

# The Durability of Populism and Authoritarian Practices in Duterte's Philippines\*

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This article revisits Duterte's populist and authoritarian performances, analyzing reports that reflect the connection between the populist logic and democratic backsliding in the Philippines. Through a systematic examination of Duterte's real and perceived achievements, the article explains how rhetorical strategies and actions, guided by the logic of populism, help sustain popularity and justify authoritarian practices. Fulfilled promises celebrated and failures constantly dismissed by Duterte supporters are identified, using them as indicators of their consent to Duterte's leadership approach. The article finds that Duterte supporters welcomed authoritarian measures and considered them as manifestations of their champion's political will crucial for satisfying their practical demands. As Duterte supporters maintained, disciplining or eliminating government opponents and fully supporting the administration were prerequisites for progress. With the Duterte presidency marking a critical juncture in Philippine democracy, there is a pressing need to reevaluate his legacy and delve deeper into the allure of populist rhetoric and authoritarian practices in the Philippines.

**주제어** Duterte, campaign promises, populism, authoritarian practices, democratic backsliding

## I. Introduction

Despite numerous human rights violations and failure to realize some key campaign promises, Rodrigo Duterte remained popular with the vast majority even toward the end of his term in office. Duterte's satisfaction rating was historically impressive throughout his presidency, as it

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consistently grew since he assumed office, with a record high of +72 net ratings by the mid-point of his term in December 2019, according to the pollster Social Weather Stations (SWS) (Laroza and Paguinto, 2020). While his net satisfaction ratings dropped to +52 in the September 2021 SWS survey, his scores remained the highest among outgoing presidents since SWS started conducting such surveys (Laroza, 2021). The past two Philippine elections under the Duterte administration also support this claim. All opposition senatorial candidates lost in the 2019 midterm elections, while in the 2022 national elections, only one opposition candidate secured a senate seat. Duterte's daughter, Sara Duterte-Carpio, who ran as vice president in tandem with Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr as president, achieved landslide victories over "pinks and yellows" (reductive terms referring to politicians, technocrats, and oligarchs associated with the former Aquino administrations, the Liberal Party, and their supporters).

The conclusion of Duterte's regime offers an opportune time to revisit his record and analyze in great detail the function of his real and perceived achievements, punitive language, and political performance in sustaining his popularity and people's support for his authoritarian measures. Several attempts have been made to demystify Duterte's approval rating, but there remains a need to critically assess its connection with the populist logic and the widespread acceptance of his authoritarian language and practices.

First, to make the described connection more apparent, the article spotlights the fundamental difference between populism and authoritarianism and argues that the former is neither synonymous with the latter nor inherently promoting authoritarian practices. Populism's antagonistic frontier in Duterte's Philippines designates the immoral elite as the people's enemy, while Duterte's authoritarian posturing endorses the antagonization of drug syndicates, rebels, communists, criminals, activists, and government critics. It is for this reason that authoritarianism is not observed as a face

of populism (see Bugarcic, 2019) and the term authoritarian populism (see Dix, 1985; Griecius, 2021) is not used in this article. However, despite drawing the line between the two, the article does not deny their strong congruence. As Curato and Yonaha (2021) insightfully pointed out, several authoritarian practices in Duterte's regime stem from populist performances. To this end, the co-occurrence of populist and authoritarian elements in Duterte's political rhetoric is also explored, underscoring not only their real-life consequences but also the role of the former in providing justification for Duterte's authoritarian measures, especially among his supporters.

Second, the article systematically examines Duterte's real and perceived achievements to understand how rhetorical strategies and actions, guided by the logic of populism, can help sustain popularity and justify authoritarian measures. Recognizing the connection between satisfying people's demands and maintaining popular support for authoritarian practices, the article conducts an accounting of Duterte's record and assesses the extent to which his campaign promises were realized or left unfulfilled. Misdeeds and failures constantly dismissed by his supporters were identified, using them as indicators of their consent to Duterte's authoritarian posturing. Following the prevailing populist and authoritarian narratives on social media, achieving progress requires people's full support for the government and the silencing or punishment of its critics. The article argues that this worldview, combined with manifestations of actual and magnified achievements, helped drive the acceptance of Duterte's authoritarian language and practices.

To facilitate the analysis, the article reviews the actual and perceived fulfillment of Duterte's campaign promises: (1) restoring order by eradicating illegal drugs, (2) supporting the needy and protecting the vulnerable, (3) addressing people's needs by improving government services, (4) expanding access to healthcare, (5) shepherding the golden age of infrastructure, (6)

eliminating corruption, and (7) dismantling the oligarchy. Other campaign commitments that also helped propel his popularity have been excluded from the discussion because they fundamentally represent non-populist demands, such as establishing a federal government and protecting the West Philippine Sea from Chinese ships. For the same reason, Duterte's anti-US policies that resonated with his supporters (see Talamayan, 2022) has purposefully been left out of this inquiry. Details examined in this article are taken from Philippine fact-checkers (VERA Files and Rappler), published reports, and various posts collected during the author's immersion in media, government, and pro-Duterte Facebook groups and pages from 2016 to 2022.

