"Change is Coming" and the Remaking of Philippine Populism

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ABSTRACT

The election of Rodrigo Roa Duterte in 2016 reshaped Philippine populist politics and created significant changes in how parties and their machinery run campaigns. Besides using his macho persona through his tough stance on crime and drugs while serving as Mayor of Davao City, a major urban center in Mindanao, Duterte was able to re-image the Filipino's penchant for populist leaders by presenting himself as an outsider from Manila-centric national politics. This situation made him different from former President Joseph Ejercito Estrada, who used populist narratives to capture the highest political seat in the Philippine Government. But what gained traction for Duterte was the availability of a new medium to promote his brand and image to the mainstream political space, usually closed to outsiders like him. Being separate from an established political family like previous national political actors and lacking principal backers, Rodrigo Roa Duterte had to rely on a grassroots-initiated social media-centric campaign. He was one of the first political actors to heavily depend on the social media platform influencers, which, at that time, were only starting to gain relevance in Philippine Politics. This new medium was one of the fundamental bases for making Duterte a change actor in the country's political landscape. This paper explored how Duterte changed the campaign trail in Philippine elections and shifted the narrative of power and control in Philippine Politics.

Keywords: *populist politics, social media-centric campaign, influencers, Philippine elections*

INTRODUCTION

Rodrigo Roa Duterte epitomized how political narratives in Philippine democracy shifted towards a new phase of populist politics. The country has a history of voting for popular candidates like the former actor turned politician Joseph Ejercito Estrada (Abinales & Amoroso, 2017); however, Duterte was able to move above the other famous political actors by making use of a more grassroots approach in campaigning and the use of technology to facilitate a narrative to promote himself and his political narratives (Sinpeg, Gueorguiev & Arugay, 2020). The rise of social media and the digital sphere became the prowling ground for new populist narratives that Duterte championed. He facilitated a new dynamic in the post-EDSA political competition by contesting the status quo in Philippine electoral politics. New media and internet-savvy Filipinos immensely helped this unique presentation. Unlike the older type of popular politics, social media allows a more significant and uncontrolled space to present or restructure information to create a new point of argument and discussion. The resulting political environment was relatively more polarized than previous political events in Philippine politics. This condition was evident if there was a comparison between the 2016 and 1998 elections. Scholars saw the 1998 election as the initial rise of popular politics in the country. It led to the height of the former movie star turned politician Joseph Ejercito Estrada, endearingly called Erap, to gain the presidential seat and become the 13th president of the Republic of the Philippines. The use of his mass-focused narratives was well noted, and his exposure through his long history in Philippine Cinema as the pro-poor protagonist (Tolentino, 2010) gave him a cutting-edge advantage compared to the other competitors in the race. But without social media and the internet being in its infancy, the role played by Media was still heavily filtered due to the reliance on traditional media. In this situation, it is evident that Erap was still put into place by powerful media institutions, and the political narratives are still under the influence of traditional political mechanisms like political parties and political kingmakers. It is why, in the case of Duterte, he was perceived as a figure who not only took control of the limelight but also a person who could affect the narrative carried by the mindset of the population, which overwhelmingly voted for him. Duterte introduced a new political environment that started to chip into the EDSA political base and establish a new political reality that has resulted in the repudiation of the dominant order that stemmed from the revolutionary spirit of Philippine third-wave democratization. This new political narrative has resulted in the high success rate of his appointed allies in the midterm elections; it contributed to the eventual return of the Marcoses to the national limelight. The main task of this paper focused on exploring the peculiarity of Duterte's populism and how it was able to remake the Philippine presidential campaign trail. This research underscored the value the

