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Philippines

# The Philippines' New Strongman

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**Rodrigo Duterte's election as president of the Philippines made global news. It's not hard to see why. Described as an "outsider" and a "maverick," Duterte is a charismatic enigma.**

He's known for his profanity-laden speeches, misogynistic jokes, and promises to give the police a free hand to murder suspects. But he also proclaims himself to be a socialist and the [first leftist president](#) of the Philippines.

What does his success represent? Is his rise really anything like the change that he promises? And what does it mean for the Philippine left?

## Oligarchy in the Philippines

To understand Duterte's success, we have to look past his self-styled image as the leader of a popular uprising. Instead, we must place him in the context of Philippine economics and politics.

The Philippine economy depends on profit from rents and the relative weakness of the state. The Philippines' underdeveloped industrial base and impoverished agricultural sector mean that rent is a major source of wealth.

Capitalists compete with each other to gain influence in the state apparatus, or even capture parts of it, to control markets and gain access to resources. Together, rent-seeking and competition for control of the state produces structural corruption which, in turn, produces institutionalized impunity.

Philippine capitalism is controlled by a ruling class [Alfred W. McCoy](#) has described as an "oligarchy" made up of "a cluster of families, knitted together by ties of blood and marriage," who combine "political power and economic assets to direct the nation's destiny."

A small number of these families, who started in in agriculture, have dominated the Philippine oligarchy since the colonial period.

When Spain opened Manila to trade in the second half of the nineteenth century, it produced a capitalist agricultural sector focused on international markets.

Spain attempted to build a centralized bureaucracy to control the elite Filipino families, but it failed miserably, instead provoking a rebellion that ended after the United States took power.

The United States introduced a degree of local autonomy into the country's regions and elections, allowing the landed elite to secure their political dominance. As McCoy writes, US policies "created a new class of provincial politicians and a national legislature that opened state resources for privatization by established and emerging families."

Patron-client relationships became the backbone of Philippine politics: vertical connections ran from wealthy, landed politicians to less influential families in urban areas and then further down to the villages. Political parties became

clusters of upper-class families and their clients, traditionally centered in Manila.

[The Marcos dictatorship](#) upset this arrangement. The United States supported Marcos because it thought a stronger, more centralized state would absorb nationalist challenges to its hegemony and ensure that the Philippines remained a stable pillar of US imperialism in Southeast Asia.

But this attempt at a passive revolution largely failed because of the ruling clique's predatory nature: they "privatized" the Philippine state to an unprecedented degree, further alienating the populace in the process.

After Marcos was overthrown in 1986, the Philippines reverted back to the "oligarchic democracy" described above, but with a few important differences. The Marcos interlude broke the previous existing two-party system, and new players rose to the top. A range of parties flourished.

But just as before, these parties did not fight for a coherent political platform: instead, they organized networks of patrons and clients.

Since the nineties, this system has not been fundamentally threatened, but the governments it has produced have often been unstable, challenged from below and riven by internal rivalries.

Meanwhile, a growing population and the state apparatus have significantly altered the traditional patron-client relationships. Increased use of violence and more dispersed forms of clientelism now supplement the paternalist patron-client relationships.

The line between politicians' personal property and public funds is thin as they need to distribute government jobs and contracts or to buy votes to win support. The farther one gets from Manila, the more blatant these practices become.

All of this makes successful electoral campaigns exceedingly expensive: a politician's affiliation with tycoons and wealthy families is more important than platform substance. The kingmaking families might have *haciendero* roots but have branched out in finance, mining, construction, and other branches of the economy.

Exacerbating this situation, Philippine [campaign-financing laws](#) do not put limits on personal or corporate campaign donations and politicians do not have to reveal their backers until after the election.

The popular classes aren't ignored in campaign spectacles: politicians reach them with outright vote-buying, gifts, bribes, and campaign sorties filled with spectacle, but little substance. What is promised is almost never delivered: in this campaign, every candidate said they would end [contractual labor](#), though the chances of them going against the interests of the oligarchy in this way are slim.

## The Humble Servant

Duterte's political career has flourished because of the oligarchy. He is related to the Durano and Almendras families, who have been prominent political figures in Duterte's birth region, Cebu, for decades.

The Dutertes themselves, writes Michael Cullinane in *An Anarchy of Families*, had “long been a significant political family in Danao,” a city in Cebu province. Duterte’s father, Vicente G. Duterte, was an attorney, mayor of Danao, and, after succeeding Alejandro Almendras, governor of Davao province from 1959 to 1965. This is where his son would build his political base.