The article is organized as follows. It begins by providing a review of works that underline the conceptual distinction between populism and authoritarianism and examine Duterte's populist language and authoritarian practices. This is followed by a background to Duterte's populist and authoritarian performances, exploring in detail how the populist orchestration of consensus aids authoritarian actors' weakening of democratic institutions. Subsequent sections unpack the factors that drove the popular support for Duterte's leadership approach: his administration's real and perceived achievements. As populist actors in the Philippines frame authoritarian measures as necessary and moral means to satisfy people's desire for peace, stability, and prosperity, it is vital to investigate the gap between Duterte's rhetoric and achievements, for it informs the extent to which people approve government actions, inactions, and authoritarian measures. Such an approach not only spells out which populist demands are addressed and neglected but also provides insights into how Duterte successfully sustained his image as the unifying signifier of people's demands and normalized authoritarian language and practices. The last section circles back to the article's main point and concludes

the discussion, stressing how an in-depth review of Duterte's record can explain the popular appeal of populist and authoritarian politics in the Philippines.

## II. Populism and Authoritarianism: Conceptual Distinctions and Practices in the Philippines

As Laclau (2005) claimed, "populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political" (xi). Demands, perceived as expressions of systemic dislocation, should first be accumulated after some time to gain the capacity to form the people. According to Laclau (2005), only after constant institutional neglect can individuals realize that others have equally unfulfilled demands. Upon reaching a peak point, "an equivalential relation is established between them" (74). Through this formation of equivalential chains of unsatisfied demands, populism symbolically unifies the people and constructs an internal antagonistic frontier that separates them from the elite.

The gradual construction of an equivalential chain of various demands gives an individual demand a particular centrality, which later embodies the "absent fullness" or general dissatisfaction of the people (Laclau, 2005: 120). Once demands are popularized, they are subsumed into "empty terms" like justice and freedom, which then turn into a signifier of something more than what they actually signify (97). This "surrender of particularity" to stress "what all particularities have, equivalentially, in common" is guided by what Laclau calls the logic of equivalence (78). When demands are condensed through an equivalential logic, they simultaneously signify particular demands and broader universality (Laclau, 2005). Consolidating pluralities and constructing the social through this logic usually entails forging an antagonistic frontier (Laclau, 2005). The institutionalization

of differentiability between two opposing groups is vital to forming an equivalence among the people since the opposition against a common enemy facilitates the homogenization of heterogeneous demands (Laclau, 2005: 82, 89). Differences become equivalent to each other as people share the rejection of an excluded identity and embrace an underdog identity (Laclau, 2005).

Populism's appeal to the underdog aids people's differentiation of themselves against the elite. The populist narrative constructs the underdog identity by morally differentiating "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," portraying the elite as fundamentally evil (Mudde, 2004: 542-544). The underdog perspective also explains the appeal of anti-institution and anti-status quo among populists. As Laclau (2005) observes, anything that sustains the underdog's deprivation is treated by populists as a hindrance to the realization of prosperity, while those that avert people's suffering and introduce radical change are deemed appealing. Anyone who challenges institutions that keep the lives of the underdogs miserable is seen as a hero (regardless of whether the hero operates within or outside the legal system), while those who promote the status quo are considered collaborators of those who disenfranchise and dispossess others. These forms of antagonism, which express hate toward institutions and norms, are similar to the people-elite opposition because they also allow the totalization of all differentials.

Like Laclau, the corpus of works produced by De Cleen also sought to clarify the political logic that operates within populist articulations. Building on Laclau's works, De Cleen (2017; 2019; see also De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; De Cleen et al., 2018) offers clearer distinctions between populism and other ideologies commonly associated with it. His analysis zeroes in on articulations, treating them as mechanisms that assemble "different elements in a discourse so as to construct a particular structure of meaning" (De Cleen, 2019: 36-37). Arguing that "each politics is necessarily tied into existing

and more encompassing structures of meaning,” De Cleen (2017) claims that articulations are vital in determining whether or not a political expression is populist. By picturing articulations as building blocks of politics, De Cleen effectively reframes the study of populism: first, his research approach encourages tracing specific moments of political articulation, thereby orchestrating an accurate identification of the relationship between a signifier and the signified and revealing a political expression’s construction of meaning; second, it turns an articulation into a critical indicator of a political logic or ideology, pinpointing the specific instance when a political expression shifts from one type of politics to another; and third, it not only underscores the heartland of every expression but also reveals the fundamental difference between the populist logic and other political ideologies.

Observing the co-occurrence of different concepts and ideologies in a particular politics underlines that populism could be expressed in different ideological forms and political systems, such as nationalism, racism, neoliberalism, and authoritarianism (De Cleen et al., 2018). Thus, a holistic approach to the study of populism should not only isolate what is specifically populist in a political articulation but also recognize how populist meanings are constructed through an interaction of populist elements with other elements. This approach is helpful, if not necessary, in the context of this study, as it underlines the distinction and navigates the connection between populist articulations and authoritarian performances in the Philippines.

In the Philippines, Duterte’s rhetoric and leadership approach has captured the attention of Philippine and Filipinist scholars, even prompting the rise of the “Duterte Studies Industry” (Abinales, 2022; Thompson, 2019). The general scholarship examined Duterte’s language and performance using different social, cultural, economic, geographical, and political lenses,

covering diverse issues and viewing them from multiple angles.

First on the list is Thompson's 2016 article that characterized Duterte's campaign narrative along the lines of neo-authoritarianism. Li (2015) defines neo-authoritarianism as an enlightened autocracy, or a leadership style that fosters economic growth through undemocratic measures. According to Thompson (2016), the appeal of Duterte's call for "*tunay na pagbabago*" (genuine change) and promise for a quick fix to the country's infrastructure, corruption, and crime problems through extralegal means was driven by the people's compounded frustration under the Aquino and other post-Marcos administrations.