Duterte campaign team gave in forming loose ground-based alliances and using the social media space as powerful narrative building blocks that paved the way to Duterte winning the presidential seat. The success of these methods also entailed that this research connected with how the succeeding candidates replicated the Duterte formula.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized a qualitative approach to deal with the information and narratives from this endeavor. The research focused on the information from the literature available about Philippine populism and the peculiarity of the Duterte campaign trail. Key informant interviews were conducted to validate the emerging themes obtained from the other sources. These two informants came from the Duterte Movement, which served as the ground force of the campaign of President Duterte, and one is an active media practitioner and educator. The first-hand data obtained in this study converged with secondary sources that defined the development and progression of the themes in this paper. A thematic analysis provided a converging discussion and answer to the intent and question in the introduction of this research. The development of themes follows the six-phase approach of thematic analysis (TA) developed by Braun & Clarke (2012). This procedure allowed a better analysis of the qualitative data and gave a plausible, thorough, and sophisticated discussion of the themes obtained from the transcribed data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Defining Populism

Defining populism is a difficult task. The concept has attained multiple kinds and levels of definition and context. But this paper's term is positioned as an ideology and political style. As an ideology, populism breeds the notion that the populace is under a contentious relationship with the ruling elites. This condition ushers the political condition that elites' control is victimizing the general population, thus creating a concept of the general will undermined by the powerful elites (Mudde., 2004). As an ideology, populism espouses that the people should be heard and their welfare should be over that of the interest of the ruling political actors. Once the latter acts contrary to the will of the people, the populace can and should act by their will. This state is reflected in how popular elections can become a vehicle for an actor to mobilize the people to pursue the general will by using this rhetoric. This rhetoric can become a mechanism for candidates or political actors to gain seats or positions through elections. This situation allows the formation of the notion that populism can also become a political framework. It is evident in how the antagonization that emerges in populist political messaging becomes a simple us vs. them narrative and an overall approach to use the contest between groups to validate or invalidate a candidate or a movement. But what makes this a form of political style is based on the packaging and the

utilization of political messaging through different propaganda platforms.

The messaging creates the notion of asking for the people to be more discerning or critical of the political establishment, creating a crisis in the status quo. The populist leader will utilize this narrative to espouse the cracks and possible breakdown in the condition. This condition will then be employed by the performative capacity of the populist leader to underscore the need to change and allow new actors to replace the perceived problematic elites (Moffit & Tormey, 2014). These two variations of populism are present in the case of the experiences of the Philippines under Joseph Ejercito Estrada and Rodrigo Roa Duterte. Both have utilized political messaging where they support the people against the ruling oppressive elites (Bello, 2017). They have also used the tone where the populace should be the basis of governance because they represent the general will. Still, it is also clear that both have used the performative approach in presenting the political status quo as in trouble due to the continuous control of these elites. However, Duterte has more of an advantage in using this political messaging due to new media technologies available in 2016.

Philippine Populism: Estrada and Duterte

The trend of populism in the post-Marcos Philippines started with Joseph Ejercito Estrada. This condition of Philippine populist politics depends on the presidential electoral process of the country. With the absence of weak political parties and the persistence of solid patronage politics (Hutchcroft, 2020), the Philippines is constantly at risk of possible demagogic figures that can run a campaign based on charisma and ignited rhetoric. This condition became particularly true in the more open competition structure for the presidency in the post-EDSA democracy. The removal of the two-party system in the 1987 Constitution and the lack of the institutionalized party system have enabled popular politics to take over the Presidential race in the country fully. Joseph Estrada utilized this populist/charismatic identity through his presidential campaign for the 1998 elections. He carried the narrative of being the "pare," a concept that endears him to the general population because the term creates a semblance of closeness and accessibility, like a friend or a buddy (Macapagal, 1998). This concept is frequently used to create social bonds between people and families that are not blood-related. He also twisted this term by inverting the spelling of the word pare and developed the term "Erap," which added to the endearment of the general masses. His campaign slogan also tried to tap into the Philippines' main problem: poverty. 'Erap para sa mahirap' created a narrative that gave Joseph Estrada an image of being for "the poor" (Hedman, 2001), an identity he often connects with his heroic roles on the silver screen. Coupling this with his popularity as a movie star made it easy for Estrada to launch a campaign

that carried a narrative that poverty would be eradicated once he became president. He managed to use his film roles as the basis for his ability to accomplish his goals. Being the protagonist, Erap is depicted as the eventual savior or redemption-inducing character who will help the oppressed and the needy. Joseph Estrada became the first Philippine president considered to have won the seat by mainly relying on his popularity and thriving on getting the most votes in a plurality race of the post-dictatorial Philippine democracy. What was more outstanding was his utilization of his image rather than his credentials to promote himself to the highest political seat of the Philippine Government. He used his lack of a university diploma and his broken English to his advantage. He allowed the masses to easily connect with him, making him the preferred choice for the electorate (Macapagal, 1998). But all this pro-masses identity is a mere manufactured image of a campaigning president because Joseph Estrada came from a relatively well-off family; he has a long history of political participation as mayor of the Municipality of San Juan, then as a senator, and eventually becoming the vice president under the Fidel V. Ramos administration (Abinales & Amoroso, 2017). Nonetheless, his campaign was the first interlude of the Philippines to populist politics at the presidential level in the post-EDSA republic. However, his populist and action-star persona did not translate into a successful presidential term because he was removed from office via another people

power revolution in 2001, better known as EDSA Dos (Reid, 2001).

Like Joseph Ejercito Estrada, former President Rodrigo Roa Duterte was also considered a populist president. Joseph Ejercito Estrada and Rodrigo Roa Duterte have high popularity ratings, and their overall electoral performances in their respective electoral years are considerable. But it is not just these two metrics where both Estrada and Duterte attain their populist identities; both of them have extensively utilized their endearing traits to create followers mostly coming from the masses. They have also used class-based narratives that attack established elite structures by using or identifying the lowly classes referred to as either "mahirap" or "masa" (Thompson, 2010). But Duterte was slightly different due to his distinct path to the presidency.

Rodrigo Roa Duterte rose into the national spotlight based on his notoriety and capacity to charm the populace, using colloquial words and cusses commonly used by regular folks (McCargo, 2016). His penchant for being natural and being one with the people enabled his popularity to reach the national level. President Duterte also presented a fresh face and character in the national electoral race. He was considered an outsider from the usual political candidates that have saturated national politics for decades (Casiple, 2016). This outsider identity bodes well for him when he finally places his hat on the race. Being from Mindanao and an outsider of the Manila-centric national political sphere, he was immune to the

probable issues stemming from controversies often shooting out to discredit political actors hoarding national politics. His declaration was also strategic because it did not have enough time for would-be competition to dig dirt on his political career, which could invalidate his position as a candidate. Overall, the Philippine electorate was also tired of the mudslinging among traditional political actors and families that have dominated the political landscape for decades. His Mindanao and Cebuano roots also supported him from the often left-out voices underrepresented at the national level (Thompson, 2016). He was also able to embody the growing dissatisfaction of the Visayan and Mindanaoan population, who were disgruntled with the Luzon domination in the overall political affairs of the country. However, the support from the VisMin area is not enough to propel him to the top seat. Duterte also catered to the greater dismay and disappointment of the masses and the middle class on the EDSA-era political system. This change in political narratives reflects the distinctive presentation of Duterte as a popular leader. He successfully captured the dissatisfaction of the people, creating a new historical juncture in Philippine politics similar to how previous strongmen were able to attack previous institutions and instigate a political-ideological shift, instigating their accession to the top seat of the Philippine government (Parcon, 2021). This change is captured in his tagline: "Change is coming," which can also be represented by Duterte's distinct political messaging and packaging represented by the term "Dutertismo." This concept presents how Duterte took the hearts and minds of the electorate by using mass-based messaging without formally presenting a credible platform (David, 2016). However, this situation could not have been successful without utilizing a new media tool maturing in the 2016 election. The rise of social media platforms provided Duterte's team with an extensive avenue to promote his message and image without conventional impediments in traditional media like censorship.

