

Populism and Media in Duterte's Philippines

Fernan Talamayan and Anna Cristina Pertierra

Mr Fernan Talamayan is a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies, National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, Taiwan. ORCID: 0000-0002-1716-7881

Dr Anna Cristina Pertierra is an Associate Professor of Cultural and Social Analysis at Western Sydney University, Australia. ORCID: 0000-0003-4410-5528

Abstract

Since the 2016 election of Rodrigo Duterte as President, the Philippines appears to have reached a moment of peak authoritarianism. Despite standing out in the Asian region as a nation with strong traditions of liberal democracy, the Philippine political system has long been characterised by oligarchic or patrimonial dimensions. Since the Second World War the Presidential office has swung between leaders of liberal vs illiberal persuasions, but across parties, regions and cities, many political offices are attained through personal or familial followings and 'strongman' leadership, rather than an ideological commitment to left or right policies. Within this national context, we suggest that there is little 'new' about Duterte's success, and an assessment of him as representing a radical right is problematic. Yet populism and authoritarianism can both be identified in his leadership.

This chapter seeks to explain the historical national dynamics that have led to Duterte's success as an authoritarian populist in the digital age. Having provided an overview of Filipino and international literature that places Duterte within a context of post-war politics, we explain the role of digital technologies and populist public discourse, which shape possibilities for political success, disinformation and persecution. We then present two case studies of how media and journalism have become a pressure point for an increasingly authoritarian political environment in Duterte's Philippines: these case studies are the closure of the leading television station ABS-CBN, and the legal battles faced by news website Rappler and its founder journalist Maria Ressa. Our discussion provides two concerning examples of the role that media plays in expanded (rather than new) forms of populism and authoritarianism in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Since the 2016 election of Rodrigo Duterte as President, the Philippines appears to have reached a moment of peak authoritarianism. Despite standing out in the Asian region as a nation with strong traditions of liberal democracy, the Philippine political system has long been characterised by oligarchic or patrimonial dimensions. Since the Second World War the Presidential office has swung between leaders of liberal vs illiberal persuasions, but across parties, regions and cities, many political offices are attained through personal or familial followings and ‘strongman’ leadership, dominated by networks of elite political family dynasties rather than an ideological commitment to left or right policies. Largely outside these chains of elite dynasties, active leftist movements have been built through labor and civil society organisations whose representation in the House of Representatives is facilitated through a party list system. Beyond electoral politics, a spectrum of leftist organisations has included militant groups linked to the Communist Party of the Philippines, which despite a decline in numbers in recent decades, retains a guerilla presence in some regions.

Given this political landscape, Duterte’s ideological positions are complex and have shifted over time; he differs from most previous presidents of the Philippines because he has publicly claimed to be left-leaning, and is regularly hostile to United States policies and leaders. In the early months of his presidency he built unprecedented alliances with the Communist Party by allocating positions in his first Cabinet to Communist-endorsed candidates. However, the relationship disintegrated rapidly and from 2017 onwards, Duterte’s rhetoric and policies became increasingly anti-leftist. An additional complexity in Duterte’s ideology is that he has long expressed goodwill towards the family of the former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, whose regime included widespread violence and the torture and killings of left-wing dissidents. Duterte’s popularity has been built upon a rejection of the liberalism associated with the most famous opponents of Marcos, the rivalling Aquino family and their associates, who have been the dominant force in anti-Marcos politics since his overthrow in the 1986 People Power revolution. Duterte’s immediate predecessor in the presidency was Benigno Aquino III (‘Noynoy’), whose assassinated father had been Marcos’ most famous opponent and whose mother then became the first post-Marcos president as a result of the People Power movement. These patrimonial dynamics of Philippine politics are so pervasive that, since at least the 1980s, the Filipino voting public has more often understood their electoral options as being between the rival Marcos and Aquino camps than being a choice between left or right policies and ideologies. Within this national context, we suggest that a straightforward assessment of Duterte as representing a radical right is problematic. It is illiberalism, more than a simple left/right dichotomy, that most strongly marks the political culture of Duterte’s presidency (Thompson 2016). Illiberalism, populism and authoritarianism can all be identified in his leadership.

