

SOUTHEAST ASIA: VOTING AGAINST DISORDER

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Since his election to the presidency of the Philippines in May 2016, Rodrigo Duterte has brought his country's politics into the international spotlight. He had risen to national prominence on his record as a crime-fighter while serving as mayor of Davao City on the large southern island of Mindanao between 2013 and 2016. As mayor, he had worked with alleged death squads, and he has been famously unapologetic about his aggressive and misogynistic rhetoric. Nicknamed "the Punisher," he stood out among presidential candidates by vocally insisting that he was ready—even eager—to use violence and strong-arm tactics in the quest to solve social and political problems. He has governed just as he had promised: In less than a year, thousands of real and suspected drug dealers and users have been killed.

Duterte's presidency is the most recent example of a trend in Southeast Asian politics that I call "voting against disorder." Other examples include the 2014 presidential candidacy of Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia, and aspects of Thai electoral politics since Thaksin Shinawatra's rise to the premiership in 2001. The politicians involved have been doing more than calling for law and order—an appeal commonly heard for decades in the region and indeed around the world. The "voting against disorder" trend involves candidates and elected officials promoting not law *and* order, but rather order *over* law, and seeking legitimation for this program at the ballot box. Despite their reliance on elections, moreover, politicians who campaign against disorder frequently draw on popular views of mass politics as a threat that must be controlled.

The ideas in play here stretch back to the authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines (1965–86), to Indonesia’s New Order under the brutally repressive Suharto (1967–98), and to the military governments that ruled following postwar Thailand’s numerous coups.

Even within democratic polities, preoccupations with disorder so strong that they threaten the rule of law have proven capable of reshaping electoral platforms. The success of order-first political strategies reflects elite and middle-class frustrations with unstable and ineffective governance, combined with a historically rooted belief that political stability and material progress require the elimination of disorderly elements. These strategies have become prominent across an array of disparate political environments in Southeast Asia, and in all cases co-exist uneasily with the democratic settings in which they have recently taken hold.

Fears of disorder can threaten democracy if politicians capitalize on them for electoral gain. Even when order-first politicians leave elections in place, their actions in office often threaten such pillars of democracy as civil liberties and popular representation.¹ In the worst case, voting against disorder can prove the first step in electoral democracy’s collapse into electoral or competitive authoritarianism, with elections continuing while authoritarian rulers slice away at civil freedoms and the possibility of real competition. When politicians such as Duterte win democratic elections, their opponents cannot challenge them on the basis of electoral legitimacy. The task instead is to offer a different plan for making democratic governance work—one that provides security without crushing liberty.

Duterte Against Disorder

Philippine democracy has passed the test of two lawful transfers of power, with presidential successions from Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–10) to Benigno Aquino III (2010–16), and from Aquino to Duterte. Yet numerous weaknesses, from rampant vote-buying to shortcomings in the rule of law, have persisted. Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World* survey for 2016 rates the Philippines as only Partly Free, and Filipinos commonly lament the state of their country’s democracy. Economic growth has been anemic for decades. Under Benigno Aquino, growth rose modestly and macroeconomic performance was sound, but sharp inequalities lingered to feed popular frustration. Duterte is an outsider to Manila politics with a reputation for ruthlessness forged by his often-brutal assertion of control over formerly violent and dangerous Davao City. His deeds since gaining the presidency have been consistent with his words before taking office, and have earned him widespread popular support.

The 72-year-old Duterte’s behavior reflects his own personality and

the particular concerns of the Filipino electorate, but it also embodies a pattern found across Southeast Asia in recent years: an appeal to mass concerns about disorder that elevates order over the law. Politicians such as Duterte emphasize order above law because they recognize a sense among voters that their countries' legal systems have failed to solve social problems or to produce good governance. To such politicians and their supporters, order is the prerequisite for effective governance. Law can be a means to secure order, but if law fails, then extralegal means become justified. This focus on order is hardly unique to modern Southeast Asian democracies. Indeed, it shares many similarities with classic criticisms of modernization theory, including Samuel P. Huntington's famous proposal that political order, not democracy, is the key to political and economic development.²

What is the relationship between voting against disorder and electoral authoritarianism, in which elections proceed but without enough competition to meet minimal democratic standards?³ Voting against disorder entails the emergence, within a democratic system, of support for a political platform that either implicitly or explicitly promises to undermine the rule of law—and with it, democracy itself. Voting against disorder may thus be a *pathway to* competitive authoritarianism, portending a trip down the path taken by figures such as Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—both rulers who enjoy considerable popular followings and who like to assert their own electoral legitimacy. But it is important to remember that when politicians such as Duterte claim an electoral mandate to reorder national politics, they are in some sense correct: Duterte campaigned on his record in Davao City, and he has followed through on his campaign promises in Manila.

