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The Aquino Legacy: Implications for 2022 Elections

By Mely Caballero-Anthony and Julius Cesar Trajano

SYNOPSIS

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COMMENTARY

THE PHILIPPINES' former president Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III passed away on 24 June 2021, just five years after the end of his term in 2016 and after battling a lingering illness. The only son of Philippine democracy icons, the late president Corazon Aquino and Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr, Noynoy Aquino was catapulted into the presidency in 2010, a few months after the demise of his mother, with the overwhelming support of millions of Filipino voters who were sick of alleged corruption that hounded his predecessor.

The visible outpouring of public grief and support across the country's political spectrum shows that the Aquino legacy endures despite the popularity of the firebrand President Rodrigo Duterte. This could have significant impact on the much-awaited campaign season for the 2022 national elections.

Security and Foreign Policy

The most relevant and enduring legacy of the Aquino presidency is the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling that favoured the Philippines on the issue of the South China Sea (SCS). It was under the Aquino administration that the Philippines brought its case against China on South China Sea before the arbitral tribunal — a move

backed by the international community, especially its key allies such as the United States and Japan.

The decision to take its case to the arbitral body allowed the Philippines to push for an international approach in dealing with China and the South China Sea disputes and seek the support of its fellow ASEAN members — some of whom had their own similar disputes with Beijing.

The PCA ruling came in mid-2016, shortly after the inauguration of Aquino's successor, President Duterte who chose to downplay the award in favour of pursuing a friendlier policy towards Beijing. Duterte also made public pronouncements minimising its security alliance with the US.

Despite the administration's efforts to 'appease' Beijing, it is noteworthy that most of Duterte's cabinet members continue to cite the arbitral ruling as an important contribution of the Philippines to the international law. Clearly the Aquino legacy in this regard reverberates.

Along with the arbitration-internationalisation approach, Aquino commenced large-scale military modernisation projects to address, among others, its aging hardware and have credible defence posture. These are being continued by the Duterte administration for its current military modernisation programme.

Peacebuilding in Mindanao and Revitalising the Economy

Another key legacy of Aquino was the revival of the stalled Mindanao peace process that led to a political settlement of a decades-long Moro rebellion led by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Under his watch, the government and the MILF signed the Framework Agreement on Bangsamoro in 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro in 2014, after years of intense peace talks brokered by Malaysia.

Although Aquino was unable to see through the conclusion of making the agreement legally binding before the end of his term in 2016, the efforts made it easier for the incoming Duterte administration to enact the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2017, leading to the creation of a new Moro autonomous region with MILF officials as the governing authorities.

The BOL is the culmination of the comprehensive peace agreement forged during the Aquino administration. Without such important peace pact, the law would not have existed and armed rebellion would have been worse today in Mindanao.

International and local economists and business sector credited his administration for the Philippines' annual growth rate of 6% during his term, the fastest since the 1970s. Aquino also earned respect for his fearless campaign against corruption and promoting good governance.

By 2016, Aquino turned over a resurgent national economy as his legacy with fiscal sustainability. This, his supporters say, could have been used by his successor to make the economy even stronger and more inclusive.

Political Missteps

Aquino had its own share of critics for his administration's shortcomings. When the Philippines was severely hit by Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, his government was widely criticised for being ill-prepared and for its dismal humanitarian response.

The lessons from this tragedy led to several policy innovations during and after his term that reformed the disaster management framework in the Philippines, two of which are the adoption of a National Disaster Response Plan and the institutionalisation of Pre-Disaster Risk Assessment in 2014.

There was also the botched police operation in Mindanao in 2015 to capture a wanted foreign terrorist which instead led to the death of 44 police commandos in an MILF zone. This was the reason cited for Aquino's failure to get the BOL enacted before the end of his presidency.

The Haiyan tragedy and the death of 44 police commandos in Mindanao had hounded Aquino until he stepped down in 2016. As social media began to rise in the Philippines as a political propaganda tool during the last years of his administration, Aquino's failings were not only amplified but also came under greater scrutiny.

These, analysts have argued, significantly helped the electoral victory of Duterte in 2016, a complete anti-thesis of Aquino in terms of leadership image and political style. Duterte was projected as a strongman, a crime-buster vis-à-vis Aquino's liberal democratic image.

Aquino's Legacy and the 2022 Elections

Could the untimely demise of Aquino just months before the start of the campaign season for the May 2022 elections affect the current Philippine political landscape? So far, the country's opposition remains fragmented although there are ongoing efforts led by 1Sambayan, a coalition of political personalities and former officials who served under Aquino.

The goal of this coalition is to present a united front and field a single tandem for president and vice president. Duterte who remains popular but legally barred to seek re-election is being encouraged by his supporters to run instead as vice-president with his daughter Sara Duterte as presidential candidate.

As the country pays its last respect to its 15th president, the occasion also allows Filipinos to mourn yet celebrate the life and legacy of the son of Philippines' democratic icons who carried on the baton.

Thus, while it is too early to tell if and how the electoral dynamics will be impacted by this turn of events, it bears noting that some things remain constant in Philippine politics: symbolism, charisma, and political dynasties matter. These often trump party ideology and political platforms. The country's politics has just started to become more interesting — and perhaps more unpredictable.

Mely Caballero-Anthony is Professor of International Relations and Head of Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre), and Julius Trajano is Research Fellow at the NTS Centre, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg