Democracy against Disorder in Southeast Asia

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The election of Rodrigo Duterte as President of the Philippines has distressing implications for democracy in Southeast Asia. Rising to national prominence on his record for stamping out crime in southern Davao City with the cooperation of alleged death squads, and famously unapologetic for his aggressively violent and misogynistic rhetoric, Duterte stood out among Filipino presidential candidates in his willingness to confront the country’s social and political problems using violent, strong-arm means.

Duterte’s election is but the most recent example of a trend in Southeast Asian politics towards a politics of democracy against disorder. Examples of such politics beyond Duterte in the Philippines include the candidacy of Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia, and aspects of Thai electoral politics both under Thaksin Shinawatra and under successive post-Thaksin military governments. Democracy against disorder is more than simply an appeal to law and order, which is as common a platform for candidates in Southeast Asia as it is elsewhere around the world. What is distinctive about democracy against disorder is that it emphasizes order over law, yet its proponents seek legitimation through elections rather than through some alternative method of achieving political power. Democratic politicians campaigning against disorder frequently draw on popular views of mass politics as a threat that must be controlled, and preoccupations with the

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masses and disorder among the region’s non-democratic regimes stretch back to the Marcos period in the Philippines, to Indonesia’s New Order, and to Thailand’s military governments. Contemporary politicians in the Philippines and Indonesia (and, recently, in Thailand) bring these views into the modern era by combining that preoccupation with disorder and democratic politics.

The recent political histories of Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines illustrate how under very different conditions and with very different results, disorder animates electoral campaigns, and officials have pursued policies in office that reflect fears of disorder. A comparison of these three countries reveals that such politics emerges from elite and middle class frustrations with the perceived inability of democratic elections to generate stable and effective governance combined with a historically rooted belief that disorderly societal actors must be eliminated as a precondition for political stability and material progress. As a result, democracy against disorder is not a threat to democracy in procedural terms, for politicians such as Duterte do not intend to eliminate elections. However, democracy against disorder does threaten freedom, civil liberties, and popular representation, key aspects of a substantive conception of democracy. It may even threaten serious consideration of policies to address economic inequality, also a key aspect of substantive democracy.¹ The fact that politicians like Duterte are not, fundamentally, anti-democratic means that their opponents cannot appeal to democratic legitimation as an alternative, but must instead offer a different substantive vision for how to make democratic governance work.

Duterte Against Disorder

In most views of democratic consolidation, the challenge is to ensure that authoritarian forces—militaries, former hegemonic parties, and others—are unable to seize the reins of power, while simultaneously routinizing and institutionalizing elections as the “only game in town” for ordinary citizens and elites alike.\(^2\) Viewed through this lens, Philippine democracy would appear fairly well consolidated, at least on the surface. And yet it is plain that Philippine politics suffers from a number of weaknesses, ranging from rampant vote buying to fragile rule of law, among many others. As a result, Freedom House rates the Philippines as only Partly Free,\(^3\) and Filipinos commonly lament the poor performance of their country’s political system. Economic growth in the Philippines has been anemic for decades. Even with the relatively capable economic performance under outgoing President Benigno Aquino III that did generate good macroeconomic performance, the fruits of that growth are not widely shared, representing just one more source of popular frustration. It is in this context that Duterte, an outsider to national politics but with a reputation for having taken control of formerly violent and dangerous Davao City through ruthless means (his nickname is “the Punisher”), captured the presidency in May 2016. His nearly 40% of the popular vote placed him well above the vote for any other candidate in a five-cornered race.