After the [1986 People Power Revolution](#) brought down Marcos, Rodrigo Duterte became vice mayor of Davao City. He ran for mayor two years later and held the position for ten years.

Almendras, by then a seasoned politician and logging magnate, as well as former Marcos cronies like Manuel Garcia, Elias Lopez, and Ricardo Limso supported Duterte’s first steps into politics.

When Duterte reached the three-term limit for mayor, he became a member of the House of Representatives. He returned as mayor of Davao City three years later. He reached the limit again in 2010, so he became vice mayor, trading positions with his daughter, Sara Duterte-Carpio, who became mayor in his place.

In Davao City, Duterte cultivated his image as a humble servant of the people. But pre-election revelations about his personal wealth should surprise no one.

When it came out that Duterte has an undeclared bank account worth over \$4 million, he waved it away, saying it was from gifts from his “[wealthy friends](#).” What wealth he did declare has shown remarkable growth: for the last nineteen years, it grew an average of 132.6 percent annually.

We should understand Duterte as a larger-than-usual version of the strongman, a not-unusual figure in Philippine politics. Political scientist Patricio Abinales’s [work on Mindanao](#) describes the strongman as a regional representative of more powerful, Manila-based actors. Strongmen amass power through clientelist networks, control over vital enterprises and, “most important of all, a monopoly of the means of coercion and violence.”

In this analysis, Rodrigo Duterte is an “outsider” in Manila, the representative of a less powerful, more provincial layer of the Philippine elite. Some of his allies, like proposed minister of finance Carlos “Sonny” Dominguez, also come from Mindanao-based clans or studied together with Duterte.

But after the elections, other establishment parties and turncoats from the incumbent government quickly joined Duterte’s coalition, anxious to preserve their access to power and public resources.

Leftist trappings aside, this is the clearest way to understand Duterte: a regional boss who managed to strike it big by winning the presidency, pushing aside a sector of the traditional high elite. The most significant change his election promises is that Manila’s elite has been partially replaced by another, more provincial segment of the country’s oligarchy.

## Money and Murder

Duterte’s camp managed to win by harnessing a wave of anger and dissatisfaction dispersed over different social classes.

He could not have won without his base in Davao City. Davao City is relatively thinly populated, with 1.45 million

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residents occupying 2,444 square kilometers. It is a commercial hub and by far the most important city on Mindanao, the second-largest island of the Philippine archipelago. Mindanao's economy is mainly agricultural, and it remains on the periphery of Philippine social and political life.

Now heralded as an example of good governance, in the mid-1980s Davao City was a battlefield.

The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA), were at the height of their power. The NPA was testing urban warfare tactics in Davao, trying to develop methods to bring their [rural guerrilla war](#) into the cities.

But by the time Duterte became mayor, CPP influence in Davao City had collapsed. The government used an anticommunist militia, [Alsa Masa](#) (Risen Masses), made up of former army and police personnel, local thugs, and defectors from the NPA and supported by military commanders and local businessmen, to keep them out. They succeeded in getting rid of not only the underground left and the guerrillas, but also the legal, above ground left groups.

Alsa Masa was primarily active under Duterte's predecessor, but according to a 1988 report by Erik Guyot of the Institute of Current World Affairs, Duterte supported the anticommunist vigilantes. He supposedly gave them money and declared, "the peace and order situation has greatly improved with the advent of the Alsa Masa."

Today, Davao City is called "the safest city in Southeast Asia," and Duterte's perceived success in fighting crime there was central to his presidential campaign.

But his "tough stance on crime" is a euphemism: under his mayorship, a death squad nicknamed the [Davao Death Squad](#) or DDS murdered hundreds of people and became a fixture of the city. Just like Alsa Masa, the DDS is made up of former NPA fighters and local toughs, operating under the protection and with the cooperation of local authorities.

According to a [Human Rights Watch report](#), "local activists say death-squad killings of alleged drug dealers, petty criminals, and street children in Davao City started sometime in the mid-1990s."

The report cites the Coalition Against Summary Execution (CASE) and the Tambayan Center for the Care of Abused Children (Tambayan) who claim the number of death-squad killings in Davao City increased dramatically in the second half of the 2000s "seemingly in response to increasing crime rates as the city grew.

CASE documented 814 death-squad killings in Davao City between 1998 and early 2009. The [victims](#) were members of the urban poor, mostly suspects in petty street crimes like drug use, small-scale drug dealing, or cell phone theft.

Duterte has denied DDS's existence, but made it clear he supports the extrajudicial killing of suspected criminals. He has even boasted of the number of people he has supposedly killed himself.