This chapter seeks to explain Duterte's remarkable success as an authoritarian populist in two main ways: by understanding the historical national dynamics that have led to his popularity, and focusing on the changing role of digitally enabled media as an explosive frontier for political consolidation. In the following sections, we assess the historical and sociopolitical conditions that allow Duterte's style of politics to thrive. Having provided an overview of Filipino and international literature that places him within a context of post-war politics, in the chapter's second half we focus on two case studies of tense relations between mass media and Duterte's administration, which exemplify the rise since 2016 of disinformation and media persecution as dimensions of public life. By bringing together our historical analysis of longstanding dynamics in Filipino politics and culture with the more recent scholarly attention to mass media and social media, we argue that the Philippines offers useful lessons to those who seek to understand contemporary political cultures in the Global South: the Philippines' Duterte era spotlights how earlier populist language and practices are continued and reinvented in developing nations trapped between global powers. The Philippines also exemplifies how the politics-media relationship is a central element in new or expanded forms of populism and authoritarianism in the twenty-first century.

1. Contextualising Duterte's Indomitable Popularity

Rodrigo Roa Duterte was for much of the 1990s and 2000s best known as the tough-talking Mayor of Davao City, the most populous city in the Philippines' southern region of Mindanao. Despite coming from a family of established politicians, and graduating with a degree in law from an elite university in Manila, Duterte's popular image is one of anti-elitism. He was credited by his supporters for a transformative leadership of Davao City with his trademark 'strongman' style, featuring a 'law and order' strategy that is alleged to have made regular use of extrajudicial death squads. Duterte's unorthodox persona includes speaking in a vernacular style, often featuring expletives and misogynistic humour, and expressing a willingness to engage in violence to meet his political objectives. Prior to the 2016 elections, Duterte had a high profile in the Philippines, and was especially influential in the southern regions that are politically as well as geographically remote from the central hub of Manila. But he was not especially considered a frontrunner among the crop of candidates competing for election as president, and many polls only noted a late surge in popularity for his candidacy. Duterte was elected with a clear but unspectacular 39.01% of the nationwide vote.

Typically, Philippine presidents experience a gradual decline in popularity after their election to the single six-year term permitted. But Duterte's popularity has been remarkable, in that it grew once he assumed office and then accelerated to a record high of +72 net satisfaction ratings by the mid-point of his term in December 2019 according to a leading national survey company (Social Weather Stations, also known as SWS). Based on the SWS survey, the president received excellent scores across all geographic areas (Mindanao, +81; Visayas, +79; Luzon, +66; and Metro Manila,

+66) and socioeconomic classes (upper and middle classes, +76, working class, +72; and extremely poor, +71). Throughout 2020, despite blunders and inefficiencies by his government in managing long lockdowns related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the president continued to enjoy rock-solid support among many Filipinos.

Duterte's popularity might seem curious given that it was achieved amidst allegations of corruption, controversial China-leaning foreign policies, chauvinistic and misogynistic remarks, numerous human rights violations and an increasingly authoritarian leadership. Scholars have sought to explain how Duterte has maintained popular support since his election despite allegations of crime and strong evidence of governmental failures. Ronald Holmes (2016) attributed Duterte's high trust ratings to the supposed fulfillment of his campaign promise of fighting criminality and illegal drugs (p. 63). Adele Webb (2016) ascribed Duterte's appeal to his 'subversiveness,' as Duterte claims to represent and stand up for 'the people,' signifying 'the refusal to continue the indignity of the past' (p. 139). Meanwhile, Nicole Curato (2016, 2017) argued that his popularity is driven by, among others, people's desire for a better tomorrow, as well as their collective frustration toward technocratic reforms. To Wataru Kusaka (2017), the widespread public support for Duterte is anchored in a 'social bandit-like morality,' which he described as 'the coexistence of compassion and violence under a patriarchal boss who maintains justice outside of the law' (p. 49). Such approaches are important, but to better understand how and why Duterte's presidency has to date been so successful, we need to look further back. A historical approach to the topic can also help explain Filipinos' fixation with populism and authoritarianism.

2. Historicising Duterte: Populism in the Philippines, 1913-2016

While many regard Duterte's ascendance to power as the catalyst for such practices as idealising authoritarianism and normalising the culture of impunity and extrajudicial killings (EJKs), we argue that Duterte's presidency intensified rather than created a prevailing culture of cruelty. As this section will show, Duterte's populism adopted previous presidents' signification of 'the people' (poor and law-abiding Filipinos), while expanding their notion of 'the enemies of the people.'

