

HORIZONS

# Philippines: Is Duterte a 'post-modern' Marcos?

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Reflecting on Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The Possessed" (1871), the French writer Albert Camus argued that the biggest challenge of our times is increasingly the "inability to believe" in any grand Truth.

Set in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, the novel explores the dangers of mindless nihilism and blind rejection of tradition and truth in favor of redemptive destruction. Dostoevsky presciently foresaw the horrors of Bolshevism, which exploited generalized grievances and systematic lies to institute a reign of terror.

A century later, Camus warned about the dangerous combination of half-truths and suspended disbelief, which was replacing old beliefs in once deeply traditional societies. In his own philosophical treatise "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), Camus offered a clairvoyant view of our "post-truth" era.

Such misgivings are now also increasingly relevant among rapidly growing post-colonial nations overtaken by a toxic cocktail of political cynicism, right-wing populism, and systematic disinformation. What we confront is no less than a deliberate perversion of "post-modern" theories, which have reduced the world into a multiplicity of "narratives" and "constructs" at the expense of facts and reason.

This is precisely where Dutertismo and the Marcosian legacy are inextricably linked.

On the surface, Duterte and Marcos are nearly alike. But, in fact, and more crucially, they are totally different.

For all his gargantuan misdeeds, Ferdinand Marcos was a product of modernity. His speeches were polished, coherent, and efficiently well-prepared, while his consolidation of power was based on a systematic blueprint for constitutional authoritarianism.

A capable lawyer with an imaginative mind, Marcos deployed his acute familiarity with constitutional orders to subvert a fragile and broken post-colonial democracy in the name of a "new order" ("bagong lipunan"). Appreciative of intellect, he asked decent scholars to ghost-write his books in justification of his megalomaniac vision.

In short, Marcos bothered to provide a coherent rationale for his style of governance, which characterized the dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Now contrast this with President Duterte, who often doesn't even bother to give a coherent speech, or dress properly for the occasion, unless he is on a visit to China. Unlike Marcos, the former mayor has not only dispensed with countless protocols, but also has often ruled by fiat, almost reminiscent of medieval despots.

In this sense, Mr. Duterte is nothing like the modern dictators in recent memory. One could argue that he is Marcos — but with a “post-modern” twist. And if true, this has major implications.

To begin with, this is why it’s extremely difficult to classify Mr. Duterte’s regime and ascertain whether we are still a “democracy” or have already turned into a full-fledged autocracy. I have used the term “imperial presidency,” while other political scientists deploy alternative jargon like “executive aggrandizement.”

Moreover, it means one can’t predict Mr. Duterte’s next move based on Marcos’ script. Often, history doesn’t even rhyme, never mind repeat. Unlike modern dictators, “post-modern” autocrats rely on a more fluid and nebulous set of tactics and strategy to consolidate power. As Harvard professors Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky have warned, 21<sup>st</sup>-century despots are no longer relying on tanks and coups to consolidate lifetime rule.

In the words of Mr. Duterte, Marcos was “the best president” we have had, only if “he didn’t become a dictator for so long.” And this brings us to the question of “post-modernity.”

One of the greatest strengths of right-wing populists from Donald Trump in America to Narendra Modi in India is that they no longer have to bother to even appeal to reason and factual truth. What matters above all is their ability to establish an affective, rather than rational, connection with their supporters, who seem more interested in subjective beliefs than uncomfortable truths. Even more interesting is how apologists of contemporary autocrats are fond of citing and misrepresenting the works of post-modern thinkers by deliberately reducing everything to “narratives” and “discourse,” to the self-serving exclusion of incontrovertible facts.

I remember how during my university years the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida fascinated me. They brilliantly exposed the limits of science and “logos” as well as the penetration of power into every sphere of knowledge.

But soon, I also recognized what Camus and Dostoevsky most feared: How rejection of reason and tradition could lead to complete absurdity. When you can’t believe in anything based on facts or tradition, you could fall for anything.

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