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THE TASK OF ETHICS IN A RADICAL WORLD: POST-COLONIAL STRUGGLE AS THE ROOT OF CONFLICT IN PHILIPPINE SOCIETY

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Abstract. This analysis traces the roots of antagonism in Philippine society to the post-colonial struggle of the Filipino that persists to this day. Conflict and division characterize the essence of this struggle. The ordinary Filipino finds himself voiceless in the affairs of the state. This colonial legacy, in the mind of Rodrigo Duterte, gives legitimacy to his radical leadership. With the demise of elite democracy in the country, the task at hand, given the decades of domination in Philippine society, is to implement real reforms. But while Duterte's radical approach to state-building is tempting due to his ambition to reshape the hegemonic nature of national politics, public morals and decency, rather than the kind of rhetoric that is dismissive of human rights, should be the fundamental principle that the Filipino nation must be built upon.

Keywords: Post-Colonial Struggle, Radical Democracy, Rodrigo Duterte, Public Morals

Legacy of a Colonial Past

The Philippines as a nation is a panorama of a thousand contradictions. Before the Spaniards came, there was no centralized government to administer the political landscape in the archipelago. Spain found this out after Miguel Lopez de Legazpi arrived in 1574. From an administrative end, the *conquistadores* knew that political power needed to be

concentrated in the capital to hasten the subjugation of the native population. With the help of Filipinos themselves, Spain instituted the systematic means of enslavement of Filipinos by consolidating power in the capital. *Pueblos* that consisted of different barangays were organized and a friar was appointed by Spanish authorities to act both as a religious leader and as civil administrator. Land was the prime motivation for this.

To secure the control of the native population in the archipelago, chieftains were appointed as *cabeza de barangay*. To ensure the loyalty of local leaders to their Spanish rulers, “kickbacks” were allowed on the tributes collected from the people. According to Vicente Rafael, the origin of this patron-client type of relation goes back to the *Reconquista* of the medieval period wherein “the relationship was institutionalized in the form of Royal Patronage, first granted by Pope Julius II to Ferdinand and Isabela.”¹ The fall of the Roman Empire and the emergence of the Renaissance, merged with man’s faith in God, aided the domination of a people. Religion, thus, helped preserve Spain’s control of most of the colony for more than three hundred years.

General Emilio Aguinaldo, an *Ilustrado*, declared the Independence of the Philippines on June 12, 1898. On August 13, 1898, Spain ceded the country to the Americans for twenty million dollars in the *Treaty of Paris*. The two countries staged the mock *Battle of Manila Bay* in which the Spanish fleet was totally destroyed by General George Dewey, effectively ending Spanish rule in the Philippines. It was a war staged in order to save Spain from the embarrassment of losing their crown jewel in the Orient to the superior firepower of the Americans. But the Filipinos and the Americans were never real allies, to begin with. Filipinos, hence, still had to win their freedom from foreign rule.

The Philippine-American War began on the evening of February 4, 1899, when US Private William Grayson fired the first shots in Block 7 near Barrio Santol of what came to be known as

the *Battle of Manila*. After annexing the country, the Americans would govern by means of what they called “benevolent assimilation.” Renato Constantino writes that “the fact that the Americans were able to count among their supporters the high ranking leaders of the revolution proved very useful to them.”² For Constantino, it was the collaboration of the *Ilustrados* that has “provided the Americans with a ready justification for the colonization of the Philippines.”³ This had marked the birth of the patronage system that still prevails to this day.

The politics practiced in the country is best exemplified by President Manuel Quezon. The former President was quoted, saying: “To tell the truth, gentlemen, I should like to continue being president of the Philippines if I were sure I would live 100 years. Have you ever known anyone who had voluntarily renounced power unless it is for a lady that in his opinion was more important than power itself?”⁴ President Quezon, by saying so, might have inaugurated traditional politics in the Philippines. It is the type of politics that rests on patronage and relies on the submission of a people to powers-that-be.

The absence of a level playing field in the actual opportunities for governance is due to the fact that the country has dysfunctional political institutions. Our past leaders lacked the political will to institute reforms. As a result, the people have continued to suffer under bad governance and the absence of a vision to achieve justice and peace in society. In addition, whatever growth the country might have achieved has been decimated by thieves in the government. Moreover, the oligarchy that controls the economy continues to take advantage of the people. Paul Hotchcroft and Joel Rocamora explain:

Over more than a century – from the representational structures of the First Malolos republic of 1898 to the political tutelage of American colonial rule, from the

cacique democracy of the postwar republic to the restoration of democracy in the People Power uprising of 1986 – Filipinos know both the promise of democracy and the problems of making democratic structures work for the benefit of all. Some 100 years after the introduction of national-level democratic institutions to the Philippines, the sense of frustration over the character of the country’s democracy is arguably more apparent than ever before.⁵

Post-Colonial Antagonism in Philippine Society

The EDSA *People Power* toppled a dictatorship to put an end to an abusive regime that has plundered the government. But it can also be said that President Corazon Aquino did not succeed in rebuilding the institutions of the country. This key failure was due to the fact that like the other Philippine presidents before her, the power of the office found its true limits: the influence of the oligarchy. In the same manner as President Quezon was not really able to break up the large land estates owned by prominent clans in his desire to liberate the Filipino peasantry, President Cory too failed in her effort to implement land reform. The icon of Philippine democracy only succeeded in restoring its elitist form.⁶

The unjust power dynamics that created the oligarchy in the country exists to this day. Thus, for Hotchkroft and Rocamora, the nature of Philippine politics is about “dividing all the spoils and expanding the quantity of spoils.”⁷ The experience of Filipinos can be characterized in two words: extraction and exclusion. To this day, most Filipino politicians serve no one but themselves and the rent-seeking ways of individuals who wield political influence. Hence, the Philippine state can be rightly characterized by “the persistent inability of the state to provide basic services, guarantee peace and order, and foster economic development.”⁸

According to Reynaldo Ileto, the model of Philippine politics and society is that of a “patron-client, wherein the patrons or elites are the source not only of money and favors but of culture as well.”⁹ There is a debt relationship between rich and poor.¹⁰ Social conditioning, in this regard, is based on the unequal life situation of the people.¹¹ In a way, Philippine democracy is weak because Filipinos have not matured in terms of their civic duties. They rely on traditional politicians on a host of things, e.g., hospitalization, transportation, burials, including weddings. For this reason, “trapos” or traditional politicians take advantage of this relationship.

Many Filipinos do not feel their obligation in terms of nation-building, and as a people, they believe that the state’s primary duty is to provide all that is necessary for its citizens to be able to achieve a higher standard of living. It is not exactly wrong to think this way, but it decapitates the ability of people to realize progress. People often think that a politician is helping them. But in reality, the masses are simply being manipulated by those who are in positions of power, who in turn are also taking advantage of the dysfunctional nature of state institutions.

President Benigno Aquino III failed to change Philippine society. And this was because he had been unable to overcome the influence of the oligarchy that wanted to maintain the *status quo*. Jeffry Ocasio thinks that “the previous administrations prior to Duterte have not been able to deliver the promised reforms because of the lack of political will.”¹² In reality, the Philippines as a former colony continues to suffer from the painful stigma of that corrupt old order that has only exploited its riches but impoverished the lives of the people. The state legislature represents landed interests that simply use the government “as an instrument for primitive accumulation.”¹³

When a state is poorly governed, the element of favoritism in politics will define the kind of relation people have with their government. The consequence is that millions of people will be

excluded from the benefits of progress. In this regard, the linear approach to nation-building simply reinforces the biases that Filipinos have been subjected to. If the leaders that Filipinos elect are nothing but recycled politicians who come from old clans, then it is a kind of democracy that will not be able to endure for the ordinary man. This is a narrative that can be found in the country's colonial past. In fact, Patricio Abinales thinks that "during the colonial period armed revolts were few, and when they did occur they were motivated less by grand visions than by localized exigent demands."¹⁴

Since the time of the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, the weakness of the Philippine state has been obvious, given its inability to deliver basic services to the people, initiate the equitable distribution of wealth, and promote the cause of peace. In truth, Philippine democracy is one that is marked by the weakness of its institutions due to an age-old patronage system.¹⁵ The fact is the EDSA Revolution failed the Filipino people in terms of their expectations. EDSA did not bring about the real change that the *masa* wanted from their new government after deposing the dictatorship. For this reason, a charismatic leader becomes appealing to the sentiments of the masses who are fed up with the ineptness of their government.