Former presidents of the Philippines can be seen as setting in place many of the dynamics that have enabled the success of Duterte's populism. This is evident almost from the earliest establishment of local governance in 1913, when representative politics emerged with the widening of the national suffrage. In these early years, Manuel L. Quezon's *Nacionalista* party dominated the local political arena, whose government claimed to be of the people and for the people. However, in a continuation of political dynamics that had shaped the nineteenth century, the intentions and goals of the landed elite were poorly aligned with the urban and rural poor. According to Abinales and Amoroso (2005), the *Nacionalistas* 'paid little attention to landlessness, wages, and other problems of the rural and urban poor,' resulting in a 'surge in popular protest' from millenarian movements in the 1920s and 1930s (pp. 147-148). To keep poor dissenters in line, political meetings of opposition organisations such as the *Sakdalistas* were restricted, and the

Philippine Constabulary (colonial police) were mobilized to crush the *Sakdalistas* in armed confrontations in 1935 (p. 148). Quezon would later express anguish over being compelled to take such a drastic measure (Quezon 1936). He would also reassure the people that he remains committed to representing their will by rallying against ‘selfish and greedy landowners’ (Quezon 1940) and campaigning for a social justice program that addresses farmers’ and laborers’ demands.

Quezon set an example for future presidents as to how the people could be mobilised to advance an agenda. Quezon was able to appeal to the people by expressing sympathy for the poor and siding with them against their enemy (landlords). Presenting himself as the people’s champion, he was able to justify the use of extralegal violence for the sake of life, liberty, and peace. He also managed to control ‘both external relations with Washington and the country’s volatile provincial politics’ (McCoy 2017, p. 18).

The tenure of another high profile president, Ramon Magsaysay (1953-1957) is also worth mentioning, as it set an example for Philippine presidents to successfully represent and deal directly with the people. Magsaysay’s humble origins —a former bus mechanic from a provincial lower-class family—captured the popular imagination. Peasants received him as ‘one of theirs,’ while the international media portrayed him as a ‘carpenter’s son’ and a ‘farm boy’ (Cullather 1993, p. 307). He was also known as a reformer, representing nothing of the old politicians. Taking advantage of his popularity and U.S. backing, he strengthened the central government by deploying both the military and social forces to combat people’s enemies. Under his watch, however, the enemies were no longer just the landlords; they also included Communists and abusive politicians. Believing that poverty and underdevelopment fuel insurgencies, Magsaysay also employed the military for public works and economic advancement programs (Magsaysay 1954). He established presidential agencies to mobilise the people ‘independent of local “political bosses” and landed elites’ (Abinales & Amoroso 2005, p. 181).

The Philippines’ most notorious populist president, however, is undoubtedly Ferdinand Marcos (1965-1986). Like many populists, Marcos claimed to understand people’s sentiments and committed to end ‘the monopoly of privileges and power by [sic] the old oligarchy’ (Marcos 1973). He described graft and corruption as ‘the nemesis of every development program’ (Marcos 1973) and publicised his anti-graft and pro-development efforts. Like many other politicians, Marcos himself was regularly accused of corruption, but he deflected such allegations by exposing corrupt practices in government offices other than his own. In the early years of his term, Marcos was highly successful in simultaneously wresting control of the political system, while presenting himself to the public as offering something new that was an antidote to old styles of corrupt politics; echoes of such a strategy can be seen in similar proclamations made by Duterte in his public speeches.

The Marcos presidency also set an important precedent for Duterte in terms of promoting censorship and controlling access to information. A turning point in the Marcos presidency was the declaration of Martial Law in 1972, immediately after which he ‘nationalised’ key media

businesses, effectively transferring their control to reliable cronies to prevent the use of media ‘to undermine the faith and confidence of the people in our government’ (Office of the President of the Philippines 1972a). Two commercial broadcast television stations and associated radio stations, owned by high-profile members of elite families—ABC (now TV5) and ABS-CBN—had licences revoked and properties seized by the Marcos government with accusations of disseminating ‘subversive materials’ and participating in ‘a conspiracy to overthrow the government’ (Office of the President of the Philippines 1972b). Newspapers and magazines were also shut down, and high profile publishers and journalists were arrested and imprisoned.

