Philippines: The Left Under Duterte

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Former Philippine congressman Walden Bello on what Duterte's election means for the Left.

During the years of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, Walden Bello worked from the United States to expose the Marcos regime's financial links with the World Bank and its irresponsible use of development loans.

Later, after breaking with the Communist Party of the Philippines, he joined Akbayan Citizens' Action Party, a Philippine electoral alliance of socialists and progressives. He served in Congress as an Akbayan party-list representative in 2010.

But he resigned from his position in March 2015, citing his disagreement with the party's support of the Aquino presidency due to its deviation from promises of good governance and accountability [1].

During the 2016 national elections, Bello embarked on an independent senatorial campaign [2]. The campaign ran with the support of NGOs, people's organizations, and other progressive organized forces to form the Dignidad Coalition [3].

Bello ran on a basic platform of socialism and dignity, advocating for domestic food security, high-quality state-sponsored education, labor rights, and land reform. He won over one million votes, but he was unable to win a seat in the legislature.

Jacobin spoke with Bello about his recent campaign, setbacks for the Left in Latin America and worldwide, and the troubling rise of President-elect Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.

You ran outside of the Philippine party system as an independent candidate, describing your campaign as a venue for progressive coalition-building. Where did the drive for a new left alternative come from?

Walden Bello – The groups and party-lists that came together to draft me initially to run for senator were quite dissatisfied with the two key forces of the Left — on the one hand, the Makabayan bloc of Congress, identified with the National Democratic Front (NDFP), and on the other, the Akbayan coalition, which was seen as having converted itself, tragically, into basically the left wing of the Liberal Party.

What my campaign stood for was deeper political empowerment and an anti-neoliberal economic policy. But because to some extent democratic empowerment and neoliberalism would simply be abstract to people, it was formulated as a "coalition to fight for dignity."

What social base makes up the Dignidad Coalition?

The members are mainly members of five party-lists engaged in my candidacy, and members of a variety of social, civil-society groups — farmers' groups, women's groups, workers' unions and federations, and organizations in support of indigenous rights.

The Dignidad Coalition came together as an umbrella that brought together different people from these different organized forces.

How to bring in people that have been mobilized, but were not organized before — that is the key challenge up to this point.

What was your general campaign strategy?

We wanted to see if we could wage a different kind of campaign, one that would maximize the use of social media and also fire up the base of the different populations — including the urban poor, workers, peasants, and middle-class professionals — who would be the campaigners on the ground.

The ideal was to see if we could turn a social movement into electoral machinery, because the dynamics of social movements are very different.

We also wanted to ensure that we didn't rely on big corporate money. And we wanted to make sure that we did not go to the religious kingmakers, like Iglesias Ni Cristo.

We did this on principle because so many of the other candidates, even if they have a faintly liberal or progressive image, found the electoral process expensive. Inevitably, they tapped into the big corporate groups.

These were the red lines we did not cross in our campaign — because these are the groups you want to discipline, to bust, when you're in power. You're practically destroying your credibility if these are the people you rely on in your campaign.

How do you feel about the campaign's performance?

I think that we never really saw this as a one-shot deal, but instead as something that we would gain experience from.

We hoped that working together in the coalition would create working relationships that could be the base of a more long-term formation. The Dignidad Coalition was born in the middle of the campaign, and eventually we thought that it would go beyond the campaign.

However, we were not the beneficiaries of the electoral insurgency — it was President-elect Duterte who was able to accomplish that.

Still, in terms of the results, I think people were happy we were able to get over a million votes. And given the fact that we had run the campaign without crossing those red lines I mentioned, this was a good result.

But one good thing is that the electoral process brought together these groups that did not have many working relationships among themselves before.

And the elections, the process by which we had to convert different groups within a social movement into pieces of an electoral organization, was a very good experience in terms of working together.

Do you think the coalition has a future beyond your own persona?

I certainly hope so. People have been talking about 2019. But I discourage that kind of talk because I don't think that I will be willing to do that.

First of all, I'm going to be seventy-three years old, and that's quite old to be running for office. Secondly, there are many new faces that really deserve more exposure.