Rodrigo Duterte and the Philippines as a Patchwork State

It matters to ask, according to Abinales, why the US era in the Philippines 1898-1935, did not produce any of the likes of Rizal, Mabini, or Jacinto. Instead, the Filipino society simply saw the emergence of an elite class of *Ilustrado* politicians who would then govern the country for decades. The children of the same people would perpetuate the dynastic order of politics in the country. The patronage that Filipinos have been used to for a very long time is like a cancer that is destroying the basic foundations of the Philippine state.

Rodrigo Duterte was elected with the overwhelming support from all sectors of the country. He has been successful in convincing the masses that he is their last card. Since Philippine politics is defined by self-serving interests, Duterte promised to put an end to the unwarranted privileges that he says are wrongly enjoyed by the few. In our history as an independent nation, nobody from Mindanao has ever occupied Malacañang. This is the kind of narrative that the campaign of Duterte used in order to rally the people of the island behind his improbable bid for the presidency.

But Duterte was successful, not only because Mindanao felt that it high time for someone to take control of the power in the capital, but also because of demographics and Duterte's huge popularity on social media. It is this affective attitude that has won over to his side the millions of Internet users in the country. During the last presidential debate, 65 million Filipinos were talking about the then-mayor compared to his closest rival, who had 35 million. Beyond this social media aspect, there is undeniable pride and honor on the part of the Cebuano-speaking regions. He has become the protest vote against *Ilustrado* politicians, or "the wealthy, ethnically mixed, intellectuals."¹⁶

Two things might help explain the above. The first reason is that millions of Filipinos from all over Mindanao have since migrated to the different parts of the Philippines in search of decent wages. While Marcos portrayed Mindanao as the land of promise in the past, decades of socio-economic underdevelopment had forced its residents to seek a higher quality of life elsewhere. It is apparent that many of these people actually campaigned for Duterte and most of them have also felt that the time has come for someone from Mindanao to take over the national leadership.

The second reason has something to do with the manner Duterte communicates with the masses. While politicians from the capital apply their own technocratic ways of explaining to the

people the need for reform, Duterte uses the narrative of domination to provoke the sentiments of ordinary folks, thereby influencing their feelings and attitudes regarding the historical injustices caused by centralized governance. This message, as a matter of fact, has won for Duterte the deep sympathies of people who have felt being left behind by progress for the longest time.

Duterte's antagonistic style was effective, especially so because of the lack of political will of the former president. Duterte's sudden rise to power draws its strength from the frustrations of the Filipino people on the weak leadership of PNOY. The Aquino government had an unpopular cabinet and the president himself has shown his indecisiveness on crucial issues. Then, tragedy after tragedy ultimately had revealed PNOY as someone who was insensitive to the plight of the powerless, including the 44 members of the SAF who died in the Mamasapano raid.

The anthropologist Karl Gaspar has shared that Duterte and himself "were not really close, but he got to know the president during his youth."¹⁷ Several years, thereafter, his schoolmate will become state prosecutor. Gaspar was a victim of Martial Law, having been an activist. He would meet the future president during the hearings of his case. After President Cory was installed into power, Duterte's mother, Soledad, was supposed to be appointed as OIC-Vice Mayor for Davao City. She suggested, however, that her son should take the post instead of her. That was the start of Duterte's political career.

Duterte's radical methods counter liberal values and ideals. The interesting point here is that liberalism's brand of politics, one of its critics suggests, is nothing more than a form of a public morality.¹⁸ From the point of view of radical democracy, the good of society does not take root in an agreement or a singularity, but in a plurality that denies a uniform understanding of freedom and equality. Still, our biggest concern now is how we, as one

country, might be able to overcome our status as a poor patchwork state, where “self-interest overlaps with reason.”¹⁹

A patchwork state is a weak state. This means that the leaders lack vision and politicians are only concerned about their own good. As a result, people suffer from bad or even the absence of basic services. For Ruby Suazo, this appears to be a difficult case in politics where “the politician is actually more concerned about his personal interests. This is apparent in the limited foresight of a leader who will consider only the particular concerns of his own constituents, but not the greater good.”²⁰ This observation can be confirmed easily by means of a simple visit to the countryside where the poor only get to see their leaders during elections. It is a sort of injustice that reveals the immaturity of the political culture in the Philippines.