These observations were also present in several scholarly works, such as Curato's (2016) article on Duterte's authoritarian fantasies. However, Curato departs from Thompson in the sense that Curato categorically identified Duterte as a populist and suggested that Duterte's politics endorsed a dichotomy between "the people" and "dangerous other" (7). This exclusionary framing of Duterte's rhetoric and style linked the notion of populism with authoritarianism and punitive politics. A similar analogy may be found in Juego's (2017) work, which tackled the binaries of "good citizens" and "bad criminals," as well as "the dying EDSA-type liberal democracy" and "the emerging Duterte-led authoritarian populism" (129, 134).

Another outstanding contribution is Maxwell's (2018) article on people's perception of threat and the rise of Duterte. Maxwell's work is one of the first that used a quantitative research approach to analyze Duterte's popularity. Results of Maxwell's survey showed that people who trust authorities and the law also trust the former president. Further, Maxwell found that Duterte supporters "believe generally in the legitimacy of power and the primacy of authority over individual liberty" (9), thus explaining the widespread acceptance of the supposed necessity of extralegal measures

and extrajudicial killings.

Curato and Yonaha (2021) expanded the earlier analysis of Duterte's populist performance by looking at how it deepened people's distrust of the "good governance agenda" and intensified support for authoritarian practices (393). They also emphasized the functions of Duterte's performance of a macho populist and disciplinarian father—images that stick to many Filipinos (hence the moniker *Tatay Digong* or Father Digong)—in promoting a caring but violent leadership. Regilme Jr's (2021) work framed the described phenomenon as a crisis of democracy, with the article offering insights into the legitimization and contestation of Duterte's illiberal and authoritarian politics using temporal and spatial frames. Talamayan and Pertierra (2023), meanwhile, added another layer of analysis by looking at the historical and sociopolitical conditions that enabled the continuation and reinvention of the populist language in the time of Duterte.

While much has been said on the topic, this article argues that there remains an empirical gap in the current literature. An empirical investigation of Duterte's populist language and authoritarian practice can further underscore the fundamental difference between populism and authoritarianism, the specific moments of their congruence, and the role of the former in promoting authoritarian practices and sustaining popularity. The described differentiation and intersection may be clarified by closely analyzing the details of Duterte's political rhetoric and performance.

### III. Democratic Backsliding in the Time of Duterte

"You, ABS-CBN, you're a mouthpiece [of the oligarchs]. Your franchise will end next year. If you are expecting its renewal, I'm sorry. You're out. I will see to it that you're out" (Duterte, 2019; translation by the author). These were

Duterte's words in December 2019, months before Congress officially revoked ABS-CBN's license to broadcast. While Duterte's allies were resolute that the closure of the country's most extensive media network would have no chilling effect on press freedom, former Vice President Leni Robredo—a staunch Duterte critic—posited that it would most likely influence journalists' editorial choices (Salaverria, 2020).

The move to shut down ABS-CBN is both populist and authoritarian in nature. It is populist when the closure of ABS-CBN is dubbed as an attempt to dismantle the reign of oligarchs in the country. The act follows a populist logic for it supposedly represents people's will: "*desisyon ng taumbayan*" (decision of the people) (Geducos, 2020). Yet, the populist move also promotes an authoritarian practice for it undermines a democratic institution. As the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility aptly pointed out, the fate that ABS-CBN suffered creates a culture of fear, thus indirectly but effectively controlling newsrooms across the country (Luna, 2021).

ABS-CBN was not the only media company under fire during the Duterte presidency. Rappler's Maria Ressa, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021, was arrested for cyber-libel charges in 2019 and verbally attacked by Duterte supporters. Elites who were major shareholders in the Philippine Daily Inquirer yielded to Duterte's pressure and sold their shares to Ramon Ang, a business magnate allied to Duterte (Venzon, 2017).

Surveys and reports by leading research institutions could also help paint the grim picture of the freedom of expression in the time of Duterte. After the successful shutdown of ABS-CBN, Social Weather Stations (SWS) found that 65 percent of Filipinos believed publishing anything critical of Duterte, even if it was the truth, was dangerous (Laroza and Zaide, 2021). While this number dropped to 42 to 45 percent in May and June 2021, such numbers remain alarming, especially when observed alongside the small number of Filipinos (25 percent) who believe it is safe for the media to print

or broadcast anti-Duterte content.

However, what truly completes the picture are the numbers showing the general population's confidence in criticizing Duterte. As the May and June 2021 SWS surveys show, around 27 to 33 percent of Filipinos fear that saying things against Duterte may harm them (Laroza, 2021). For comparison, the percentage average for the same concern during his predecessors' regime is as follows: Corazon Aquino (1986 to 1991, 21 percent), Fidel Ramos (1994 to 1998, 20 percent), Joseph Estrada (1998 to 2000, 19 percent), Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001 to 2009, 20 percent), and Benigno Aquino III (2011 to 2015, 22 percent). The peak in Duterte's time is closest to the administrations of Ferdinand Marcos (29 percent in July 1985) and Corazon Aquino (30 percent in September 1988).

A casualty of the country's deteriorating freedom of speech is Ronnel Mas, a Zambales public school teacher. The teacher was arrested without a warrant in May 2020 for his tweet that maligned Duterte: "I will give ₱50 Million reward *kung sino makakapatay kay Duterte* (to anyone who can kill Duterte)" ("NBI Arrests Teacher" 2020, translation by the author). It was evident that there was no credible threat in the words of the public school teacher as he also had no means to pay the PHP 50 million reward specified in his post. Nevertheless, the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) filed sedition charges against the teacher.

