

# Showbiz for ugly people? How Filipino politics is one big soap opera

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Ever wondered why politics in the Philippines is so melodramatic? Or how any Filipino who gets even remotely famous ends up in public office? Here Anna Cristina Pertierra of Western Sydney University discusses how the country proves the old adage that “politics is show business for ugly people”...



The international press has become very interested in Philippine politics since Rodrigo Duterte was elected president in 2016. His [controversial character](#), apparent [disregard for protocol](#), and the [wave of deaths](#) in his “war on drugs”, including extrajudicial killings, have garnered much more attention than the nation is usually afforded.

Understanding Philippine national politics more broadly – and Duterte’s success in particular – requires a serious look at the role of media and celebrity in the national electoral machine.

Duterte is a beneficiary of a political culture where policies and processes have been less electorally effective than the glitz of show business and success of personal charisma.

## The celebrity factor

Duterte is just the latest in a long line of macho politicians evoking cinematic style. This formula has been successful in the Philippines since at least the 1960s [when Ferdinand Marcos](#) and his glamorous wife Imelda rose to power using film-star looks and flashy performances to generate popular appeal.

Duterte's reputation as a tough-talking man who takes no hostages echoes the imagery and language of Philippine and Hollywood action film heroes, as reflected in [his nicknames](#): “The Punisher” and “Duterte Harry”.

It's not just that Filipino politicians adopt the look and style of celebrities to generate votes. In many cases, they actually were celebrities before they became elected politicians.

Actors, singers, comedians and news anchors frequently win political office across the country. In the 2016 elections alone, [44 show business celebrities](#) ran as candidates at the national or local level.

In a political scene that continues to be dominated by dynastic families – many of whom control whole provinces or regions – celebrities are often the only candidates who can generate enough momentum to be elected.

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The current Philippine senate includes [Manny Pacquiao](#), a world champion boxer who recently reclaimed his welterweight title belt in Las Vegas while on a short break from his senatorial duties. [Vicente “Tito” Sotto III](#), one of the country's most famous stars, who for more than 30 years has hosted a high-rating noontime variety show is also a senator.



## Scandals and investigations

Rather than entertaining audiences on comedy shows or at sporting events, in late 2016 senators Sotto and Pacquiao were on television screens across the nation cross-examining witnesses in a televised [inquiry](#) investigating the killing of an arrested mayor in his jail cell. Across the country, many Filipinos were transfixed by daily proceedings that resembled a courtroom drama.

For several weeks, the private life of [Senator Leila de Lima](#), who is a rare voice of opposition against Duterte, [was discussed in lurid detail](#) in both congress and the senate, where investigations were being conducted on the drug trade and corruption in prisons.

De Lima had previously served as the Secretary of the Department of Justice, and had been [accused](#) of heading a drug trade through prisons with the aid of her driver, with whom she [admitted to having had a romantic relationship](#).

This driver, after much evasion and complication, was brought to testify at the house and senate hearings and [claimed that he received bribes from drug dealers](#). But de Lima and her defenders [insist such claims are fabrications](#).

The televised senate proceedings also featured dramatic testimony from an arrested druglord, Kerwin Espinosa, [who wanted to atone for the death of his father](#) by testifying against corrupt officials, and from the charismatic National Chief of Police.

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A close Duterte ally whose nickname is “The Rock”, [the police chief was moved to tears while speaking to the senate](#), having heard testimony about corrupt police.



## TV politics

It's no coincidence that these political intrigues read like soap opera storylines. Such melodramatic scandals are watched with great interest by everyday Filipinos, who follow the storylines as if they were from a television serial.

Daily revelations and entanglements are discussed while people watch the live streams or television broadcasts in living rooms, malls or restaurants, or listen on the radio while travelling on public transport. Such conversations mix with celebrity gossip and conversations about television as part of the fabric of daily life; people speculate about the twists and turns of each day's events and consider the personal enmities and family histories behind political disputes.

The overriding themes of betrayal, revenge, secret love, and complex family histories are the sorts of plot lines that frequently feature in the *teleserye* soap operas – originally inspired by Latin American *telenovelas* – [that play on Philippine television channels at night](#).

Although at first glance, a senate full of television stars and sportspeople may seem to be amusing buffoonery, this melodrama is in fact very serious business. In a context where [few politicians have ever delivered genuine reform](#) to improve the lives of Filipinos through actual policies, the emotional dimension of following the ups and downs of political players in their television senatorial courtroom drama at least offers some kind of connection for everyday viewers.

Observers note that pursuing senate investigations that explore the details of a senator's sexual life and televising testimony from alleged druglords, [is distracting politicians](#) and the public from more serious issues. Within the Philippines, the cycles of news stories created by senatorial investigations and presidential pronouncements occupy at least as much airtime as stories of extrajudicial killings. They also generate further discussion – and dispute – on social media.

[ALSO READ: Duterte tightens grip on power with purge of jailed De Lima's senate allies](#)



## Ties that bind

The melodramatic dimensions of Philippine politics are important to understand because these are the emotional ties that push people to support politicians in times of transition.

[Around the world](#), scholars have shown how television programs make [use of melodrama](#) to convert their audiences into [national communities](#). The emotional impact of daily soap operas and other melodramatic programs connect viewers at home to a public world in which political leaders and advertisers compete for their loyalty.

But the Philippines has gone one step further in bringing together dramatic entertainment and national publics. There, politics makes use of television melodrama to keep citizens following the storylines.

The Philippines offers an extreme example of an evolution of electoral politics that has been noted around the world, with the mixing of entertainment media and political movements.

Donald Trump was able to [parlay his mastery of reality television into political success](#). And Silvio Berlusconi's media empire [was also an essential part of his domination of Italian politics](#).

While mastering the art of public performance is part of any politician's job, populist leaders who rise to power as symbols of change have an especially good talent for melodrama. They thrive on conflict, and they don't shrink away from the twists and turns of changing loyalties and personal vendettas.

Politics is a world for which show business celebrities are perfectly adapted, and their predominance in the Philippines offers a glimpse of what TV populism could look like in other countries.

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