

OPINION

President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines' Strongman Syndrome

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"If your destabilisation is taking place and there is chaos already, I will not hesitate to declare a revolutionary government until the end of my term," warned firebrand Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in October, amid growing domestic opposition to his presidency.

The threat of suspending the country's democratic constitution was just another iteration in Duterte's long-running flirtation with authoritarian rule. However, over the succeeding weeks, as the Southeast Asian country prepared to host world leaders for the East Asia Summit, the Filipino leader tried to downplay the provocative statement. He insisted that the threat wasn't final policy (yet), but, instead, just an exploration of various scenarios to address the country's need for order and stability.

Yet this didn't prevent Duterte's supporters from openly calling for the suspension of the country's democratic constitution in favour of an imperial presidency. On November 30, pro-Duterte civic organizations held rallies in major cities, where they advocated for an outright establishment of a "revolutionary government".

Philippine democracy has never looked as brittle in recent memory, with a growing number of Filipinos brazenly expressing their profound disenchantment with democracy and embracing authoritarian fantasies in the person of Duterte. And what's happening in the Philippines is eerily echoed across emerging market democracies, ranging from India to Turkey and Indonesia.

Populist art of governance

Like any modern populist, Duterte has presented himself as the voice of the Filipino people, the knight in shining armour who shields the nation against criminals and foreign threats, and, without lacking a tinge of millenarianism, as the Philippines' last hope for national salvation.

As Jan-Werner Muller argues in his latest book, "What is Populism?", populists are inherently illiberal and, over the long run, risk sliding into full-fledged authoritarianism as they implement their vision of collective revival. This is precisely because of their exclusive claim to represent what French Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau termed as the "general will" - namely, the collective interest of the people.

"In Duterte's conspiratorial narrative, a cabal of oligarchs, liberal civic groups, insurgents and criminal syndicates are hell-bent on unseating him."

For populists, Muller argues, they and only their supporters have monopoly on the true interest of society, while critics are automatically dismissed as ungrateful citizens or, even worse, treasonous elements opposed to change. Any opposition is dismissed and derided as a plot by “the enemy” of the republic.

Evidence-based and pluralistic public debate, which German philosopher Jürgen Habermas termed as “communicative rationality”, is supplanted by a more stridently us-versus-them struggle for the soul of the nation.

No wonder then, for instance, Duterte often lashes out at his critics, accusing them of hatching a “destabilisation plot” against his government in order to preserve an oligarchic status quo.

The tough-taking president often speaks with moral conviction, accusing his opponents of sabotaging his administration’s key policies. In Duterte’s conspiratorial narrative, a cabal of oligarchs, liberal civic groups, insurgents and criminal syndicates are hell-bent on unseating him.

Other democratically-elected populist leaders, such as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have often deployed similar language against their critics.

The upshot of populism is often the progressive emaciation of liberal institutions, which aim to curb the powers of political leaders based on the rule of law, and the principles of pluralism, which presume no single group or individual has monopoly on truth and public interest.

Autocratic nostalgia

Of crucial importance isn’t so much Duterte’s rhetoric, but the fact that a growing number of Filipinos are subscribing to what I call the “strongman syndrome”: the simplistic belief that a decisive leader with strong political will can single-handedly address complex 21st-century problems, which beset rapidly-developing nations like the Philippines.

According to the latest Pew Survey, 50 percent of Filipinos support autocratic rule in their country. In fellow, emerging market democracies such as Indonesia (52 percent) and India (55 percent), the majority support a “strong leader” who has little respect for democratic checks and balances.

Another, recent study, published earlier this year in the *Journal of Democracy*, shows that the majority of citizens in the Philippines, as in India and Turkey, prefer a “strong leader” who doesn’t have to bother with elections at all. It is precisely within this context of autocratic nostalgia that thousands of Duterte supporters took to the streets of Metro Manila on November 30, beseeching the president to institute “extraordinary measures” to fix a “failed [political] system”.

“Democracy has simply lost its currency in the imagination of too many people, gradually paving the way for fulfillment of most pernicious authoritarian fantasies.”

They called for, among other things, legislation of tough internal security measures against enemies of the state, increased spending on national security and law enforcement, as well as suspension of the democratic constitution in favour of a powerful presidency and a federal form of government.

To be fair, attendance at the pro-Duterte rally was relatively poor, with only a few thousand showing up. Also, in an apparent show of force, pro-democracy activists in the country held their own counter-rallies, accusing the Duterte administration of lurching towards full-fledged authoritarianism. More importantly, the powerful Philippine military has, so far, openly opposed the

institution of a revolutionary government.

Yet, widespread autocratic nostalgia, as well as the landslide election and enduring popularity of populist leaders such as Duterte, underline growing dissatisfaction with liberal democracy across the post-colonial world. Democracy has simply lost its currency in the imagination of too many people, gradually paving the way for fulfillment of most pernicious authoritarian fantasies.

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* Al Jazeera. 4 Dec 2017:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/philippines-strongman-syndrome-171204114823206.html>

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