And third, I think that the Duterte period is going to pose certain challenges to everybody, including people within the coalition through which leaders can arise.

Many in the Philippines have compared your platform and reliance on smaller donors to the Bernie Sanders campaign. What similarities and differences do you see between his campaign and your own?

First of all, the Sanders campaign has definitely connected with a very big part of the electorate in the United States in a way that I don't think I was able to.

Secondly, I think that the discourse of the Sanders campaign is in many ways more advanced than the discourse that we have here. I mean, he's already talking about socialism and putting socialism out there as an alternative.

But that is not something that we can do out here, not only because of bad images associated with socialism, but that it would feel very abstract to people here. In the US, it's much less abstract. When you talk about socialism, it's an alternative.

The third thing is that in the US, Bernie Sanders did not have a left bloc on which to base his campaign. He came as an individual mainly reliant on a loose liberal progressive community. Here, I really came here from the social movements of the Left.

But the similarity of course is that we are both essentially talking about real democratic empowerment.

We're talking about the way inequality has really destroyed people. In the United States they talk about the one percent; we talk about the oligarchy here in the Philippines.

And we are also talking about the way that finance capital has been an extremely destructive process in terms of communities and societies, although here our criticism of finance capital and globalization is tied in to a criticism of the oligarchic landed class.

Duterte proclaims himself as the first socialist president of the Philippines. What do you think he is tapping into when he says this?

I think that when Duterte says he is the first socialist president what he really means is something more akin to "socialist populism."

Basically, he sees himself as a figure that will serve in the interest of the marginalized masses. So I don't think he's using the term socialism in the way that progressives would use the term.

And maybe that's his understanding of it — that it's really a personalistic kind of relationship to the masses whose interest he feels he's going to work for.

In the campaign, there was definitely a kind of anti-elite language that fueled his popularity. I think

that he connected in a way that he probably hasn't even realized he connected. Because of that he has really aroused a lot of expectations.

Yes, he has an inter-class appeal. But nevertheless, especially towards the latter part of his campaign, it was very clear to me that the people at his rallies were the people that came from the poor, that came from the workers, the urban poor, etc.

And I think that these are the same groups that have been marginalized both from electoral power and by the liberal discourse that emerged during EDSA III.

That was a time that you could see that class politics had caught hold, even if only briefly. So there's those expectations that have been raised.

And there's a lot of debate on whether Duterte will in fact deliver, or how he's going to break away from the neoliberal discourse.

So you disagree with the analysis that Duterte intends to stick with the neoliberal status quo?

Alex de Jong termed his style of leadership "neoliberal authoritarianism" in his article [4], and I think it's too early to say that actually.

The reason I say that is because I know Duterte doesn't really engage that much in economic analysis. But I also know that he realizes that there's a great deal of expectations.

And to be able to deliver on those, he will have to bend the neoliberal rules. He will really have to move away from the conservative management's straitjacket that you have right now: anti-redistribution, low inflation, against state intervention in the economy.

There's no way that he's going to be able to deliver on these expectations without having to bend these rules. And I think the worry about the Makati Business Club, the IMF and others — they're not worried about socialism.

They're worried about a Chávez kind of populism that moves away from the anti-inflationary, neoliberal-conservative economic management, and this is going to unleash economic unpredictability, scare off foreign investors, and bring about inflation.

And to say at this point that he will not bend the rules — not in a socialist way, but in a populist one — is premature at this point.

What about his authoritarian leanings?

At the same time, and here is where he appealed a lot to the upper class, the middle class, and even among the lower classes is his anti-crime agenda. And I think this is where he feels he's an expert.

I have a feeling that he will do what people have expected — which is basically put human rights and due process aside and move very quickly on dealing with crime in shortcut ways. I think unfortunately he's going to deliver on that.

And I don't think this is just a middle-class, or an upper-class kind of agenda. I think that appeals to a lot of people in the slum areas where they have to deal with drug dealers and pushers and crime in general. I think that's part of his whole populist agenda. And that's where I think the problems also will emerge.

