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The Philippines in 2018: a Year of Disruption and Consolidation

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Abstract

2018 is a year of so much uneasiness and tension in Philippine politics. It saw one of the greatest crises in the Supreme Court, the bloodiest period in local politics of late, and successive attempts to silence critics of the president and the government. This year also witnessed major political alignments in the Duterte administration: a change in the leadership of the Senate, the election of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo as Speaker of the House, the rivalry between Hugpong ng Pagbabago and Partido Demokratiko ng Pilipinas-Lakas ng Bayan, and the eventual termination of the alliance with the radical left. This review aims to understand these developments in Philippine politics. It seeks to know why are there so many rifts and shifts in the political rule of Duterte. These changes can be interpreted as part of an ongoing transition toward democratic regression under the Duterte regime. The disruptive events that ensued throughout the year should be understood as the offshoot of the extant efforts to alter the political status quo since the election of Duterte in 2016. The administration uses these events to consolidate its power by rallying its supporters for the 2019 midterm elections and reconfiguring the alignments within the Duterte bloc.

Keywords

democratic regression – Duterte – midterm elections – Philippines – political alignments – political consolidation

1 Introduction

The rise of Rodrigo Roa Duterte to power in 2016 paved the way to some of the most contentious policy changes in the Philippines. In just two and a half years, the country saw the rapid rise of cases involving unresolved killings of suspected drug users and couriers; the controversial burial of the late strongman, Ferdinand Marcos at the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Heroes' Cemetery); and a radical shift in foreign policy that is closer toward China and Russia, among others.

Duterte is also known for his invective-laced speeches, misogynist comments and rape jokes, and excessive bravados that have placed the country once again in the international limelight. Since his successful presidential campaign, Duterte has antagonized sectors and movements (e.g. #everywoman movement), important foreign and local political figures (e.g. Vice-President Leonor Robredo, then United States [US] President Barack Obama, etc.), religious institutions and personalities (e.g. Roman Catholic Church, the local bishops, foreign missionaries, Pope Francis, etc.), to name a few.

His unprecedented dominance in Philippine politics has united almost all major political forces in the country at the beginning of his term. Through his party, the Partido Demokratiko ng Pilipinas-Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban), Duterte coalesced with some of the most powerful blocs (e.g. parties, dynasties, personalities, etc.) in the Philippines today: the Nacionalista Party, Communist Party of the Philippines-National Democratic Front, Marcoses, Arroyos, Cayetano, etc. With its gargantuan political bloc in control, the regime was able to undermine the clout of Vice President Robredo, imprison an opposition senator (Senator Leila de Lima), threaten media institutions (e.g. ABS-CBN, Philippine Daily Inquirer, Rappler, etc.), insult the Philippine Roman Catholic Church and its bishops, malign political families (e.g. Aquinos, Lopezes, Prietos, etc.), and even snipe at former rivals (e.g. Senator Grace Poe, former Interior Secretary Manuel 'Mar' Roxas II, etc.).

But despite its successes and feats in the past years, the Duterte administration has yet to accomplish some of its agenda in Philippine politics: federalism and charter change, lowering the age of criminal liability, reimposition of the death penalty, among others. Its dominance in the Senate and House of Representatives has been useless in rallying support for the passage of these controversial bills in the past years. Duterte's popularity, these past years, has been inadequate in pushing for more changes in our society. Why is the Duterte administration, notwithstanding its political resources at its disposal, having a hard time realizing its goals? Are the controversies and issues of 2018 part of a

bigger scheme that has yet to unfold in the coming years? How do we interpret the political events and happenings that took place in 2018?

This review intends to answer these questions by identifying and examining the tumultuous events that shaped Philippine politics in 2018. In the discussions below, I will structure my survey and appraisal of the events of 2018 according to the following themes: *disruptive events* and *moments of consolidation*. The latter pertains to key developments in Philippine politics that can be perceived as contributing to the growth and strength of the Duterte administration and the 'Duterte bloc' and the political institutions it controls. The former, on the other hand, connotes the significant incidents that merely alter the composition of political space, dynamics of political institutions, among others.

Both these changes can be interpreted as part of an ongoing transition in Philippine politics under the Duterte administration. The *disruptive events* that ensued throughout the year should be understood as the offshoot of the extant efforts to alter the political status quo since the election of Duterte in 2016. The administration uses these events to consolidate its rule by rallying its supporters for the 2019 midterm elections and reconfiguring the alignments in the Duterte bloc.

2 Disruptive Events

This year will go down as one of the tumultuous and turbulent in Philippine politics. In a span of twelve months, various institutions and personalities were shaken by events that transpired to test the stability of the political status quo in the Philippines. Under this theme, these are the disruptive events of the year that are oriented in altering the extant political status quo in the Philippines: the Supreme Court crisis, political stand-off, and assault on local government officials.

