As the growing backlash against globalization picks up pace, populists and nationalists are on the march, particularly in the US and Europe. Leaders in Asia can hardly escape this growing trend, even as they grapple with their own emerging domestic challenges and the evolving transformation in the regional order. We profile some of Asia’s key leaders and the mark they are making.

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The more that Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte reveals in the murder of supposed criminals as a legitimate tool of statecraft, the more his popularity seems to grow. His personal vulgarity, attacks on low-level drug dealers and heavy-handed assault on the political opposition have done nothing to undermine his rule. Beyond these headline-grabbing escapades, however, he has delivered on parts of his agenda to forge peace deals and address corruption, writes Michael Vatikiotis, but at what cost to the structure of Philippine democracy and its fragile rule of law?

Rodrigo Duterte: The ‘Moderately Successful’ Populist
By Michael Vatikiotis

ON A RECENT VISIT to Israel, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s confounding ability to surprise was on full display. Visiting the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Israel in early September, he laid a wreath and said he could not imagine a country obeying an insane leader like Hitler: “I could not ever fathom the spectacle of the human being going into a killings spree murdering old men and children.” Yet just two years earlier, he famously compared his war on drugs to the Holocaust and said that he would be happy to slaughter three million drug addicts — a remark that generated outrage and for which he was forced to apologize.

More than two years into Duterte’s presidential term, police conducting his War on Drugs have shot and killed around 4,000 people, mostly poor slum dwellers (although human rights activists suspect the body count could be as high as 12,000-15,000). The crackdown on drugs has resulted in the deaths of elected city officials and even Catholic priests. Duterte has shown no remorse. Yet, confoundingly, he remains popular. He may have silenced his critics using extra-judicial means, sacking the Supreme Court chief justice in the process, but he continues to deliver on key parts of his promise to address chronic problems of corruption and inequality.

While Duterte draws most attention because of the war on drugs and his foul-mouthed disregard for women and religion, as a populist leader he is moderately successful. The reputable Social Weather Stations survey showed that Duterte had a “very good” trust rating of 65 points as he marked his second year in office in mid-2018. These figures have fallen in recent months because of the economic downturn, but they remain remarkably high and visitors to the country find many ordinary Filipinos quick to defend their erratic, unconventional, informally dressed chief executive.

Understanding why this is so, requires a deeper understanding of the Philippine national psyche and Duterte’s own upbringing and personality.

WHAT MAKES DUTERTE TICK?
The Philippines, a country of more than 106 million people, is an odd basket of contrasts. Surveys reveal that the average Filipino is happy and optimistic, yet socio-economic data suggests they are severely afflicted by income inequality in a country where 40 of the richest families account for almost 80 percent of the wealth. Starved of opportunities at home, almost 12 percent of the population live or work overseas, one of the world’s largest diasporas. And yet Philippine society is deeply nationalistic and given to fits of jingoism. It is sometimes easy to forget that the country was a colony of the US from 1898 until 1946.

In this context, Duterte’s appeal becomes more understandable. Born into the family of a provincial governor in the city of Davao in Mindanao, Duterte’s father was often absent. His mother was a stern disciplinarian who forced him to attend strict Catholic schools where he was allegedly molested by an American priest. To escape the strictures of life at home and at school, he ran with his father’s police bodyguards, who introduced him to guns, booze and life on the street. Later, he attended law school in Manila, where he fell under the influence of leftists and communists. This complex lattice of experiences explains both his skill and appeal: Duterte is a canny political animal who served for more than a decade as mayor of Davao; he speaks the rough language of the underclasses and is inclined to sympathize with their plight. His experience as a young boy at the hands of the church explains his disdain for religion, and perhaps a distaste for Americans; although coming from Mindanao, where US colonial rule was harshly imposed, could also have inspired a deep resentment of Americans.

So what was it about the state of the Philippines that enabled Duterte to so effortlessly win almost 40 percent of the popular vote, given that he only entered the presidential race late in the day?

