

The Duterte Reader: Critical Essay on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency

Rodrigo Roa Duterte's meteoric rise to the presidency in 2016 has undeniably left many scholars on Philippine politics dumbfounded. Duterte's campaign departed from traditional campaign methods that had proven effective in getting popular, wealthy, and dynastic personalities elected. His presidential campaign was exceptionally focused in using social media as a tool in influencing people's perceptions and opinions. It attained the rare feat not only of successfully mobilizing voters in a highly fragmented area such as the island of Mindanao but also in garnering support from people of different backgrounds, religions, economic statuses, ideologies, and so on. His assumption of power was filled with so much controversy and anxiety. The first months of his administration saw the institutionalization of some of the most divisive policies—the drug war, Ferdinand Marcos's burial at the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Heroes' Cemetery)—the Philippines has ever seen in recent decades. His presidency has been heavily criticized for normalizing political improprieties (e.g., public cussing, indecent jokes), appropriating populist tendencies (e.g., antagonizing “yellow” forces, fostering public paranoia), and undermining political institutions (e.g., persecuting the opposition, vilifying media institutions, tolerating the proliferation of fake news), among many things.

From these ongoing discussions, *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency* gives an overview of how contemporary interlocutors think about the emerging insights, realizations, articulations, and narratives regarding Duterte and his presidency. Drawing from the perspectives of academics, activists, and journalists, this reader offers one of the most comprehensive examinations and critical interrogations of the Duterte presidency: the man and the myth as well as the institutions and dynamics surrounding his administration and the outcomes thus far. This compilation of essays tackles how and why Duterte's phenomenal rise to national prominence disrupts and perpetuates elite democracy in the Philippines (4). The editor, Nicole Curato, is a sociologist and a recipient of the Australia Research Council's Discovery Early Career

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As Curato explains, *The Duterte Reader* can be arranged according to the following themes: (1) electoral insurgency and the inevitable rise of Duterte, (2) the liberal ideas and illiberal fantasies of his regime, and (3) crass politics and spectacle-driven publics that emerged in his presidency (4–5). This thematization aims to capture the elusive understanding about the person behind Duterte, the institutions and structures that work around him and his supporters in the government, the myths that reinforce the articulation of his visions for the country, the messy and unstable dynamics that complicate the political situation in his regime, and the enigmatic outcomes of his rule that further divide the public.

Expounding on the first theme, electoral insurgency and the inevitable rise of Duterte, are the essays of Carmel Abao, Jesse Altez, Cleve Arguelles, Kloyde Caday, Ronald Holmes, Anna Pertierra, and Julio Teehankee. They discuss how and why Duterte's rise to power disrupts Philippine electoral politics and perpetuates elitist politics. The book offers insights about the following factors that influenced Duterte's come-from-behind victory in 2016 and the widespread popularity that he currently enjoys: activating populist tendencies (305–10); sustaining deep connection with the general public (58); continuing efforts to undermine the dominant EDSA People Power narrative (265); promoting the emergence of a post-EDSA narrative (50–53); promising inclusive politics for the diverse peoples of Mindanao (111); and appropriating melodrama in politics (222). These essays present the earliest and most wide-ranging analyses to date of the Duterte campaign, with its multifaceted operation and the gargantuan political support during the incipient stage of his presidency.

Abao's essay, for example, articulates the populist tendencies of the Duterte regime by focusing on the antagonistic pairing of populism with pluralism. Duterte's populism is attributed to his ability to exploit the growing cynicism and disillusionment of the people toward elite politics through the following means: "othering" the elites, crass and rough talking, action-oriented governance, among others. Compared with other presidential candidates in 2016, Duterte's appeal was generated by intensifying public hatred and frustration toward the political status quo at that time. As Abao claims: "Duterte was the perfect candidate that could ride out and take advantage of the perfect storm. Duterte would not only represent the

people—he was to be the embodiment of the people. Duterte *was* the people ready to take back power from the elites” (306).