2.1 *Supreme Court Crisis*

The Supreme Court crisis involves the events that led to the removal of Maria Lourdes Sereno as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The crisis revealed the cracks and tensions that exist in the judicial branch of the government. As a disruptive event, the crisis shattered the existing dynamics in the Supreme Court that used to be headed by a Chief Justice appointed by the previous president and known to resist attempts to be influenced by the current administration. With the downfall of Sereno, as will be explained

later, the Supreme Court is no longer perceived as antagonistic toward the Duterte regime.

Sereno's removal in 2018, which can also be described as the 'Year of three Chief Justices',¹ began with the filing of an impeachment complaint by lawyer Larry Gadon with the Committee on Justice of the House of the Representatives on 30 August 2017. Apart from citing culpable violation of the Constitution, corruption, high crimes, and betrayal of public trust, the complaint attests that Sereno failed to make truthful declarations in her Statement of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth (SALN). The complaint was immediately endorsed by twenty-five lawmakers (Cruz 2017). The House Committee on Justice eventually proposed that the Supreme Court should conduct investigation of the Judicial Bar Council proceedings of Sereno's nomination process. Several members of the Supreme Court even attended the Committee hearings exposing rifts and rivalries within what was usually perceived by the public as a collegial body. However, before the entire membership of the House of Representatives could decide to impeach the Chief Justice, there was an intervention from the Office of the Solicitor General (OSG) under Solicitor General Jose Calida to file a *quo warranto*² case against Sereno with the Supreme Court on 05 March 2018 (Buan 2018a). On 11 May 2018, Sereno was removed as Chief Justice following the Supreme Court decision (8–6) to grant the *quo warranto* petition by the Solicitor General for violating requirements on SALN (Cigagal 2018).

Upon closer look, the removal of Sereno revealed the gravity and seriousness of the crisis that affected not just people in the judiciary and legal profession but also the general public itself. Since the filing of the impeachment case and the eventual intervention of the OSG, Sereno's ordeal galvanized a series of protests and demonstrations organized by various movements and groups from the moderate/center-left opposition and the radical left. During this protest cycle, groups such as the radical left's Movement Against Tyranny and Gabriela Partylist, moderate/center-left Tindig Pilipinas, the Liberal Party, and Akabayan Party, among others coalesced to create the Coalition for Justice (CFJ) (Navallo 2018; San Juan 2018).

CFJ became the key movement that organized masses, protest actions, demonstrations, etc. in support of Sereno. During the more than two-month

1 Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno was ousted on May 11, 2018; Chief Justice Teresita Leonardo-de Castro headed the Supreme Court from 28 August 2018 to 10 October 2018; and Chief Justice Lucas Bersamin was appointed on 28 November 2018.

2 *Quo warranto* (latin for 'by what authority') is a legal action directed to a person that seeks to resolve a controversy or dispute over his/her authority or right to occupy a position or public office.

struggle against the *quo warranto* case, it strongly asserted that Sereno can only be removed by impeachment.

Among the court employees and legal practitioners, the Sereno issue bitterly revived the old tensions that were left unresolved since the impeachment of the late Chief Justice Renato Corona in 2011. The crisis involving Sereno once again divided the Judiciary. Majority of court employees and legal practitioners held 'Red Monday mobilizations' to show their support for the impeachment of Sereno. Some lawyer activists and retired figures in the judiciary, on the other hand, joined CFJ in their campaign against the impeachment and later on, the *quo warranto* case (Torres-Tupas 2018a).

2.2 *Political Stand-Off*

The political stand-off pertains to the events that surround the attempts to silence critics of the government. These disruptive events include two of the most controversial issues of 2018 – legal provocations against the online news company, Rappler, and Senator Antonio Trillanes.

The confrontation with Rappler ensued in January 2018 when the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) revoked the online news company's Certificate of Incorporation. The revocation asserts that Rappler violated the Constitution by allowing funds from Omidyar Network to be used in its operations as an online news provider (Fonbuena 2018). It alleges that Rappler also violated statutory restrictions on foreign equity in the mass media.

This revocation sparked numerous demonstrations and mobilizations, both offline and online, from the general public. On 19 January 2018, many journalists, academics, and various groups from the opposition organized and took to the streets their denunciation of this recent attempt to silence critics of the government (Terada & Bacungan 2018). Similarly, various campuses also staged their indignation against the recent move to harass the media in the country.

Rappler CEO Maria Ressa also experienced the same legal persecution from the government by facing five tax cases filed by the Department of Justice in November 2018.³ For some legal experts, the separate cases filed before the Pasig Regional Trial Court and Court of Tax Appeals are meant to expedite the issuance of an arrest warrant for Ressa (Buan 2018d). On 03 December 2018, Ressa was able to post bail at the Pasig Regional Trial Court Branch 265 (Elemia 2018).

3 The Department of Justice filed four cases before the Court of Tax Appeals on 26–28 November 2018 and one case before the Pasig Regional Trial Court on 14 November 2018.