Duterte’s behavior as a candidate certainly reflects his own personality and the particular concerns of the Filipino electorate, but he must also be understood as a reflection of a pattern that is observable elsewhere in Southeast Asian politics in recent years. As noted above, the distinctive feature of democracy against disorder is the combination of order above law with


electoral democracy. This makes it different from strongman authoritarian rule in which order supersedes law, and elections fall by the wayside as well. Politicians like Duterte emphasize order above law because they recognize that electorates suspect that their country’s legal systems are ineffective, either for mitigating social problems or in generating effective governance. In their view, the law is a means, but order is the end, and extralegal means are justified in achieving order when legal means fail. This belief in order as an end is hardly unique to modern Southeast Asian democracies. Indeed, it shares many similarities with classic criticisms of modernization theory, including Samuel Huntington’s famous proposal that political order, not democracy, was the central to the process of political and economic development.4

But critically, democracy against disorder is indeed democracy, if only narrowly and procedurally so. This differentiates it from competitive or electoral authoritarianism, in which elections exist but are not competitive enough to meet the minimal standards required for democracy.5 Critics of Duterte and other politicians like him may be right that they have ambitions to roll back civil rights and political liberties once in office, but it is clear that these politicians and their supporters believe that the only legitimate way for them to hold national office is to be elected. Once in office, their having won elections forms the basis of the popular legitimacy, offering them the possibility of bypassing legal channels in pursuing their preferred vision of order. It is important to remember that when politicians like Duterte appeal to elections as giving them a mandate to reorder national politics, they are in some sense correct: Duterte campaigned on his record in Davao City, and if he follows through on his campaign promises in Manila, will probably be viewed favorably by many of those Filipinos who voted for him. Unlike

U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump, to whom frequent comparisons have been drawn, it is straightforward to see just how Duterte plans to govern based on his record in Davao City.6

Politicians like Duterte thrive on the belief that society contains within itself the greatest threat to order, and that existing political arrangements—whatever they happen to be—have allowed societal disorder to infect national government. For this reason, support for order above the law thrives among those social groups for whom mass politics is particularly threatening: elites and the middle classes. In the words of Julio Teehankee and Mark Thompson,

Duterte’s rise is not a reaction by the dispossessed, the losers of “exclusive” growth, but rather it is symptomatic of the anxieties about criminality, rampant smuggling and government corruption of those now marginally better off after a couple of decades of solid economic growth.7

Political scientist Patricio Abinales has a blunter take, that elites and middle classes “are the two ‘sectors’ of society that are most worried about their possessions and desire peace at any cost so that they can pursue their avarice.”8 But Duterte’s appeal is more than just avarice, it is an appeal to making government in the Philippines work.

To understand how Duterte’s election fits into a broader pattern of democracy against disorder, it is useful to review the recent political histories of Indonesia and Thailand, two other middle income countries in the region with recent democratic experiences. Even with their dramatically different political environments, these two countries provide examples of a similar kind of politics motivated by similar kinds of societal concerns.

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Indonesia’s 2014 electoral campaign shows how elite and middle class anxieties about disorder propelled the candidacy of one elite and nearly allowed him to defeat a candidate with otherwise broad electoral appeal. The election pitted Joko Widodo (known as Jokowi), Governor of the Jakarta capital region and formerly the mayor of a regional city in Central Java, against Prabowo Subianto, a former general with a stained human rights record who is also the ex-son-in-law of the strongman dictator Soeharto. Jokowi campaigned on a populist platform focusing on effective governance, appealing especially to lower class voters on the basis of his modest origins, a characteristically Javanese demeanor, and his successful record as a popular and effective mayor and governor. Prabowo adopted a different populist vision characterized by outrage at the incompetence of Indonesia’s ruling politicians, a sense of national exploitation, and a promise of strongman rule. In the event, Jokowi defeated Prabowo, but the result was fairly close by the standards of Indonesian presidential elections—a winning margin of just six percent.

Prabowo’s candidacy appealed in particular to Indonesia’s urban and middle classes. On what basis would such segments of Indonesia’s electorate support a disgraced former general with a hot temper and fortune earned through rent-seeking and family connections? For answers, it is helpful to understand how these citizens view the state of Indonesian democracy. Since the fall of Soeharto, Indonesians have faced numerous changes in politics and society. Both the poor and the middle classes have had to become accustomed to frustratingly high levels of corruption, a far more liberal press environment, political decentralization, and a bewildering proliferation of

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politicians and elections. Many among Indonesia’s middle segments tend to perceive these developments in negative terms, as a social and political environment that has become uncontrollable, with greedy public officials impeding development, criminal elements unchecked by the police, and a rise of perceived social problems such as drugs and homosexuality. Soeharto’s New Order regime was characterized too by public corruption and brutal politics, but in name, ideology, and practice, order prevailed over disorder. Indonesia’s middle classes voted for Prabowo because he promised to reorder Indonesian politics and society, away from what many see as its disorderly state.