There were also cases when the Duterte government attempted to take away the freedom of speech of some Filipinos residing overseas. In April 2020, a Filipina caregiver in Taiwan was accused by the government of posting "nasty and malevolent materials against President Duterte on Facebook," prompting them to ask the Taiwanese government to deport the said Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) (Gotinga, 2020). However, based on reports, the OFW on Facebook simply expressed her criticisms of Duterte's stringent measures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Everington,

2020). Amidst deportation and legal threats, the OFW promised to publicly apologize, delete her critical posts about Duterte, and never post anything that questions Duterte's regime. Although the Taiwanese government successfully rejected the move to deport the OFW, such attacks on random individuals (even those working overseas) warn Filipinos to be careful when expressing opinions online, especially when it concerns the Duterte government.

All the described acts that undermine free speech were celebrated by Duterte supporters in the name of national progress. How does one come to terms with all these violations of freedom of expression? A quick answer may be found in various comments on posts on social media, where people assert that nothing good came from the "excessive freedom" in the Philippines. In this view, freedom of expression takes a backseat in the country's pursuit of peace and progress.

The closure of ABS-CBN, the arrest of Ressa, and the cases that involved a teacher and a Taiwan-based OFW also hint at another strategy listed in Duterte's authoritarian playbook: the weaponization of the law. The imprisonment of former Senator Leila de Lima in 2017, the near arrest of former Senator Antonio Trillanes IV, and the impeachment of former Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno in 2018 provide insights into how Duterte weaponizes the law and the legal system. The common denominator in the three incidents is the target of punishment: they are all prominent critics of Duterte and villainized both by Duterte and his supporters.

In 2017, former Senator de Lima was imprisoned for her alleged links to the large-scale drug trade in the country. This allegation surfaced after de Lima filed a resolution in July 2016 calling for a Senate probe on multiple cases of extrajudicial killings since Duterte took office (Ferrerias, 2021). Since then, Duterte and his allies have been hurling accusations at de Lima,

saying that she used drug money to fund her 2016 senatorial campaign and was abetting the illegal drug trade inside the New Bilibid Prison (Bernal, 2017). In less than two months, de Lima was removed from position as chair of the Senate Committee on Justice and Human Rights, with Duterte-allied lawmakers initiating her ousting. After several months of hearing, de Lima was arrested for supposedly violating the *Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002*. What is curious in de Lima's case is that Duterte's camp succeeded in sending her to prison without presenting compelling evidence that proves her guilt (Buan, 2017).

Like de Lima, former Senator Trillanes IV was also a loud critic of Duterte's brutal crackdown on drug users and syndicates. After a flank of attack by Trillanes on Duterte's Police Chief (now Senator) Ronald dela Rosa and after organizing alleged former members of Duterte's Davao Death Squad, Duterte's government was quick to deliver a counterattack, which came in the form of revoking Trillanes' amnesty (McKirdy, 2018). Trillanes, as a former naval officer, was arrested for rebellion in 2007 but was later granted amnesty in 2011 under President Aquino III. When ordered to be arrested, Trillanes attempted to avoid arrest by staying inside the senate premises for almost a month—a Constitutional affordance given to Philippine lawmakers. Trillanes later surrendered to the authorities and was allowed to post bail to secure his temporary liberty ("Trillanes Free for Now" 2018). Duterte supporters again lauded Trillanes' arrest, believing the former senator was actively attempting to destabilize the Duterte government.

The impeachment of Supreme Court Justice Sereno came after Sereno shielded supposedly erring judges from Duterte's attacks, arguing that the executive branch should respect the independence of the judiciary (Mogato, 2018). Sereno was also vocal about her condemnation of Duterte's drug war, as well as the declaration of martial law in Mindanao (O'Grady, 2018). She also contested Duterte's approval of the burial of the late dictator

Ferdinand Marcos in the country's National Heroes' Cemetery (O'Grady, 2018). These acts naturally angered Duterte:

*Sige ka diyay, daldal nang daldal, sige, upakan kita* (Go ahead, talk and talk, I will hit you). I will help any investigator, *talagang upakan kita* (I will really hit you). I am putting you on notice *na* (that) I am now your enemy and you have to be out of the Supreme Court. I will see to it then after that I will request the Congress, go into the impeachment right away." ("Duterte to Sereno: I Am Now Your Enemy" 2018, translation by the author)

In this performance of Duterte's macho populist image, the former president effectively stigmatized Sereno as an enemy of the Filipino people, to the point that Duterte even insinuated that "she is bad for the Philippines" ("Duterte to Sereno: I Am Now Your Enemy," 2018). This rhetorical strategy endorsed another authoritarian move, with the Supreme Court voting 8-6, granting "the quo warranto petition to remove Sereno from office on the basis of an invalid appointment" (Buan, 2018). The Human Rights Watch referred to the removal of Sereno from office as "a frontal assault on human rights protections and democratic rule" (Conde, 2018).

Members of the legislative branch bent to Duterte's will out of fear of persecution. Quoting an administration-allied congressman, "*boto lang kami nang boto dahil sa takot namin [sa Pangulo]* (we vote as the President wishes out of fear of him) (Cepeda, 2019, translation by Cepeda). To Regilme (2021), this statement, among others, testifies to the fear of political retaliation among some members of the Philippine Congress. A counterpunch that authoritarian presidents commonly use to hurt political opponents in the legislative branch is "the deprivation of easy access to the national budget" (Regilme, 2021: 7). This strategy effectively disables legislators for it takes away the necessary capital to fund their projects for their constituents.

