

Professor Nick Bisley

Welcome to Asia Rising, the podcast of La Trobe Asia where we discuss the news, events and general happenings of Asia's states and societies. I'm your host Nick Bisley, the Executive Director of La Trobe Asia.

On 30th June, Rodrigo Duterte was sworn in as the Philippines 16th President. The 71 year old is the first occupant of the Malacanany Palace to hail from Mindanao, the large Southern Island known for its long running, low intensity conflicts. He joined the campaign late, ran in an overtly populous manner and claims that Manilla Bay would be turned red with the blood of criminals, among his many notable utterances. More importantly he won office handsomely, easily defeating his rivals who seemed colourless and flatfooted in contrast to the energetic outsider.

Observers outside the country were stunned by his sudden rise to power, in both his tone and at times violent rhetoric he seemed, to many, to be South East Asian version of Donald Trump. More evidence of the global anti-establishment populist zeitgeist. Yet Dugong as he's known to many in the Philippines, represents a much more complex figure than this, while an outsider to the local establishment, he was the Mayor of Davao City for more than 20 years. And though superficially he seems to appeal most to less affluent Filipinos, his electoral support was plainly widespread.

But what kind of leader is Duterte? What changes does he want to bring to South East Asia's second largest population? He's largely unknown outside the Philippines and throughout the campaign sent widely diverging signals about his foreign policy priorities, so just where is he likely to take the country's international policy?

Joining me today to discuss this most interesting and intriguing political leader is Doctor Nicole Curato, Nicole was an ARC Early Career Research Fellow at the Institute for Governance and Policy Advice in the University of Canberra. Welcome to the program Nicole.

Doctor Nicole Curato

Hi Nick, thanks for inviting me.

Nick Bisley

So let's start with the man himself, who is Rodrigo Duterte and what's his back story?

Nicole Curato

Right, well first of all I think as all academics do, I always start with a caveat, so I approach this as a sociologist who has done research in disaster affected communities as part of my ARC Project. I'm not a political insider so most of my observations are based on how the people I talked to, I interviewed and I've served appreciate their leader.

Coming from what I observed during my field work, and these are disaster affected communities like typhoon Haiyan, one of the most remarkable things that they like about Rodrigo Duterte is he's a man of action. And that is not something we take for granted in the Philippines because, there's always a contrast drawn between talk and action, so in the case of Haiyan for example, Duterte was able to exemplify his man of action characteristic by actually going there in the disaster affected community, delivering aid, very quietly, no fanfare, no media. Brought in the world class medical personnel that provided aid in Tacloban and city. That is something.

So that is one, among many examples, that support the narrative of Duterte as a man who does things and doesn't just say things. I think we have to draw that contrast because, in the campaign, especially the way he was covered by mainstream media, the focus is always on his words, but for a lot of people on the ground the focus is on the action.

Nick Bisley

So he was Mayor of Davao for more than 22 years, so nearly a quarter of a century in charge of the biggest city on the second biggest island, Mindanao in the South. How important is that do you think for his prospective presidency?

Nicole Curato

Davao is very symbolic because the narrative of Davao City is it's a city from the South and as you mentioned, it's very much defined by conflict and disorder and there is this man who really transformed this city, to become one of the most liveable cities in South East Asia. That is not an insignificant achievement especially if you compare Davao City with nearby cities, municipalities and provinces in the rest of Mindanao.

Of course a big part of that Davao City narrative of bringing in peace and order is the mayor's very tough approach against criminality and that is where the allure is coming, from a lot of people from urban centres. Let's not forget that one of the first constituencies that threw their support to Rodrigo Duterte are people from urban areas and that is because the narrative of Davao City was very strong.

It offers the possibility that, if you have a strong mayor who can really get rid of crime, criminality and also cut red tape in terms of delivering services in the day to day transactions people have in the City Hall, it's really very alluring narrative for people all over the country. So yes you're right, the story of Davao City is very important, it's also very symbolic because, it's not often the case that we hear a success story of a city in the South transforming itself.