One useful term for capturing this sentiment is the Indonesian word amuk, borrowed into English through Malay as amok. In everyday usage amuk frequently appears with massa to describe masses run amok. When “masses run amok,” it is normally the masses themselves who suffer; but it is the middle classes and elites who are most frightened, and strive for order in order to control the masses. Fears of amuk massa were instrumental in the popular legitimation of Soeharto’s New Order regime, and draw on narratives that date from the Dutch colonial period but have been repeated and rearticulated since independence about the Indonesian people’s proclivity towards disorder and violence. Even if the mass disorder that erupted after the fall of the New Order is today considered unlikely, the idea that the Indonesian state must be vigilant against this kind of disorder remains.

If Prabowo’s campaign and its strongman imagery appealed to Indonesians who see contemporary politics as disorderly and uncontrolled, Jokowi’s first years in office have seen his administration embrace some of their same concerns even after Prabowo’s defeat. The concern is not masses run amok, but instead social ills and a vague sense of a threat to Indonesian security.

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11 For the best comparative and historical overview of violence in Indonesia, see the contributors to Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad, eds, *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective* (Leiden: KITLV press, 2002).
Indonesia under Jokowi continues to eagerly execute convicted drug traffickers, and officials regularly speak of drugs, homosexuality, and other social issues as national scourges. Surveillance of foreigners has increased, as have worries about other potential vectors of destabilizing influence from abroad. And concepts such as Bela Negara or “defend the nation,” which will task millions of Indonesians with participating in the protection of Indonesia’s sovereignty and stability, are receiving new public attention. Importantly, these measures are quite popular—even if the implementation of a program like Bela Negara seems expensive or impractical, the concept behind it is widely accepted as legitimate and praiseworthy.

**Thailand**

Thailand and Indonesia would seem a strange parallel when characterizing the politics of democracy against disorder. Indonesia has enjoyed four rounds of democratic national elections since 1998, whereas Thailand has seen military coups in 2006 and 2014 and several paralyzing political crises in between. Indonesians voted down the candidacy of an aspiring strongman in 2014, but since 2014 Thailand has been led by an actual strongman, Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the former head of the Royal Thai Army who seized power through extraconstitutional means. Thai politics revolves around a central cleavage frequently depicted as “Red Shirts” versus “Yellow Shirts,” the former allied with the parties and social forces originally mobilized by Thaksin Shinawatra, and the latter associated with traditional aristocratic and bureaucratic interests. There is no analogous cleavage structure anywhere else in Southeast Asia.

These stark differences between junta-led Thailand and democratic Indonesia and the Philippines allow us to see more clearly one important parallel: a belief among elites and many middle class elements in the necessity of strong, hierarchical authority in order to manage the

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Thai people. Kevin Hewison and Kengkij Kitirianglarp, invoking Thak Chaloemtiarana’s classic text on “despotic paternalism” in Thailand, describe the term Thai-style democracy (prachathipatai baep thai) as founded on social hierarchy, centralized authority, and limited mass mobilization.\(^{13}\) Such a conception of politics rests ultimately on Thailand’s political institutions—the monarchy, the judiciary, the military, and others—as providing order in the context of a populace that is prone to disorder.

