During the so-called “Third Wave of Democratization” that swept Asia beginning in the 1980s, there was widespread optimism that democracy was developing deep roots in the region. But with growing rivalry between China and the US, and changing political dynamics in many countries in Asia, there are now growing fears of democratic backsliding throughout the region.

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Populist Promises, Democratic Fissures: Indonesia and the Philippines

By M. Faishal Aminuddin

Democracy in both the Philippines and Indonesia is threatened by an untenable dilemma. Leaders stake out populist positions but then must yield to conflicting political pressures that force inevitable compromises that erode democratic institutions. Restoring a healthy balance to democracy in both places will be an uphill battle, writes M. Faishal Aminuddin.

Democracy IN the Philippines and Indonesia is in the process of sliding back towards authoritarianism. Legions of analyses show how the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte (elected on May 10, 2016) in its unrelenting use of intimidation fundamentally differs from other post-Marcos Filipino presidencies. Duterte’s government uses the legal system to attack political opponents, disparages or threatens leaders of key accountability institutions, and bartered the mainstream media with political debts from the promises they made during their presidential campaigns. Beginning in 2014, Widodo promised that he would massively expand infrastructure across Indonesia. These infrastructure projects were to be funded mostly by loans from China through different cooperation schemes and carried out mainly by massive State Owned Enterprises (SOEs). Duterte, on the other hand, had said during his election campaign that the biggest problems faced by the Philippines were drug abuse and organized crime. Ultimately, those campaign debts have held both elected leaders hostage, negatively impacting the performance of the governments they lead.

In the 2019 presidential race, Widodo doubled down on his vision to accelerate national development by building even more infrastructure to open up access to different regions, which would then accelerate domestic trade and strengthen tourism. Furthermore, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) would be able to find new markets and transport their products more easily. The budget for this undertaking soared from 155 trillion rupiah in 2014 to 410 trillion rupiah in 2018. During the 2019 election campaign, it became apparent that the infrastructure developments undertaken during his first term, while significant, were not sufficient to guarantee public satisfaction with the government. The promises regarding infrastructure were easily countered by the issue of increased state debt, which may make the economy fragile and directly reduce national sovereignty.

In the Philippines, Duterte’s government faces negative sentiments due to the country’s growing economic relationship with China and its avoidance of the United States. Foreign investment from China increased 10 percent in the early period of his presidential term. The trading sector, there was a 34 percent increase between 2017 and 2018, but overall Beijing only invested US$4.3 billion of a promised US$45 billion into promised infrastructure projects. However, the increase of negative sentiment is mainly driven by the issuance of Alien Employment Permits (AEP). Within the last two years, around 40,000 permits have been issued, with more than 25,000 of them held by Chinese nationals. Since 2016, shortly after Duterte took office, more than 3 million Chinese nationals have visited the country. This resulted in rising public anxiety about the number of illegal workers, especially those working for Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGO).

However, the negative impact of this issue is balanced by the public view of Duterte’s war on drugs. In June 2019, a survey showed the public’s satisfaction with the war on drugs at 82 percent.

campaigns, Widodo faced a barrage of attacks from hard-line Islamic groups. This resulted in a strong polarization over the majority Muslim vote. Duterte drew support from left-wing parties and politicians. Although the support from these groups across the country was not as much as that of the main voter base, the overall support was quite significant for his policies in parliament and in public debate. Widodo faced the issue of growing religious radicalism during the 2014 and 2019 campaigns. Personal attacks on Widodo’s Islamic credentials somewhat subsided when he made a religious leader, Ma’ruf Amin, his vice president. A Kyai (Islamic scholar) from the huge Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Muslim organization who was also the chairman of the Indonesian Council of Ulema, Ma’ruf helped burnish Widodo’s credibility as a “real” Muslim. Religious, racial and economic attacks had all been brought to bear in the defeat of Jakarta Governor Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama in the 2017 Jakarta governor’s election. A Christian, ethnic Chinese and Widodo ally, Ahok was used by the opposition to gain political support from Muslim voters. He not only lost the election — despite pre-poll surveys giving him a 70 percent approval rating — he was charged and jailed for blasphemy. The massive outpouring of manipulated public anger against Ahok became a chilling lesson for Widodo and his supporters.

The other undercurrent running through the Ahok debacle was his Chinese ethnicity. Widodo also had to convince voters in 2019 that Indonesia’s debt to China over infrastructure was not a heavy burden and will not weaken the country’s sovereignty. The country’s response in its conflict with China over the waters around the Natuna islands became Widodo’s effective answer. He successfully showed that the country’s sovereignty cannot be compromised by business interests. Similarly, it may not be difficult for Duterte to assert his country’s sovereignty despite its economic dependence on China. Duterte is being held hostage mainly by his populist land policies, which are at odds with the interests of landlords and the traditional bourgeoisie.

The populist strategies used by Widodo and Duterte are forcing them to adapt to various internal pressures by lowering the achievement targets of their promises. This may disrupt the running of the government. However, both presidents have to also show their supporters that they are committed to their promises. Widodo has to ensure that minority groups are protected despite pressures from hard-line Islamic groups. He also has to pay attention to his supporters from rural areas when he is driving forward large economic sectors controlled by oligarchs. Duterte has to make sure that his supporters from rural areas and urban poor communities have access to economic gains while, at the same time, having to compromise with the alliance of regional landowners who supported him.

