

Ghost of Dictator Marcos Hangs Over Philippines' Duterte

by Clarissa Batino - Norman P Aquino June 15, 2016

Manila: Rodrigo Duterte won the Philippine presidency in a blaze of hard-line rhetoric—an outsider who will stamp out crime and corruption. But his power base is tied to the nation's oldest political camps, including that of ex-dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

Duterte's Partido Demokratiko Pilipino-Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban) party won only three of the 297 seats in the House of Representatives while party president Koko Pimentel is its lone member in the 24-seat Senate. That made PDP-Laban what Filipinos call a "motorcycle party." Yet within days of Duterte's 9 May win, politicians from all sides rushed to join him.

That's how it goes in Philippine politics. Law makers did the same in 2010, abandoning Gloria Arroyo's party in favour of then newly-elected president Benigno Aquino's Liberal Party.

"Real political parties don't exist because what we have are caricatures," said Ramon Casiple, executive director at the Institute for Political and Electoral Reform in Manila. "Parties don't get to decide anything. Personalities and political families make the decisions, in the same way that it was Duterte himself, not any party, who chose that he should run for president."

While family dynasties have been the foundation of politics across much of post-colonial Asia, the recent victories of outsiders in India, Indonesia and the Philippines may be shifting the political spectrum. Nowhere is that more apparent than the Philippines, where the mass defections mean there is little restraining influence in Congress from the opposition.

That makes it easier for Duterte to carry out his ambitious plans, including reinstating the death penalty, cracking down on smuggling, easing foreign ownership limits and shifting to a federal government system. It could also mean he has enough support in Congress to avoid the kinds of pitfalls some predecessors faced, including impeachment attempts for graft or violating the constitution.

'Radical proposals'

"The president has some radical proposals, some out-of-the-box solutions so it's very important that the leadership in both houses can convince the majority to support these measures," said Pimentel, who's gunning for the Senate leadership.

Those who aren't aligned with the new leader can be shut out. In a separate election in May for vice-president, Aquino-backed Leni Robredo won by a hair against Marcos' only son, Bongbong Marcos. Yet Duterte has not offered Robredo a cabinet post, saying he doesn't want to offend his friend Marcos.

Part of the reason for the country's revolving politics is the constitution adopted after the 1986 revolt that ousted Ferdinand Marcos. The charter encouraged numerous parties and limited the presidency to one six-year term in an effort to prevent another dictator.

Minority report

Every president since Corazon Aquino three decades ago has been elected with less than 50% of the vote. Duterte got 39%, even less than Aquino's 42% in 2010. The effect of the constitution has been to encourage politicians to switch allegiance to whoever wins and holds the purse strings. Those who don't risk being marginalized both in the new government and in Congress, and that means losing money for projects in their home town.

"If you're with the president's party, you get more funds for your constituents," said congressman Teddy Baguilat, who's been with the Liberal Party since 2001. "If you fail, your district will suffer and so will your political mileage."

Baguilat said he'd like to support the minority opposition but he needs to ask party chiefs if that would be okay because they all agreed last month, including Aquino, to allow members to align themselves with 71-year-old Duterte in a bid to stem an exodus from the party.

Super majority

Aquino's party won more than a third of lower house seats. Yet Duterte already has enough backing to give him a super majority, or two-thirds of the lower house, weeks before he takes office on 30 June, House speaker in-waiting Pantaleon Alvarez said.

Behind the parliamentary merry-go-round are the powerful oligarchs and political dynasties that have dominated the nation since independence.

Benigno Aquino is the son of Corazon, the wife of Liberal leader Benigno Aquino Jr., who was assassinated in Manila airport during the Marcos dictatorship. Their party was founded in 1946 by former president Manuel Roxas, grandfather of Mar Roxas who was defeated by Duterte in the election.

Connected families

Traditional supporters of dynastic politicians include tycoons Eduardo Cojuangco Jr. and Manuel Villar, who have lined up to back Duterte.

Almost 40% of law makers have links to politically connected families, compared with about 6% in the US and 10 % in Argentina, according to a 2012 study in the *Philippine Political Science Journal*.

Cojuangco, chairman of San Miguel Corp., the nation's largest company, ran for president in 1992 and lost to Fidel Ramos, who was backed by Corazon Aquino. A former associate of Marcos and the uncle of outgoing president Aquino, Cojuangco founded the Nationalist People's Coalition.

Villar is head of the Nacionalista Party, which allied itself with Bongbong Marcos' party in 2009. Bongbong backed Villar's presidential bid in 2010, when he lost to Aquino. The former Senate president is owner of property company Vista Land & Lifescapes Inc. On the day Villar signed a pact to back Duterte, his son Mark Villar agreed to head the Department of Public Works and Highways in the new government.

‘Extremely Machiavellian’

“Villar was an extremely Machiavellian choice for Duterte who may need to have maximum support in Congress if he faces impeachment,” said Richard Javad Heydarian, an assistant political science professor at the De La Salle University in Manila. At least seven former Philippine presidents have faced impeachment attempts, including the last three in office.

Duterte told reporters last month he chose Mark Villar for his organizational skills. Villar told Bloomberg TV Philippines on 25 May his family will not benefit from his cabinet post. Duterte has also said he will not be influenced by big business interests. “There are two things that catapulted him to the presidency: the frustration toward the current administration and the hope that he will deliver on his promise of change,” said outgoing law maker Neri Colmenares. “We hope that he will be independent and work for the people. Otherwise, we have a big problem.” **Bloomberg**

First Published: Wed, Jun 15 2016.

Ref.: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-06-14/ghost-of-dictator-mar-cos-hangs-over-philippine-strongman-duterte>

Look also www.president.aboutphilippines.ph