The presidencies of Quezon, Magsaysay, and Marcos exhibited a continuation of a state- and elite-centered government, across different political periods and ideologies. They claimed to represent the people by advancing political and economic reforms that appeared to champion historically marginalised populations over wealthy elites. All three presidents were also masters of domestic and geopolitical maneuvering: they succeeded in monopolising control over political violence, taking advantage of the global political currents, and receiving the United States’ approval and support. Magsaysay’s and Marcos’s brands of populism were particularly shaped by the real and perceived threat of communism. With the escalation of the Cold War, new democracies across the Asian region flourished under repressive and oppressive dictatorships. It seemed that in an effort to ‘preserve’ democracy against the ‘imminent’ communist threat during the Cold War, democracy itself had to take a backseat.

The geopolitical dynamics that shape Duterte’s own maneuvers have taken on interesting new configurations: as mentioned earlier, his own relationship to leftist politics is complex, and unlike his predecessors, Duterte has consistently allied his government with Chinese interests over those of the United States. Yet the geopolitical game that shapes possibilities for Philippine presidents remains one in which perceived threats from foreign powers are deployed to national political ends, and the favour of a superpower (in Duterte’s case, China) is sought to bolster economic deals and trade relations of questionable benefit to the average Filipino. Amidst the failure of successive post-independence administrations to adequately address the genuine needs of the people for economic development and human rights, Duterte is the latest in a long line of populists to promise Filipinos radical change, committing to restore faith in governments that have been plagued by corruption and injustice. A desire for ‘*ginhawa*’ (well-being) and ‘*ganap na kasarinlan*’ (absolute independence) makes populism appealing as a form of redemptive leadership. But in so doing, populists reinvented the political maneuvering of their predecessors, encouraged social divisions, and utilised similar instruments of power.

Along with his distinctive relationship to China, a second departure of Duterte from his forerunners has been his capacity to harness newly available digital media technologies to efficiently connect to his constituents and forward the necessity of political will to end criminality and corruption in the country. In the next section we explore this defining characteristic of Duterte’s populism and propaganda.

3. Populist expression and digital communication in the era of Duterte

Duterte's rise to power has prompted a broader rise in popular expression and propaganda that emulates his populist politicking style. Since the 2016 election, public debate in the Philippines has undergone extreme polarisation, with most pro-government propaganda generating a peculiar mix of anti-elite, anti-activist, and anti-*dilawan* vocabulary (*dilawan* or yellow refers to politicians, technocrats, and oligarchs associated with the former Aquino administrations, the Liberal Party, and their supporters). Duterte and his followers' populism regularly invokes the idea of '*tunay na pagbabago*' (genuine change) and 'popular' reforms. However, it is not a populism akin to that described in the United States as 'the idea of a genuine egalitarian left-wing politics' (Müller 2016, p. 8). Explaining the popularity of Duterte's promise of change with Filipinos, Curato (2016) argued that his call for radical change draws energy from people's 'latent anxiety,' which is caused by various threats to peace and order, and discontent, inflamed by the failures of technocratic reforms in addressing the people's immediate concerns. In describing Duterte's campaign in 2016, Curato (2016) observed that Duterte's populist rhetorical style has allowed citizens to 'reclaim their esteem as citizens who can take charge of their political destiny' (p. 103). While elections in the Philippines have long been plagued by vote-buying, political intimidation and killings (Curato 2016, McCoy 2017), supporters of Duterte across all classes rallied for him and even willingly paid for campaign materials to express that they are one with Duterte's call for unity and change (Curato 2016). Supporting Duterte is equated here with supporting his call for drastic national change. Taking an active role by sacrificing for the general cause and Duterte's political goal was, in a way, a form of showcasing patriotism.

Such populism granted Duterte 'the status of both spokesman and defender' of the Filipino people—a status that permitted Duterte to effectively discredit such seemingly powerful entities as the United States government and the Catholic Church, to which a Filipino president would typically be held accountable (Webb 2016, pp. 129-130). A discursive space in which rudeness and violence are commonplace also has an effect of diminishing accountability, so that the banality of actual mass killings in the country, as an extension of rhetorical violence that is part of everyday political speech, becomes acceptable to many of his supporters.

What Curato has described as the reclamation of the democratic agency is evident in the online activities of Duterte's supporters. One example of online content creation that features in the current research of Fernan Talamayan is the Youtube presence of Mr. Riyoh, an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) who works in the Middle East and is an avid supporter of Duterte and Marcos. Mr. Riyoh 'voluntarily' creates videos to defend and promote Duterte and Marcos; his early videos stated that he does not receive compensation for his videos, although as we discuss below, there have been widespread allegations and growing evidence that many bloggers are paid for their Duterte and Marcos content. In contrast to some other channels in this genre, very few of Mr Riyoh's videos contain advertisements, suggesting that he does not receive significant income directly from YouTube. Mr Riyoh's channel and comments echo the promotion of Duterte's populist discourse, which goes hand in hand with revisionist narratives of the Marcos regime in

the 1970s and 80s. Mr Riyoh speaks directly to his audience as he responds to Duterte's and Marcos's critics. For instance, in his video entitled 'Real talk about MARCOS–Mr. Riyoh' posted in June 2016, he initiated a debate with Lourde de Veyra, a famous anti-Marcos celebrity. Mr Riyoh countered established claims about Marcos family corruption, arguing that their family's wealth existed prior to the Marcos presidency, and that Marcos proclaimed martial law in 1972 to re-establish peace and order and propel the Philippine economy to greater heights. Numerous videos produced by Mr. Riyoh associate both Duterte and Marcos with economic progress, stability, peace and order, patriotism, heroism, and hope.

Content creators and influencers who support Duterte and Marcos typically use the vernacular of the people and identify themselves as 'the people.' They use common street language that appeals to the ordinary Filipino, and often adopt Duterte's excessive use of expletives to manifest transparency and realness. Perspectives are presented as giving voice to views that have long been marginalised by technocratic governments (Talamayan 2020, p. 136). Their videos typically employ an 'us-versus-them' narrative and prompt some followers to express the need to rewrite history, reclaiming it from the educated and landed elite (p. 136). While the us-versus-them approach in the populist rhetoric in the Philippines echoes Ernesto Laclau's (2005) notion of an underdog, with specific reference to the Philippines, Webb & Curato (2019) regard it as a hallmark of 'populist nationalism,' in which the 'down/up antagonism' between richer and poorer citizens is harnessed by Duterte's supporters in ways that fit Duterte's campaign agenda (p. 52). This dynamic can take the form of the people against a small and powerful elite, or as an underdog that has long been subject to the abuse of colonisers and local oligarchs (Webb & Curato 2019 p. 52). Popular discontent with the previous Aquino administration is a reaction to the failures of reformists and technocrats' promise of widespread economic growth, and the accumulation of unfulfilled expectations create an impression that it is only through drastic change that democratic reforms could be indeed achieved (Webb & Curato 2019, p. 54). Thus, Duterte's utilisation of the language of urgency paves the way to what Curato (2016) describes as the politics of hope, foregrounding the role of democratic agency, esteem, and collective aspiration (pp. 105-106).

Online debate among Filipinos has become an extremely important dimension of political life in the Duterte era. While content creators like Mr Riyoh have established their presence in blogging and vlogging platforms like Youtube, their content circulates in a much bigger ecosystem in which viral and social media spreads political commentary alongside celebrity gossip and entertainment media (Perterra 2021). A key factor that made the rise of polarised and polarising expression so possible in the period of Duterte's election was the growth in widespread access to smartphones, social media and the Internet among the vast majority of the 108 million Filipinos at home and the more than 2 million Filipinos working and living abroad. The Philippines has been well documented in both market and scholarly research as among the world's most vibrant markets for digital media and telecommunications; early years of mobile phone technology at the turn of the millennium saw a rapid takeup of texting in the Philippines. The use of communications technologies was fuelled in part by the economic resources and transnational family dynamics of

overseas workers whose remittances contributed around 11% of GDP over the past fifteen years. Internet-enabled technologies such as smartphones, Internet cafés, tablets and desktop computers have become a part of the landscape for all but the poorest or most isolated of Filipinos, and social media, particularly Facebook, has become a regular feature of everyday life (Soriano et al 2018, Uy-Tioco 2019, Uy-Tioco & Cabañes 2021). Starting in 2013, Facebook piloted data-free access to a basic version of its platform, provided for free on major telecommunications carriers in the Philippines, allowing the country to become the first market in which Facebook became more accessible and more widespread than the Internet itself (Uy-Tioco 2019). Such projects initiated by platforms like Facebook in populous nations of the Global South, where large and often dense populations have long histories of thriving public discussion despite and amidst fragile political institutions, have laid the groundwork for explosive digital public spheres in which digital expression - and digital disinformation - have an increasingly strong influence in political processes, including electoral outcomes.