Earlier that year, a Rappler reporter who regularly covers the president, Pia Rañada, was also harassed by the government following a news report involving the Special Assistant to the President, Lawrence Christopher 'Bong' Go. In the report, it showed sensitive documents implicating Go and alleging his participation in the purchasing of navy frigates. Rañada later on was barred in entering Malacañang Palace grounds to cover important events involving the president (Rañada 2018a).

Another attempt to silence critics comes from a series of arrest warrants issued to another leading opposition, Senator Trillanes. This began on 04 September 2018, when Duterte signed Proclamation no. 572 (dated 31 August 2018) that revokes the amnesty granted to Senator Trillanes for his participation in a series of military mobilizations or *coup d'état* attempts against the administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo during her term (Office of the President 2018; Corrales 2018b). The proclamation attests that Senator Trillanes did not comply with his application for amnesty and did not explicitly admit his guilt for the crimes that he committed during the Oakwood Mutiny and the Manila Peninsula Siege (Corrales 2018b). It claims that the grant of amnesty by former President Benigno Simeon Aquino III is *void ab initio* (meaning, it has no legal effect).

Senator Trillanes began his criticisms against Duterte and the latter's administration since the 2016 campaign season. In April 2016, he called on Duterte to sign a waiver to allow investigators to probe his bank accounts which contain undeclared wealth amounting to 211 million pesos (Rañada 2016). Days before the May 2016 elections, he even filed a plunder complaint before the Ombudsman to allege that there is 2.4 billion worth of unexplained wealth in the bank accounts of then presidential candidate Duterte. He hinted that these amounts are produced from 'ghost employees' in the Davao city government and illegal drug operations in the city (Pasion 2016). In the next two years, he continued to be a vocal critic of the administration especially during Senate hearings, privilege speeches, and other media interviews.

With his impending arrest, Senator Trillanes sought refuge in the Senate on the very same day of the publication of proclamation no. 572. On 25 September 2018, Makati Regional Trial Court Branch 150 issued the arrest warrant of Senator Trillanes to face charges involving his rebellion case (Perez & Reformina 2018). The second opposition senator to be arrested by the government posted Php 200,000-bail which led to his release on the same day.

In December 2018, Senator Trillanes received four new warrants of arrest, this time, involving a libel case filed by presidential son, Paolo Duterte (Cabalza & Yap 2018). The case stems from an accusation made by Senator Trillanes that linked the younger Duterte to illegal drug smuggling in the country. Senator

Trillanes once again escaped his impending arrest due to the constitutional privilege that guarantees lawmakers immunity from arrest (for offenses punishable by not more than 6 years) while the Congress is in session.

2.3 *Assault on Local Government Officials*

The assault on local government officials speaks of the series of assassinations and ambushes against local government unit (LGU) officials. Since the beginning of the Duterte administration, the war on drugs has extended to several LGU officials in the country. In August 2016, Duterte even released a list of narco politicians, judges, and law enforcers (Ayop 2016).

Among the prominent LGU officials killed in the past years are Albuera, Leyte Mayor Roland Espinosa Sr. in November 2016 and Ozamiz Mayor Reynaldo Parojinog in July 2017. These two cases involve two powerful LGU officials who were accused by the government of leading the drug trade in their localities. Parojinog was killed in a police raid (Francisco & Gavilan 2017). Espinosa died in an alleged gunfight inside his cell (Bonifacio 2016).

In 2018, ten new cases were recorded involving assassinations of mayors, vice-mayors, a barangay *kagawad* (legislative council member), and a region-based partylist representative. Common among these cases is the brazen approach in killing the officials. Most of the assassinations were done in broad day light and in public places. This has created fear and paranoia in most localities especially for the upcoming 2019 midterm elections. The list of table 1 indicates the names and dates of the assassinations.

To contextualize the killings, the recent wave of political assassinations involving local officials occurred while the war on drugs in the country is happening. As of May 2018, there are more than 22,000 unresolved cases related to the antidrug campaign of the Duterte administration (Drug Archive Philippines 2018). This growing number of killings in fact prompted academic institutions (Ateneo School of Government, De La Salle University, University of the Philippines Diliman, and Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism) to launch an online database about the antidrug campaign of the Duterte regime.⁴ The said database systematically records all cases of killings involving the antidrug war campaign of the government.

4 Drug Archive was launched last 25 June 2018 at the Ateneo de Manila University. The project aims to provide a research-based information about the ongoing drug war of the Duterte regime. The website address is <http://drugarchive.ph>.