The murders have not been unpopular. They are seen by many as a practical response to an ineffective judicial system and corrupt law enforcement. This belief is shared by many on the Philippine right more generally, who support police violence, including summary executions, as a "solution" to crime.

Beyond Davao, Duterte enjoys national popularity as a "crime-buster." Many working-class Filipinos believe crime is

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spiraling out of control, an impression fed by the media's sensational focus on particularly gruesome cases. But according to a poll by Social Weather Stations, Duterte voters come disproportionately from the wealthier layers of the population, who are attracted to his promise to eradicate street crime.

They are willing to accept increased state violence and to ignore the fact that Davao City's safety is mostly fictional "based on manipulated statistics and without consideration of the city's most vulnerable residents" in the hope that Duterte will repeat his reported success on a national scale.

To many of his admirers, Duterte is a like a patriarchal figure who protects "but also punishes" his inferiors. His strongman persona appeals to those conservatives who believe that the only thing wrong with the existing rules is their enforcement.

His supporters complain that Filipinos "lack discipline" and look to him to impose respect for order on the population at large. His proposals to implement a nationwide curfew, to ban smoking in the street, and to limit the sale of alcohol all fit this sensibility.

The fact that so many wealthy Filipinos support Duterte may be surprising. After all, it was elites that benefited most from the Aquino government. He implemented the kind of policies that have broad support in the more affluent parts of Philippine society, declared fighting corruption a priority, and succeeded according to neoliberal measures.

Philippine GDP grew by record numbers during his presidential term. By local standards, the Aquino government was exceptionally stable, facing serious threats neither from the popular classes nor from other oligarchic factions.

But affluent Filipinos supported Duterte in the election, rejecting [Mar Roxas](#), the incumbent government's candidate.

How did the Aquino government's credibility break down so much so that Duterte could sweep the elections? One answer is that Aquino's relative successes bred impatience, which was exacerbated as he came to be seen as a less and less effective leader.

This is not to say that the popular classes did not support Duterte. Philippine sociologist and political activist Walden Bello [cites](#) Duterte's "railing against corruption and poverty, his obvious disdain for the rich" the *coños* as he called them "and above all, his coming across as "one of you guys" that acted as a magnet to workers, urban poor, peasants, and the lower middle class."

The Aquino government's successes mainly benefited the wealthy, and the government came across as arrogant and out of touch when it ignored the popular classes' criticism.

Roxas was plagued by similar weaknesses. As scion of one of the country's most prestigious families (he is the grandson of Manuel Roxas, first president of the independent Philippine republic), he was too closely associated with the government and appeared too much like the career politician and privileged son of the high elite that he is to appeal to the dissatisfied electorate.

In a debate with Roxas, Duterte played up his ordinary-guy persona by making fun of the privileged policy wonk.

He said he would end the conflict between the Philippines and China over parts of the South China Sea (or West Philippine Sea) by personally planting a Philippine flag on the disputed atolls. Seeing his opponent's stunned

reaction, Duterte added he would get there on a jet ski.

This outsider flair has always played for him. Support for Duterte is especially strong in his home region of Mindanao because his proposals directly address their grievances with Manila and seem to offer an end to decades of unrest.

His proposals for a more decentralized and federal system of government respond directly to those who feel neglected and exploited by what they call "imperial Manila." Further, he supports autonomy for Muslim Filipinos.

The [Muslim rebels](#) in Mindanao renounced their original goal of secession long ago and now demand autonomy. Duterte's opposition to military operations against them shows that he is more sympathetic to their complaints than traditional Manila oligarchs.

Finally, he promises to reopen peace talks with the CPP. NPA activity is largely concentrated in Mindanao and, after decades of "armed struggle," many residents see that the government cannot make the insurgency disappear by simply pouring in more soldiers. But members of the high elite "who see the Maoist insurgency as the work of evil ideologues manipulating ignorant peasant folk" still believe that "godless Communism" needs to be crushed.

People believe Duterte can make peace with the Maoists because he developed good personal relationships with them in the eighties. Despite his association with former Marcos cronies, his political allies back then included Leoncio "Jun" Evasco Jr, a former CPP leader, and the late Erasto "Nonoy" Librado, secretary general of Kilusang Mayo Uno-Mindanao, the trade union movement associated with the pro-CPP "national-democratic" milieu.

He developed a live-and-let-live relationship with the guerrillas by not supporting military operations against NPA operations concentrated in the regions bordering Davao.

The legal national-democratic organizations have been relatively soft in their criticism of Duterte, treating him instead as a kind of ally. Much of the critical research on the DDS does not come from the national-democratic human rights groups but from more broad left-liberal ones.