The period leading up to the 2016 election of Rodrigo Duterte has been understood in retrospect as something of a milestone in the unrolling of digital disinformation as a decisive element in electoral campaigns - and it is important to note that not only Duterte, but many candidates in the Philippines, with a range of affiliations, appear to have engaged teams of digital campaigners to work with both overt and covert tactics to reach voters through social media and other digital communications. In 2019 data consultant Christopher Wylie, whose whistleblowing exposed the activities of the Cambridge Analytica political consulting firm and prompted international investigation, specifically described the Philippines as a ‘petri dish’ in which tactics and techniques for influencing political opinion have been tested out with minimal risk prior to rollout in markets of the Global North in which regulation is more robust (Occinola 2019). While global platforms created the infrastructure, and international consultancies developed new markets, at a local level, Filipino workers engage in the digital labour that creates and distributes viral political content. Important scholarship on digital disinformation in the Philippines suggests that organised digital campaigns, staffed by experienced advertising and public relations professionals, have employed large numbers of individuals to work under the radar producing viral content and engaging in ‘trolling’ activities to harass public figures whose political positions oppose their employers’ interests (Cabañes & Cornelio 2017, Ong & Cabañes 2018, see also for context Soriano 2021).

The rise of digital political expression, which includes digital disinformation but to an as-yet unknown degree, has shifted the dynamics of public debate. The penetration of political commentary from newly influential voices into the everyday social media practices of the average Filipino voter, challenges the dominance of traditional media players and organisations in shaping political debate. But an even bigger and more explicit threat to the established media landscape, in which ideals of a free press and liberal democratic debate have been imperfectly sought, can be seen in the hostile relations between the Duterte administration and high-profile sources of journalism and media content. While passionate vloggers, paid trolls and everyday social media users have been variously engaged in public debate through Facebook, YouTube and other

platforms, the President's administration has also overseen a period in which independent journalism and critical current affairs have become marked as the enemies of the people.

4. Democratic backsliding in the time of Duterte: tense relations with media

Following the conspiratorial logic of Duterte's populism, leading industry players in the Philippines' media landscape have, by virtue of their public commitment to the liberal ideal of a free press, been targeted by direct and indirect government actions. Targets have included the respected English language broadsheet newspaper, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, which was sharply criticised by Duterte in 2017 and sold under some pressure by the elite family that owned it. But in this section we focus on two longer running and higher profile examples of media players whose existence has become increasingly difficult: that of the major television network ABS-CBN, owned by the prominent Lopez family, and the online news service Rappler, co-founded and run by Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa. The scale of these two media organisations differs greatly, with the former being the most extensive and longest running broadcasting network in the nation, overseen by one of the country's most powerful families, via a holding company with interests in media, telecommunications, energy, manufacturing and real estate. The latter example of Rappler is much smaller in comparison, as an independent news website that was launched in 2011; yet the presence of Rappler as a critical and independent voice, backed by the credibility of its internationally experienced founders, quickly saw its occupying an influential niche in national political coverage.

The ABS-CBN media group is the Philippines' largest, and comprises interests across every kind of media, including digital, cable subscriptions, radio and film. But it is the free-to-air television broadcasting network that serves as the corporation's lynchpin. Owned by the prominent Lopez family, the ABS-CBN television network actively cultivates a public image as having been at the forefront of the free press since the earliest days of Philippine television (Pertierra 2021). Such an image is reinforced by the public knowledge of the network's history of being sequestered under the Marcos government as one of the first acts of Martial Law. When the Lopez group reacquired ABS-CBN after the 1986 People Power revolution, which saw the Marcos overthrow, it was awarded an extended licence to broadcast which required renewal by Congress before May 2020.

Despite several years of attempts with sympathetic politicians to renew the franchise, a series of legal and political disputes allowed the franchise to expire. President Duterte's enmity for the television network was well known, and between 2017 and 2020 he made regular accusations against ABS-CBN, while his supporters in Congress delayed any possibility for franchise renewal. As a result, in May 2020, what had been the nation's largest and most powerful television stations ceased broadcast (Gutierrez 2020). In the months that followed, deals were struck so that many of the most popular and profitable programs could air through alternative stations (Elemia 2020). But at the time of writing it remains the case that the highest profile news and current affairs coverage that was historically the flagship of ABS-CBN broadcasting has been severely muffled at best. The years of struggle that have characterised the relationship of the ABS-CBN group and the Duterte

administration echo the broader dynastic tendencies that shape both politics and media in the Philippines. While Duterte's aggressive stance towards the media company calls upon the legacy of the Marcos family, and symbolically aligns him to their anti-liberal political lineage, ABS-CBN itself is a product of the Lopez family dynasty, which has interests well beyond media and is a dominant player in other key industries including energy, infrastructure, telecommunications and property. It is important, then, to bear in mind that even while ABS-CBN as an institution champions the liberal ideal of a free press, this commitment to liberalism is in itself an expression of particular Lopez family values, and therefore could be seen as a less authoritarian but no less patrimonial expression of the historically entrenched political dynamics described in earlier sections of this chapter.