Liberals in this country have been basically quite complacent thinking that their values, including questions of human rights and due process, are sacrosanct and institutionalized into the political system.

But I think that has been a very big and questionable assumption. Duterte has basically not feared to transgress liberal discourse. Not only does this not trouble a significant part of the population, they've even clapped for it!

This just shows me that the liberal-democratic values have not really been fully institutionalized or internalized, except by certain sectors of the elite and the middle class.

So as long as he feels that he has got momentum behind him, I think that will give him the arrogance to do what he wants. But that momentum can only be there so long as he eventually delivers on the economic front.

And if he doesn't deliver there, that momentum could fade very quickly. I sense that if he delivers some major redistributive initiatives in the first six months to a year, liberal democracy here is really in trouble.

There's another big question mark for his anti-crime program — what is he going to rely on? There's the military and there's the police, and one cannot assume that they will be a very compliant tool.

You have a lot of ambitious people both in and out of the military, in and out of the police. It will not be an easy process to convert the military and the police into the tools of his anti-crime policy.

What factions of the oligarchy are likely to rebuff Duterte's anti-crime agenda?

I think what will happen is that if he pushes through this anti-crime policy and at the same time pushes through some redistributionist policies, then that is going to bring him into conflict with parts of the elite.

But if, which I don't think will happen, he pretty much retains the old economic framework and just maybe expands the CCT program as his mechanism against poverty, then probably they'll say, "Okay this is fine."

They can live with the CCT program, but they can't live with real redistribution, which for them would really be anathema.

Nonetheless, I think there are certain sectors of the elite in this country, some of whom are in the Liberal Party and identify with liberal-democratic values — pluralism, bourgeois democracy, human rights, and due process.

These are many of the same people that led the first EDSA revolution. So I don't think they all have just a cynical view of liberal values.

And obviously the last administration, of Roxas and Aquino, were both very big on human rights, very big on due process — but nevertheless conservative when it came to corruption.

So that's the liberal elite that we have. And they're real. They're there. And I think that opposition to Duterte is to be expected from these people who were the ones blindsided by his election.

And it will be very important for progressives not to allow themselves to be led by these people. That is the surest way to suicide for them — to be seen as being led by these people who were decisively

repudiated at the polls.

How else may Duterte differ from previous presidents? Does he have the capacity to build something sustainable beyond his six-year term?

The one thing about him, which is different from many politicians, is his non-reliance on a party.

And it's really classical Bonapartism, where the leader and the masses join forces. And so as long as he holds the support of the masses, he can be tempted to do anything.

That is, if he feels that he has this direct communication with the masses, then he doesn't have to go through the institutional route. And that's very Bonapartist.

And I think whether he will build something that lasts beyond the next six years, whether under his reign the whole EDSA system is going to vanish, it really depends on the interaction of forces at this point.

If he's able to maintain the populist momentum, if he doesn't get strong resistance from different society groups, if the different parts of the state basically become compliant — then he will realize how fractured the institutions are and how they can be replaced.

But he's an instinctive politician, and I think he's going to wait. He may not even have all of these things planned out, but a lot of these things emerge out of the process.

If the things that I said happen, then that will probably give him the sense that he can create something institutionally new.

Some of his close supporters might be the people who will be thinking in this way — that he may need a mass party. And he may not realize the need for it, but they might convince him otherwise. And even if he thinks about it, it's not easy to build.

What do you make of issues the Left is facing in Brazil and Venezuela?

We really need to think through more clearly the failure of the Left in Venezuela and in Brazil in particular.

I think that in terms of Brazil, there were probably a number of conjunctures that were missed. One was that the Workers' Party coming to power in 2002 had a very strong reputation as a clean, anti-corruption party. And I think they made a really wrong decision in terms of the compromises they made even back then.

The first corruption scandals first took place in 2002 and 2004, and the rationale was that they had to buy off others in order to grow. That giving-in opened key sectors of the party up to corruption.

The second thing is the Workers' Party was absorbed by government — it really failed to maintain itself as an independent force that did, in fact, act as a check in government.

