019," Philstar Global, February 20, 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/business/2019/02/10/1892315/inflation-forecast-ease-4-2019>.

²⁰ Mara Cepeda, "Otso Diretso turns to volunteers to boost struggling campaign," Rappler, March 15, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/news-break/in-depth/225690-otso-diretso-volunteers-boost-struggling-campaign>.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, "Slavoj Žižek on Greece: the courage of hopelessness," NewStatesman, July 30, 2015, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/07/slavoj-i-ek-greece-courage-hopelessness>.

²² Jeanne Park, "What a Syriza Victory Would Mean for Europe," Council on Foreign Relations, January 23, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/what-syriza-victory-would-mean-europe>.

²³ Martin Farrer, Jennifer Rankin and Ian Traynor, "Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis resigns despite referendum no vote," The Guardian, July 6, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/06/greek-finance-minister-yanis-varoufakis-resigns-despite-referendum-no-vote>.

²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "Slavoj Žižek on Greece: the courage of hopelessness," NewStatesman, July 30, 2015, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/07/slavoj-i-ek-greece-courage-hopelessness>.

²⁵ Ellalyn De Vera-Ruiz, "Duterte senatorial bets hold sway in most recent Pulse Asia survey," Manila Bulletin, March 18, 2019, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/03/18/duterte-senatorial-bets-hold-sway-in-most-recent-pulse-asia-survey/>.

²⁶ "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," Youtube video, 0:39, posted by "The Zeroth Folio of Shakespeare" February 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOVsQ04A-Mg>.

²⁷ "Fourth Quarter 2018 Social Weather Survey: Pres. Duterte's Net Satisfaction rating rises to 'Very Good' +60," Social Weather Stations, December 28, 2018, <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisp.php?artcsyscode=ART-20181228124054>.

²⁸ Daniel Friedman and Donald Wittman, "Why voters vote for incumbents but against incumbency: A rational choice explanation," Journal of Public Economics 57 (1995):67-83.

²⁹ Mark Thompson, "Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines," Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs 35 no. 3 (2016):39-68, <https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jsaa/article/viewFile/1009/1021>.

³⁰ Lian Buan, "Can PH return to ICC in the time of Duterte? 'Yes, through void ab initio'," Rap-

pler, March 19, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/226087-can-philippines-return-icc-duterte-administration>.

³¹ Maan Macapagal, "PNP: 23,000 killings under investigation in 2 years," ABS-CBN News, June 15, 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/06/13/18/pnp-23000-killings-under-investigation-in-2-years>.

³² "De Lima marks 2nd year in jail: 'How many more years shall I endure?'" Rappler, February 24, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/224267-de-lima-marks-second-year-jail-friends-family-allies>.

³³ Camille Elemia, "Trillanes says he'll go to jail if Duterte proves claims vs parents," Rappler, November 27, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/217640-trillanes-dares-duterte-prove-parents-anomalies>.

³⁴ "Richard Heydarian: The Catholic Church contends with Duterte's rule," Nikkei Asian Review, February 8, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Richard-Heydarian-The-Catholic-Church-contentsWith-Duterte-s-rule>.

³⁵ Pia Ranada, "Introducing the new Bong Go: Media-shy to media-savvy," Rappler, March 20, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/198527-new-bong-go-media-shy-savvy>.

³⁶ Carmela Fonbuena, "DOCUMENTS: How Bong Go is linked thrice to frigates deal," Rappler, February 19, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/news-break/iq/196338-philippine-navy-frigates-deal-documents-bong-go>.

³⁷ Pia Ranada, "Introducing the new Bong Go: Media-shy to media-savvy," Rappler, March 20, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/198527-new-bong-go-media-shy-savvy>.

³⁸ Christina Mendez, "Sara Duterte could be next president after Rody," Philstar Global, February 17, 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/02/17/1894372/sara-duterte-could-be-next-president-after-rody>.

³⁹ See Randy David's "Dutertismo," Philippine Daily Inquirer, May 1, 2016.

www.stratbase.ph

SPARK[®]

the key link between IDEAS and ACTION

The article featured in this series is the sole property of

SPARK- the key link between IDEAS and ACTION

Copyright 2019

9th Floor 6780 Ayala Avenue,
Makati City 1220

V (632) 892.1751
F (632) 892.1754

stratbase



ADR

ALBERT DEL ROSARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

SPARK

The key link to idea and action is the on-line newsletter of ADRI (Albert Del Rosario Institute), that covers socio-political, economic and security analysis of timely issues that affect the direction of the economy and political landscape governing the Philippines.

STRATBASE ADR INSTITUTE

Stratbase ADR Institute is an independent international and strategic research organization with the principal goal of addressing the issues affecting the Philippines and East Asia through:

- 1) effecting national, regional and international policy change or support;
- 2) fostering strategic ideas based on cooperation and innovative thinking;
- 3) providing a regional venue for collaboration and cooperation in dealing with critical issues in East Asia; and
- 4) actively participating in regional debates and global conversations.