

Research Article

A Reaction to Alexis Deodato Itao's Paper on *The Political Vision of Contemporary Filipinos: A Ricoeurian Reading of Duterte's Popular Presidency*

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Abstract: This reaction paper analytically engages with Alexis Deodato Itao's analysis of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's populist leadership through a Ricoeurian lens. Itao's work explores the complex interplay between the socio-political realities of contemporary Filipinos and the narrative construction of Duterte's presidency. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theories of narrative identity and interpretation, Itao examines how Duterte's rise to power can be understood as a response to the deep-seated frustrations and desires within Filipino society. The paper critiques the construction of Duterte's political persona as both a savior and a strongman, shaped by a collective national memory and societal expectations. Through a Ricoeurian approach, Itao also addresses the tensions between the President's personal mythos and the broader narrative of Philippine history. This reaction paper reflects on Itao's interpretation, considering the implications of Duterte's presidency for Filipino identity, democracy, and governance, and raises questions about the ethical dimensions of political narrative-making in contemporary Philippine society.

Keywords: contemporary Filipinos; Duterte presidency; popular leadership; hermeneutics; democratic governance

1. Introduction

During seminary formation, a distinguished professor of Political Philosophy offered valuable insights into the significance of political figures in the Philippines. His paper on Duterte's Popular Presidency prompted a detailed analysis of the relationship between Paul Ricoeur's ideas and the challenges encountered during Duterte's administration. According to Sir Itao, this connection provides a framework for interpreting societal developments through the perspective of Ricoeur's theories.

In this context, this research is relevant because it correlates with current events in the country. According to Sir Itao, Duterte is not a perfect president, but as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, political power is inherently paradoxical: it contains both a potential for harm and a capacity for good. While the popular presidency of Duterte is not drawn without its evils, many of the positive outcomes that Filipinos now enjoy are often overlooked by critics, and these benefits can be attributed in part to his firm political will (Itao, 2018). As a result, according to Itao many Filipinos do not perceive the president as a threat to the country's democracy.

Furthermore, Itao's application of Ricoeur's philosophy to Duterte's Popular Presidency highlights the motivational impact on Duterte's supporters. During Duterte's presidency, many Filipino citizens sought a good and harmonious life (Itao, 2018). For Itao, Duterte's leadership encouraged the Filipino people to be vigilant and aware in daily life, as reflected in his "SONA" statements, which promised freedom for the country. For many Filipinos, freedom meant protection from the societal threat posed by illegal drugs (Labastin, 2018), addresses that Duterte's policies aimed to provide liberty to society by addressing this issue.

However, criticism of the war on drugs was also voiced by many Filipinos, including Roman Catholic priests. These critics argued that Duterte posed a threat to democracy because of his approach to individuals who engaged in harmful actions. At the same time,

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some citizens viewed Duterte as a solution to societal frustrations, as his immediate implementation of rules sought to curb corruption and the drug problem upon assuming office at Malacañang Palace.

For Heydarian (2018), Rodrigo Duterte became president not just because of his personal success, but because of deeper issues in Philippine society and its political system. The study shows that many Filipinos were unhappy with traditional political leaders who were often linked to corruption, inefficiency, and inequality. Because of this, the dissatisfaction of people with a leader who presented himself as an outsider and promised strong and decisive leadership became a question for everyone. However, Duterte's ability to communicate in a straight-forward and relatable manner helped build a sense of connection with ordinary citizens, reinforcing his popularity. In this sense, his rise reflects not only political strategy but also the emotions, frustrations, and expectations of the public. Also, Heydarian (2018) emphasized that Rodrigo Duterte's presidency emerged as a response to corruption in the Philippines, highlighting his own claims that he was the 'last card' of the Filipino people.

Additionally, according to Teehankee (2016), the Philippines has a political system where institutions are relatively weak, but presidents tend to have strong and self-influential power in the government. Because of this structure, leaders like Rodrigo Duterte are able to gain significant control and authority once elected. His presidency should be understood within this context of "weak state, strong presidents," where limited institutional checks and balances allow the president to dominate political decision-making. De Vera (2025) explains why many Filipinos supported Duterte's leadership by examining their attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of politics. It shows that people's support was influenced by concerns such as crime, corruption, and dis-satisfaction with traditional political leaders. Duterte gained public support because many citizens were looking for strong and decisive leadership that could address their problems. Their political preferences were shaped by their frustrations with the existing system and their desire for change, which made populist leadership appealing.