TABLE 1 Local officials killed in 2018

Date of assassination	Name	Position / Place
27 May	Ronald Lowell Tirol	Mayor – Buenavista, Bohol
02 July	Antonio Halili	Mayor – Tanuan, Laguna
03 July	Ferdinand Bote	Mayor – Gen. Tinio, Nueva Ecija
07 July	Alexander Lubigan	Vice-Mayor – Trece Martires, Cavite
07 July	Michael Magallanes	Kagawad, Zamboanga City
11 July	Al Rashid Muhammad Ali	Vice-Mayor, Sapa-Sapa, Tawi-Tawi
05 September	Mariano Blanco III	Mayor – Ronda, Cebu
01 October	Alexander Buquing	Mayor – Supiden, La Union
14 November	Al-Fred Concepcion	Vice-Mayor – Balaoan, La Union
22 December	Rodel Batocabe	Representative, Ako Bicol Partylist

SOURCES: ADEL & ROMERO 2018; CARDINOZA, SOTELO, AVENDAÑO & GAMIL 2018; FALCATAN 2018; GAVILAN 2018; MAYOL & LAURO 2018; LUCES 2018; PASCUAL 2018; PEREZ 2018; REY 2018; TAKUMI 2018

The killings of LGU officials revealed the darker side of the Duterte administration's war on drugs. The campaign against drugs that is extended to local politicians may be seen as a way to silence local politicians who are critical of the Duterte government. Also, this trend may also be interpreted as an effective means to force local politicians to support the government.

3 Moments of Consolidation

2018 will also be remembered as a year of strengthening and consolidation on the part of the administration. Throughout the year, the events that happened revealed new opportunities that can further the goals and objectives of political actors or forces in the Philippines. Under this theme, these are the moments of consolidation of the year that are valuable for various political forces in the Philippines: new political gains, political realignment of the Duterte bloc, and mobilization for the 2019 midterm elections.

3.1 *New Political Gains*

These gains pertain to the emergence of favorable resources that are meant to increase the power or capability of Duterte administration. In the discussion

below, there are three important events that further the power or resources of the Duterte administration: the extension of martial law in Mindanao, new political appointments, and the state visit of Xi Jinping.

Starting off with the martial law extension, this political development involves the activation and as well as the legitimatization of the Duterte administration's influence both in the Legislature and Judiciary. On 23 May 2017, President Duterte, through Proclamation no. 216, declared martial law in Mindanao. This proclamation also suspended the privilege of the writ of *habeas corpus* in the whole of Mindanao. On 23 July 2017, the two Houses of Congress in a joint session extended martial law until 31 December 2017 (Cepeda 2017). Martial law was extended again by Congress in a joint session on 13 December 2017 (Viray 2017). In February 2018, the Supreme Court, voting 10–5, declared the constitutionality of the re-extension of martial law (Buan 2018).

The declaration of martial law seeks to address a major national security concern brought by the presence of the Maute group that led to the Marawi siege, among other things, in Mindanao. While this may be contentious to some, many people were of the same impression that the Marawi siege in May 2017 necessitated an extraordinary response from the government at that time. However, the Social Weather Stations surveys conducted in 2017 about this controversy reveal the volatility of the general sentiment of the people.

In the June 23–26 survey, the declaration of martial law in Mindanao was supported by 57% of the people, as against 29% who said that martial law should have been declared only in Marawi (Social Weather Stations 2017a). However, in the succeeding surveys, this support started to lose its grip by showing 54% of people not supporting the extension of martial law in Mindanao in September 2017; then 62% of people not supporting the extension of martial law in Mindanao in December 2017 (Social Weather Stations 2017b; 2017c).

As a political gain, the recent Supreme Court decision revealed the status of Duterte's influence in both the two Houses of Congress and the Supreme Court. In the Congress, the two joint sessions revealed how the majority support that the current government has can be reliably mobilized despite the growing negative sentiments of the people for its two extensions. Also, the majority votes that determined the re-extension case also show how many justices in the Supreme Court tend to favor the administration.

For the new political appointments, the events here connote the giving of new of positions to perceived allies of the Duterte administration. In the succeeding months, the Duterte administration made use of the disruptive effects of the Supreme Court crisis to rally its supporters as well as to strengthen its influence in the Judiciary. In the aftermath of the Sereno removal, Duterte's

appointment of the new Chief Justice Teresita de Castro on 25 August 2018 can be interpreted as a way to solidify his clout in the Supreme Court. Chief Justice de Castro is both the oldest person to be appointed as Chief Justice (at 69 years old) and shortest-tenured Chief Justice (43 days) in the history of the Supreme Court.

Associate Justice Lucas Bersamin's appointment as the 25th Chief Justice of the Supreme Court on 28 November 2018 can also be perceived as a way to reward a justice whose recent decisions have consistently favored the current administration. Associate Justice Antonio Carpio, his rival during the selection process for the next Chief Justice, is a known critic of Duterte on foreign policy issues, such as the West Philippine Sea issue. Bersamin, on the other hand, has been consistently voting in favor of the government on the issues of martial law extension, the Sereno *quo warranto* case, the Janet Lim Napoles bail, and the Marcos Burial case (Torres-Tupas 2018b). He was, in fact, the *ponente* of some of the most controversial cases to date: Arroyo acquittal case and the Delfin case (Torres-Tupas 2018b).

Another controversial appointment that happened in 2018 is the selection of former Supreme Court Associate Justice and fellow San Beda alumnus, Samuel Martires, as the new Ombudsman. Martires was Duterte's first appointee in the Supreme Court in 2017 (Francisco 2017). He has decided in the past in favor of the Marcoses (Binondo Central Bank Scam). He, in fact, dismissed a case filed in the Sandiganbayan against then-Mayor Duterte involving the demolition of the two-million canal project (Francisco 2017). He also dissented in a Sandiganbayan-issued arrest warrant against Enrile during the pork barrel scam in 2014 (Francisco 2017). As an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, he voted to allow the burial of the late dictator Marcos, at the Libingan ng mga Bayani, to acquit former president Arroyo, and to grant bail to Senator Juan Ponce Enrile (Francisco 2017).

Martires replaced one of the remaining vocal critics of Duterte in the government, Conchita Carpio Morales who just finished her term as Ombudsman. With the new appointment, various cases pending in the Ombudsman will now be directed and approved by a friendly Ombudsman. It is expected that he will play an important role in influencing any move to file cases against Duterte or any of his allies in the government.

Following his appointment as the sixth Ombudsman, Martires issued two controversial orders that can be construed as softening the rules in handling corruption cases. In a memorandum issued on 29 August 2018, Martires ordered his prosecutors to withdraw all petitions to suspend officials who are already facing criminal cases in the trial courts (Buan 2018b). This memo favored Senator Gringo Honasan in his graft case (involving 30-million-peso

pork barrel) with the Sandiganbayan when Ombudsman lawyers immediately withdrew their petition to suspend him (Buan 2018b). On 24 September 2018, he issued a new order that prohibits the Office of the Ombudsman to challenge prior decisions before the Supreme Court (Buan 2018c). While this may be seen as a way to unclog the dockets of the highest court, this new policy can be also interpreted as a way to favor charged public officials.

The last event that gave new political resources to the Duterte regime is the state visit of a new political ally, Chinese President Xi Jinping, on 20–21 November 2018 (Adel 2018). Duterte began courting China in 2016 upon his assumption to the presidency. In the succeeding months, the foreign policy shift towards China led to a series of presidential visits to China in October 2016, May 2017 and April 2018 (Rañada 2018c).

Since the resumption of closer Philippine-China relations in 2016, Duterte is said to have bagged an estimated 24-billion-dollar investment and loan pledges from China. In addition to this, the reemerging relationship between the two countries may also determine the future of the West Philippine Sea. Many people are expecting that this may lead to the signing of the joint exploration framework between China and the Philippines.

Critics are attacking this foreign policy shift with China as a political mistake that would result to the capitulation of the country's sovereignty toward the disputed islands in the West Philippine Sea. In addition, the recent loans and grants that are offered by China may also lead the Philippines to a 'debt trap', as argued by some economists (Chan 2018).

3.2 *Political Realignment in the Duterte Bloc*

The second moment of consolidation in 2018 is the political realignment of the Duterte bloc or the changes or adjustments in the relationship between and among the smaller political blocs that constitute the larger Duterte bloc. There are two major adjustments that took place in the Duterte bloc: the takeover of the Hugpong ng Pagbabago (HNP) as the dominant political group or party and the end of the cooperative relationship between the administration and left-leaning groups.

The takeover of HNP involves the emergence of HNP, which literally means 'Alliance for Change', as the new dominant political party in the Duterte bloc. HNP was launched on 23 February 2018 as an offshoot of the efforts of some Mindanao politicians, led by Davao City Mayor and presidential daughter, Sara Duterte, to gain more clout and influence in Philippine politics (Basa 2018).⁵

5 HNP's officers include: Davao Occidental Governor Claude Bautista (President), Davao Oriental Governor Nelson Dayanghirang (Vice-President), Davao de Norte Governor

In the next few months, HNP was able to forge alliances with some of the powerful personalities, families, and political parties in the country. During that time, HNP has coalesced with the Nacionalista Party, Nationalist People's Coalition, National Unity Party, Partido ng Masang Pilipino, and Lakas-CMD (Aguinaldo 2018; Porcalla 2018; Madarang 2018). It was also able to get within its ranks some of the powerful families in the country: the Jalosjoses of Zamboanga del Norte, Marcoses of Ilocos Norte, Pinedas of Pampanga, Belmontes of Quezon City, among others (Madarang 2018).

