

Philippines under Duterte - Revolutionary government: Show of force...or sign of weakness?

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Manila, Philippines - A Revolutionary Government would most likely lead not to authoritarian stability but to a succession of destabilizing military coups. This scenario, more than anything else, is what prevents the President from giving the green light to the RevGov faction.

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The rallies for a so-called Revolutionary Government ("RevGov") have alarmed many sectors of the citizenry.

People have cause to be worried because the rallies are blatantly pushing for tearing up the Constitution and replacing it with a regime that would be a thinly-veiled dictatorship that would concentrate power in the hands of the president. But even as the people must take this threat seriously and oppose it, it must also be pointed out that the push for a Revolutionary Government is a sign of confusion and disagreement within the political coalition supporting President Rodrigo Duterte.

Conflicting agenda in the Duterte coalition

The faction pushing for the RevGov finds itself at cross-purposes with the faction that prefers to change the political system via charter change through a constituent assembly, and the two, in turn, are pitted against those who would prefer the political status quo and pour their efforts to winning the Senate and House elections in 2019.

The electoral campaign has already begun for the last group, and the RevGroup's agenda would suspend if not abolish the electoral process and could do away with the seats they are vying for. While united in their support for Duterte, the factions are in disagreement on their strategies for perpetuating Dutertismo.

These groups are fighting for Duterte's ear, and the RevGroup's rallies are a "show of force" meant as much for us ordinary citizens as for the other forces in the Duterte coalition and for Duterte himself.

Their agenda is for Duterte to use authoritarian means to prop up the political and economic status

quo without a drastic break from the current political order. They don't mind Duterte's trampling on the human rights of the poor and vulnerable with his extrajudicial executions, but they would mind his limiting their access to political office and curbing their economic power.

The RevGov gang

Many of those advocating a Revolutionary Government, in contrast, are frustrated middle class supporters, political adventurers, ex-military rebels, and ex-activists who want to have a larger share of the political and economic power that they feel is now monopolized by what they view as the "oligarchs" that have "hijacked" Duterte.

These people do not seek system change; they simply want a share of the spoils. But in contrast to the elites allied with Duterte, they are conscious of the dangers of Duterte's slipping popularity among the masses that voted for him owing to his failure so far to deliver concrete measures that would make a difference in their lives. However, the absence of a program of social and economic reform in the RevGov agenda shows that its partisans have no answer to people's aspirations other than the advocacy of an authoritarian order.

So far the Duterte coalition has been held together by the different factions' common cause against the so-called Yellows or Dilawan and by their support for Duterte's War on the Poor that masquerades as a "War on Drugs". The RevGov rallies reveal, however, that there are serious tensions within the coalition – tensions may break out in open conflict very soon.

Duterte's dilemma

Where is Duterte in all this? We should expect him to throw some crowd-pleasing lines to the RevGov partisans. He knows, however, that unilaterally abolishing the current constitutional order would also mean destroying the source of his legitimacy as chief executive which he derives from the constitutionally sanctioned process of succession via national elections.

It would expose him to efforts to depose him by forces that would justify their moves as efforts to restore the constitutional order, whatever might be their real intentions. Duterte is likely to be especially worried about the military, which he does not control, like he does the police, where ambitious officers, jealous of their peers in power in Thailand and Myanmar, would welcome his destroying the Constitution to unleash their own projects to grab political power.

A Revolutionary Government would most likely lead not to authoritarian stability but to a succession of destabilizing military coups. This scenario, more than anything else, is what prevents the President from giving the green light to the RevGov faction.

Counterrevolution, not revolution

The recent turn of events should remind us that the Duterte coalition remains, in many ways, an alliance of convenience among forces that have disparate agenda behind their common support for Duterte's war on the poor, due process, and human rights.

It underlines that there is nothing progressive about the Duterte agenda.

The revolutionary rhetoric employed by some forces in the alliance simply masks their agenda of having a larger piece of the political and economic pie. A program of social, economic, and political transformation to bring about greater equality and justice is the last thing they have in mind.

The so-called Duterte Revolution is, in fact, more appropriately termed a counterrevolution rather than a continuation of the glorious revolution of 1896 led by Gat Andres Bonifacio.

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P.S.

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<https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/189970-revolutionary-government-duterte-force-weakness>

* A member of the House of Representatives from 2009 to 2015, Walden Bello made the only resignation on principle in the history of Congress owing to principled differences with the administration of former President Benigno Aquino III.