Aside from this area of inquiry, Fernandez (2022; 2023) notes that Duterte became popular because people's trust in leadership and social connections influenced their support for him, and Duterte's leadership gained support because many people trusted him and believed in his ability to represent their interests, even in the context of dissatisfaction with traditional politicians. Maboloc (2018) explains that the Philippine state is a "predatory state," where political elites often exploit public resources for personal or political gain. It also discusses how radical political approaches, such as Duterte's policies, emerge in response to long-standing corruption and systemic inequality. Duterte's leadership and policies can be understood as a response to a system where corruption and elite dominance are deeply rooted, leading to calls for drastic or radical political change.

Thus, former President Rodrigo Duterte became a leading figure in addressing corruption and in demonstrating to members of the Philippine government that there is hope for the country. His leadership resonated with many citizens who were dissatisfied with traditional political elites and who sought decisive action to address long-standing social and political issues. By presenting himself as a strong and determined leader, he was able to mobilize public support and reshape political discourse toward issues of governance, law and order, and national reform. In this sense, his presidency reflects not only individual leadership but also the broader sentiments and expectations of the Filipino people for meaningful change within the political system.

The central contention of this paper is that Duterte's administration represented a challenge to the oligarchic structures in the Philippines. The philosophical framework of Paul Ricoeur is employed to examine how Duterte's presidency can be interpreted as a potential ground for democratic development. Alexis Deodato Itao's work, "The Political Vision of Contemporary Filipinos: A Ricoeurian Reading of Duterte's Popular Presidency," serves as the basis for a critical reaction in this study. The arguments and ideas presented in Itao's article are analyzed and interpreted within the framework of Ricoeur's philosophy. The concluding part of his paper, Alexis Deodato Itao argues that Ricoeur's philosophy can be applied to the Philippine democratic context, suggesting that Ricoeur's concept of the paradox of political authority provides a useful framework for understanding Duterte's popularity, particularly regarding his strong stance against oligarchs, corrupt politicians, and powerful business elites perceived to dominate society.

To guide this analysis, the following questions are addressed: 1) How does Ricoeur's philosophy inform Itao's analysis of Duterte's leadership and popularity? 2) In what ways does Duterte's presidency reflect the collective aspirations and political imagination of Filipinos, according to Itao? 3) What ethical and democratic implications arise from applying

Ricoeur's framework to contemporary Philippine politics? 4) How can a Ricoeurian reading contribute to a critical understanding of populism and political authority in the Philippines? These guiding questions structure the subsequent subtopics of the paper and provide a clear path for the analysis.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is purely library-based and employs a qualitative philosophical approach, focusing on critical and conceptual analysis rather than empirical investigation. The researchers relied entirely on secondary sources, including books, scholarly journals, peer-reviewed articles, and other published materials that discuss Alexis Deodato Itao's paper "The Political Vision of Contemporary Filipinos: A Ricoeurian Reading of Duterte's Popular Presidency," as well as relevant literature on postmodern philosophy, political thought, and Filipino political culture.

The methodology involved careful reading, interpretation, and synthesis of these materials. The researchers engaged in a philosophical hermeneutic process, examining how Itao interprets the political vision of contemporary Filipinos through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy, and how this perspective sheds light on the popularity and governance style of Rodrigo Duterte. Emphasis was placed on identifying the key philosophical concepts, arguments, and theoretical frameworks presented in the sources, and evaluating their applicability to understanding contemporary Philippine society.

No fieldwork or empirical data collection was conducted, as the study is grounded solely in theoretical and conceptual analysis. By relying on existing literature, the researchers were able to critically reflect on and synthesize the connections between Ricoeurian philosophy, political leadership, and postmodern interpretations of democracy in the Philippine context. This approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of the ideas and arguments presented in Itao's paper while situating them within broader philosophical and socio-political discussions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *The Background Context of Duterte's Rise to Political Power*

Starting from his native place (Davao), President Rodrigo Duterte implemented a different rule in society until he became the President of our nation. Since becoming the 16th President of the Philippines after garnering more than 16 million votes in the May 2016 presidential elections, Rodrigo Duterte has continued to enjoy popularity among the majority of Filipinos.

In the past two years, from July 2016 to July 2018, the survey has yielded a strikingly similar result, and that is: Duterte has the backing and support of most Filipinos. In one of the latest surveys alone, Duterte received an impressive 88% approval rating from Filipinos. This does not mean, of course, that Duterte lacks political enemies and detractors. He has plenty, and most of them belong to the political party of the previous administration that he defeated in the last election (Abao, 2017). It was mentioned that the upsurge to the Presidency of Duterte began in his political career, when many people admired him as a new hope in our country.

Fossati (2025) claims that this explains what influences people in Southeast Asia when choosing their political leaders. It focuses on understanding the reasons behind voters' decisions by looking at different factors such as the personal qualities of candidates, their reputation, their political party, and their past performance.

