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Duterte's Victory: The Face of Alternative Leadership?

By Phidel Vineles

Synopsis

The Philippines is perhaps the best regional illustration that democracy does not always run smoothly. A reformist presidential candidate can get elected to re-establish democracy and improve the country's governance, but it is uniquely Philippine politics today that a maverick leader is set to become the next president. It also raises questions about the return of strong-man rule in the country.

Commentary

WITH RIVAL candidates having conceded defeat, the tough-talking Rodrigo Duterte with a "strong-man" image is set to be the presumptive Philippine President. The new leader will be sworn in on 30 June 2016 for a six-year term, but Duterte is already busy forming his Cabinet. He has even met the Chinese ambassador in Manila and talked about how he will conduct relations between the two countries that have been ruptured by their territorial dispute in the South China Sea.

Duterte's victory is remarkable. Despite his foul-mouthed and unconventional ways, he came from behind to beat strong candidates from the elite establishment. Analysts say that "grievance politics" in the Philippines played a large part in the Duterte win. People seemed to want an alternative leadership, as they are tired of the current political status quo. Even the popularity of outgoing President Benigno Aquino could not help his choice candidate, the veteran minister Mar Roxas, win enough support.

People's Pent-up Frustration

There has been no major structural change in Philippine politics since the 1986

revolution which toppled the strongman president Ferdinand Marcos. According to the Philippine sociologist, Walden Bello, the political scenario in the country has something to do with that outcome which installed Aquino's mother Corazon as the new leader. Till today, Corazon Aquino is known as the country's "icon of democracy". But despite the success of her son as president in bringing about economic growth, there is unhappiness at the grassroots that politics has been hijacked by the elites.

The perception that the Philippines is largely driven by elite politics has perhaps boosted Duterte's popularity. Many Filipinos are wary that governance is largely dominated by political dynasties, wherein 70 per cent of Philippine legislators came from political clans. The frustration with the country's oligarchic political structure has been aggravated by high poverty and unemployment rates.

Although strong economic growth is said to be President Aquino's legacy, unemployment and poverty remain as the country's persistent problems. Official statistics show there are a total of 2.6 million unemployed Filipinos last year; poverty incidence among Filipinos who do not meet their basic needs in 2015 was at 26 percent. Thus, the Aquino administration has barely improved the spread of wealth in the country and inclusive growth continues to be elusive.

Duterte gains considerable mass support for his stance on illegal drugs, public law and order issues and the erosion of effectiveness of public institutions which affect the lives of ordinary people. According to the police, the number of crimes committed nationwide increased by 46 percent during the first six months in 2015. There was also indignation among Filipinos over the death of 44 members of the police's special troops killed last year in an ambush in Mamasapano, Maguindanao province.

Vague Policy Agenda

It is hard to understand what economic plans that Filipinos see from Duterte. In fact, he hardly talked about his economic plans during his campaign speeches. During a dialogue in Manila on 27 April with more than 600 business leaders, Duterte did not dwell on economic platforms, choosing instead to talk about fighting drug trafficking and crimes. Indeed, the feedback was that the business leaders were uncertain about Duterte because he did not discuss much about what he was going to do with the economy.

The vagueness of Duterte's economic policy is also seen in his foreign policy. It appears that Duterte may not continue Aquino's stance on the South China Sea dispute with China. Aquino has taken the matter to international arbitration instead of sweating it out in bilateral negotiation. Some analysts argue that Duterte might disregard the result of the arbitral tribunal in The Hague, whether it is in favour of Manila or not.

However, Duterte's position on the issue needs further clarification. According to him, he would call for multilateral talks with China on the South China Sea and include US, Japan, and other claimant states, but China has repeatedly said that it is only willing to resolve the issue bilaterally.

It is not a surprise that his supporters never turn their backs on him despite the ambiguity of his proposals. An example of this is when Duterte suggested reviving the Philippine steel industry although demand for steel globally is at its lowest. Duterte also receives huge support for his anti-crime plan although its details fall short. According to him, he will double the salaries of police officers and deploy thousands of police and military troops to attack crime and drug traffickers and kill those who resist. However, there has been no serious explanation on how all this will be financed.

Appeal of Strong-man Leadership

While absence of effective governance appeared to be critical factors favouring Duterte, some analysts point to the 'autocratic nostalgia' in the country. After 30 years of democratic promise and failure of several reform-minded presidents, there is no strong reason against trying out a maverick politician from a small city to take charge. The inability of the incumbent democratic president to groom a credible successor also adds to voters' antipathy towards the political establishment.

Even Senator Bongbong Marcos, the son of the late Ferdinand Marcos, is in a tight race with Congresswoman Leni Robredo to be the next vice president, with both receiving more than 13 million of votes. Many Filipinos find Bongbong's key message appealing to them when he said that if his father was given more years to serve the country, the Philippines will be like Singapore. However, several analysts argued that the country went downhill because of Marcos' import-substitution-based economy.

Politics is a game of perception, and the Philippines appears to be sliding towards strong-man rule again. Frustration of Filipinos with the failure of the outgoing government to trickle down the benefits of economic growth has clouded the ideal that the country truly needs a deepened democracy. However, it seems that a majority of Filipinos cannot see that anymore because several decades after the Marcos regime, there has been limited structural change to the country's political system.

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