Duterte manages to balance the country's far right and the Maoists. Since 2001, he has endorsed parties from the national-democratic bloc while also voicing his admiration for Ferdinand Marcos and calling for his burial in the cemetery for national heroes.

Many of Duterte's supposed contradictions make more sense once he is put in his regional context. He can be a Filipino nationalist while supporting a decentralized government, calling for Muslim autonomy, and promoting peace with the CPP.

His strange combination of machismo, misogyny, and support for gay marriage makes sense when you understand the long tradition of a visible, but strongly delineated and non-threatening, homosexuality in Mindanao.

## Mix-and-Match Elections

Duterte declared himself a socialist and the first leftist president of the Philippines "but there is little reason to believe this is anything more than demagoguery. The policies of his presidency seem to be more of the same.

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Barely confirmed as the winner, Duterte made it clear that he intends to follow the main lines of Aquino's economic policies. Capital has responded favorably: a few days after the election, [Bloomberg](#) reported that Duterte "is reinvigorating financial markets in the Philippines with his transformation into a business-friendly leader."

His initial economic statements, as well as the suggested names for his cabinet (mostly establishment figures, many of whom were part of previous administrations), drew praise from the financial giant [JPMorgan](#), which declared that "financial markets will welcome the explicit commitment of the incoming administration in keeping the current macro-economic policies."

In fact, it seems that Duterte will liberalize the Philippine economy even more than Aquino or Roxas would. He wants to remove the constitutional limit on [foreign ownership](#) of firms in the Philippines, to organize more Special Economic Zones, and to lower corporate taxes.

The Left, mostly unable to gain a foothold in an electoral field dominated by clientelism and corruption, has not been able to successfully oppose this.

After the fall of the Marcos dictatorship, the national democrats organized the [Partido ng Bayan](#) (People's Party), but after two disappointing elections, the party "practically dissolved itself." The situation has not improved much in the intervening years.

In 2010, two well-known national-democratic candidates, Satur Ocampo and Liza Maza, ran for Senate, but they did not finish among the winning twelve candidates.

Maza came in twenty-fifth with 3.6 million votes, while Ocampo received 3.3 million votes to finish in twenty-sixth place. The only national-democratic senatorial candidate in 2016, Neri Colmenares, gathered almost 6.5 million votes, but came in twentieth, failing to win a seat.

The Philippine left has had more success in the so-called party-list elections. Fifty-seven seats in the House of Representatives (20 percent of the total) are set aside for party lists, which are supposed to represent geographically dispersed and marginalized groups who would otherwise not be represented. Filipinos can vote for one of the party-lists in addition to specific candidates.

The first party-list elections took place in 1998 and saw the Philippine left's return to Congress. Several socialist and social-democratic groups, such as Sanlakas and Akbayan, managed to win seats.

The national democrats returned to electoral politics in 2001 with the organization of [Bayan Muna](#) (Nation First). Since then, they have overtaken other leftist forces in the party-list elections and organized a variety of lists targeting different sectors.

But the Left is struggling here as well. The predatory elite have discovered that the system can be used to access government resources and have organized their own party lists.

In fact, several of the most electorally successful lists have little to do with the marginalized groups they supposedly represent. Instead, businessmen, former high-ranking government officials, and members of political families use them to get elected.



One way the Left has tried to overcome the hurdles put up by the oligarchs is through alliances with established bourgeois parties. But these alliances require the Left to make sweeping political concessions.

This was the road chosen by [Akbayan](#), which was originally created as an alliance between different socialist and social-democratic groups. It has been one of the more successful left-wing electoral formations.

But in 2010, it allied with Benigno Aquino and his Liberal Party. During the Aquino government, Akbayan moved closer and closer to the government, committing itself to the 2016 government candidate "no matter who it would be.

Akbayan's alliance seems to have paid off, at least for Ana Theresia Hontiveros, its senatorial candidate. After toning down her leftist profile and becoming almost indistinguishable from a liberal reformist, she finally made it to the winning twelve. But Akbayan itself fell from fifth (in 2013) to thirteenth in this year's party-list elections.

Dissatisfied with his party's unconditional support for Aquino and his Liberal Party, Akbayan's best-known representative, [Walden Bello](#), resigned his congressional seat in 2015. Commenting on his party's poor performance this year, Bello said; "I don't want to rub it in at this point but since I've been asked, I think the loss of over two hundred thousand votes from 2013 and then slipping from fifth to thirteenth [was probably due to the party's] identification with the Liberal Party . . . "

Results for the national-democratic Bayan Muna were also disappointing. The party got its start in 2001 with the support of then-president [Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo](#). "The CPP apparently was able to secure support from the Macapagal-Arroyo clan that helped Bayan Muna receive the most number of votes for the Party List and the maximum of possible seats," writes Dominique Caouette in his 2004 study of the CPP. But this year Bayan Muna fell to fourteenth place (from third in 2013).