A common mistake is to associate prachathipatai baep thai and related beliefs exclusively with Thailand’s royalists, or with the military—two institutions most naturally geared towards enforcing order through hierarchy. In point of fact, notions of democracy against disorder can be found across the Thai political spectrum, including Thaksin himself. Others have noted the parallels between Thaksin and Prabowo, both of whom reached out to the poor in a bid to secure their votes through promises of redistribution and services (although only Thaksin was successful in this regard).\(^ {14}\) But more specifically, under Thaksin, extrajudicial killings of criminals, especially those alleged to have ties to the country’s brisk trade in narcotics and methamphetamines, rose sharply. These were justified using similar terms to those later used by Duterte, deeming the drug trade both a security threat and a challenge to national harmony and promising that “being ruthless [to drug traffickers] is no bad thing.”\(^ {15}\) Less bloody but no less important was the order that Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party brought to Thailand’s perplexing party system. Democracy against disorder under Thaksin meant using elections to establish a


\(^{15}\) See Marcus Roberts, Mike Trace and Axel Klein, “Thailand’s ‘War on Drugs’,” (The Beckley Foundation Drug Policy Programme, briefing paper number 5, 2004).
more coherent party system, and to use the power that comes from that system to (among other things) eliminate perceived threats of criminals, secessionists, and others.

Today Thai Rak Thai is long gone, Thaksin himself has been in exile for a decade. But the lineages of Thaksin’s time in office are clear, and as Hewison and Kengkij have observed, his influence among previously unmobilized segments of Thai politics meant a threat to the kind of order under which royalist, traditionalist, and bureaucratic interests had thrived. Importantly, military interventions have not sought to eliminate electoral democracy once and for all, but rather to reconstitute it in more orderly terms, using the constitutional drafting process to engineer electoral and judicial institutions that are not vulnerable to popular pressures but which nevertheless should feature elections and perhaps even rotations of power. This is what makes contemporary military rule in Thailand so challenging: no matter how illiberal military government is, Prayuth’s rule is popular among many Thais (especially elites and middle segments), and his seizure of power is also justifiable to many Thais as a response to the kind of disorder that popular mobilization represents. The history of this divide in Thai politics stretches all the way back to 1932, the year of the establishment of Thailand’s constitutional monarchy, when the divide between aristocratic/bureaucratic/military and popular democratic forces first emerged.

**Philippines**

With the benefit of comparisons with democracy against disorder Thailand and Indonesia, we are now in the position to make more sense of Duterte’s appeal in the Philippines. Duterte’s obsession with drugs and his eagerness to kill drug dealers parallels that of governments in Indonesia and Thailand, both of which have resorted to both judicial and extrajudicial means in combating a perceived scourge of drugs. His coarse and misogynistic
language is reminiscent of Prabowo and Prayuth—it is more noticeable simply because it is more frequently delivered in English, by a politician running to lead a country with which the United States has a close historical ties. The banal quality of many of Duterte’s supporters’ hopes for their president—that he will ease the traffic in Manila, or that he will clean up public restrooms—is entirely familiar as the kind of urban and middle class desires found in Bangkok and Jakarta. But most importantly, the purpose of the Duterte campaign, that a brash leader unbeknownst to the establishment can bring order to a country suffering from social and political ills, is typical of democratic politics in contemporary Southeast Asia.

There are other parallels as well. Duterte is a political outsider whose rise to national prominence began in the regions and campaigns as uniquely able to solve problems in the capital; in this, he parallels Jokowi and, given his heritage as a Sino-Thai from Chiang Mai, Thaksin. (Even Prabowo, a consummate product of the New Order regime, tried to position himself as an anti-establishment candidate.) Duterte sought power by running for and winning an election, as Prabowo attempted to do and as Thaksin certainly would do if he were allowed to contest in democratic elections today. There are no plans to scrap democratic elections, but like Prayuth and Prabowo, Duterte hopes to reform national political institutions in ways that will solve problems hold to be generated by the democratic status quo. In Duterte’s case, one proposal is to adopt a federal system that would increase the power granted to the regions, a move that should be interpreted as parallel to the draft Thai constitution that would generate greater stability by creating greater partisan fragmentation and more equality between the two main political parties, Pheu Thai and the Democrats.16 However, Prayuth’s draft constitution also proposes recentralizing Thailand to weaken the provincial bases of power that allowed Thaksin

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to rise to prominence, the exact opposite of Duterte’s federalism proposal. Prabowo hoped to reorder Indonesian politics by weakening regional politicians as well—he ominously suggested eliminating direct elections both at the local and national level. In sum, what Duterte shares with his counterparts in Thailand and Indonesia is a willingness to ignore the constitution to get things done, coupled with the belief that institutional change will better manage threats to national stability and material progress from below.

The takeaway points from this comparison are critical, for understanding Duterte himself, and for characterizing the state of democracy in the region. Duterte is not *sui generis*, a one-time product of the Philippines’ uniquely messy political system. He represents an instance of a type of politician who can be found across Southeast Asia. Perhaps his closest parallel is Prabowo, but even democratically elected politicians who oppose Duterte, Prabowo, and Prayuth find themselves driven by the same concerns about disorder that motivate their opponents. Duterte is a crude misogynist, but he appeals to the kind of urban and middle class voter fears that contemporary democratic politics has lost its moorings, and that social ills such as drugs and corruption can only be dealt with through force. Democracy against disorder is not dictatorship in disguise. However, it *is* fundamentally illiberal, using democratic elections to empower strong and rulers who promise not to be bound by established law, and preoccupied with the social ills and mass politics as a vector through which they might spread.

**Democracy, Asian Style?**

One might interpret the politics of democracy against disorder in Southeast Asia using a culturalist framework, invoking notions of Asian values or “Asian style democracy” that were

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once in vogue among scholars of Asian politics.18 Should we understand democracy against disorder as the contemporary manifestation of culturally Asian preoccupations with order and hierarchy? The answer is no, for three reasons.

First, democracy against disorder does not appeal consistently or uniformly to Filipino, Indonesian, and Thai electorates. Duterte’s main constituency outside of his home region of Mindanao was elites and middle classes, especially in Metro Manila and its immediate surrounding regions. Prabowo’s electoral base was urban and middle class Indonesians. Supporters of military rule in contemporary Thailand, and opponents of Thaksin during elections, are statistically more likely to be from central Thailand and to be from middle class or elite backgrounds. It is simply not true that there is a common, culturally determined predisposition for supporting democracy against disorder in Southeast Asia.

Second, politicians like Duterte invoke national interests, but seldom address national values or essential cultural traits, and even then only obliquely. Duterte’s rhetoric on the campaign trail was instead bombastic, militaristic, and even managerial, speaking of officials’ duties and responsibilities and appealing to the interests of Filipino voters. His campaign’s website focuses on national concerns such as overseas Filipino labor and land reform rather than on culture or values. Prabowo Subianto promoted himself as a strong and determined leader using visual cues that resonate with Indonesian voters—often appearing with a crisp white safari shirt and a red beret, sometimes on horseback. His rhetoric spoke of national interests and historical precedent, but when it came to his plans to eliminate elections for local leaders, justifications were made in practical terms, that current practices were wasteful, ineffective, and prone to corruption. Only in the case of Thailand do we see the consistent invocation of a specifically Thai understanding of what democracy ought to be like. But even this fails to

adequately capture the concerns with disorder that motivate politicians who oppose the Bangkok-centered traditional establishment. They may also support order above the law even while rejecting the premise that Thai-style democracy requires a particular kind of democratic politics.

Third, democracy against disorder can be found outside of Asia as well, although the presence of stronger left-right cleavages means that it is harder to discern in the ways that it appears in countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand. Traces of democracy against disorder can be found Latin American democracies such as Chile and Peru, where parties on the right campaign on anxieties about the disorderly masses, and in countries like Hungary where Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz portrays the country as vulnerable to migrants and other destabilizing threats. Even the United States is not entirely immune from this threat, as we see with the rise of Donald Trump since 2015. However, the more apt examples of democracy against disorder are found in countries with more fluid party systems, non-programmatic parties, and weak rule of law. Some examples of countries that more closely match this template of democracy against disorder include Guatemala, Madagascar, and Uganda.