The legal system also provided avenues for the Duterte government

to pacify other political opponents. In July 2020, Duterte signed into law the *Anti-Terrorism Act*, adding “a new weapon to brand and hound any perceived enemies of the state” (“Philippines: Dangerous Anti-terror Law,” 2020). The Anti-Terror Law expanded the earlier definition of terrorism and mandated that “speeches, writings, proclamations, emblems, banners, and other representations tending to the same end” are punishable by 12 years of imprisonment (McCarthy, 2020). While the previous anti-terrorism law penalized authorities who conducted illegal detentions, the expanded law legalized detention without charge for 14 days (Curato, 2021). Government critics intensely opposed the signing of the Anti-Terror Law, but Duterte supporters argued that people should not fear the law if they are not involved in subversive activities. While the law explicitly recognizes advocacy, protest, dissent, and strikes as activities that do not compromise public safety, the crux of the issue lies in the government’s subjective interpretation and manipulation of what constitutes a threat to the safety of the Filipino people. Authorities’ practice of red-tagging, for instance, places activists and student movements in a precarious position, for such practice instantaneously labels them as terrorists (Makalintal, 2018).

These cases fit Duterte and his supporters’ populist narrative when the targeted actors are framed as members, allies, or supporters of the immoral elite—the yellows that supposedly hindered the country’s growth for decades because of their supposed greed and interests. As villains, any authoritarian measure that incapacitates them is deemed moral and justifiable. This perspective makes his weaponization of the legal system unique, for what truly gives it teeth is the support Duterte receives from the “moral people.”

To further understand Duterte’s popularity and assess people’s consent to his authoritarian rule, the subsequent sections tackle the key drivers of his popular backing: the real and perceived fulfillment of Duterte’s

campaign promises. They take stock of Duterte's accomplishments and failures to help explain why or to which extent people willingly supported their champion's actions and inactions.

#### IV. Restoring Order by Eradicating Illegal Drugs

Duterte's much-touted drug war was packaged by his administration and supporters as a measure to secure the good members of society from the bad ones. Duterte has consistently framed illegal drugs as the root of many issues that beset Filipino families and the cause of the destruction of the moral fabric of society. Because of the real and perceived threats of illegal drugs, Duterte brazenly ordered the police and military to kill drug suspects should they fight back (Morallo, 2017). He even suggested handing guns to criminals to give police enough reasons to execute drug suspects on the spot.

Although Duterte failed to fulfill his promise to eradicate illegal drugs within the first three to six months of his presidency, his drug war definitely had an impact on the population. Duterte supporters boast that drug addicts decreased drastically during Duterte's presidency and that Duterte's drug war provided the impetus for positive changes in local communities. To underscore the "effectiveness" of Duterte's drug war, the government reported in 2019 that around 1.4 million drug users have surrendered to the authorities under Duterte's watch. Backing the narrative of a safe Philippines is the police data that marks a 63 percent decline in index crimes under Duterte's stewardship (Caliwan, 2021). Based on social media posts and comments, Duterte supporters believed that the former president's extralegal measures translated to peace in localities formerly under constant threat from drug users and other hardened criminals.

While the desire to eliminate people involved in illegal drugs is anchored on a dichotomy that is not necessarily populist (not hierarchical) but rather exclusionary (reduction to bare life), it is critical to mention it here for people's demand for peace and order, at times, are iterated following different logics. For instance, the imprisonment of former Senator de Lima may be understood as a demonstration of Duterte's political will to punish those involved in the illegal drug industry (punitive), an example of his weaponization of law (authoritarian), and an attack on the corrupt and immoral elite (populist).

## V. Supporting the Needy, Protecting the Vulnerable

As mentioned, in the populist worldview, supporting a leader's agenda can aid the fulfillment of people's demands. Thus, to solidify and sustain the status of a populist champion, it is paramount to satisfy people's immediate needs, safeguard the interests of the marginalized, and advance the cause of the underdogs.

In line with Duterte's populist strategy, his administration took concrete steps to institutionalize social support systems. In 2019, Duterte signed the *Act Institutionalizing the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps or Relief for Filipino Families Program). The 4Ps is a program initiated by former President Arroyo in 2008 with 320,000 beneficiary families and expanded by President Aquino III, which in 2016 supported 4.4 million households (Ranada, 2021a). In Duterte's time, it was made into a permanent government program, and its beneficiaries were further expanded to 4.8 million families (Ranada, 2021). The government presented the signing of 4Ps as a means to protect the poorer population from the impact of higher commodity prices, providing PHP 2,400 per year in 2018 and PHP 3,600 per year in 2019 and

2020 to the poorest 10 million Filipino families (Dela Paz, 2018). Although 4Ps recipients say that the grant amount is insufficient to meet their family needs, they are happy to receive any form of monetary support from the government (Habito, 2021).

In March 2020, Duterte signed the *Bayaniban to Heal as One Act* into law, giving him the authority to distribute PHP 5,000 to PHP 8,000 emergency cash aid to 18 million low-income families and displaced workers due to COVID-19. In an interview by Rappler, Pulse Asia's Ana Maria Tabunda and University of the Philippines' Aries Arugay and Jean Franco suggested that the government cash assistance kept Duterte's popularity afloat, mainly since money is a "tangible form of assistance directly felt by the people" (Elemia, 2020). According to the November 2020 SWS survey, seven of ten Filipino families "received monetary help from the government since the COVID-19 crisis began" (Damicog, 2021).