Contributing to the second theme, liberal ideas and illiberal fantasies, are the essays of Patricio Abinales, Walden Bello, Lisandro Claudio, Sheila Coronel, Jayson Lamcheck, and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, who examine how the contradictions in the liberal regime in the Philippines played an important role in intensifying support for Duterte. Furthermore, they aim to make sense of Duterte’s governance by focusing on its effort to negate liberal democracy through its fascist disposition (78–79); its neoauthoritarian-nationalist project (94–95); and the securitization (147–51), commodification (176), and politicization (200–3) of the drug war. These essays demonstrate the depth of analysis in the writers’ ability to nuance the articulations, justifications, and conceptualizations, including misconceptions, from the emerging “Dutertismo” vis-à-vis the liberal democratic set-up, biases, structures, and dispositions extant in Philippine politics and governance.

Quimpo’s essay, for example, argues that Duterte’s successful electoral campaign and popularity have been heavily influenced by the effective production, articulation, and diffusion of the illegal drugs problem as a “securitized” issue that can then justify the state’s use of excessive violence toward the populace (147–51). Quimpo also claims that the securitization of drugs was easily activated by Duterte by being populist on the issue. Duterte, as Quimpo claims, “adroitly targeted an issue of great popular concern that could project him as an action man in busting crime and that could broaden his popular appeal” (152).

The last theme, crass politics and spectacle-driven publics, draws upon the works of Jason Cabañes, Jayeel Cornelio, John Andrew Evangelista, Emerson Sanchez, and Adele Webb to comprehend the general sentiment and perception toward, including the public toleration and acceptance of, the Duterte’s regime’s extremely antagonistic and excessively vulgar tendencies. In this part of the book, the authors try to engage the general public(s), in particular, their complex sense of identity, place in society, and political ethos, to name a few. The analysts illuminate some of the misunderstood social and political dimensions that also constitute the present-day Duterte regime’s extremely vitriolic politics (236–40); hypermasculinity of political rule (255–61); pseudo-ideological alignment with the extreme Left (288–96); and toying with the colonial past and the political ambivalence of Philippine democracy (133–39).

Cornelio and Cabañes's discussion on the rise of trolls makes sense of the ambiguous role of social media in elections by looking at the phenomenon of vitriolic politics (236–40). Their essay depicts trolling as a form of online engagement that seeks to affect another person's disposition toward politics—by harassment, intimidation, or threats. Duterte's campaign team masterfully appropriated the use of trolling to control the mood and direction of the framings, articulations, and conversations in public. This campaign method influenced public opinion by deploying messages that vilified elite-driven politics and a conniving media, thus allowing Duterte's camp to strategically frame and shape the election narrative on issues such as criminality and drugs, among others (238).

Notwithstanding the brevity and the provisional claims of the essays, readers will definitely appreciate the efforts of the editor to compile these seemingly diverse yet theoretically entwined critical papers about Duterte and his controversial presidency. However, to the more critical and engaged scholars of Philippine politics in general, the book can be a frustrating source of information about the real score on Duterte's presidency. For one, readers will find the book inadequate in discussing the dynamics between various stakeholders (e.g., labor groups, movements, the church, youth, media) and the current actors/institutions of power (e.g., military, police, administration coalitions) under Duterte. Furthermore, the book is silent on the undercurrents between and among the "blocs" within the regime and how these dynamics affect the overall workings and shortcomings of this administration. Lastly, it would be interesting to see how stakeholders engage the actors within the Duterte bloc, especially how these actors/institutions affect the overall overtures, successes, and failures of the current regime.

The book provides an initial discussion of Duterte's rise to power and a preview of what his presidency might look like in the years to come. Published almost a year after his electoral victory, it probes his political rule by revealing the overall "structure" of his regime: its excesses and immoderations and of course its shortcomings and defects. Using the multidisciplinary lenses in the social sciences, it puts forward the sharpest insights to date that deal with the contentious topic of Duterte: the man, his "Dutertismo," his fantasies, frustrations, resentments, and fetishes, among others.