Duterte and New Media

The 2016 national elections allowed the utilization of a new mechanism for promoting candidates. Social media platforms became a more robust and successful tool to tow a narrative and develop an image of a political candidate. Rodrigo Duterte was one of the most successful candidates to utilize varied social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to gain political points and obtain necessary votes to win a political seat. What made these social media sites very effective was the high level of internet utilization among Filipinos. Internet usage in the Philippines is the second longest in the world, according to the 2022 report by Hootsuite and We Are Social (Baclig, 2022). Facebook and Twitter also allowed the digitalization of information competition. This new space for political contestation is where Duterte was able to cement his rise as the leading candidate. By utilizing a propaganda-manufacturing "keyboard" army, the Duterte campaign reached more people, and these sites,

influencers, and organizations became narrative builders that allowed the weaponization of ideas and information to promote the candidate and discredit the opposition. The so-called Duterte online warriors could also present their ideas more effectively without the cost of political ads in traditional media. As an effective tool to promote the candidate's agenda, these influencers and social media pages have enabled the narrative to shift to favor Duterte to win the presidential race (Bengali & Halper, 2019). The extensive use of social media has made the former president a disrupting force in the campaign system in the country, redefining the Presidential Elections and Filipino populism. His social media-fueled campaign changed the presentation of political messaging. Ditching the reliance on traditional media like TV, Radio, and Print gave his crew liberty and broader space to present an alternative to the old 'truth' in Philippine politics.

Duterte as a Changing Force in Philippine Politics?

Interviewed Persons	Statements	Themes
P1. Media/ Personnel/ Academic	"As mayor, he had the track record for stomping crime and corruption in his bailwick	No nonsense leader
P.2 Political Appointee/ Grassroot Organizer	*"kasi hindi ako naniniwala sa simpleng pakiusap sa mga drug lords e.* You really need to have a tough leader during his time"	Tough Leader

When Duterte came into the campaign trail, he was able to muster massive support from different classes of Philippine society. He carried a macho image that was seen as a timely figure that would resolve the many issues that hounded the Philippine society in the last few years. In the campaign, Duterte also fully utilized vital themes that resonated with the people. Based on the interview of both P1 and P2, Duterte was able to project himself as a no-nonsense and tough leader ready to stomp out drugs, crime, and corruption. The basis for this image is his exploits when he was the city executive of Davao City. He was responsible for turning the city around and becoming a peaceful and progressive urban center in Mindanao (Casiple, 2016). He extensively used the bailiwick image he developed to form a narrative that it will take a person like Duterte to resolve the social ills that hound Davao or Mindanao and all the provinces and cities in the country. However, this image tends also to project the recognition that the nation is under threat from prominent political and criminal entities. That is why his campaign presented a narrative that "Change is coming" due to the undesirable conditions that the country is in. This tagline epitomized the shifting political reality now moving forward from the EDSA-centric narrative of Philippine national politics.

Rejection of the EDSA Spirit and the Relatable Alternative Candidate

Interviewed Persons	Statements	Themes
P1. Media Personnel/Academic	"Majority of the voters managed to relate to or connect to Duterte, who presented himself as the ultimate alternative to typical national politicians."	Alternative Leader
P2. Political Appointee/Grassroot Organizer	"So because of that personal experience and my philosophical study… nagkaroon ako ng sense of connection. That i was able to relate to the passion of one Rodrigo Duterte na hindi ko nakita sa iba"	Relatable Candidate

Introducing a new narrative in the Philippine political landscape best exemplifies the campaign of Rodrigo Duterte. The campaign anchored his run in the 2016 elections on the criticisms of the nation's status quo. The country was presented as hounded by systemic issues and inefficiencies that resulted in the stunted progression of Filipinos. This critical presentation enabled the formation of a counter-narrative to the dominant EDSA narrative. The EDSA system, anchored with neo-liberal reform, failed to transform the nation from the destructive Martial Law period (Bello, 2017). The country's democracy was stuck in a quagmire of political and systemic weaknesses, making the consolidation of Philippine democracy anemic. Rather than creating strong parties and stable democratic procedures, the nation settled with constant party switching and patronage politics (Teehankee & Kasuya, 2020).