The Duterte administration and supporters also trumpeted the former president's fulfillment of his commitment to provide social benefits for OFWs. While the signing of the *Social Security Act of 2018* in February 2019 made the Social Security System (SSS) coverage required for OFWs, some OFWs complained that its provisions were discriminatory and oppressive (Torres-Tupas, 2019). The law's provision that mandates OFWs to make monthly SSS contributions is perceived by some workers as an additional financial burden, especially since many of them are debt-ridden after paying "the many requirements for OFW employment even prior to commencing employment abroad" (Torres-Tupas, 2019). Further, there is no assurance that their employers abroad would shoulder these contributions.

Duterte supporters were mostly quiet about Duterte's failure to fulfill his populist promise to end precarious work by abolishing contractualization. Also known as "*endo*" or "end of contract," contractualization is defined as "the illegal practice of hiring fixed-term employees and continuously

renewing their contracts to avoid giving benefits a regular worker is entitled to” (Tomacruz, 2018). Despite controlling the majority in Congress, nothing truly materialized in Duterte’s pledge to end said unjust practice. In fact, the president rejected the anti-*endo* bill in 2019, arguing that “the sweeping expansion of the definition of labor-only contracting destroys the delicate balance and will place capital and management (in) an impossibly difficult predicament with adverse consequences to the Filipino workers in the long term” (Santos, 2019).

## VI. Addressing People’s Needs, Improving Government Services

One of the first steps that Duterte took to address people’s demand for better government services was the establishment of the 8888 citizen complaints hotline. Dialing 8888 directs people’s calls to the Office of the President (OP). This grievance hotline, dedicated to receiving reports of corruption or ineptitude, is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Cupin, 2016; Feraren, 2016). The OP forwards every complaint received through 8888 to concerned agencies for urgent action. According to the Civil Service Commission (CSC), the hotline handled an average of 232 calls per day a month after its launch (Feraren, 2016). Callers commonly complained about slow and unclear government processes, failure to attend to people’s requests, and delayed release of government IDs and documents, to name but a few (Bueza, 2016). Based on the Philippine Commission on Audit (COA) 2019 report, the OP’s 8888 Citizens Complaints Center exceeded its targets by over 169 percent by acting on 240,000 complaints and requests (Rosario, 2020).

Expressing sympathy during Duterte’s first State of the Nation Address

in 2016, Duterte said, “I do not want to see people lining up under the heat of the sun. I do not want people lining up under the rain” (Esmaquel, 2016). Duterte expressed his grief about the sight of passport applicants in Davao City staying overnight and sleeping on pavements outside a shopping mall to secure their slot. In this regard, Duterte signed a law in 2017 that extends passport and seafarers’ book validity from five years to ten. This measure was accompanied by orders to speed up processes for Filipinos, including “the issuance of travel documents, passports, and other documentations (sic) needed for [people’s] free passage and travel” (Esmaquel, 2016). Duterte is also attributed for the extension of driver’s license validity from three years to ten (Gita-Carlos, 2021). It could be observed on Facebook that many positively received these changes and praised Duterte’s political will for the improvements lessened the hassle and inconvenience Filipinos commonly experience when lining up for hours to complete specific government applications

Duterte also promised to cut red tape in different government departments. He signed the *Ease of Doing Business Act* in 2018, hoping that it would “solve the perennial problem of bureaucratic red tape” and “spare people of intolerable waiting time” (Ranada, 2018). Apart from serving the people, the law was designed to induce more foreign investments by creating a unified business application form to make putting up or renewing businesses plain sailing. The law also endorsed a zero-contact policy to reduce corruption, forbidding government employees in agencies that process business applications to communicate with applicants.

## VII. Expanding Access to Healthcare

Duterte fulfilled his promise to make hospitals and medicines accessible

to the impoverished masses by signing into law the measure that promotes universal health care (Ranada, 2019). Duterte's Universal Health Care (UHC) Law automatically enrolls all Filipinos in the National Health Insurance Program and provides them access to all medical services. The program features two membership types—direct and indirect; the first is done through paying health premiums and the latter through sponsorship for poorer members of society. The funding needed for UHC is supplemented through the Department of Health's budget, revenues from increased taxes on tobacco products, and Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) members' contributions, among others. In all fairness to Duterte, this measure is unquestionably for the people. However, as Lagman (2020) pointed out, there must first be efficient health and financing systems and a sufficient number of hospitals and healthcare workers before the law could positively impact Filipinos.

The country's experience in mitigating the risk of the spread of COVID-19 speaks volumes about other necessary measures the government must take to genuinely improve people's access to healthcare. While UHC is a welcome development to many, the COVID-19 crisis reminded Filipinos that there remains a need for the government to invest more in healthcare infrastructure and healthcare workers, eliminate healthcare delivery disparities, and close the health inequality gap in the country ("COVID-19: An Ongoing Public Health Crisis," 2021). While hospital beds in the National Capital Region (NCR) meet the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation of 20 hospital beds per 10,000 persons, the situation looks bleak outside NCR. Based on WHO 2018 data, there are only 8.2 hospital beds for 10,000 people in Luzon, 7.8 in the Visayas, and 8.3 in Mindanao, with bed occupancy rates higher in public hospitals than privately-owned ones (Dayrit et al., 2018). Hospitals that can perform major surgeries and provide intensive care are not well-distributed nationwide; they are significantly concentrated

in NCR and Central Luzon (Lagman, 2020). WHO also noted that the country still lacks regulatory mechanisms for private for-profit healthcare providers. In terms of healthcare providers, the country only has one doctor for every 33,000 persons, which is way below the ideal ratio of one doctor per 10,000 individuals (Cabato, 2016).