Nick Bisley

It is a sense that what he could do to Davao, he could do to the country?

Nicole Curato

Absolutely and that's really one of the main things he campaigned on, he campaigned on, his tagline during the campaign was 'change is coming' and integral to that is not just his own way of campaigning for himself but the way people from Davao City really support that narrative. So you have really true believers coming from Davao City who support him and that's again not an insignificant achievement.

Nick Bisley

It's not dissimilar to the appeal of firstly Jokowi in Indonesia, he was a successful mayor of Jakarta, obviously a bigger city, but also Modi in India, he was the leader of Gujarat and the sense that he turned Gujarat into this very successful, economically prosperous part of India, that he could do this for the country.

I wanted to just ask the question about Mindanao, so he's the first president from Mindanao. How important do you think that is, either for his politics or for how he's going to govern?

Nicole Curato

I think just as far as identity politics is concerned it's very meaningful. I've had my own little tour of Mindanao, talking to students there from Iligan and Marawi and these are students who are very conservative, religiously conservative, but would throw their support to a man who's been

accused of misogyny right? One of the most fascinating things in my conversations with these students is the weighing, the weighing of – his misogyny is yes, it's a fact of law, but he's very proud of his Maranao heritage really matters.

I think Nick, one of the most interesting things that happened in his final political campaign rally two nights before the election was he shouted "Allahu Akbar" in front of a massive crowd of people. You don't see that every day and he did say that by saying, "My mother has a Maranao background, my family is Muslim" and that is pretty symbolic, especially in the context now where we tend to demonise cultures that are very different from what we're used to so yes that is very symbolic.

And the second thing I want to say is, when he assumed power attention suddenly shifted to Mindanao, when he won elections he never travelled to Manila until I think, if I'm not mistaken, his inauguration day. Business leaders went to Davao City; he formed his cabinet from Davao City; the media set up in Davao City; they started calling his office there the Malacanang of the South. So literally and figuratively all lives are now in Mindanao and again that is something that we have to acknowledge.

And finally also I think, it's very fascinating that in the campaign season, one of the biggest catch words is 'Imperial Manila' so in a way it's very reflective of the discontent that people have of the attention being given to the capital and the lack of attention being given to the South. So in a way that is something that Duterte delivers in the political conversation.

Nick Bisley

I remember seeing some of the reporting about, if you want a seat in government you're going to have to go to Mindanao and...

Nicole Curato

That's right, the world's biggest job fair.

Nick Bisley

It was quite something. Given the contrast; for people who are not familiar with the Philippines, given the contrast that Manila has been this premier city that dominates the country and has done for decades and is really quite striking. Let's turn to the election itself. What issues did he campaign on and what promises has he made?

Nicole Curato

Right. Actually it's been very interesting because one of his successes is he was able to reframe the issues in the elections. If we look at the earlier presidential frontrunners, most of their campaign promises revolve around the issue of poverty; revolve around the issue of delivering inclusive growth; because of course the Philippines had unprecedented growth under the Aquino administration, but the main criticism was it wasn't really felt among the poorest sectors and the middle classes as well.

So that has been the narrative of the campaign for quite a while, until Duterte entered the campaign and reframed the issues into something more basic which is peace and order. And that really gained traction, if we compare the surveys, regular surveys held outside the electoral season about what are the top concerns of Filipinos, it's usually inflation, lack of jobs, health or these three. But when Duterte entered the picture and the survey question asked, what are the issues you want your presidential candidate to solve? Criminality, drugs are on the top of the list, I think that's a very good indicator on how Duterte was able to reframe the issues in this election.

So he campaigned precisely on that issue of getting rid of criminality, restoring peace and order, going after drug lords. We've seen in the past fifteen days on how this has been very much central to the developments in the political scene. So if you watch Philippine news every day, probably the first fifteen minutes of prime time news programs are devoted to criminals being killed, summary executions of petty thieves, police officers being told that, 'it's ok go after these drug lords, Duterte will protect you, he will support you, don't be afraid of the Commission on Human Rights', so that's been the kind of developments during the air codes here, those are the kinds of developments that we've seen.

