

Philippines: Duterte's order to militarize the Bureau of Customs, governance and corruption

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One can't think of anything more emblematic of the Duterte style of governance than the order to place the operation of the Bureau of Customs (BOC) under the supervision of the military.

It is direct and personal; it neither consults nor delegates, except on some economic issues. The executive departments most directly implicated in this latest order — the defense and finance departments — appear completely clueless about its parameters, and, indeed, of its legality. Careful not to contradict the presidential directive, however, they say nothing as they wait for a more explicit definition of what the President has in mind, or until he stops talking about it.

Equating analysis with paralysis, Mr. Duterte's governance style puts a premium on quick action as an index of political will. It is arrogant. It is dismissive, if not contemptuous, of any need for methodical planning, if only to set clear targets and review criteria.

The announcement itself — radical and sweeping in its language — appears to be the main object of the exercise. As with the handling of the drug problem, the “cesspool” that is Boracay, the greed and rapaciousness in the mining industry, the communist threat, crime, and government corruption in general — the aim is to elicit shock and awe — in proportion to the President's visible exasperation with phlegmatic solutions. It is calculative in the use of the carrot and stick — in particular, in the mobilization of fear to achieve results.

It cares little for laws, precedent, universal norms, or constitutional correctness. It asserts its legitimacy by confidently assuming responsibility for questionable decisions taken, for shameless behavior displayed, or for reckless words uttered in the course of a public appearance. Indeed, it seems to take pleasure in breaking all expectations and correct form, and in using the powerful platform of the office to insult and ridicule targets of presidential ire and enmity — secure in the thought that unadorned autocracy is its own justification.

It is what perplexes, amuses, irritates, scandalizes, and angers those who have watched Mr. Duterte's inexplicable rise to the presidency. It is also what endears him to his countless adoring fans. He appears to be the perfect symbol of an epoch that celebrates the unbridled expression of contempt, hostility, hate, and resentment as the ultimate mark of authenticity.

Without a clear understanding of the systemic roots of corruption and a rational plan of action to extirpate these, Mr. Duterte's show of political will at the corrupt BOC is nothing but hot air. Members of the Armed Forces may be exemplars of discipline and obedience, but they do not possess the specific knowledge and expertise needed to run Customs.

Discipline, the readiness to obey without question, and the will to enforce the rules are plainly not enough. The soldiers have to know what they are supposed to be looking for, and what they are up against. A working familiarity with the situation at the BOC — how the system of internal controls in

place fails to come to life in the day-to-day tasks of inspecting cargo and collecting the right revenue — is basic. To be sure, such familiarity can be acquired, but not overnight. The failure of former military men — Marine Capt. Nicanor Faeldon and PNP Gen. Isidro Lapeña and the crew of sharp-eyed young ex-officers they had brought with them — to stop the smuggling of large shipments of illegal drugs into the country eloquently attests to this.

So complex is the sociology of corruption in organizations that the science of governance can hardly keep up with the inventiveness of the corrupt and the criminally inclined. The use of gigantic magnetic lifters to conceal and smuggle drugs, for example, is remarkable for its daring simplicity. It's almost at par with the use of drug mules to hide and transport drugs converting their body parts into pouches. One needs information and experienced personnel to uncover these methods. Asking the military to take over Customs on the ground that they are used to carrying out orders from higher authority without question is simply bereft of imagination. Or, maybe, that's what this is all about — to appear publicly to take the problem head on while allowing it, for whatever reason, to continue undisturbed.

The German sociologist, Max Weber, probably did the most extensive work on bureaucracy as a modern form of rational administration. He understood its superiority over traditional forms of organization. But he was also aware of the dysfunctions that typically arise when officials lose sight of the substantive goals of their organization and become overly focused on the details of procedural compliance. The organizational rigidity that is created becomes fertile ground for corruption and inefficiency.

I am amazed by the way Mr. Duterte has managed to keep his popularity ratings despite his unproductive and capricious hit-and-miss approach to governance. I would attribute it less to his charisma than to the surge of public disenchantment with conventional politics and government administration that is engulfing nations like ours. People think a willful strongman is the answer.

Be that as it may, I challenge the President to devote a little of his vaunted political will to addressing the nation's other chronic problems — the lack of a mass housing program for the poor, the modernization of public transport, urban congestion, unemployment and job insecurity, and the durable structures of inequality that have consigned the vast masses of our people to a life without hope.

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P.S.

• "Duterte's order to militarize the BOC". Philippine Daily Inquirer / 05:08 AM November 04, 2018: <https://opinion.inquirer.net/117228/dutertes-order-to-militarize-the-boc>

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