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President Duterte: A Different Philippine Leader

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

The Philippines' new president Rodrigo Duterte will act differently from his predecessors. There is a need for a more layered understanding of the man and his policies.

Commentary

SINCE THE election of Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte as the next Philippine President in a landslide victory on 9 May 2016, the regional and international media have highlighted his outrageous remarks on various sensitive topics. For instance he backed the extra-judicial killings of drug dealers, alleged that journalists were killed because they were corrupt and called Philippine bishops critical of him “sons of whores”, among other crude comments. None of these remarks have dented his domestic support. But they have attracted international attention and provided a negative one-dimensional view of the 71-year old new leader.

While his main opponents, former Interior and Local Government Secretary Mar Roxas and Senator Grace Poe, conceded defeat even before all votes were counted, the vice-presidential race was closer. Congresswoman Leni Robredo, with a reputation for fiscal probity and a simple lifestyle, narrowly defeated Senator Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the son of the former dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Duterte has indicated that Robredo will not be given any role in the new Administration as he had favoured the election of Marcos.

How Duterte Will Be Different

Duterte will act differently from his Philippine predecessors. But there is a need for a

more layered understanding of the man and his policies. He is the first Philippine President who is not from the traditional land-owning elite, which has dominated the critical centres of power in the capital Manila since independence. His base is in Davao City in the traditionally neglected Southern Philippines and he claimed that he will continue to stay in Davao, commuting daily by commercial aircraft, until he is comfortable in Manila. To stress this point, he was in Davao when he was officially proclaimed by a joint session of the Philippine Congress on 30 May as the winner of the election and the next President.

His election signals a shift away from Manila-centred politics and an effort to reach out to hitherto marginalised sectors of Philippine society. His speeches and public comments are in English rather than Tagalog, the *lingua franca* of Greater Manila, which has been promoted throughout the archipelago as the national language. He has emphasised his links with Mindanao and several of his cabinet appointments hail from the region.

Duterte also draws support from the Philippine left wing and has close ties with the founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) Jose Sison, under whose leadership the CPP waged a Maoist-influenced guerrilla insurgency and who has been in exile in the Netherlands since 1987. Duterte has welcomed Sison's plans to return home. Although government negotiations with the CPP since 2011 are currently at an impasse, Duterte is more likely to reach an agreement with the CPP and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA).

This opening to the left is seen in two of Duterte's cabinet appointments who were nominated by the National Democratic Front, an NPA ally. Judy Taguiwalo, a University of the Philippines professor and women's rights advocate, is the secretary of social welfare and development while Rafael Mariano is secretary of agrarian reform. Incoming Cabinet Secretary Leoncio Evasco Jnr, a former NPA rebel and ex-priest, served as Duterte's campaign manager and has enjoyed close ties with Duterte since the 1990s.

Pro-business Technocrats

These appointments are balanced by pro-business technocratic appointments to key economic portfolios including secretary of finance Carlos Dominguez, who served in the cabinets of Presidents Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos and is a close friend of Duterte from Davao City. Alfonso Cusi, secretary of energy, served in the Administration of President Cory Aquino.

The secretary of economic planning, Ernesto Pernia, was lead economist at the Asian Development Bank. Based on Duterte's effective economic management in Davao City, economic policy is likely to follow the growth-oriented policies of outgoing President Benigno Aquino with greater emphasis on decentralisation, poverty alleviation and land reform.

Former President Fidel Ramos, who served from 1992 to 1998, was an early supporter of Duterte and has been influential in pushing pragmatic policy choices. Ramos' influence is positive as his tenure was marked by an economic transformation in the Philippines as well as a significant outreach to the NPA and

Muslim rebel movements. Ramos appointees now holding Cabinet posts include peace process adviser Jesus Dureza, who held this post under Ramos.

Because of Duterte's unwillingness to accommodate the preference of the Manila political elite for business as usual, his Cabinet includes more nominees with close personal ties to the President and who hail from Davao and the surrounding Cotabato region. Other friends or former classmates of the President include secretary of transportation and communications Arthur Tugade, secretary of justice Vitaliano Aguirre, executive secretary Salvador Medialdea and chief of police Ronald Dela Rosa, the former police chief of Davao City.

Domestic Priorities

Duterte's priorities are domestic. Law and order, anti-corruption and crushing the drug problem are at the top of his agenda. He aims to devolve power from the central government to the provinces. By working out of Davao so far, Duterte is symbolically reminding Manila politicians that a political revolution is underway. He intends to shift to a federal-parliamentary system and the constitution will have to be revised.

His appointment of Major General Delfin Lorenzana as the secretary of defence reflects a desire to maintain ties with the United States even as the Philippines moves to restore its relationship with China. Lorenzana has spent most of the past two decades in Washington as defence attache and, after his retirement in 2004, as presidential representative at the Embassy from 2004 to 2009 and again since 2013.

Duterte's foreign policy is still unclear. Perfecto Yasay, former head of the Securities and Exchange Commission whose roots are in Davao City, is the new Foreign Secretary. As Yasay is not linked to the pro-American policies of the outgoing Administration, a tilt away from the US towards a more even-handed approach is possible.

Managing China Relations

Yasay's first challenge will be the management of the bilateral relationship with China. So far, mixed signals have been sent by the new Administration. During his election campaign, Duterte called for bilateral talks on South China Sea claims. Post-election, he proposed a multilateral dialogue involving claimant states as well as other states including the US, Japan and Australia.

He has also said that he would not surrender the Philippines' right to Chinese-occupied Scarborough Shoal. Yasay has said that relations with China should improve as long as China "adheres to the rule of law, respects our territorial integrity and sovereignty".

With the eclectic rainbow coalition of cabinet appointees, no clear foreign policy and national security policy outlook can be discerned at this time. ASEAN is not a focus of his attention. But Duterte is likely to be persuaded by his advisers to make the usual round of courtesy visits to his ASEAN counterparts. ASEAN leaders at the next

ASEAN Summit in Vientiane in November will have to deal with a disengaged leader unless issues directly concerning the Philippines are on the agenda.

One worrying possibility is the revival of the Philippines claim to Sabah, reflecting the influence of Duterte's power base in Mindanao. Nevertheless, while his priorities may be domestic, international developments may intrude and shape the priorities of his administration.

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