**CO-OPTING THE OPPOSITION**

In general, the weakening of the opposition in the Philippines has come about through the regime’s aggressive intimidation of the press. This does not occur much in Indonesia. However, both the Duterte and Widodo regimes are aware of using social media to control issues. The Duterte government applies so-called Key Internet Protocols, or KICs, to censor online media, limit information and launch technical attacks on government critics. In Indonesia, Widodo’s supporters use similar tactics on social media. Attacks on Widodo through social media are incessant and — if considered a direct threat to the president — often get a quick and firm response from the police. From 2014 to 2019, at least 241 individuals faced criminal charges over criticism of the government, with 82 of them being accused of hate speech and insulting the president under the Information and Electronic Transaction Law.7

In the Philippines, attacks on freedom of expression on social media or in conventional media are of concern because they are often followed by physical attacks or torture. The conditions in Indonesia are also growing worse, as critics of the regime may face pressure from regime supporters. In parliament, both Widodo and Duterte rely on co-optation to limit the opposition’s movement. Duterte tends to take repressive actions through the parliament, where left-wing parties and politicians have become his main allies and support his populist policies, such as the Tax Reform Program, which provides benefits to the middle class. It was an exceptional case when Duterte supported the Anti-Political Dynasty Bill of 2018, but failed to get approval from Congress. His support was questionable because he himself comes from a political family, his children also hold public office and his daughter is mentioned as a future successor to the top office. Similarly, many legislators supporting him also belong to political dynasties. Meanwhile, Widodo applies a different strategy. In rearranging the working cabinet during his second term, Widodo embraced one of the rival parties, Gerindra, to form a coalition in parliament and in the cabinet. Most of the parties in the DPR, or House of Representatives, at least nominally support the government. They are led by the president’s party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), and the Golkar Party, leaving only two genuine opposition parties, both relatively minor religious parties with an insignificant number of seats in the parliament.

Widodo moves in a somewhat more flexible space than Duterte and uses a soft approach in weakening the opposition. In the Philippines, unlike in Indonesia, political parties are almost completely personality-based with some existing divisions based on splits between right-wing conservatives and left-wing populists.

President Duterte is supported by the majority coalition Kilusang Pagbabago, which was formed in 2016 and occupies 20 of 24 senate seats and 271 of 303 House seats. The PDP-Laban Party, which leads the coalition, was the winning party supporting Duterte in the 2016 presidential election. The opposition coalition, Oposisyon Koalisy, led by the Liberal Party, does not have a significant number of seats. In the 2019 general election, the Liberal Party formed a coalition, Otso Diretso, led by Vice President Leni Robredo (in the Philippines the president and vice-pres-
ident may represent different political parties) that was positioned as the opposition to Duterte. They failed to obtain any senate seats. The weak opposition also faced harsh pressure imposed by Duterte on his rivals.

**WEAKENING OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**

Another main concern is the weakening of public institutions. The most striking example is the position of Widodo’s government over the weakening of Indonesia’s popular Corruption Eradication Commission, or KPK, and a draft criminal code, which led to massive demonstrations after he was sworn into his second term in office. The DPR moved to weaken the KPK with a new law that was not opposed by the president and effectively declawed what had been a robust law enforcement body. The criminal code revision was shelved as a result of the protests but is likely to resurface. Widespread public speculation focuses on the possibility of political deals between the president and his coalition supporters to keep the KPK out of their business in exchange for legislative backing.

Duterte’s war on drugs has led the National Police (PNP) to carry out extrajudicial killings of presumed drug dealers. The body count demonstrates that law enforcement isn’t functioning properly and only underscores the PNP’s reputation as a public institution associated with rampant corruption. When the police become the sole executor in the war on drugs, it also makes obeying other rules even more difficult. In the 2016-2018 period, Duterte fired more than 400 police officers who were proven to have violated various regulations. Meanwhile, the national police chief, Gen. Oscar Albayalde, was caught up in a case involving suspect police officers accused of profiting from the drug trade. He denied involvement but the case highlighted diminished respect for the force. Duterte eventually even offered to take over the leadership of the PNP himself. The underlying point, however, is that both the Philippine National Police and Indonesia’s KPK have been systematically weakened due to unfulfilled promises, murky facts and conflicts of interest within the inner circles of the two regimes. There are at least two important measures that can be taken to strengthen democratic resilience rooted in the political culture of each country, namely strengthening civil society and creating impartial public institutions.

**CIVIL SOCIETY AND PUBLIC SERVICE**

Weak civil society is often caused by an orientation change among its actors as they move toward politics. Besides, the independence of civil society organizations is still low, and they rely heavily on state resources. This causes their critical voices to be easily influenced by the public resources distributed to the organizations. Strong civil society is supported by educated communities and citizens who have access to adequate political education.

Public institutions are vulnerable to being co-opted for the interests of the ruling regime and result from a selection model based on personal closeness, collusion and nepotism. The process of filling job vacancies in those institutions has to be strongly controlled by the public. If the institutions deal with public services, the officials have to be accountable not just to the government or the legislature, but also to the public. The impartiality of public institutions will contribute to good governance.

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