The takeover was also felt in the House of the Representatives with the ouster of House Speaker Panteleon Alvarez in July 2018. The ouster is said to have resulted from the tension between Alvarez and Sara Duterte (Lalu 2018). However, upon closer look, one can easily notice that HNP's rise as the Duterte bloc's ruling party is connected to the inability of PDP-Laban, officially the President's party, to rally or control members and direct legislative agenda both in the Senate and the House of Representatives. In July 2018 also, an infighting erupted in PDP-Laban where some senior leaders of the party led a national assembly to elect a new set of party officers (Yap 2018). The new faction accused party leaders Pimentel and Alvarez of allowing mass oath-taking of new members to happen without proper political education or orientation from the party. The internal squabbling within PDP-Laban was finally addressed in August 2018 when President Duterte himself met with the two factions to mediate (Elemia 2018).

The end of the administration's partnership with left-leaning groups or the radical left is one of the surprising developments in the political alliances of the Duterte regime in 2018. The alliance between the Duterte administration and the national democratic movement (and its party, the Communist Party of the Philippines), technically ended with the announcement that Duterte fired Labor Undersecretary Joel Maglunsod on 02 October 2018 (Esguerra 2018). Maglunsod, together with other cabinet officials also appointed by Duterte at the beginning of his term, such as Social Welfare Secretary Judy Taguiwalo, Agrarian Reform Secretary Rafael Mariano, National Anti-Poverty Commission Secretary Liza Maza, among others, are known members of organizations and movements identified with the radical left.⁶

Antonio del Rosario (Secretary General), and Compostela Valley Governor Jayvee Tyron Uy (Treasurer).

6 Taguiwalo left DSWD on 16 August 2017 following the decision of the Commission on Appointments not to confirm her appointment to the DSWD post. Maza, on 20 August 2017, resigned as Secretary of NAPC. On 16 September 2017, Mariano also was not confirmed by the Commission on Appointments.

Since his assumption to power in 2016, Duterte pulled in the radical left to support his government by appointing some left-leaning personalities (e.g. Maza, Mariano, Taguiwalo, etc.) in the government. The peace talks with the national democratic movement began the following year where a series of negotiations was held in Norway and the Netherlands. The peace talks were terminated late in 2017 due to the series of rebel attacks across the country which prompted Duterte to shut down the talks (Tubeza 2017).

In 2018, a series of backchannel discussions was launched both by the government and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines peace panels to facilitate the resumption of talks. In June 2018, the government decided to suspend these backchannel talks to give way to a serious evaluation of the signed agreements with the national democratic movement (Corrales 2018a). In September 2018, Duterte became vocal of his decision to eventually abandon plans to resume peace talks. He accused the radical left of being insincere with the peace talks due to the continued attacks and operations of their armed group, the New People's Army (NPA), in various parts of the country (Geducos 2018).

With this new development in the alliance, the radical left now finally ends its two-year ambivalent relationship with the Duterte administration. Since 2016, they had a serious difficulty of reconciling their position over various contentions issues (such as the Marcos burial at the Libingan ng mga Bayani, the quo warranto case against Sereno, among others) and their alliance with the Duterte administration. Also, being part of the Duterte bloc, they had an uneasy relationship with various personalities that used to repress them in the past (such as the Marcoses, Arroyos, etc.).

3.3 *Mobilization for the 2019 Midterm Elections*

The last moment of consolidation is the preparation for the mid-term elections. The mobilization for the 2019 midterm election began when HNP, PDP-Laban, and the opposition forces started to float names of people who will run in the 2019 elections. In July 2018, while the Duterte bloc was being shaken by the rift within PDP-Laban, HNP was finally granted accreditation by the Commission on Elections to participate as a regional party in the 2019 elections (Aquino 2018). One by one, members of the PDP-Laban, various political parties, families, and influential figures started to join the new ruling party.

For the 2019 midterm elections, HNP coalesced with Nacionalista Party, Nationalist People's Coalition, National Unity Party, Partido ng Masang Pilipino, Lakas-CMD, PDP-Laban, among others (Aguinaldo 2018; Porcalla 2018; Madarang 2018).⁷ In October 2018, HNP created its own Senate line-up

⁷ Despite the tension, PDP-Laban, with its own 12-man slate, was forced to coalesce with HNP.

composed of personalities belonging to the smaller political blocs within the Duterte bloc. They are as follows (Rañada 2018):

1. Senator Juan Edgardo 'Sonny' Angara;
2. Congresswoman Pia Cayetano;
3. Senator Joseph Victor 'JV' Ejercito;
4. Special Assistant to the President Christopher Lawrence 'Bong' Go;
5. Former Senator Jose 'Jinggoy' Estrada;
6. Former Philippine National Police Director General Rolando 'Bato' dela Rosa;
7. Congressman Zajid Mangudadatu;
8. Reporter Jiggy Manicad;
9. Ilocos Norte Governor Imee Marcos;
10. Senator Aquilino Pimentel III;
11. Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque;
12. Former Presidential Adviser Francis Tolentino;
13. Senator Cynthia Villar.

The moderate/center-left opposition coalition (composed of the 2010 to 2016 administration party, Liberal Party, Akbayan Party, Magdalo Party, Aksyon Demokratiko Party, Black and White movement, Tindig Pilipinas, among others) also mobilized to mount a campaign in 2019. The moderate/center-left opposition was eventually diminished into a small coterie of loyal party members and officers and allies from parties, movements, and advocacy groups that are critical of the current administration. The once gargantuan party coalition of the Aquino administration (2010–2016) now becomes a small party vilified by supporters of the current administration. For the 2019 midterm election, the moderate/center-left opposition coalition is poised to support the following candidates in the Senate (Buan & Elemia 2018):

1. Congressman Gary Alejano;
2. Senator Paolo Benigno 'Bam' Aquino;
3. La Salle Law School Dean Jose Manuel 'Chel' Diokno;
4. Former Member of the Regional Legislative Assembly of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao Samira Gutoc;
5. Former Solicitor General Florin Hilbay;
6. Atty. Romulo Macalintal;
7. Former Interior Secretary and former Senator Manuel 'Mar' Roxas II; and
8. Atty. Erin Tañada.

Aside from the two major coalitions, other candidates from various groups are also mobilizing their supporters for the midterm elections. Popular reelectionists Senator Grace Poe and Senator Nancy Binay are running as independent candidates for 2019. They are joined by returning senators Sergio Osmeña III and Lito Lapid. Former partylist representative Neri Colmenares is representing the radical left-opposition in the May 2019 polls.

All throughout the year, administration candidates (e.g. Villar, Cayetano, Angara, Estrada, Marcos, Pimentel, and Ejercito), as well as independent reelectionists (e.g. Poe and Binay) and returning candidates (e.g. Osmeña and Lapid), have consistently topped the poll surveys.⁸ Only Aquino and Roxas are consistently placing within the top twelve to fifteen.

TABLE 2 Positions to be contested in 2019 midterm elections

Number of seats	Positions
12	Senators
243	House of Representatives – District Representatives
59	House of Representatives – Partylist Representatives
81	Provincial Governors
81	Provincial Vice-Governors
780	Provincial Board Members
145	City Mayors
145	City Vice-Mayors
1,628	City Councilors
1,489	Municipal Mayors
1,489	Municipal Vice-Mayors
11,916	Municipal Councilors
1	ARMM Governor
1	ARMM Vice-Governor
24	ARMM Regional Assemblymen
18,094 (Total)	

SOURCE: BUEZA 2018

⁸ In 2018, Social Weather Stations conducted surveys in March, September, and December. Pulse Asia, Inc., on the other hand, conducted surveys in June, September, and December.

At the other levels of the government, the Duterte bloc is also poised to win most of the positions at the House of Representatives, provinces, cities, and municipalities. Looking at Table 2, HNP and its allies are expected to get most of the more than 18,000 positions across the country.

Upon closer examination, the recent surveys only validate the high popularity of the president all throughout the first half of his term. Despite the attacks from various opposition groups, Church, and civil society groups as well as recent problems in the economy such as the rice shortage and inflation, the administration or the Duterte bloc was able to sustain its popularity among the people.

4 Towards 2019

The disruptive events and moments of consolidation of 2018 are indeed part of an ongoing transition in Philippine politics under the Duterte regime. The *disruptive events* that saw the crisis in the Supreme Court with the overthrow of Sereno, political stand-off with Rappler and Trillanes, and numerous assassinations at the local level have altered the political status quo by undermining the extant democratic mechanisms, practices, and dynamics that are still being strengthened in the country's government institutions. The events have disrupted ongoing efforts to make political institutions stronger and more independent.

The Supreme Court, since the ouster of Sereno, has been headed by Chief Justices known to have cooperative disposition with the Duterte bloc. Opposition figures or groups critical of the government like Senator Trillanes, Rappler and Ressa, since the political stand-offs of 2018, are now preoccupied with their cases and more distracted in engaging the Duterte bloc on various political issues. The local assassinations that happened in 2018 have indeed created a new culture of fear and acquiescent disposition among local officials.

The *moments of consolidation*, on the other hand, which talked about the new political gains from the martial law extension, appointment of new allies in the government, and the state visit of the leader of an emerging superpower; political realignment that comes from the HNP takeover of the Duterte bloc and the political isolation of the radical left; and mobilization efforts of the political forces for the 2019 elections, have indeed facilitated the further growth of the Duterte bloc.

