

Women [&] Power in the Time of Duterte

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Much has been written about Rodrigo Duterte's misogyny and his hatred and fear of strong women. High-profile targets include Senator Leila de Lima, who has been in jail since February 2017 on the testimony of incarcerated drug-lords, police officers, and former prison officials; the first female Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, who was deposed in 2018 despite having a mandate until 2030; and the present leader of the fragmented opposition, Vice President Maria Leonor Robredo, who is often dismissed and degraded as inutile yellow liberal "dilawan" scum while objectified for her looks, legs, and marital status.

Journalist Maria Ressa, TIME Person of the Year, has been dealing with at least six lawsuits with the usual side of rape threats and taunts to her appearance. Foreign dignitaries have not escaped this treatment. He cursed United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur Agnes Callamard, mocked former International Monetary Fund (IMF) managing director Christine Lagarde, and hurled a number of threats and racial slurs against International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor Fatou Bensouda. However, not enough has been said about the many women who wield power under the Duterte regime.

FREUDIAN ROOTS?

Some attribute this to Duterte's fraught relationship with his strict mother, Soledad Roa Duterte. Nanay Soling was a respected philanthropist

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and activist who fought the Marcos dictatorship in Davao. Upon her husband's death at the age of 56, she raised five children, including the difficult Rodrigo, on her own. Stories of her surviving a nervous breakdown and her liberal use of capital punishment occasionally pepper the President's late-night tirades to the media—his version of fireside chats, but with coffee and durian.² It was to Nanay Soling's tomb, shared with his father, former Marcos minister and Davao governor Vicente Gonzales Duterte, that Duterte rushed upon his election in May 2016. At three in the morning, the strongman was recorded in front of the marble tomb, weeping, "tabangi ko, ma, please help me, mom."

Despite his love and respect for his mother, this has not translated to respect for women for this self-confessed mama's boy and "former bakla" (Sasot, 2017)—but that's another essay altogether. In one of his characteristic rants, he described a potential replacement for Ombudsman Conchita Carpio-Morales as such: "I want someone whose integrity people believe in. Of course, it could not be a politician, especially not a woman" (Corrales, 2018). In another rant, he said: "I believe in women's competence, but not in all respects" (Lopez, 2018).

He has nevertheless weaponized the talents of many women to great effect.

WEAPONIZING TRUTH

The early part of Duterte's regime saw much of former dancer and sex columnist turned spin doctor Esther Margaux "Mocha" Uson. Uson used her popular blog to campaign for Tatay (Father) Digong, particularly amongst the overseas Filipino worker (OFW) set. This earned her an Assistant Secretary post at the powerful Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO), as well as parallels to Pablo Escobar's pet journalist Virginia Vallejo, whose torrid affair with the Colombian drug-lord catapulted them both to superstardom (or

² Local rumor has it that after the 1986 People Power Revolution, Nanay Soling was originally offered the post of Davao mayor. Upon her refusal, her son, then working at the City prosecutor's office, was appointed officer-in-charge vice mayor by President Corazon Aquino.

so we learn from the Netflix show *Narcos*, popular around the time of Duterte's rise). Uson was temporarily disgraced thanks to her contribution to the federalism campaign, which was a raunchy song rhyming the first syllable of federalism with the Tagalog words for breasts and vagina. Although this was performed by her online Good News Gameshow co-host Drew Olivar, the fact that the video was shot in Uson's office in Malacañang palace, with Uson laughing in the background, drew enough pressure to ease her from the post. She was then reappointed as deputy executive director of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) in September 2019.

Transwoman Sass Rogando Sasot continues to project herself as a political scholar in the Netherlands, supporting the Duterte administration through her blog entitled *For the Motherland*. She is but one of many "ka-DDS" bloggers and influencers who support the fake news ecosystem in the Philippines, which thrives on altered photos, memes, and the rise of Free Facebook as a vector for disinformation. Efforts to address "fake news," including the penalization of troll army firms such as Twinmark, has somewhat stemmed the influence of Sasot and her colleagues. However, their words still hold venom.