## VII. Shepherding the Golden Age of Infrastructure

Aside from the drug war, much of the publicized Duterte legacy was centered on the achievements of his *Build, Build, Build Program* (BBB). Duterte's BBB was supposed to usher in a golden age of infrastructure through rapid modernization of the country's ports and airports and expansion of roads and railways. It was implemented to provide "quality infrastructure projects that allow greater connectivity and mobility, create more jobs, and boost economic activity" within and outside the nation's capital (Parrocha, 2021). According to the BBB website, at the heart of this program was Duterte's desire to uplift the lives of millions of Filipinos.

Japan committed to funding Duterte's North-South Commuter Railway (NSCR) extension project through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), a loan amounting to PHP 628.42 billion (Rey, 2019). The signing of the loan agreement between the Philippines and Japan in January 2019 was publicized as a reflection of Duterte's political will. Apart from extending the railways in Luzon, Duterte's government also secured a loan from Japan to rehabilitate the Metro Rail Transit Line 3 (MRT3) in NCR. The Duterte government has also purchased new trains, a move that again received much adulation from Filipinos on Facebook. Meanwhile, the development of Duterte's China-funded Mindanao Railway Project (phase one, PHP 82 billion) was signed in October 2021 and is expected to be

completed by 2024 to 2025 (Camus, 2021). From the populist perspective, these initiatives reflect his recognition of and response to the popular demand for a seamless commuter experience.

According to VERA Files, some roads and bridges constructed to alleviate NCR traffic are fully or partially completed; examples are the Skyway Stage 3 project, the China-funded Estrella-Pantaleon and Binondo-Intramuros bridges, the Bonifacio Global City (BGC)-Ortigas Center Link Road Project, among others (Santos and Berdos, 2021). The government reported in June 2021 that 2,515 kilometers of road and 1,020 bridges are under construction. In October 2021, Duterte inaugurated the commercial operations in the newly constructed Bicol International Airport (BIA) in the southern part of Luzon. The project, according to the Department of Transportation (DOTr), generated “755 jobs with 1,100 more indirect jobs expected to become available once the airport begins commercial operations” (Parrocha, 2021). BIA has been delayed for 11 years, and its completion is projected again as a testament to Duterte’s political will. Decongestion of the Ninoy Aquino International Airport was also partially fulfilled by constructing a new passenger terminal (with an eight-million passenger capacity) at the Clark International Airport (Fenol, 2021). This new passenger terminal was inaugurated in July 2021.

While Duterte indeed contributed to improving the country’s infrastructure in numerous ways, some projects were wrongly or misleadingly attributed to him. An example is the 8.9-kilometer Cebu-Cordova Link Expressway (CCLEX), which will be named the longest bridge in the Philippines once completed (Semilla, 2021). It has become one of the prominent faces of Duterte’s BBB, but the bridge is not part of the said infrastructure program. Although Duterte led its groundbreaking rites in 2017, it is not included in NEDA’s annual comprehensive status reports from June 2017 to May 2021 and is not listed as a BBB project on BBB’s

official website. However, several people conveniently tagged the project as part of Duterte's BBB, including the former Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) Secretary (now Senator) Mark Villar. While some netizens were quick to correct those who misattributed the project to Duterte's BBB, their comments were commonly brushed off by Duterte supporters and accused of being critics or yellows.

Duterte said in his last SONA that he directed the DOTr, DPWH, the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), the Department of Finance, and the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) "to be (at) full speed" to ascertain the completion of his flagship projects within his term. However, as Cordero (2022) noted, out of the 119 big-ticket projects under BBB, only twelve were completed before the Duterte administration stepped down.

## VIII. Eliminating Corruption

Within the antagonistic frontier that populism endorses, corrupt officials are depicted as society's immoral villains. In keeping with his populist strategy, Duterte promised to be tough on malfeasance and insisted that no cabinet member was ever involved in any corruption during his term. As a president with a penchant for drama, Duterte commonly bragged about firing top officials and personnel involved in unscrupulous acts, which came with "outbursts of exasperation and expletives" (Baladad, 2019). However, Duterte never divulged the reasons behind the forceful removal of such officials. Further, no criminal or administrative charges were filed against them in most cases. Worse, notwithstanding Duterte's "one whiff, you are out" policy, the president habitually reappoints them to other executive branch agencies.

Also, despite championing government transparency, Duterte never disclosed his Statement of Assets, Liabilities, and Net (SALN) to the public. He even slammed the Office of the Ombudsman for probing into his family's alleged hidden wealth (Baladad, 2019). Duterte's refusal to release his SALN is a clear violation of the Philippine Constitution and the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees. Another indicator of Duterte's insincere promotion of transparency is his persistent attacks on the Commission on Audit (COA). Accusing COA officials of "hampering the work of his administration," Duterte in 2019 joked about kidnapping and torturing government auditors to stop them from scrutinizing their work ("Duterte Wants State Auditors 'Kidnapped, Tortured,'" 2019). Confronted with corruption allegations during the pandemic, Duterte instructed COA officials to stop publishing audits that supposedly slander him and his cabinet secretaries (Cepeda, 2021).

