



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 362 | November 9, 2016

Duterte, Mindanao, and Political Culture

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Alan Tidwell, Director of the Center for Australian, New Zealand and Pacific Studies at Georgetown University explains that “Arguably the Philippines was in crisis even before the election of Duterte. His election can be seen, in part, as a reaction to that crisis, as much as it can be seen as contributing to it.”

The Philippine President, Rodrigo Duterte, seems intent on taking his country down an untrodden path. Since being sworn in as the Philippines’ 16th president this June, the first from Mindanao, he has made international news by advocating extrajudicial killings while at the same time thumbing his nose at the US. What could be motivating his dramatic actions? Many observers focus on his idiosyncratic personality. But greater insight comes through understanding the political culture of Mindanao in which he honed his political skills. The political culture of Mindanao sits within the broader Philippine context that is racked by violence, poverty and corruption.

Human Rights Watch reported that in 2015, the year before Duterte came into power, the Philippines was a country where attacks against indigenous people were rampant, child labor, especially in small-scale mining, was commonplace, eight journalists were murdered, and extra-judicial killings especially in Mindanao were routine. In the 2015 Perception of Corruption Index released by Transparency International, the Philippines ranked 95th out of 167 states. While certainly not the worst by global standards, the Philippines is hardly a model of good governance. Its rank of 115 out of 188 countries in the 2015 Human Development Index underscores the challenges it faces. The current tidal wave of population (approximately 102 million with a growth rate of 1.7%), strains the nation’s budgets and infrastructure. Metro Manila’s population exceeds 12 million and continues to grow. The burgeoning population, corruption, disregard for the rule of law and poverty have combined to dramatically inflate the crime rate in the Philippines. In 2012, a total of 217,812 crimes were reported; by 2014 that number had exploded to 1,161,188. Arguably the Philippines was in crisis even before the election of Duterte. His election can be seen, in part, as a reaction to that crisis, as much as it can be seen as contributing to it.

Who is Rodrigo Duterte?

Duterte is the son of Vicente Duterte, one time governor of the then-province of Davao. Beginning in 1987, Rodrigo Duterte served as mayor of Davao for seven terms; his daughter and son now serve as mayor and vice-mayor, respectively. Even before Duterte began his current six year term as President, he attracted attention. During his campaign he earned international infamy for saying “I was angry she was raped, yes that was one thing. But she was so beautiful, I think the mayor should have been first. What a waste,” when talking about a 1989 rape and murder of an Australian missionary in Davao.

Shortly after his ascent the pace of extrajudicial killings increased rapidly. The victims appear to be mostly those suspected of drug dealing, though given the lack of due process and judicial review it is hard to say for sure.

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The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

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Then came Duterte's now-infamous condemnation of US President Barack Obama, calling him a 'son of a whore,' which subsequently led to Mr. Obama cancelling a scheduled meeting with Duterte during the ASEAN summit. Most recently the Philippine President has denounced the US-Philippine alliance, declaring that it was "time to say goodbye" to the United States during an address in Beijing. Whether Duterte's rejection of the United States represents a real shift in Philippine policy or whether it is better understood as leverage or personal pique remains unclear. Given Duterte's enflamed rhetoric and decision to curtail US military exercises in the Philippines, it seems that the former mayor of Davao has something more in mind than mere drama.

Duterte's actions have led many to trawl through his past and wonder at his motivations. There is no doubt that to many Duterte is an unusual character; however, his actions seem less idiosyncratic when placed in the context of the politics of Mindanao.

Mindanao Madness

Mindanao is where the Philippine state is at its weakest; in part because the area is deeply resistant to control. After all, Mindanao is notorious as the place where both the Spanish and American colonial powers were unable to assert their dominance. Clan allegiance and warfare is rife in Mindanao. This violence is reinforced by the *Rido*, best described as "a state of recurring hostilities between families and kinship groups characterized by a series of retaliatory acts of violence carried out to avenge a perceived affront or injustice."

Separatist conflict has been the dominant feature of Mindanao since at least 1972, when then-President Ferdinand Marcos signed Proclamation 1081 imposing martial law throughout the Philippines. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Abu Sayyaf group, and the New People's Army have all fought against the government of the Republic of the Philippines.

Separatist conflicts are not the only threat to Mindanao peace. The worst single human rights abuse recorded in Philippine history emerges from bloody competition between local kin and tribal group leadership. Some 58 people died in the 2009 Maguindanao massacre when supporters of Mindanao politician Ismael "Toto" Mangudadatu, candidate for governor of Maguindanao, were executed. Members of the clan led by rival gubernatorial candidate Andal Ampatuan Sr., were suspected of carrying out the attack.

Mindanao is also a crime hotbed. Of the top fifteen Philippine cities most affected by crime, five are in Mindanao including Davao City, which ranks fourth overall and second for rape and Cagayan de Oro which ranks fifth overall. Poverty is sharper and deeper in Mindanao than elsewhere in the Philippines. Nine out of ten provinces with the lowest HDI levels are in Mindanao. The people of Mindanao must constantly contend with the dual plagues of violence and poverty.

Conclusion

President Duterte's actions have certainly taken on a singular character. Analysts unfamiliar with the politics of Mindanao may wish to cast the President as 'odd.' No doubt he is out of the ordinary, but much of his behavior is in keeping with the politics of his home island where violence is commonplace. In addition to violence, allegiances are familial and jealously protected. An offense against one extended family clan member can bring on vengeance from any other part of the extended family clan – a sure recipe for conflict escalation. Yet, in the final analysis Duterte is a product of his environment in which respect for rule of law and human rights runs a distant second to the rule of violence and power.

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