Although critics may be right that Duterte and similar politicians intend to roll back civil rights and political liberties once in office, these candidates never promise to abolish democracy itself. Once in power, they can invoke their electoral legitimacy when they seek to bypass legal channels in pursuing their preferred vision of order. Nonetheless, in supporting politicians who intend to roll back the preconditions for genuinely free, fair, and competitive elections, voters may in turn be undermining their own chances of holding these politicians accountable in the future.

Politicians such as Duterte thrive on the belief that existing political arrangements—whatever they happen to be—have allowed societal disorder to infect national government. For this reason, support for order over law thrives among those social groups which (in Southeast Asia at least) find mass politics 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.⁴

Political scientist Patricio Abinales states more bluntly 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.”⁵ But Duterte appeals to more than just avarice; he also holds out the promise of making the Philippine government work.

To understand how Duterte fits into a broader pattern of voting against disorder in Southeast Asia, 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, driven by similar kinds of concerns.

Indonesia

During Indonesia’s 2014 presidential campaign, elite and middle-class anxieties about disorder nearly allowed one elite candidate to defeat an opponent with an otherwise broad electoral appeal. The election pitted Joko Widodo (known as Jokowi), governor of the Jakarta capital region, against Prabowo Subianto. A former general with a stained human-rights record that had earned him a discharge from the army, Prabowo had been from 1983 to 1998 the son-in-law of long-ruling dictator Suharto (1921–2008). Jokowi promised more effective governance, pointing to his successful record in lower offices. He appealed especially to lower-income voters with his modest background and characteristically Javanese demeanor—a reserved personal style and easygoing public persona that meshed well with traditional expectations of Javanese political leaders. In contrast, the brash and aggressive Prabowo ran a more classically populist campaign. Expressing outrage at conventional politicians and at what he said was their cooperation in Indonesia’s exploitation by hostile interests, he vowed to rule with a strong hand.⁶ Many observers consider the 2014 election to have been a key test of Indonesian democracy: Prabowo, they believe, would have used the presidency to wreak havoc on democracy’s institutional and constitutional foundations.

Prabowo’s candidacy appealed in particular to Indonesia’s urban and middle classes.⁷ Why did so many from these groups support a disgraced ex-general with a hot temper and a fortune earned through rent-seeking and family connections? For answers, consider how these citizens view the state of Indonesian democracy. Since Suharto’s fall in 1998, Indonesians have had to accustom themselves to rampant corruption, a far more liberal press environment, political decentralization, and a bewildering

proliferation of politicians and elections. To many in the middle and upper classes, these seem like the signs of a country that is spinning out of control, complete with greedy officials, unchecked criminals, and perceived threats to social order from drug use and homosexuality. Despite the corruption and brutality that went on under Suharto's New Order, his time looks to many like an era when order prevailed. Prabowo promised to give order the upper hand again, and middle-class Indonesians flocked to vote for him.

The Indonesian word *amuk*, borrowed into English through Malay as "amok," captures this sentiment particularly well. When "masses run amok," it is normally the masses themselves who suffer; but it is the middle classes and elites who are most frightened. Fears of *amuk massa* draw on narratives, dating from the time of Dutch colonialism, about Indonesians' proclivity for disorder and violence. Suharto (like Prabowo, a general) had climbed to power in the mid-1960s amid a bloody campaign that had cost hundreds of thousands of lives, allegedly to quell a communist and leftist insurgency.⁸ The fall of his New Order regime decades later had also been marked by the eruption of religious, ethnic, and local-separatist conflicts into widespread strife across this vast, archipelagic nation of close to a quarter-billion people. Although few today expect a replay of these older outbreaks, the idea remains strong that the government must guard vigilantly against such civil broils.

Although Prabowo lost the election, his rival Jokowi's administration has embraced some of these concerns. Fears of alleged social ills and a vague sense of a threat to Indonesian security have guided Jokowi's policies. Indonesia 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 destabilization from abroad such as the Internet and global communism.⁹ And Indonesia under Jokowi has taken a new interest in things such as *Bela Negara* ("defend the nation"), a program of quasi-military training and nationalist ideological instruction that aims to prepare millions to defend Indonesia's sovereignty and stability.¹⁰ Although potentially expensive and impractical, these measures are quite popular.