The ratings of the Philippines in Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) offer an insight into the level of corruption under Duterte's regime. Based on the CPI report, nothing radically changed in the country's corruption incidence, as its rating (115th place out of 180) remained the same compared to 2019 and one notch lower than his first year in office (Robles and Robles, 2021). Ironically, Duterte himself repeatedly gave honest assessments of corruption in his government. In a televised speech in 2020, Duterte offered to resign because of his exasperation with bureaucratic corruption. Expressing his frustration, Duterte snapped, "I had everyone [in the Cabinet] summoned. I said I was getting fed up. In my years in government, there had been no end to this [corruption]" (Aguilar, 2020). This declaration shifts the blame to corrupt officials, thereby sidestepping accountability.

## IX. Dismantling the Oligarchy

Similarly, populist politics in the Philippines paints the local oligarchs as the primary source of people's hardship and suffering. Duterte considered his supposed dismantling of the oligarchy (without declaring martial law) as the proudest moment of his presidential career. Yet, Duterte also brazenly declared that he was happy to see his helpful friends become wealthier than they already were. In his words last July 2020, "*Yung kaibigan kong tumutulong, pag yumaman ka nang yumaman, mas maligaya ako*" (My friends who are helpful, if you get richer and richer, I will be happy) (excerpt from Duterte's speech in Sulu; Mindanao in July, 2020; quoted and translated by Punzalan, 2020). Although his spokesperson was quick to deny that Duterte was keen on promoting cronyism, evidence shows that Duterte's presidency paved the way for the rise of new cronies in the country. Take, for example, the case of Dennis Uy. A Davao City businessman who helped finance Duterte's 2016 presidential run, Uy was given the favor of receiving a USD 220 million loan from the Bank of China. This amount was part of the USD 24 billion credit and investment pledge secured by Duterte in his October 2017 visit to China (Venzon, 2017). Uy said that the loaned money would be used to finance his business expansion.

The Duterte administration also showed signs of giving preferential treatment to Uy. For instance, the government granted Uy's Phoenix Petroleum (PXP Energy), a company that expressed interest in oil exploration activities in the West Philippine Sea, a major contract to build a liquefied natural gas (LNG) import terminal in Batangas, south of Manila (Rivas, 2018). The Duterte government also gave Uy's Udenna Corporation "unwarranted benefits" by letting Uy buy a 45 percent stake in the Malampaya deep-water gas-to-power project, which supplies up to 20 percent of the country's electricity requirements and generates billions of pesos of profits for the

government and its private partners (Lopez, 2021). The government lost at least PHP 138 billion in profit because of the buyout (Lopez, 2021).

In light of these corruption allegations, pro-Duterte bloggers like Mark Lopez and their followers were always quick to defend Uy and Duterte in online public spaces. They considered corruption issues published in mainstream news outlets defamatory or fake.

## X. Conclusion

This article presented select promises, issues, and accomplishments connected to populism to explain how they contributed to the maintenance of Duterte's popularity and promotion of his populist and authoritarian politics. It examined popular perceptions of Duterte's works, unpacking the appeal of his actual achievements and instances of exaggeration of government accomplishments.

Reflecting on the presented cases, when people miss out on the whole picture, many do not realize that some measures (deemed achievements) do not necessarily fix their enduring problems (i.e., access to proper health care and alleviating poverty). With populist politics contributing to people's growing distrust of media and fact-checkers, posts that exaggerate or disconnect accomplishments from their contexts can relay their desired meaning to their intended audience, crystallize biases, sustain a leader's popularity, and justify various assaults on democracy. As observed during deep dives in different comment threads on Facebook, such posts often reinforce Duterte supporters' faith and confidence in their champion.

Evidence shows that Duterte fulfilled some of his promises, and many Filipinos appreciated his actions. Filipinos are so used to constant state neglect that any policies or projects that could alleviate their everyday

struggle (even at the minimum) are almost always warmly welcomed. As the old Filipino cliché goes, “*mas mabuti na ‘yan kaysa wala*” (something is better than nothing). This mindset, among others, may help explain why Duterte supporters remained firmly committed to the former president despite failing to attain several campaign promises. Despite Duterte enriching individuals close to him, Duterte supporters seem content to see certain wealthy members of society bend their knees to their champion. To them, justice has been served by punishing immoral enemies or keeping the oligarchs in line. Amidst corruption allegations, Duterte supporters believed it was their moral obligation to defend their champions from defamation and fake news. By defending their champion, they believed they were protecting their interests.

The article also demonstrated that Duterte’s achievements came with a hefty price—democracy had to fade into insignificance as his supporters pursued their dream of a better tomorrow. Duterte’s authoritarian measures were perceived as manifestations of his political will, deemed instrumental in achieving his campaign promises.

Summing up, in analyzing the operation of the populist logic in Duterte’s rhetoric and the appeal of his authoritarian politics, the article revealed the key ingredients for sustaining a leader’s popularity and mainstreaming authoritarian practices: first, the successful framing of authoritarian practices as a requirement for progress and an indicator of a leader’s political will; second, the strategic communication and circulation of a leader’s real and perceived fulfillment of people’s demands; and finally, the people’s consent to a leader’s authoritarian rule, which they believe increases the likelihood of meeting their practical needs and fulfilling their desired stability and progress.

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