At first, this seems hard to fathom. The country was growing at a healthy clip under his predecessor, President Benigno Aquino III. In the first quarter of 2016, the election year, the Philippines economy grew by almost 7 percent — faster than any of its ASEAN neighbors. The economic fundamentals also improved — better revenue collection, higher capital reserves and an improvement in the level of public services. Credit ratings went up and investors crooned. But for the single six-year term limit imposed on the Philippine presidency, many investors would have applauded a second term for the quiet and business-like son of the late Corazon Aquino, who was herself president after assuming power in 1986 on the back of the People Power protests that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos.

NO TRICKLE DOWN
Yet for many ordinary Filipinos, very little of this progress in the formal economy has trickled down. The faster the country grew, the more obvious its poverty became. The rich got richer, the corrupt escaped jail, crime rates soared and Manila’s creaky infrastructure groaned under the weight of its populace. Measures of inequality in the Philippines soar above its regional neighbors, with a Gini coefficient of more than 44 and poverty rates above 20 percent; the murder rate at close to 9 percent is the highest in Southeast Asia.

Set against this failure to deliver on promises
and dashed expectations, there has developed a fatigue with democracy and the liberal elite who rose to power in the post-Marcos era. People started to remember “the good old days of dictatorship” under Ferdinand Marcos. Marcos’ son, Bong Bong, stepped into the electoral ring with favorable numbers. It was relatively late in the 2016 campaign that the disheveled figure of the mayor of Davao, Rodrigo Duterte, emerged as a promising candidate for the presidency. One of Duterte’s first promises was to stamp out corruption — especially in government services. Next, he promised to tackle crime, in particular drugs. Corruption and crime hit the aspiring upper end of low-income households in the Philippines — they are the people with hopes of a better future, perhaps more than one income earner and a modicum of education. So when Duterte promised to address corruption in the bureaucracy and eradicate the drugs that are perceived to be a source of criminal activity in many urban neighborhoods, voters came out in droves for him.

THE APPEAL OF THE DRUG WAR

More than two years into his term, what has been achieved? Like some of Duterte’s populist peers elsewhere in the world, the results are mixed — not all bad, but tempered and undermined by authoritarian tendencies threatening democracy and the rule of law. So while Duterte has moved fast to implement a modest amount of land reform, propose a decentralized federal system and implement a languishing peace agreement with Muslim rebels in his home region of Mindanao, he has acted equally quickly to muzzle critics, arresting some of his most vocal opponents in the Senate and orchestrating the sacking of the Supreme Court chief judge. Most controversially, he has made no bones about using extrajudicial violence to eliminate crime. During the campaign, Duterte warned that he would be killing people once he got elected: “When I become president, I’ll order the police and the military to find [criminals and drug pushers] and kill them,” candidate Duterte declared in the final weeks of his campaign: “The funeral parlors will be packed … I will supply the dead bodies.”

While mayor of Davao City, Duterte made a name for himself as a brutal enforcer. In Duterte Harry, a recently published biography by British television journalist Jonathan Miller, the author tracked down former members of the so-called Davao death squads, which the mayor used to clean up the city known as the Nicaragua of Asia in the 1980s. “Bodies were dumped everywhere,” a local paramedic tells Miller. Amnesty International alleges more than 1,000 victims of the death squads over a decade between 1998-2008. Although falling short of claiming responsibility for these deaths, Duterte has often boasted of personally using violence to deal with criminals. “If you are corrupt, I will fetch you using a helicopter to Manila and I will throw you out. I have done this before. Why would I not do it again?” he was quoted as saying in December 2016.

Duterte’s War on Drugs has attracted the most attention. For the past two years, photojournalists have documented almost nightly killings, mostly of poor people in slum areas who are found slumped in pools of blood — a few of the killings have been caught on CCTV cameras. In January this year, the US-based Human Rights Watch reported that “More than 12,000 suspected drug users and dealers, mostly from poor families in urban centers across the country, are estimated to have died in the “drug war,” including an estimated 4,000 during operations led by the police and the remainder by unidentified gunmen.” The Philippines National Police has strongly rejected multiple reports in both foreign and domestic media of higher numbers, insisting that they are simply “deaths under investigation.”