Rappler's history in the media landscape of the Philippines is quite different, and much shorter. Established as a news website in 2012, Rappler was founded by a group of highly experienced journalists with former CNN and ABS-CBN veteran Maria Ressa at the helm. In comparison to more established nationwide news organisations, Rappler does not enjoy a readership that is as large. But as a website that focuses heavily on investigative journalism and invested early in digital engagement techniques, they have been able to establish a journalistic voice and impact that belies their relatively small size, breaking key stories that are subsequently reported in print and broadcast media by their larger competitors. Rappler's extensive reportage during the first year of Duterte's presidency of extrajudicial killings and their investigations into the rise of digital trolling, are often described as having formed the catalyst for the government's particular dislike of the organisation's work (Hammer 2019). It is certainly the case that while Maria Ressa had reported on, and personally interviewed, Duterte for years before he assumed the presidency, it was only after the influence of Rappler's journalism on discussions of his administration grew that the organisation began to receive significant legal and political pressure.

The Rappler company is owned by several shareholders, with Ressa herself owning approximately 23% (Media Ownership Monitor Philippines 2021). The constitution of Rappler's shareholdings is significant, because allegations of foreign ownership have been one of the flanks of attack that have marked the news organisation's existence. Another flank of attack has been through the pursuit of a controversial legal case which attracted strong international interest: in June 2020, Ressa and another Rappler employee were found guilty in a Manila court of 'cyberlibel' with regards to an article published on the website in 2012 (BBC News 2020). The article alleged that a businessman, Wilfredo Keng, had links to crime while also having a close relationship with a Filipino judge. The article was published four months before the cyberlibel law came into effect, but had one typographical error corrected in 2014 which was argued as the basis for the validity of a guilty conviction. The cyberlibel case is one of eleven court cases that have been brought against Rappler and/or Ressa in recent years, and is perceived by Rappler's supporters as evidence of a Duterte-driven campaign of press persecution. But such legal controversies in the Philippines have had some additional consequences on the international stage, where Ressa's profile has steadily grown as a prominent advocate for press freedom.

Rappler does not sit perfectly within the family dynastic models of media and politics that the previous case study of ABS-CBN provided. But Rappler does call attention to another historical dynamic that has shaped the ‘strongman’ politics of Duterte: that of the geopolitics of international relations and the perception of foreign powers as a force against the people. Maria Ressa herself is often depicted by her detractors as representing foreign interests, spurred by her American upbringing and dual citizenship, and consolidated by the admiration and acclaim that her work has attracted in the international press, including TIME Magazine’s Person of the Year award in 2018 (TIME 2020). The striking gulf between Ressa’s largely positive public image in English-language dominated international media circles, and the sharp criticism of her work and her person by Duterte and his supporters within the Philippines, can be seen as ultimately fuelling Duterte’s populist position of rejecting an elitism that appears to be both liberal in discourse and foreign in origin.

For both ABS-CBN and Rappler, the battles to remain open have been protracted and remain in flux at the time of writing. It is not hard to see why ABS-CBN and Rappler were so firmly in the crosshairs of Duterte’s team: what these media networks share, in contrast to other local players who have not been direct targets of presidential hostility, is that they have published journalism and news commentaries that include criticism of Duterte’s record on a range of issues, including the war on drugs, foreign relations with China, and his authoritarian tendencies (Heydarian 2020). Despite their differences in size and history, both ABS-CBN and Rappler have been described by Duterte and his supporters as either being run or influenced by ‘yellow oligarchs’ who favour the Liberal Party-led opposition. Painted as money-driven institutions, the media’s ‘greed’ and ‘biases’ are alleged to manifest in reports that ‘favor’ the yellows. This framing has given the Duterte administration leeway to intimidate and attack journalists and media owners on many occasions, while using political and legal processes to seek the closure of both organisations. In both cases, even within a context of heightened authoritarianism, the processes and structures that can be mobilised to shut down television networks and websites are slow and inconsistent in their progress. Populist rhetoric that has been so clearly deployed across other areas of Duterte’s political communication are also present in their battles with the media. The government touted ABS-CBN’s closure as *‘desisyon ng taumbayan’* or ‘decision of the people’ (Geducos 2020). Rappler’s CEO, Maria Ressa, has been tagged as a fake news peddler and charged with cyberlibel numerous times by Duterte’s political allies (Wanless 2020). Duterte’s supporters accused the Philippine Daily Inquirer of ‘unfair coverage, liberal bias, tax evasion, and even “swindling”’ (Heydarian 2020).

In the subtitle for this chapter section, we have described this tendency of populist-fuelled antagonism towards journalism and media organisations as a sign of democratic backsliding. While backsliding often refers to the autocratisation and militarisation of a regime, in democratic regimes, it also refers to the systemic erosion of public confidence in institutions that guard and promote democratic values. In the cases presented in this section, the media’s role as a watchdog is undermined by destroying press credibility. By portraying ABS-CBN and Rappler as purveyors

of fake news and enemies of the people, Duterte and supporters weaken a critical institution that helps sustain democracy in the Philippines. Duterte's claim that these media organisations are controlled by oligarchs, further bolsters his own public image as the people's champion.

Conclusion: Learning from Duterte

This chapter has sought to bring together a historical understanding of politics in the modern Philippines, with contemporary case studies from media and journalism, to explain key dimensions of the success that President Duterte has enjoyed and indeed increased in the first three years of his term of office. While Duterte's ideologically flexible politics do not fit very easily along a left-right continuum, across his various policies and alliances we argue that he is consistently authoritarian and populist, with an increasingly explicit hostility towards liberalism and some new variations of anti-elitism that accord with the changing geopolitical forces of the Asian region. Both populism and authoritarianism have clear precedents in the approaches of Duterte's predecessors; his strongman approach sits upon firm historical foundations. Paradoxically, his claims of anti-elitism and underdog status belie his keen understanding of the traditional dynastic and regional politics that have been practiced by political elites across the nation for over a century. Adding this dimension to our study of Duterte serves to explain how political and legal controversies that are currently unfolding stand upon older histories of media and politics in the Philippines. Even in a moment where digital disruption seems to have transformed elements of the media landscape, and where new possibilities such as digital trolling, social media campaigning and cyberlibel cases have appeared, we can see that these new forms of political agitation themselves rest upon longer practices of populist discourse and dynastic competition.

There are of course many important controversies and debates that Duterte has provoked which we have had to leave mostly outside the scope of our discussion. These include the exponential rise of extrajudicial killings, increased military and policy impunity, an overt hostility towards human rights advocacy, a limited public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and more detailed discussion of his unorthodox relations with China. But the observations that we have offered in this chapter may also be of use in thinking through these broader shifts in political culture that seem to have occurred in the Philippines since the election of Duterte in 2016. When cast in a historical light, many of Duterte's most distinctive characteristics can be seen as expressions of an authoritarian and populist orientation that has its roots in multiple presidencies, including but not limited to the precedents of the Marcos era.

The success of Duterte also offers productive possibilities for thinking through the rise of other populist leaders who are potentially constituting a kind of radical right in the Global South. The positioning of journalists and media organisations as enemies of the people is a strategy that can be observed across many parts of the world, expanded in scope and scale by the widespread use of digital media. The important role of digital communication in electoral outcomes and public political debates is a clear example of how populous and digitally connected Global South societies have become the testing ground for new techniques and tools of political engagement. It is in

places like the Philippines that we can look for groundbreaking innovations in social and digital media, including in their impact upon political culture. Duterte's Philippines also reminds that while ideals of liberalism may seem under acute threat, in the Global South (and perhaps in the North as well), these very ideals have always operated in tandem with illiberal and authoritarian practices, often enacted by the political leaders whose regimes have enjoyed the support of global powers in the name of upholding liberal democracy. This observation in no way diminishes the gravity of challenges to the freedom of expression, to the cultivation of a diversity of voices, or to the physical safety of both high-profile and everyday people whose experiences may bring them into the crossfire of battles for authoritarian consolidation. On the contrary, it improves our understanding of how much and why populist authoritarianism can enjoy an expanded ascension in the context of the digital era.

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