So if your question is? What is his campaign promise? Its criminality or getting rid of criminality, has he delivered on that campaign promise? Well yes to a certain extent as far as the changes now are concerned, but of course the methods are very much subject to debate.

Nick Bisley

And were there other issues broadly, I mean did he make commitments around redistribution of wealth and decentralisation or is that something that has come up?

Nicole Curato

Right. He's actually been very vocal as well during the campaign season and saying he is a socialist. It's very fascinating because for a country like the Philippines a lot of people are kind of allergic to any vocabulary that draws from the language of the left. It's part of the American legacy. Duterte is very effective in saying 'I am a socialist', and they're very clear indications of his commitment to that kind of policy or that perspective as far as inviting people from the left are concerned.

So we now have people from the Philippine left who are in charge of the National Anti-Poverty Commission. Someone is also now put in office for the Department of Social Welfare and Development. Department of Agrarian reform is also now a part of the portfolio of the left, so this is the first time that we've seen personalities who have always been critical of government to now be part of government.

So to that extent you can see some empirical manifestations of Duterte's pronouncements, but of course we also have to balance that because part of his cabinet are also people who are committed to the general mainstream economic agenda. A lot of it is also a continuation of previous policies, not just in the Aquino government but way back in the Royal administration.

Nick Bisley

In the overseas coverage of Duterte which came very late, there was a lot of fixation on some of his more colourful language. What's your impression of why he uses that language and whether it was serious, did he mean what he was saying or is this just a way of getting attention?

Nicole Curato

Right. Earlier you mentioned, or you described him as a 'populist' and actually some of the literature now on populism actually says that, aside from distinguishing the people from the other; in this case the criminal, one of the main characteristics of contemporary populists is bad manners. It's the coarsening of the political language and we see that in many other contexts, so it's not unique to him, Donald Trump is another parallelism.

If we see it from the perspective of performance I would say it's kind of expected because the Philippines has such a saturated social media environment and for you to gain traction you do need to have that colourful language. I don't know what his precise motivations are, but if we

look at this from the perspective of the audience, particularly the respondents I have talked to in my own research, they don't seem to mind, because they think that, 'yeah you need the coarsening of the political language to articulate the level of frustration that we have'. Who wouldn't swear if you're stuck in traffic for three hours, who wouldn't swear if you've queued for a train for the past four hours and when you get there the train doesn't work.

This is kind of understandable, so I think as far as the coarsening of the language is concerned, I personally feel offended as a woman when he made a rape joke against an Australian missionary, I feel offended when he catcalls female journalists, but I also understand the perspective of those who are appreciative of what Duterte has done, that this is a character flaw, that we may not agree but he had redeeming qualities.

Nick Bisley

It's interesting to look at the parallels outside the country, that way in which a kind of language that mainstream political figures would think is third-rail stuff, you're dead if you use this kind of language, is in fact the opposite. It's electoral kind of catnip and it works because people are prepared to go, 'oh he doesn't actually mean that'.

Let's turn to his time in office, on 30th June he was inaugurated, he has at the moment a single six year term. What are his priorities? You mentioned earlier some of the things that have happened already. What's your sense of how he is going to travel?

Nicole Curato

Right, well aside from his main campaign promise of peace and order, one of his biggest policy platforms is the shift to a Federal System. He thinks shifting to Federalism will actually resolve insurgencies in the South, he thinks you have to empower local governments more. That issue has started to gain traction in the House of Representatives, so I think if I'm not mistaken there are already three bills filed in terms of convening different kinds of modalities in terms of how you change the constitution. So that is starting to gain traction.

Of course I'm not the kind of academic who will give forecasts, but there is enough reason to suggest that this kind of proposal has momentum, in the sense that Duterte enjoys a very good mandate. He didn't only win a landslide victory in the elections, the last survey of the trust rating for him was 'excellent', which is comparable to the rating that Aquino had six years ago when he first got into power.