But dark clouds hover above the horizon, if his critics are to be believed. For them, Duterte has antagonized the old order by obliterating the grip of political elites in the coveted positions in the government. By forging a malignant type of solidarity that is fueled by the ardent devotion of his fanatic followers, he has cemented his unenviable place as a maverick politician who knows what he wants and who does not allow others to interfere in what he does. To his voters and rabid supporters, he is the savior that they have been waiting for.

In this post-colonial era, the opposing poles in our political landscape will remain in disarray as one competes over the other for political relevance. However, what is clear is that the Duterte administration has actually succeeded in obliterating the opposition, taking away from it any form of political strength. Duterte’s alleged dictatorial tendencies are his own way of legitimizing the extreme ways of his regime because for him, there is no other means to reform Philippine society except through his radical approach.

Public Morals and Institutional Deficits

To his strongest critics, Duterte is that phenomenon in which the tendency for total control is fueled by the revolution of a fanatic people. In this radical world in which we are, the poor who comprise the majority are not out of the equation, but they are blindly obedient. The decisions of the government is no longer a question of policy or institutional rules. Radical democracy appears to be promising, but it is also fraught with many uncertainties. For some, there is nothing new. It is a question of competence. This type of social dynamics has bred an angry crowd, and somehow, an indifferent republic that has seen the murder of lives. Perhaps, such is the sad tapestry out of which the destiny of the Philippines as a nation is founded.

Duterte is that leader who believes that what he is doing is right since it is the sentiment of the majority. For instance, according to Gaspar, “despite a growing number of casualties, there has not been a public outcry.”²¹ But this observation, of course, was before the brutal killing of Kian Delos Santos, the 17-year old senior high school student who was allegedly picked up by three policemen and who shot at point blank range. That incident, in fact, has emboldened the Catholic Church. Duterte, however, has remained unpredictable amidst the criticisms, especially those that come from civil society. Many among the clergy accuse him of killing the poor.

Duterte’s critics are dismissed as Manila-centric and, thus, are judged to be unsympathetic to the problems of Mindanao. For the supporters of the President, it is as if his critics are trying to frame him into their own set of post-colonial categorizations and the Western context of human rights. The Western media, on the other hand, accuse Duterte of mass murder. The daily killings continue on the streets, even in broad daylight. As decent human beings, Duterte’s critics protest that drug suspects are also morally entitled to a society that rejects the barbaric treatment of people. Zosimo Lee, for instance, points out that

“Filipinos as whole do not really want cruelty in society and that the majority believes in the possibility of reform.”²²

It can be argued that Duterte’s emphasis on the affective sentiments of the people in pursuing the solutions to political problems or his use of non-conventional language in communicating to foreign diplomats, and his unconventional approach in terms of managing international relations, are some of the obvious instances where Duterte seeks to veer away from the usual protocols and introduce himself to the community of nations as that leader who is willing to shatter traditional relations, if need be.

Thus, if the Philippines must rise from the ashes of its colonial and post-colonial struggles, it must attain a level of civility worthy of the dignity of the Filipino. Our society must avoid then the kind of malignancy that provocateurs bring to the public space. The democratic space should not be poisoned. Only reasonableness and dialogue can bring about justice and equality. Yet, given the president’s bravado, this appears farfetched. But it is not about the president. It is about what the country lacks institutionally. Clarita Carlos explains what terms as “democratic deficits” in the Philippines:

They are deficits in governance. They are deficits in transparency, accountability and predictability. They are deficits in representation. They are deficits in the high number of Filipinos who are not able to obtain education and who are not given an opportunity to improve their lot. They are deficits in the economy which exports a lot but does not create employment. They are deficits in the way we treat our minority communities.²³

Institutional reform is a non-negotiable basic principle in state building that must be observed if Filipinos are to succeed

as a nation. In this regard, solidarity is crucial. We therefore must ask ourselves – what kind of vision do we have as a people? Without this common, yet pluralist vision, there is no way forward in terms of advancing the cause of true human progress. Politics is also about moral virtue and not just about power and its use, abuse, or misuse. If power corrupts in an absolute way, then only moral virtue can transform Philippine society into a state that is just and truly free.

