

Philippines: The making of a battered nation

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In a previous column written after the 2016 presidential election, I interpreted the rise of Rodrigo Duterte to the presidency as the “revolt of the periphery.” The avalanche of Mindanao votes for the maverick former Davao City mayor, I thought, was emblematic of the strong reaction to an “imperial Manila” and everything else that that phrase represented. I still believe this was a significant factor behind the electoral outcome of 2016. But, there is something else.

What also seemed visible in that election was some pressing need to recover our pride as a people—by going back to who we “really” are, whatever that may mean. Behind the anticolonial rhetoric that Mr. Duterte effectively employed was a kind of nativism that seemed to romanticize premodern culture and society.

What I think was taking place at a deeper level is the awakening of the feudal authoritarian mindset that has always underpinned relationships in our highly stratified society. The backdrop to this phenomenon was the growing sense that our institutions have failed to solve our most persistent problems. This is epitomized most of all by the moral panic over the spread of the drug menace. “We have become a narco-state,” candidate Duterte repeatedly warned his audiences. And he goes on: The usual solutions don’t work anymore. The country needs a leader who talks straight, takes risks, and acts willfully. Someone ready to take responsibility for his actions, and not afraid to die or rot in jail.

Our successive constitutions, from the Malolos Constitution to the present one, have tried to bury this mindset with a thick overlay of modern institutions and principles, almost all of which were inspired by Western democracies. Foremost of these are the rule of law, the primacy of civil and political rights, the separation of powers, equal access to public office, and limitations on governmental power.

Drafted in the wake of the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship, the 1987 Constitution best exemplified this aspiration to establish a modern democratic political system in this country. That charter was explicitly designed to put an end to the dragon seed of authoritarianism.

What its framers perhaps underestimated was the persistence of a feudal political culture that is renewed and reproduced at every turn by the imperatives of a social system riven by deep inequalities. Democratic and modern in intent and form, the Edsa Constitution simply lacked the conditions that would make it possible. Where the vast masses of the people live under conditions of extreme poverty, dependence and patronage quickly become the norm.

The majority who are without power trade their loyalty for the benevolence and protection of the patron. They may feel deeply resentful of this system, but they also think they are powerless to change it. Change for them is thus conceivable only as change of masters. In general, they don’t like politicians. But they are also mesmerized by leaders who seem different and are able to articulate their resentments.

In many ways, Mr. Duterte attracts the same authoritarian types—obsequious before their masters, but tyrannical before their subordinates, observes Theodor Adorno. More than anything else, they

can't stand criticism. They react to every criticism as though it were a personal attack. They respond not by reasoned argument, but by relentless attacks on the critic's person. Of those below them, they demand total trust. But they actually mean total acquiescence.

Listen to the way the President and his supporters deal with critics' demand for transparency and accountability in the matter of public projects funded by Chinese loans. First, he reacts by ordering the review of all contracts, past and present, entered into by government agencies with private entities, with a view to canceling them if shown to be disadvantageous to the people — clearly suggesting that all previous governments have entered into such onerous contracts and therefore must be held equally accountable. Then, he castigates Sen. Franklin Drilon for saying that the Duterte administration must tread carefully when securing loans from China. What's wrong with the senator's warning? That's part of his job.

But Mr. Duterte goes into a fit of rage over this, threatening in the process to suspend the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus and to have all his critics arrested. Consumed by the anger that he could not control, he ended up saying he was prepared to wage a "revolutionary war" if his patience was tested. What kind of reaction is that? Are we a democracy or a sultanate?

But, hearing his admirers express their comments on radio the other day, I began to wonder if many of our people even understand the basics of democratic citizenship. One caller, who sounded like an elderly auntie next door, called on critics to stop provoking the President. "If you can't say anything good about the President," she said, "it would be better for you to just shut up. You're not helping the country. The President is trying to solve many problems all at the same time. Let's not add to these problems by criticizing him."

I sensed that beneath admonitions like these is a concept of government that is less like the one imagined by our Constitution but more akin to the traditional Filipino family headed by an intemperate patriarch who — despite his abusiveness, uncouth language and impulsive character — must be respected, given the benefit of the doubt and obeyed. There's a term for spouses that fall victim to such patriarchal tyrants — battered wives. They suffer in silence, and fight back when least expected.

Randy David

P.S.

• Philippine Daily Inquirer / 09:10 AM April 07, 2019:
<https://opinion.inquirer.net/120610/the-making-of-a-battered-nation#ixzz5nLc4npUb>

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