The Philippines generally has been kind of allergic with the idea of constitutional change because it's also associated to a scheming president who wanted to stay on in power, because there's a limited six year term. But Duterte's doing it at the very beginning of his administration with a clear aim at Federalism, so let's see where that goes, so it's definitely worth monitoring.

Nick Bisley

The political side to him, he sort of says, you look at a guy, an outsider like this who's coming about bringing prospects of very significant change but the constitutional, economic, political. There are big vested interests at stake who stand to lose, who are going to coalesce against him.

What are the stumbling blocks that he faces? Is the Manila elite going to get their act together and stop what he's trying to achieve, or do you think they're too divided?

Nicole Curato

Right. That's kind of difficult to answer at the moment. For example, one of the first things that he did when he got elected was his cabinet had a big economic summit in Davao and started to

have a consultation process with the Manila elite, or the Philippine elite. So far I don't see any major critics against Duterte as far as the elites are concerned, maybe a lot of it has to do with them weighing up how their economic interests will be compromised by Duterte?

But so far, his pronouncements have been promising, as far as businesses are concerned. He says, he will cut red tape for you to apply for business permits. If we classify the Duterte as a populist and we reflect back on the history of populist leaders in the Philippines, they've always been very vulnerable to challenge, especially when the scandals start coming up and here I'm referring to; e.g., Jose Estrada, a very popular, charismatic leader but wasn't to the elite's liking.

The initial front runner for this election, Vice President Binay was also a charismatic, populist leader but was brought down by a lot of corruption scandals. So if you categorise Duterte as a populist leader and someone who is not particularly acceptable to some segments of the elite, then I wonder what kind of opposition emerges in this context. Of course this is speculative because, at the moment the issue is not even the kind of resistance or opposition that Duterte has, but it's the fact that there is no legitimate credible opposition.

My sense is a lot of people are still waiting, thinking about the first 100 days, what kinds of policies he will make and what kinds of business interests he will confront. At the moment the only business interests that he's confronting is mining, by assigning Gina Lopez as head of the Environment and Natural Resource Department who is a staunch anti-mining campaigner, but on the level of policy I still don't see any reason why the elite would be a bit worried.

Nick Bisley

And just finally, you mentioned earlier in the first two weeks or so of his presidency, some of the worst fears that people had about things like vigilantes and basically a suspension of the rule of law and due process for certain issues seems to have played out. Do you think that's an initial burst that will be given its head or do you think the concerns that particularly human rights campaigners have are going to get stronger and we'll see a real sort of South American style presidency on that front.

Nicole Curato

The way I will answer this question is to come from the Normative Theory of Perspective, because if I were to look at the sociology of this and look at how the everyday people see this war against drugs, war against criminals, that they have launched, a lot of them are supportive. A lot of them make that moral calculation that, 'yes these people deserve to die, they're scum: they don't belong to a civilised society so let's support the president in this campaign'. That is the sociology of it I imagine this is because drugs is an everyday issue, criminality is an everyday issue, that's probably why there's a certain consensus for a big part of the public to support this, it's underpinned by a certain set of values.

But from a Normative Theory Perspective I will say, well this is wrong, that's why human rights exists. So yes the human rights campaigners have already raised red flags, even the Vice President herself already said that "we have to investigate these extrajudicial killings", some senators have already spoken against these developments, but I would imagine that as long as that public support for such kind of methods exist then the president will still enjoy that certain sense of legitimacy.

Just in conclusion, if we are thinking of the kind of opposition we can have to confront these kinds of sentiments, then we have to be more creative in our argumentation, we can't just invoke human rights. We have to justify why human rights exist and why they matter because, apparently for a lot of people, it's not universal.

Nick Bisley

Well that's all the time that we have. The Philippines is plainly entering a hugely interesting period and I look forward to having you back on the program to have another look at one of Asia's most fascinating countries. Thanks for being part of the program.

Nicole Curato

Thank you.

Nick Bisley

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