As of this writing, the present queen of disinformation is Public Attorney's Office (PAO) chief Persida Acosta. Acosta has used her role as (supposedly) the people's advocate to defend the legality of certain unsavoury Duterte policies. During the Senate probe on the killing of 17-year-old Kian delos Santos by Caloocan City policemen in August 2017, Acosta tearfully defended the Philippine National Police (PNP). "Mawalangalang na po kay Senator (Risa) Hontiveros, wala pong pronouncement ang PAO na may pattern dito. Uulitin ko po, walang polisiya ang gobyerno na pumatay nang walang awa (With all due respect to Senator Hontiveros, the PAO has no pronouncement that there is a pattern [to the killings]. I repeat, there is no government policy [invoking the police] to kill without mercy)," Acosta said (Roxas, 2017). The three policemen involved in the slay of Kian delos Santos were convicted in 2018, the first and only conviction so far in the so-called Philippine War on Drugs.

However, Acosta's place in history is cemented for her leading role in the Dengvaxia probe, where Acosta and her forensics chief Dr. Erwin

Erfe claimed that they autopsied the bodies of 113 alleged Dengvaxia deaths, contributing to a total of 600 affected Dengvaxia “victims.” Many observers note that much of this is politically motivated, as the Department of Health (DOH) has unequivocally stated that no confirmed death has directly been caused by Dengvaxia, and PAO should cease fearmongering. Nevertheless, Acosta’s efforts have led to a vaccination scare. Public confidence in the safety of vaccines has dropped to 32% from 93%, while cases of measles rose by 350% and of rubella by over 1000% (PhilStar.com, 2018). Between 1 January and 2 March 2019, 16,349 measles cases including 261 deaths were officially reported, of which 61% of cases are not vaccinated (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF]-World Health Organization [WHO] Philippines, 2019). The drop in immunization coverage and corresponding deaths have led to calls for Acosta’s disbarment, or at least, to face some form of criminal liability.

WIELDING POWER FOR POWER’S SAKE

And then there are the women who openly wield power.

As former President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is no stranger to force. Used to cursing out men almost twice her diminutive size, her July 2018 mini coup-de-etat against Pantaleon Alvarez during the 2018 State of the Nation Address for the speakership of the house was a trigger-y event for generations of activists who contested her regime for most of the early 2000s. Soon thereafter, reports showed lines of diplomats paying homage to her personal home, as well as her publicly chastising the three economic managers—the male secretaries of Finance, Budget and Management, and Economic Development—for not adequately dealing with inflation. Macapagal-Arroyo’s freedom from the iconic neck brace that accompanied her from 2011 to 2016 during her hospital arrests for plunder and electoral fraud was, as the kids say these days, a hell of a glow-up. Especially with her noticeable distancing from her husband, Mike Arroyo, whose reputation for corruption is only matched by his wife’s taste for revenge.

However, GMA’s political resurrection would not be possible without the help of another presidential daughter, Davao mayor “Inday”

Sara Duterte. Duterte came to national notice back in 2011 for punching a sheriff in the midst of a demolition. She now leads her own regional political party, Hugpong ng Pagbabago (Faction for Change, or HNP) and is floated as a potential successor to her father in the 2022 elections. When President Duterte came under fire for his infamous “joke” about wanting to have been the first to rape a beautiful Australian missionary in 1989, Inday Sara admitted on Instagram that she, too, was a rape victim. When asked about this statement, Duterte shrugged off his daughter’s statement, calling her a “drama queen.” He added, “Maliit pa yan, nagdala-dala na yang baril. Akala ko nga tomboy yan eh.” (She has been carrying a gun since she was small. I actually thought she’s a tomboy) (Andolong, 2016).