Perhaps, we are in that painful phase of our development as a nation. However, there is also some kind of danger if we are not critical and mature. History teaches us how people have been sacrificed for the sake of identity and tribe, only to be eased out later by the leaders they have entrusted power to. In fact, the Filipino nation is not far from such a predicament. And it is actually the case that just like in times past, millions in the peripheries of society will bear all the burdens and ill consequences of a kind of democracy that is only good on the surface.

Conclusion

Philippine society is dominated by the remnants of an old order who still continue to extract from the masses and divide the old spoils of a colonial system that haunts Filipinos with damaging consequences. It appears that political clans have maintained their power at the local level. But it is beyond question that human development proceeds from the basic principles of governance and respect for dialogue. Indeed, even the educated class in the country simply forget that the collective strength of the marginalized is a necessary pre-condition in creating a just socio-political order.

We have to understand that human society must possess firm ethical and solid moral grounds in its pursuit of happiness and true justice for all. While Duterte remains to be the kind of person that he is in terms of his radical principles, the value of his

leadership lies in his political will. This virtue is what Filipinos and even Duterte himself, must take advantage of. The ghosts of the past should not define the course of the destiny of the Filipino people. We are at that point in time where we are forced to witness our gamble on the radical leadership of one man.

But radicalism cannot be used to justify disrespect and the abuse of institutions and tradition. Laws are not meant to ease the way a leader dispenses power. Rather, the rule of law is meant to protect the people from the abuse of power by those whom they entrust the same. If we remove this principle from the way the state performs its tasks and bureaucratic functions, then we are no more than a tyranny. In the provinces, local dynasts would continue their hold on power, and this patron-subject relation has persisted in dominating the political landscape.

It might be too early to tell if Duterte is the right man to reform the Philippine society. It is our fervent hope that violence has not yet become a normalizing way of overcoming reason. The real catastrophe in the killings of drug suspects is not the number of people who have been summarily executed. Rather, it is in the sheer inability of decent people to see the violence. While our worst trouble is that we easily forget the sins of the past, the greatest problem out there remains to be the maniacal use of power, as shown by evil regimes of times past, which deprived people of the right to live in this world.

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¹ Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1992), 147.

² Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*, (Manila: Tala Publications, 1974), 236.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 155.

⁵ Paul Hotchcroft and Joel Rocamora, "Strong Demands and Weak Institutions: The Origins and Evolution of the Democratic Deficit in the Philippines," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 3 (2): 259.

⁶ During the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) on "Radical Democracy" at Ateneo de Davao University on October 25, 2017 which was attended by Zosimo Lee of the University of the Philippines, Karl Gaspar of the St. Alphonsus Theological Mission Institute, Ruby Suazo of the University of San Carlos, and Jeffry Ocaj of Silliman University, it was pointed out that the real failure of Philippine politics can be attributed to its elitist democracy.

⁷ Hotchcroft and Rocamora, "Strong Demands and Weak Institutions, 266.

⁸ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 1.

⁹ Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1979), 9.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jeffry Ocaj, *Focus Group Discussion on Radical Democracy*, Silliman University professor.

¹³ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 141.

¹⁴ Patricio Abinales, "War and Peace in Muslim Mindanao: Critiquing the Orthodoxy" In *Mindanao: The Long Road to Peace and Prosperity*. Ed. Paul Hotchcroft (Manila: Anvil, 2015), 45.

¹⁵ Hotchcroft and Rocamora, "Strong Demands and Weak Institutions," 262.

¹⁶ Michael Cullinane, *Ilustrado Politics*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), 9.

¹⁷ Karl Gaspar, *Focus Group Discussion on Radical Democracy*, St. Alphonsus Theology Mission Institute dean.

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¹⁹ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 196.

²⁰ Ruby Suazo, *Focus Group Discussion on Radical Democracy*, University of San Carlos professor.

²¹ Karl Gaspar, "The Interface of Social Ethics and Human Rights in the Philippines Today," *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* 2 (2016): 2.

²² Zosimo Lee, *Focus Group Discussion on Radical Democracy*, University of the Philippines

²³ Clarita Carlos, *The Electoral Reforms in the Philippines: Issues and Challenges* (Makati: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2014), 14.