**Disorder and its Futures**

What does the future hold for Duterte, and for democracy and disorder elsewhere in the region? Current signs are distressing. Consider the example of Indonesia, where Prabowo suffered a decisive if still narrow electoral defeat. For pro-democracy Indonesians and foreign observers familiar with Prabowo’s personal history and the New Order style of politics he invoked, his defeat signaled a victory. But we can still see signs of democracy against disorder under Jokowi in Indonesia’s prickly new nationalism, continued concerns about drugs and sex, and its new emphasis on civilian security programs like *Bela Negara*. At present, much rests on Jokowi himself, and whether or not he is able to contain those old forces within Indonesia who
have for decades seen mass mobilization as a potential national threat. The most reassuring sign is Jokowi’s continued support for the rule of law, however fragile, over some extrajudicial or extraconstitutional alternative.

Indonesia is the optimistic case. The more pessimistic case is Thailand, where the military has intervened decisively against democracy. The path from the current military status quo to representative democracy in Thailand is hard to see, and the draft constitution currently under consideration reserves significant powers for unelected politicians. Thailand is the case where putting order above the law ultimately overturned democracy altogether. When democracy against disorder loses its emphasis on elections as the legitimate path to political power, the result is nothing less than authoritarianism under strongman rule. The Thai experience suggests that while Thaksin may have shared Duterte and Prabowo’s emphasis on order above the law, its combination with electoral democracy was ultimately unsustainable. (And indeed, many critics of Prabowo suspect that Indonesian democracy would have not have survived a Prabowo presidency either.)

Between those two extremes lies the Philippines today, where civilian rule remains but where an individual representing democracy against disorder par excellence is set to assume the presidency. Some observers label Duterte as neo-authoritarian,¹⁹ and notorious former dictator Ferdinand Marcos himself came to power by winning democratic elections as well, so the parallels are important. Still, at present we cannot know what direction Duterte will go. There are four possible scenarios. One is a path of moderation, where Duterte joins other recent Filipino presidents in presiding over the Philippines’ underperforming democracy in roughly similar ways as his predecessors, plagued by scandals and elite infighting. Another scenario would see

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¹⁹ Teehankee and Thompson, “The neo-authoritarian threat.”
Duterte govern as he has promised: as a ruthless enforcer of order, stamping out lawlessness and corruption, and perhaps from there building a foundation for stronger rule of law in the future.

A third scenario would have Duterte following the leads of politicians like Thaksin and Prabowo in building a new political party (or, perhaps, to refashioning PDP-Laban, the party for which he is currently chairman) that serves as a vehicle for a new kind of political movement. Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai was notably more effective than Prabowo’s Greater Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) currently is, but both represent attempts to capture the votes of large swaths of the electorate with generic nationalist messages and a strong leader. Some Duterte critics detect in his supporters elements of fascism, and the creation of such a mass mobilizational party would strengthen that case. As veteran Filipina reporter Raissa Robles recently commented about anti-press moves in the Philippines, “Duterte has released the monster in the Filipino.” But true fascism would require much more ideological work—nationalist, syndicalist, corporatist—than is currently in evidence anywhere in contemporary Southeast Asia.

These three scenarios are all broadly consistent with the maintenance of electoral democracy in the Philippines. A fourth and final scenario would see Duterte move not towards party building but towards the military and police as the ultimate instruments of political order. There are already signs that this may be his preferred course of action: he has pledged to increase police salaries to stamp out corruption, and has named several former police and military to his cabinet. A decisive move towards the military and the police would amount to the strongest threat to electoral democracy of the four scenarios. It would also most clearly parallel Marcos’s path to authoritarian rule.

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20 Abinales, “Duterte, Sieg Heil?”
Even if Duterte does not follow the military path, the coming years will be a test of democracy in the Philippines. By emphasizing order above the law, Duterte might gain performance legitimacy, but at the cost of further weakening the country’s already weak rule of law. Such governance would also move the country ever further from substantive conceptions of democracy.

Notes