The younger Duterte reportedly engineered Alvarez’s fall from the speakership when he reportedly said that Inday Sara’s HNP party was formed without the President’s blessing (Robles, 2018). Media reports claim that Inday Sara pulled this off with the support of Ilocos Norte Governor Imee Marcos, who herself has had a political axe to grind with Pantaleon Alvarez’s hatchetman, Ilocos Norte congressman and inspiration for Republic Act No. 9242, the Anti-Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) law, Rodolfo Fariñas.³

The eldest legal daughter of Ferdinand and Imelda has taken a larger role in attempting to raise the flagging political fortunes of the Marcoses, especially after the less-brilliant brother Bongbong’s failed attempts to wrest the vice-presidential seat from Leni Robredo. In 2016, President Duterte named Marcos as one of his campaign contributors, although the official Statement of Contributions and Expenditures (SOCE) does not include her as a donor. Others speculate that Marcos may have given an in-kind investment, given the role of social media in Duterte’s rise. Marcos is well entrenched in the business process outsourcing (BPO) and creative industries, and is current president of the Creative Media and Film Society of the Philippines (CREAM), later renamed as CREAM Content Distribution, Inc.

³ The 2001 suicide of Fariñas’s partner, former beauty queen and television star Maria Theresa Carlson, after years of beating and water torture, inspired the creation of advocacy group Task Force Maria which facilitated the 2003 passage of the VAWC Law.

Regardless of the amount, nature, and legality of the contribution given by the Marcoses, the Dutertes have nevertheless amply paid their debts. In 2016, the Supreme Court ruled that Ferdinand Marcos was allowed to be buried at the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Heroes Cemetery), which was affirmed one year later. In January 2019, Inday Sara appeared in a barely-legal senatorial ad with Imee. The women did the “dab” dance in motorcycle leathers, riding astride Inday Sara’s Yamaha bike. The ad was uncomfortably reminiscent of the riding-in-tandem methods used by the masked vigilantes gunning down so-called “drug personalities” in the slums of Manila. When Imee’s claims of having graduated from Princeton, UP Law, and the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) were refuted with finality by these institutions in March 2019, Inday Sara took to the media to defend her friend by saying, “So lahat sila sinungaling. Lahat ng tao sa mundong ito, sinungaling.” (Everyone in this world is a liar. Everybody lies) (Esguerra, 2019).

WOMEN IN THE SHADOWS

No less powerful are the women who quietly hold power in the shadows. Duterte’s common-law-wife, Honeylet Avanceña, is a former nurse and shrewd businesswoman who holds US citizenship despite her husband’s performative hatred of the Americans, as does their daughter Kitty. Upon Christopher “Bong” Go’s supposed resignation as Special Assistant to the President in order to run for the senate, his named replacement was aide de camp Sofia Deliu, former Miss Earth candidate and police senior inspector. During a period in August 2018 when people speculated that Duterte was at death’s door, the proof-of-life video posted by Bong Go featured the president having dinner with a former Climate Change commissioner. “Sabi nila comatose. How can you be comatose when you’re with a beautiful lady?” the President said in the video. The lady in question, Vernice Victorio, was later dubbed by netizens as the “coma girl” (Politics.com, 2018).

Similarly, Duterte has been quoted to say that only two governors, both women, supported him during the May 2016 elections. He said that one supported him out of friendship, while the other supported him for love. The former is Imee Marcos, while the latter is openly referenced as

Agusan del Norte governor-turned-congresswoman Angel Amante-Matba, who is married to Tawi-Tawi governor-turned-congressman Rashidin Matba. Prior to May 2016, Duterte would slyly comment that he would only run for president if Amante-Matba would be his first lady. He has also been quoted as having pulled Amante-Matba into the shadows during a Malacañang visit. “Hinila ko sa isang kanto, sabi ko sa bodyguards, ‘oist, umalis kayo diyan, halikan ko lang itong...’ pero hanggang diyan na lang kasi may asawa eh baka mapatay tayo. Ngayon meron na, noon wala.” (I pulled her into a corner and told the bodyguards, oist, leave us, I’ll just kiss this one. But it stopped there because she has a husband, we might get killed. Now she has one, she didn’t have one before) (ABS-CBN News, 2016).

INTERNALIZED MISOGYNY?

All of these stories, multiplied a thousand-fold, begs the question: what is the nature of power in the age of Duterte? And secondly, how do these manifestations of power morph and metastasize in relation to gender and class?