Thailand

Although the social and political factors that produced voting against disorder in Indonesia and the Philippines align differently in Thailand, a look at the Thai example illustrates how fears of disorder animate Southeast Asian politics across regime types. In Thailand, as in Indonesia, draconian anticrime policies seem to enjoy very broad appeal. Yet ever since the maverick billionaire populist Thaksin Shinawatra rose to power at this century's dawn, the traditional Thai elites and middle

classes have found themselves unable to vote their preferred vision of order into power. Instead, between 2001 and 2006, Thaksin implemented his own version of restoring order while relying on a base of mostly poor and rural voters concentrated in northeastern Thailand. The resulting elite and middle-class frustration with mass politics, meanwhile, has expressed itself as support for military coups. These have been a long-running trend in Thai history—there have been fifteen coups or coup attempts since 1932. One in September 2006 replaced Thaksin with a military ruler. After a string of paralyzing political crises, another coup in May 2014 ousted Thaksin's younger sister Yingluck, who had been elected premier in 2011, and elevated yet another general. Thus during that same year when Indonesians were voting down an aspiring strongman's bid to become president, an actual strongman (former army head Prayuth Chan-ocha) seized power in Thailand.

Thai politics revolves around a cleavage that is frequently depicted as pitting the mostly northern-based and Thaksin-supporting "Red Shirts" against the mostly southern- or Bangkok-based and establishment-supporting "Yellow Shirts." But the opposition of aristocratic, bureaucratic, and military interests to popular democratic forces stretches all the way back to 1932, the year that Thailand's constitutional monarchy was established.

In Thailand, as in other Southeast Asian countries, elites and many middle-class elements believe that strong, hierarchical authority is needed in order to manage the people. Such beliefs fit closely with the concept of "Thai-style democracy" that Kevin Hewison and Kengkij Kitirianglarp describe as entailing social hierarchy, centralized authority, and limited mass mobilization.¹¹ Yet such convictions are not exclusive to Thai royalists and military officers. In fact, politicians across the political spectrum, including Thaksin, have played to such concerns.

The struggle against disorder moved to the forefront of Thai politics after Thaksin's party won the 2001 parliamentary elections by a landslide. During Thaksin's first four-year term, Freedom House rated Thailand as Free. Yet extrajudicial killings, especially of alleged drug dealers, rose sharply. Authorities justified these killings much as Rodrigo Duterte later would: Drugs were a scourge and a threat to the social fabric. "Being ruthless [to drug traffickers]," said Thaksin, "is no bad thing."¹²

Thaksin also leveraged his electoral mandate to push through changes aimed at bringing order to Thailand's perplexing party system, with a merger of several smaller parties into his own. He used martial law and other harsh measures to deal with an insurgency in the far south, where the populace is mostly ethnic-Malay and Muslim. He drew criticism for trying to restrict and coopt the media. By the time of the September 2006 coup, Thailand's Freedom House ranking had worsened to Partly Free.

Thaksin's party is long gone, and he himself has been in exile for a decade. Yet his time in office helped to spark a clash between competing visions of order that still defines Thai politics. While Thaksin tried to impose his own vision of order, his appeal to previously unmobilized segments of Thai society threatened the kind of order under which royalist, traditionalist, and bureaucratic interests had thrived. Now, supporters of these interests wish to implement a new constitutional order, one that would again exclude the popular sectors that rose with Thaksin. Military leaders have used the constitution-drafting process to engineer electoral and judicial institutions that will feature elections, and perhaps even controlled rotations of power, but at bottom are meant to restructure political competition in ways that the postcoup leaders see as more orderly.

No matter how illiberal, military rule is also undeniably popular with many Thais (especially among the elites and the middle classes), who see the 2014 putsch as a justifiable response to disorder. The death in October 2016 of the country's broadly popular King Bhumibol Adulyadej, then 88 and in the seventy-first year of his reign, has only heightened the resonance of promises to maintain social and political order.

Duterte in Regional Context

Comparisons with Thailand and Indonesia reveal numerous parallels to Duterte's appeal as an order-restoring strongman. Duterte's eagerness to kill drug dealers parallels the programs of governments in Indonesia and Thailand, both of which have resorted to extrajudicial as well as judicial means to fight drugs. His coarse and misogynistic rhetoric mirrors that of Prabowo and Prayuth—it gets more international notice simply because it is more often delivered in English, by a man whose country has historically close U.S. ties. Many of Duterte's supporters' more banal expectations—that he will fix Manila's traffic woes or clean up public restrooms—would be entirely familiar to urban and middle-class voters in Jakarta and Bangkok. Most importantly, the notion that a brash leader un beholden to the establishment can bring order to a country suffering from social and political ills is typical of electoral politics in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Duterte's rise reflects other recent trends in Southeast Asian politics as well. He is a relative political outsider whose rise to national prominence began in the provinces, and who campaigned on the claim that he would be uniquely able to solve problems in the capital. In this, he parallels both the unpretentious Jokowi, the son of a poor cabinetmaker, and Thaksin, a member of Thailand's Sino-Thai minority from the northern province of Chiang Mai. (Even Prabowo, a consummate product of the New Order regime, tried to position himself against the establishment.) Like both Prabowo and Thaksin, Duterte has proposed various elector-

al reforms, but has announced no plans to scrap democratic elections. Above all, what Duterte shares with Prabowo, Thaksin, and Prayuth is a willingness to ignore the constitution to get things done.

Duterte is not a “one-off,” a quirky product of the Philippines’ uniquely messy political system. Rather, he represents a type of politician who can be found across Southeast Asia. Perhaps his closest parallel is Prabowo, but there is also a resemblance to Jokowi: The Indonesian case shows that order-first politicians’ rivals can find themselves, if elected, pressing an order-first agenda as well. Duterte appeals to urban and middle-class voters’ fears that contemporary democratic politics has lost its moorings, and a related belief in the need to confront social ills with force. Although such fundamentally illiberal figures may use democratic elections to gain power, their promises not to be bound by established law have unmistakably negative implications for democratic durability.

Should we understand voting against disorder as the contemporary manifestation of Asian cultural preoccupations with order and hierarchy, a culturalist framework once in vogue among scholars of Asian politics?¹³ The answer is no, for three reasons.

First, “voting against disorder” does not have a uniform appeal across any country’s electorate. Instead, it reflects class-specific anxieties. Outside Mindanao, and especially in greater Manila, Duterte’s main constituents belong to the elites and the middle class. Prabowo drew most of his backing from urban and middle-class Indonesians. Supporters of military rule in Thailand are more likely to be from the country’s central region, and to have middle-class or elite backgrounds. It is simply not true that there is a common, culturally determined predisposition to vote against disorder in Southeast Asia. Elite and middle-class fears remain significant even when order-first policies come from politicians (such as Jokowi and Thaksin) whose main electoral base lies elsewhere: Once these candidates take office, new exposure to pressure from social groups outside their original lower-income base can help prompt a turn toward the anti-disorder program.

Second, politicians such as Duterte emphasize national interests over national or cultural values, which they address obliquely if at all. Duterte’s rhetoric on the campaign trail was bombastic, militaristic, and even managerial, with references to officials’ duties and responsibilities. His campaign’s website focused on national concerns such as land reform and overseas Filipino labor, not on culture or values. Prabowo used visual cues that resonate with Indonesian voters to promote himself as a strong and determined leader; he often appeared with a crisp white safari shirt and a red beret, sometimes on horseback. But he justified plans to eliminate elections for local leaders through practical arguments that current practices were wasteful, ineffective, and prone to corruption. Only in the case of Thailand do we see the consistent invocation of a

nationally specific understanding of democracy. Yet support for order over law can also be found among politicians who reject the premise that “Thai-style democracy” requires a particular kind of politics.

Third, we see voting against disorder outside of Asia as well, although this pattern is harder to discern in countries with stronger left-right cleavages. In Latin American democracies such as Chile and Peru, parties on the right campaign on anxieties about the disorderly masses, and in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s ruling Fidesz party plays on fears of migrants and other destabilizing threats. The closest parallels exist in countries with more fluid party systems, nonprogrammatic parties, and weak rule of law, such as Guatemala and Madagascar.

Disorder and Its Futures

What does the future hold for those Southeast Asian countries where fears of disorder threaten to consume electoral politics? Current signs are distressing. Consider the example of Indonesia, where Prabowo lost at the polls. Under Jokowi, we can still see the impact of worries about disorder in Indonesia’s prickly new nationalism, continued concerns about drugs and sex, and new emphasis on civilian security programs such as *Bela Negara*. At present, the key question is whether Jokowi will be able to contain the forces within Indonesia that have for decades seen mass mobilization as a potential threat to national security. The most reassuring sign is Jokowi’s continued support, however fragile, for the rule of law over extrajudicial or extraconstitutional methods.