Populist enforcer: Rodrigo Duterte poses with a rifle on a visit in April to the Philippine National Police headquarters in Quezon City near Manila.

Photo: Bullit Marquez/AP

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pool of people, with a number of elected city officials and even Catholic priests mysteriously shot in recent months. Duterte has used accusations of complicity in the drug trade to jail some of his fiercest critics, most notably Senator Leila de Lima.

Beyond the grisly spectacle of bloodied bodies, grieving wives and orphaned children, there are those who question Duterte’s assertion that the country has more than four million drug users, or that the war on drugs is having much impact on the situation. True, close to 800,000 supposed drug users have surrendered to authorities and volunteered for rehabilitation, but the infrastructure to cope with this volume of treatment is inadequate. Meanwhile, another Social Weather Stations survey revealed in 2017 that eight out of ten Filipinos fear they may become victims of the war on drugs, while a similar number nonetheless support the campaign.

Away from the carnage on the streets of Manila and other parts of the country, Duterte has generated controversy on the world stage. Like US President Donald Trump, the former city mayor was given to surprising outbursts — such as when he called both US President Barack Obama and Pope Francis a “son of a whore” in Tagalog. He has shown little patience with the formal aspects of diplomacy, showing up late for summit meetings, dressed informally and sometimes even skipping key events.

METHOD AND MADNESS

Yet, as with Trump, there is some method to his approach. Duterte insisted that there was little point in pressing the legal case against China’s encroachment on Philippine islands in the South China Sea, arguing that the country had neither the means nor the support for confrontation. His approach ultimately helped reduce tensions in the region — even if it allowed China to complete its construction of defensive fixtures on small islets within the Philippines economic exclusion zone. Similarly, Duterte has confounded sceptics who said he would face an uphill struggle implementing the peace agreement reached under his predecessor with Muslim armed groups in Mindanao.

Using his powerful majority in Congress, Duterte rammed through an enabling law in July and a plebiscite is scheduled for January to launch the new autonomous region of Bangsamoro. As a result, levels of organized violence in Mindanao have declined — although there remains the threat of fringe groups allied to the Islamic State.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Duterte’s tenure so far is the manner in which he has dealt with political opposition. Critics have been handled harshly, and often threatened with violence. Senator de Lima, who cut her teeth investigating the Davao Death Squads, languishes in prison. Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno was removed almost without a whimper — she was a critic of Duterte’s War on Drugs. More bizarrely, Antonio Trillanes, a former naval officer given amnesty for an attempted rebellion against the government in 2013 who is now a senator, faced the prospect of arrest by the military in the Senate after criticizing Duterte.

Human rights and civil society activists have sounded warnings that Duterte may be undermining four decades of democracy in one of Southeast Asia’s most enduring examples of democratic transition. Although it should be remembered that two presidents have already been ousted by extra-constitutional means — Marcos in 1986 and Joseph Estrada in 2001 — and there have been repeated coup attempts since 1986.

Having said this, the Philippines’ presidential system, modelled on that of the country’s former colonial ruler, is powerful in a setting where the oligarchy craves the protection of government, and many legislators are drawn from the families who control the country’s wealth. “Presidents in the Philippines have usually been able to subordinate the legislative and judicial branches of government, creating the danger of ‘elected autocracy’ or even outright dictatorship,” argues Mark Thompson, an academic at City University in Hong Kong. Mindful of the violence enabled after Marcos declared martial law in 1972, many were alarmed when Duterte declared martial law in the island of Mindanao after Muslim extremists occupied the city of Marawi last year.

Much of this concern is unvoiced in the Philippines, especially since the government has sought to muzzle outspoken media outlets such as the popular news website Rappler. And perhaps it says a lot about the sorts of people who now serve Duterte that his own spokesman, former human rights lawyer Harry Roque, had once spoken out against Duterte, allegedly telling a forum on the Marcos period of martial law before the elections in 2016: “Please do not vote for this murderer, this self-professed murderer.”

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