These pathologies of the Philippine democracy allowed the likes of Rodrigo Duterte to gain traction in a populace tired of Philippine politics. Based on the responses of P1 and P2, they identified Duterte as a candidate that does not reflect the ills of Filipino National political elites. Being a candidate uninvolved in the messy politics of imperial Manila, he was perceived as a better bet for the presidency. He was heavily seen as an alternative leader who could translate his success in transforming Davao City to the national level (Casiple, 2016). However, what distinguishes Duterte from the others, besides being an outsider, is his ability to charm voters by presenting himself as an accessible and relatable candidate, a candidate who can connect directly to the common Filipino with his Visayan "authenticity and masculinity" (McCargo, 2016 ; 188).

Replicability of the Duterte Style and the Future of Philippine Populism

Interviewed Persons	Statements	Themes
P1.Media Personnel/ Academic	'BBM basically copied Duterte's social media strategy. He had inspired a new breed of social media warriors that continue to wax nostalgic about his father's "golden years" as president.' "BBM upped the ante by conversing to the public through his own vlogs."	Replication Social Media Narrative Formation Vlogger Campaigner
P2.Political Appointee/ Grassroot Organizer	"yes doon sa template… sense of grassroots ownership, social media, mobilization of volunteer groups… talagang there is really a template." "meron din si BBM. halimbawa… iyong political party nya… iyong Partido Federal ng Pilipinas. I was a part of that… i was the second youth chairman of the party. Mga kasama natin sa Dekada was also part of PFP… to mobilize the youth there. Nabuo ito sa efforts ng MRRD-NECC… the lawyers in our group… sila din iyong bumuo ng PFP."	Replication of the Campaign Strategy Same people, different clothing

Rodrigo Duterte was a trailblazer who used volunteerism and social media platforms to win the highest elected position in the Philippine government. He changed the strategy of political campaigns in the nation by creating alternative avenues to effectively convey their political messaging and propaganda to the target population. This innovation was cited by both interviewed key informants (P1 and P2) as a new template or approach for creating more opportunities for political aspirants to gain electoral success. Even the succeeding president, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (BBM), used the campaign strategy of the Duterte camp. He has extensively invested in social media to promote a new narrative that promoted a redemption counter wave to the EDSA spirit that greatly demonized the legacy of his dictatorial father. This new take in presenting the Martial Law period was the penultimate end of the People Power narrative that took control of the political environment after the EDSA revolution. Through influencers, BBM promoted a nostalgic "golden era" political image of his family's time as the nation's ruler under an undemocratic regime. This return to the mainstream political environment of the Marcoses after years of being demonized after the EDSA validated the authenticating power of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These open and almost censor-less digital propaganda tools have reshaped political competition to new heights. However, more is needed to equate the success of Marcos in replicating the Duterte template. BBM also innovated by becoming a direct player in the

narrative-building process, which allowed him to win the 2022 election. As mentioned by P2, Bongbong Marcos also became a vlogger, which Rodrigo Duterte never dabbled in. Coupled with the established grassroots system of the Marcos loyalists, this new political campaign strategy became very potent for BBM to become the country's next president. However, the immense contributions of Rodrigo Duterte in reshaping the political environment that led to a new narrative in Philippine politics cannot be discounted. His introduction of social media platforms as potential areas where would-be political actors could present their raw and uncut ideas became the new norm for almost all interest and active players in Philippine politics. This new way of political promotion may validate Duterte's effective form of populism.

To a certain degree, we can attest that the game plan used by Duterte's campaign team utilized populism as an ideology and political style (Mudde, 2004). He was successful in using the alienation of the populace from the elite-dominated system of the Philippines. His critique of the EDSA political narrative has successfully devalued the legacy of the 1986 people power. This populist ideological attack on the status quo allowed the formation of a paradigmatic shift in the political environment of the Philippines, which eventually allowed the once-hated Marcoses to come back on top. Duterte used this growing sentiment of distrust and disgust of the current condition of Philippine politics to promote himself as a potential and alternative candidate who is outside the circles of "corrupt"

and "ineffective" elites in Manila. By drawing from his success as a Mayor of Davao City, Duterte created a brand that people can connect to. His use of unfiltered words and humor endeared him to the population (Casiple, 2016). But all these traits and portrayals are only enough with the formation of Duterte political style. With the adoption of the grassroots and volunteer networks plus the extensive reliance on social media, the populist style of Rodrigo Duterte became clear and structured. Through the ground-level promotion coupled with the promotion via Facebook, he captured the hearts and minds of Filipino voters. These powerful promotion mechanisms gave him a high-level connection with the people and authentication in his messaging. He could bypass the established systems like traditional media and the traditional political mechanisms, which often reject his type of candidate. This is the reason why Duterte is different from other presidents. He was able to use populism to become president. Still, he used it so successfully that he finished his term, unlike Erap Estrada, and provided a new template for succeeding candidates like Bongbong Marcos to adopt to ensure or at least guarantee a successful run for office. This relative success of Duterte populism indicates what sets the former president apart from other populist leaders in the Philippines. Unlike President Estrada's populism, Dutertismo was not only about mass-based politics but also about the increasing rejection of the traditional EDSA Narrative. President Duterte was also able to fully validate his tough guy

persona by being the Dirty Harry of Davao City and Mindanao (Zabriskie, 2002). He did not rely on a manufactured image of a hero on the silver screen like that of President Estrada. It is essential to promote his persona via the social media sphere because it is easier to use his uncensored speeches laced with profanities that endear the masses and his other supporters.

CONCLUSION

Philippine elections have always been highly contested. It is perhaps the greatest virtue of Philippine Democracy. However, with the incomplete consolidation of the democratic system and political culture, the country can easily be classified as a "stuck democracy." The nation's weak party system and the prevalence of patronage politics have significantly hampered the quality of political institutions. This sad state of the Philippine political system is why electoral cycles, though competitive, tend to create a cycle of democratic instability. This unstable system resulted in the people's dissatisfaction with the state of things in the country, resulting in the rise of populist candidates. These types of political actors had a mixed record until the rise of Rodrigo Duterte. They either win like Joseph Ejercito Estrada but then lose their grip on power or, like Fernando Poe Jr., lose against a heavily controversial election. But because of the lack of a stable political party system, the country is bound to have another populist president, and Rodrigo Duterte fit the bill. He fits the

classifications of populism as an ideology and populism as a style. But unlike other populist political actors, he successfully established himself on the throne. By faithfully following Mudde's definition of the two definitions of populism, he created a mass following by becoming close to the people to the extent that it resulted in a high level of volunteerism that Walden Bello witnessed. But what made him more endearing was his success in creating a new narrative that displaced traditional EDSA-centric political narrative. Duterte also displayed a better populist style by using a 'novel' space for promotion. Through social media and the digital sphere, he successfully changed and elevated political campaign competition at the level of "net wars," which was very new in the Philippine electoral landscape then. He turned Facebook posts, vlogs, and trending topics into a validating tool that gave him a greater audience and following from one of the world's most internet-consuming nations. The Duterte campaign ensured its victory and created a new political template for other political actors to base their campaigns on by converging this technology-based propaganda promotion with the active volunteer movement.

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