When considering the possible outcomes of a political fixation on disorder, Indonesia is the optimistic case. A more pessimistic scenario has played out in Thailand, where order-first political currents from both the “red” and the “yellow” sides have converged to undermine democracy. Voting against disorder allowed Thaksin to consolidate his power and undermine democratic accountability; the backlash against his rule has led to a pair of coups that have ended democratic rule altogether. Stepping up their efforts (so far unavailing) to write a constitution that will allow the traditional elites and their supporters to vote against disorder *and win*, Thailand’s military rulers have proposed a constitution that hands much power to unelected officials. The path back to representative democracy is hard to see. The Thai experience suggests that the combination of “order over law” and electoral democracy—a mix that Thaksin was experimenting with long before Duterte and Prabowo hit the scene—is ultimately unsustainable.

Between the troubling but still hopeful Indonesian case and the democratically disastrous Thai case lies that of the Philippines today. Civilian rule remains, but voting against disorder has produced a president whose war on crime rejects legal and humanitarian restraints. Some observers label Duterte a neo-authoritarian,¹⁴ and aspects of his rise parallel that

of notorious former dictator Ferdinand Marcos (1917–89), who began his two decades of rule by winning the competitive 1965 presidential election. Lending support to perceptions of continuity between the two

By putting order before law, Duterte has built his own popularity and power at the expense of his country's already weak rule of law, and thus has put Filipino democracy itself at risk.

men, Duterte satisfied the hopes of Marcos's family and supporters by meeting a campaign promise to authorize the long-ruling dictator's burial in the Heroes' Cemetery in Manila. The decision to transfer Marcos's body, previously housed in his hometown in the country's north, to the military-administered cemetery generated considerable public controversy and protest.

More broadly, Duterte's first four months in office provide clear evidence that he is governing exactly as he promised, as a ruthless enforcer of order and scourge of perceived social ills. Firm numbers are unavailable, but reports suggest that Duterte's campaign against suspected drug dealers and drug users had killed thousands by January 2017. His popularity remains sky-high: In December 2016, his approval rating was 83 percent.¹⁵ In a case that garnered national attention, Duterte publicly defended police officers accused of killing Rolando Espinosa, mayor of the small city of Albueria on the island of Leyte, while he was under detention on drug charges. In early November, Duterte also publicly speculated that suspending *habeas corpus* might be necessary to quell violence on the restive southern island of Mindanao.¹⁶

Duterte has also pushed for closer relations with China, saying to a gathering of Chinese businesspeople and officials that he had "realigned myself in your ideological flow. And maybe I will also go to Russia to talk to Putin and tell him that there are three of us against the world: China, Philippines and Russia."¹⁷ This statement followed his denunciation of security and military cooperation with the United States, long the bedrock of Philippine foreign policy. Rhetorically, then, Duterte seeks to align the Philippines with two world powers that are vocally critical of what they see as "Western" liberal democracy. Many Filipinos expect tangible benefits from this shift in the form of Chinese infrastructure investments.

What comes next? Will Duterte imitate Prabowo and Thaksin by building a new political party (or refashioning his current one) on the basis of generic nationalist messages and promises of strong leadership? Some Duterte critics detect in his supporters elements of fascism,¹⁸ and the creation of such a mass-mobilization party would strengthen that case. Veteran Filipina reporter Raissa Robles recently commented with regard to moves against the press that "Duterte has released the monster

in the Filipino.”¹⁹ But true fascism would require much more ideological work—the laying out of a full nationalist-corporatist program and worldview—than can now be seen anywhere in today’s Southeast Asia, including the Philippines.

The more likely scenario sees Duterte focusing on the military and police as the ultimate instruments of political order. Duterte has increased police salaries in a quest to stamp out corruption, and he has named several former military and police officers to his cabinet. A decisive move toward enlisting the military and the police, or a suspension of *habeas corpus*, would amount to a clear blow against democracy in the Philippines, reminiscent of Marcos’s path to authoritarian rule.

Neither of these scenarios involves the elimination of elections, but each is consistent with Philippine democracy decaying into competitive authoritarianism. The areas to watch are civil society and the press. As of January 2017, Duterte’s relationship with the media remains strained: He has at times welcomed criticism, and at others expressed frustration with his coverage. Anti-Duterte civil society remains vocal, but the president’s sheer popularity means that a mass mobilization in the style of the 1986 People Power movement, during which vast crowds in Manila drove Marcos from power, is unlikely. On Twitter, Facebook, and other new media, anti-Duterte civil society groups have their work cut out in combatting a steady stream of paid propaganda and other pro-Duterte posts.²⁰ Of course, if Duterte begins to target protesters, clamp down on civil society activists, or move openly against the media, then we will know that Philippine democracy is in serious trouble. But even without such open crackdowns, by putting order before law, he has built his own popularity and power at the expense of his country’s already weak rule of law, and thus has put Filipino democracy itself at risk.

NOTES

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