As the discussions above revealed, the Duterte administration, not just Duterte himself, but also the Duterte bloc, and other blocs that constitute it, was able to use the disruptive events to consolidate their dominance by

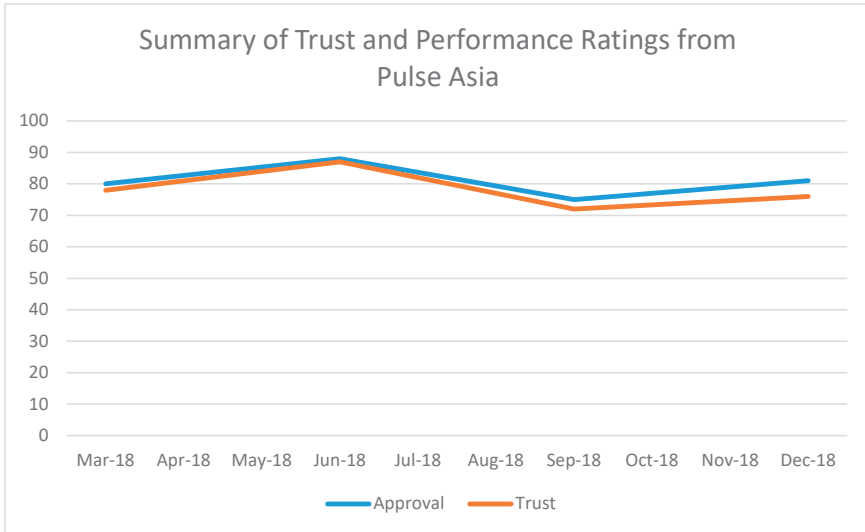


FIGURE 1 Trust and performance ratings of Duterte (Pulse Asia 2018a, 2018b, 2018c)

making use of the issues of the Supreme Court crisis, Trillanes' arrest, Sereno's and Rappler's cases, and the assassinations of local politicians to maintain the backing of Duterte supporters.

The successful conversion of this disruption as a way to consolidate the political resources of Duterte was seen all throughout the year as Duterte enjoyed relative high trust, satisfaction and approval ratings (see Figure 1) despite the issues that hounded his administration. In Pulse Asia's performance and trust ratings surveys, Duterte got an approval rate of 81% and trust rating of 76% in December 2018; approval rating of 75% and trust rating 72% in September 2018; approval rating of 88% and trust rating of 87% in June 2018; approval rating of 80% and trust rating of 78% in March 2018 (Pulse Asia 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

In the sws Net Trust Rating, Duterte got 65% in March 2018, 57% in June 2018, and 62% in September 2018 (Social Weather Stations 2018a). In the sws Net Satisfaction Rating surveys, Duterte got 56% in March 2018, 45% in June 2018 and 54% in September 2018 (Social Weather Stations 2018b). (see Figure 2).

In the 2019 midterm elections, the Duterte bloc is expected to dominate the twelve (12) seats in the Senate as well as the 302 seats in the House of the Representatives and close to 18,000 positions in the local government positions. With this political feat, it is safe to assume also that the aftermath of the 2019 midterm election will pave the way to the filing of contentious bills, such as the proposal to change the charter and to change the form of government to a federal set-up, lower the age of criminal responsibility, reinstitute death

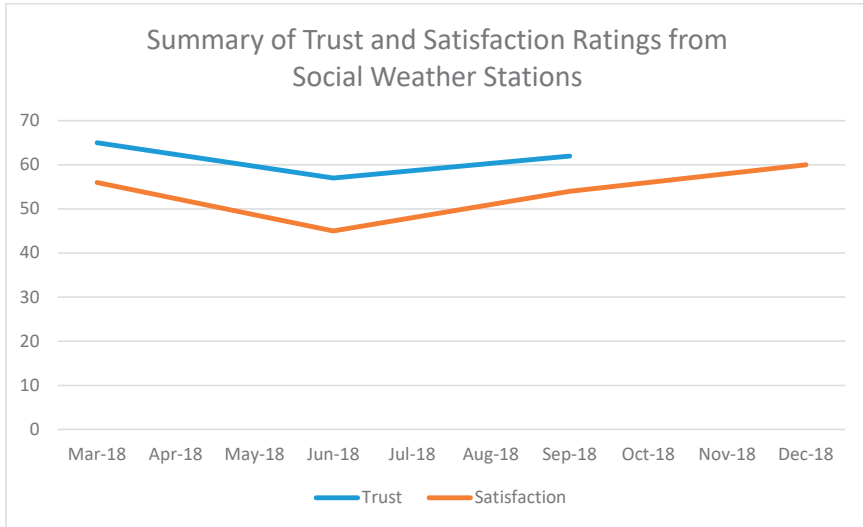


FIGURE 2 Trust and satisfaction of Duterte (Social Weather Stations 2018a, 2018b)

penalty, among others. Opening the second half of Duterte’s administration, this moment of consolidation will definitely open new doors to new possibilities in Philippine politics. Will this lead to a stabilization of Duterte’s rule? Will this transition to a second Duterte administration under Sara Duterte or a rule of the same Duterte bloc with a different personality on top? Or will this evolve into the same fate as that of the implosion that took place within the Liberal party coalition in 2013 to 2016?

Notes on the Contributor and Acknowledgments

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