The third thing is that it compromised with neoliberalism. The party avoided really attacking the conservative economic policies of the capitalist regime.

Instead it relied on the Bolsa Família in terms of alleviating poverty, making it seem like there could be a painless transition to a more equal Brazil. Now I think that's a big mistake. So the lessons to me are clear in the case of Brazil, which I've followed more closely.

In the case of Venezuela, I think that one big problem is that during the Chávez period they were not able to get out of the dependence on oil even though they had the instruments to begin to do that.

The second thing, of course, is the continuing reliance of the government on the military. Whether we like it or not, whether or not we say it was a progressive military, that became a substitute for a real mass political party.

And thirdly, a real mass political party would have solved the problem of succession. It's very rare that charisma can be transferred, and you really have to organize a succession in terms of the succession of policies, and not just have a vague approach.

So I think those are the lessons that we can get from Venezuela and Brazil.

But to some extent, the Left is in a different position in these two countries than here. Here we're desperately trying to make ourselves relevant and grab onto a critical mass of the population to base our contention for power.

They were much further ahead of that. How they achieved that is another thing. But certainly they were able to achieve a critical mass in the population for the Left, which so far we have not yet been able to do here.

But these are lessons for the Left everywhere, and not just for the Philippines. What happened in Venezuela and Brazil really has implications for the Left globally.

We need to draw the appropriate lessons. We win if they win in Brazil, we win if they win in the United States, we win if they win in Venezuela.

And those are the stakes in the fight against neoliberalism and capitalism at this point in time. It's really a global struggle. But the important thing is to have footholds for the Left to show that it can govern.

Nonetheless, I think to a great extent the Latin American experiences in the first fifteen years of this century were very important in terms of providing inspiration. And then from 2008 on, the economic and financial crisis really showed how bankrupt the current system is.

There have been setbacks in Latin America, and then there was that big setback in Greece. And so you have a situation where neoliberalism really is in crisis and cannot help but be in crisis at this point, because it's really exhausted its capacity to reinvigorate capitalism.

And yet there is no new alternative that's emerging, that's taking hold in a number of countries or in one country. So that's really where we're at, at this point.

It just pushes us more to really take hold of the crisis and get our act together, because history's not going to wait for us. In the case of the Philippines, with its own specific conditions, we're trying here to grapple with the situation.

And I'm sure in other countries that is happening too, but the big issues of course are always that if the Left does not step in or get its act together, then the Right will — meaning the counterrevolutionary right that can even adopt anticapitalist rhetoric.

So the question you have to ask is this — is the Duterte phenomenon an emerging attempt to grapple with the crisis of dependent capitalism in the Philippines? Have a great part of the masses gravitated to him because it represents to them a desperate effort to change things?

One could say the same of Trump's position in the United States.

Unfortunately, that's the whole advantage of the Right. They can always think different things and put them together and make it appealing to different sectors.

But that's both the strength and the weakness of the Left — its rationality, its desire to be coherent, to be politically consistent.

In the end it's a good thing. But we're dealing with these fascist personalities that are able to create these contradictory plots that make sense in terms of emotional coherence, but in terms of rational coherence are really out of this world. But we can't go that route. It would be tremendously opportunistic for us.

There have been leftists who have gone that route — like Mussolini. But look where he ended up.

P.S.

* Jaconin. 6.29.16: https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/walden-bello-philippines-duterte-dignidad-coalition-akbayan/

* Walden Bello is a writer and activist born in the Philippines, co-founder of Focus on the Global South, and former Akbayan representative. He ran for the Philippine senate in 2016 as part of the Dignidad Coalition.

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 37231), Philippine Left: Akbayan and the conscience of a progressive – The corridors of power and our ethic.

[2] http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/730732/walden-bello-joins-senate-race-as-luke-skywalker

[3] ESSF (article 38347), The Dignidad Coalition (Philippines): Why our campaign has blazed the way to our democratic future.

[4] ESSF (article 38075), Rodrigo Duterte, The Philippines' New Strongman.