

Seen from the Philippines: The making of a fascist mindset

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In highly unequal societies like ours—where wide disparities in social circumstances at birth determine a person's access to food, shelter, and healthcare, a good education, a rich and diverse cultural heritage, influential connections, and a successful career—it is common to encounter the belief that all these existing inequalities in life are somehow undeserved and can be radically reversed overnight.

This belief can nurture ideas about the need to alter prevailing social structures through a protracted process of revolutionary struggle. Or, it can pave the way for the emergence of a strongman who boldly mocks the existing liberal order and its institutions, while extolling the myth of force and the efficacy of violence as a solution to society's persistent problems. The latter is what fascism is about. More than the socialist revolutions of the past century, it is fascist populism that threatens to upset the liberal capitalist world order today.

While concealing the structural seeds of inequality, liberal democracy promotes the belief that all people are created equal, and therefore are entitled not only to the basic goods of society but also to the dignity of the human person.

Fascism believes otherwise. It believes that some groups are not entitled to the equal treatment they claim. This belief is founded on the notion that in bestowing differential endowments on human beings, nature also creates its own "hierarchies of worth."

This is total nonsense. Human beings may be born with differing natural endowments but there is nothing natural about the treatment of a particular set of endowments as worthier or more valuable, or for that matter, more harmful to society, than others. Such valuation is at its core always social or cultural or historical—a contingent product of conditions in society at a given time.

Rather than seek the sources of inequality in society's structures—e.g., its property system, its political institutions, or the organization of its family and schools, etc.—fascism legitimizes domination by pointing to the supposed inborn superiority and/or inferiority of the groups to which people belong.

Colonial subjugation and oppression contained the seeds of fascist thought, which later turned inward. The nationalist movements that formed in our part of the world to oppose colonial domination drew from the Enlightenment belief in the fundamental equality of all human beings. In contrast to today's fascist nationalism, these nationalist struggles were thus, at their inception, not only anti-imperialist but also anti-fascist. The colonized claimed the right to self-rule based on the principle of equality of all peoples.

Jose Rizal, the nation's hero, was wary of the dangers of gaining freedom too soon. On the eve of the Filipino revolution, he warned against today's slaves becoming tomorrow's tyrants. Now, we know

that one who spouts nationalist rhetoric might also be a fascist, championing national self-determination while harboring strong beliefs in the ineradicable inequality of the races, of the sexes, and, indeed, of those born to rule and those born to submit.

The junior high school student who, overnight, became the chilling personification of the Filipino bully mirrors, in many ways, the making of a fascist. His language ("*bugbog o dignidad*") is marked by the unmistakable vocabulary of domination and submission. In one video, he is heard telling his prey to choose between defending himself and risk being beaten up, or submitting and allowing himself to be stripped of his dignity. The victim chose to keep his dignity and refused to submit to the power of the bully, who then proceeded to mercilessly beat him up.

But, that is perhaps only the visible side of this affair. What is interesting is the ensuing public reaction, which revealed something I did not quite expect. A lot of people not only felt aggrieved and angered by the one-sidedness of the bullying incident, they also threatened to teach the bully a lesson by giving him and his family a dose of his own medicine. It was as though the nation suddenly saw its children in the shoes of the victim, and felt his utter helplessness and humiliation. I know I did. But, beyond that, many also wished that someone as strong and as skilled in martial arts—an equalizer, a punisher—had stepped in to intervene and beat the bully to a pulp. Note how easily the sense of "aggrieved victimization" can turn into its fascist opposite.

The phrase comes from the philosopher Jason Stanley, who, in his 2018 book, "How Fascism Works," ominously writes: "Those who employ fascist political tactics deliberately take advantage of this emotion, manufacturing a sense of aggrieved victimization among the majority population, directing it at a group that is not responsible for it and promising to alleviate the feeling of victimization by punishing that group."

Tapping into an abundant supply of generalized public resentment, "Tatay Digong" [President Duterte] rides on the myth that Filipinos are in dire straits because they have been the defenseless victims of bullies that have long terrorized the nation: drug peddlers, corrupt narcopoliticians, a rapacious oligarchy, communist rebels, and "hypocritical" religious leaders. He is angry. He has come to set things right, to bully the nation's entrenched bullies and their human rights enablers, to "kill" them if necessary.

This is Dutertismo's vicious narrative, as deeply flawed in its understanding of complex social problems as the deadly scapegoating that characterized the rise of European fascism.

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P.S.

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