The national-democratic bloc regularly makes alliances with bourgeois politicians founded on basis of written political agreements. But nobody really expects the politicians to uphold these documents.

What matters is the transactional nature of the agreement: the national democrats provide their grassroots supporters' votes in exchange for campaign resources and publicity. The alliances do win congressional seats, but do little to build an independent socialist movement because it links the Left to their senior partners.

It has also led to unexpected alliances, such as in 2010, when national-democratic candidates shared the platform with Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr, the proud son of the late dictator who was then running (successfully, as it turned out) for Senate.

This year, however, there was an interesting experiment that could offer another way forward. After resigning his seat, Walden Bello ran as an independent. Although he still considers himself an Akbayan member, the party did not support his campaign.

Bello also refused money from the oligarchs, turned down support from religious leaders, and did not form alliances with the established parties. Instead, the campaign relied on the support of social movements and progressive groups.

The number of votes Bello gathered was small: just over one million. But Bello's independent candidacy and progressive platform can become a first step toward something bigger.

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As always, the underground layers of the national-democratic movement, the CPP itself, and its diplomatic front, the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) did not officially endorse any candidate, calling for “revolution, not elections.”

But one prominent Maoist had some nice things to say about Duterte. [Jose Maria Sison](#), the founding chair of the CPP and still the main ideologue of Philippine Maoism, declared in pre-election interviews that a Duterte presidency would be the best option for “national unity.” He also expressed optimism about the reforms the new government could bring. In a first for Philippine presidential campaigns, Sison and Duterte talked (via Skype) a few weeks before the elections.

Makabayan, the aboveground political alliance of national democrats, declared its support for presidential candidate Grace Poe. But media reports claim that part of their movement did support Duterte.

Peter Tiu Lavina, a Duterte spokesperson, criticized the national-democratic support for Poe, claiming that “at least their units in Mindanao which were more grounded did not go with the selfish, myopic and opportunist posturing of its national higher organs.”

CPP units gave Duterte’s image as a peace-builder another boost by handing over prisoners of war to him personally while his election campaign was in full swing. Duterte claims Sison, who has been living in the Netherlands in exile for the last few decades, looks forward to coming home once peace negotiations are reopened. Duterte has also offered the CPP several cabinet positions, an offer Sison welcomed as “magnanimous.”

Luis Jalandoni of the NDFP said the proposal is “a big step towards unity and will remove the shackles of oppression and exploitation.” The NDFP even suggested Duterte could be the Philippines’ Hugo Chávez.

But Duterte’s proposals put the CPP in a difficult position. After years of cultivating ties with the CPP units in Mindanao, he has sympathy among them. If they refuse his request for support, Duterte could try to drive a wedge between the Mindanao units and the party leadership.

But if the CPP accepts his offer, they risk ending up as apologists for a bourgeois government. Sison’s suggestion that the proposed cabinet positions go to qualified “patriots,” who are not necessarily CPP members, would put some distance between the party and the government.

Duterte’s plan to reopen peace negotiations poses similar dilemmas. The CPP has always insisted that armed revolution is the only way to solve the country’s problems and claims their guerrilla army is on the verge of escalating to a new, higher level.

The new government however wants the Maoists to give up [arms](#). Refusing the offer to negotiate would cost the CPP support, but they need more mass support to force the government to make meaningful concessions.

It is telling that Duterte offered posts in social affairs to the national democrats while leaving the real core of state power, such as finance and the military, in the hands of establishment representatives.

It is perhaps still too early to tell what kind of “revolution” Duterte will bring to the Philippines. One thing that seems certain is that citizens can expect experiments with draconian law-and-order policies. Duterte has said he wants to reintroduce the death penalty “by hanging.”

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His history in Davao City shows he does not care for suspects' civil rights. The [poorest](#), most vulnerable parts of society will pay the highest price for this. Police violence is already rampant. Now the cops have a president who thinks they should be able to act without consequences.

The situation may seem bleak from the outside. A Duterte presidency will not tackle the impunity, poverty, and inequality that plague the country. Only a strong left can do this. The Philippines already has a relatively powerful left, but it is dispersed over a large number of political groups, movements, and social organizations.

Translating this social weight into political representation is difficult, as the recent election results proved. But the building of an independent, socialist left is long overdue, and there are many committed activists who can make it a reality.

*28 May 2016*

[Jacobin](#)