In 2018, the Philippines was reported as the most gender-equal country in Asia, and the eighth best in the world (World Economic Forum, 2017). One would presume that this means that women can be all they can be if they so wish to do so. Not so in Duterteland—and certainly not if you belong to the working-class. These rankings mean nothing when the much-lauded Filipino matriarchal systems are used to cement longstanding class and regional inequalities, as well as good-old internalized self-hatred against one’s fellow (wo)men.

What is it that makes even powerful women such as Bohol mayor Tita Baja-Gallentes laugh despite being targeted with sexual innuendoes in public? During a 2019 election sortie, the president complemented her beauty by saying, “I will really grab and hold on to your panty if you try to leave, even until the garter snaps.” In the same way that Philippine Military Academy (PMA) Mabalasik Class of 2019 valedictorian Dionne Mae Umalla—only the fifth woman to graduate top-of-class in one of the most “macho” institutions in the country—giggled when the Commander-in-Chief teasingly promised to pardon the underclassmen “for the multiple

rapes of Baguio’s most beautiful women”? Is it because that age-old patriarchal systems, attitudes, and beliefs have been so ingrained in even the most powerful Filipina? So much so that even they are taught that “boys will be boys,” and it is the role of the women to laugh or be quiet in the face of all insults, lest they incur the wrath of these powerful men?

The incentives for complicity are certainly there: political support, so that these women’s families retain their bailiwicks, or the opportunity to amass social clout and other forms of currency. As the criticisms levelled against Senator Pia Cayetano show—she who is panned as a “feminist of convenience,” unable to speak out against Duterte for fear of scuttling her and her brother’s fragile political hopes—abstract, feel-good Western notions of female empowerment, solidarity, and sisterhood are secondary to personal and familial gain. It is the kind of doublethink that enables Sass Sasot say that Duterte has done so much for the LGBTQI+ cause, even as her president implies that homosexuality is a disease that he had fortunately cured himself from. Not unlike the phenomenon of OFW mothers sending back remittances to abusive drunkard husbands, or perhaps, the OFW women who support Oplan Tokhang until the day their sons and husbands are shot by bonnet-wearing vigilantes in cold blood to meet a quota.

Many women in power in Duterte’s Philippines are doing nothing to assist the women outside their class—a deadly combination when poor women and their families bear the brunt of many administration policies, which range from tax reform to extrajudicial killings in the name of a so-called “Drug War.” As many have said, perhaps it is not the glass ceiling that is the problem. It is the floor. And between the floor and the ceiling, there lies the great winding chasm that separates the two. That for every Inday Sara, or say, a Lea Salonga who is vocal against Trump but has refused to “speak ill” against Duterte or the Marcoses in gratitude for supporting her career, or a Kris Aquino who openly supports Duterte and Bong Go for helping her in the face of her disagreements with her brother, former president Benigno S. Aquino III, there are female New People’s Army (NPA) rebels who Duterte entreated his soldiers to “shoot by the pussy,” or the displaced Marawi women who Duterte swore to protect his soldiers from, should the soldiers choose to inflict rape or any kind of human rights violation. And for every Persida Acosta is a

working-class mother burying her children due to measles and dengue while losing her husband, brothers, and uncles to tokhang.

Others say that many of these powerful women do genuinely care for the plight of other women and their fellow Filipinos more broadly, and that Duterteismo is a storm that one must wait to blow over, and then we can return to dignity and decency after 2022. But with the promise of a Sara Duterte presidential run (perhaps as a form of protection from litigation for her father and his minions) this is unlikely to happen. Thus we are left staring in a mirror that has shown the festering ugliness that has been in Philippine society long before a Rodrigo Duterte ever rose to power.

A prominent women's rights group using the hashtag #BabaeAko (I Am Woman), among other anti-sexism groups, is fond of saying that Duterte's misogyny will be his downfall. One respectfully begs to disagree. Duterte and his band of pigs will stay in power for as long as they like. They will remain in power until the powerful women of the Philippines deal with their own internal misogyny.

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