

AIS General Research Fund (GRF) and Early Career Scheme (ECS) Success Round 2017-18

Project Title:

The Rise of Illiberal Populist Rule in the Philippines

Brief Abstract:

This proposed GRF project examines the origins, the nature and implications of this new case of illiberal (although as of now not yet electoral authoritarian) rule in the Philippines. It aims to contribute to the literature on Philippine politics as well as to a broader comparative political literature on the problems confronting electoral democracies in the developing world and beyond.

Duterte's rise to power and the rapid establishment of an illiberal political order has been explained in two different ways - his populist leadership style and a general crisis of oligarchic democracy. Using process tracing, it will be shown that while each of these explanations has its merits, in other ways they do not fit the evidence of the case. The populist leadership perspective explains "too little" about the underlying causes of Duterte's victory and the nature of his presidential rule while the oligarchic democracy perspective explains "too much" in that Duterte was able to win the presidency with his illiberal platform despite apparent political stability and rapid economic growth during the Aquino presidency. These two explanations also represent a false dichotomy because actor-oriented populist leadership and structuralist crisis of oligarchy perspectives can be usefully combined.

The PI and co-I propose a third explanation which attempts to bridge these actor and structuralist perspectives using a "structuration" approach that focuses on key politicians but takes into account how structural factors constrain and enable them, in particular the dominant post-Marcos political order which is a distinct sub-set of oligarchic democracy. After Marcos, most presidents were loyal to the liberal reformist political order. But because they failed to strengthen state institutions, sufficiently improve infrastructure, and increase social inclusion, the narrative of good governance was undermined, elite support eroded, voters disillusioned, and institutions weakened. By challenging liberal reformism directly, Duterte was able to take advantage of this disjunctive moment despite economic growth and political stability to win the election and establish an illiberal political order with a law and order narrative, a new elite coalition, and a plan to reshape institutions through constitutional change.

It is hypothesized that the Philippines presents the thus far strongest case for the existence of "right" populism that has broken with the prevailing liberal reformist political order in a Southeast Asian electoral democracy and that Duterte's rule shows striking parallels to Latin America where several populist leaders systematically violated the rule of law.

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