However, many people also accuse him of being a threat to our peaceful country because they are both anti-Duterte's political career. He was a well-known person in his place because he declared war on drugs, and people are afraid and even terrified of the implemented rules in our society. And people do not vote based on just one factor. Instead, their choices are influenced by a combination of traits, including trust, personality, competence, and social or cultural influences. For the point of Croissant (2022), he explains how political systems in Southeast Asian countries operate and how they differ from one another. It focuses on examining various forms of government, including democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid regimes, and looks at how political institutions function within each country.

Before his Presidency he served as Davao mayor, and he accomplished a lot of establishments, not only the leadership he had done in his native place, but also the power of discipline he had established among the Filipino Davaoninos. Within weeks of his

inauguration as president of the Philippines in June 2016, Rodrigo R. Duterte became the most internationally known Filipino leader since Ferdinand Marcos Sr., the country's infamous dictator, and Corazon Aquino, the iconic housewife-turned-president who championed the restoration of democracy in 1986 (Bolaños, 2020). A great deal of media attention has been paid to Duterte's murderous war on drugs as well as to his often crass and controversial statements. The embrace of China and his visceral disdain for the United States have garnered additional attention in foreign policy circles, and he is frequently included in media reports and scholarly articles on the rise of populism globally.

Although the attention to Duterte and his brutal drug war is warranted, much less attention has been paid to his administration's broader policy agenda, its approach to politics and governance, and its broader impact on democratic institutions and norms (Capsile, 2016). It was explained, Duterte's rise to the presidency should be understood as more than just a personal political success. It shows that his leadership emerged from the broader context of public dissatisfaction with traditional politicians, especially concerns about corruption, crime, and ineffective governance. As a candidate, Duterte promised that he would produce real and rapid improvements in the lives of Filipinos, particularly by aggressively addressing crime and corruption.

Curato (2017) emphasized that Rodrigo Duterte's rise to power is closely linked to his populist style of leadership. Two and a half years into his presidency, it is both warranted and possible to assess what has not changed under Duterte's political power. The picture is a mixed one, with elements of change, continuity, and regression. The Duterte government's track record regarding human rights and democracy is undoubtedly disturbing. It has run roughshod over human rights, its political opponents, and the country's democratic institutions.

The combination of the Philippines' powerful presidency and the malleability of most of its political institutions is resulting in significant democratic backsliding. But to focus only on Duterte fails to appreciate two other important elements: the extent to which this degradation has happened through nominally legal means, and the limited pushback to date by groups and institutions opposed to strongman rule. This working paper takes an in-depth look at the complex dynamics contributing to democratic backsliding in the Philippines.

On May 10, 2016, Rodrigo Duterte, then seventy-one years old, was elected president, winning 39% of the vote in a five-way race. Charismatic, blunt, and frequently profane, Duterte combined a Dirty Harry persona with a track record as a successful mayor of Davao City, Mindanao's largest city. Although Duterte might appear to be unsophisticated and crude, he is politically savvy and attuned to the attitudes and concerns of average Filipinos. He ran on his reputation as an effective, no-nonsense mayor of Davao who prioritized law and order over legal protections for alleged criminals.

The overarching theme of Duterte's campaign was that his strong leadership would produce rapid change. During his campaign, he heaped criticism on the Manila-based elite, vowed to undertake a nationwide assault on illegal drugs and criminality, and promised to change the government to a federal system (Ramos, 2020). His victory over Mar Roxas, who placed a distant second, signaled that the promise of change was more compelling than continuity. Even though Duterte had been popular in Mindanao before he ran for president, his victory showed that his appeal spanned regions and socioeconomic classes. The 16.6 million Filipinos who voted for him appeared to believe that he could deliver real change.

Duterte's victory surprised many and shocked some. In the wake of his election, political analysts have grappled with what it says about contemporary Philippine politics. The reasons why he won are complex, suggesting that cautious and nuanced conclusions are warranted (Santillan, 2018). First, the incumbent, Benigno Aquino, the embodiment of reformist elite democracy, could not run for a second term. If he had been able to run, it might have been a very different outcome.

Second, the Philippine election law has no provision for run-offs, so there is no incentive to form coalition tickets. And Mar Roxas and Senator Grace Poe, the two most like-minded candidates, joined forces; they might have been able to defeat Duterte. Third, Duterte ran a savvy and effective campaign. He announced his candidacy late, so the media had little time to scrutinize his record as mayor, and his rivals had much less chance to attack him. His campaign mobilized large numbers of volunteers and used social media well. Fourth, all four of Duterte's opponents had significant negatives.

In contrast, because of Duterte's personality and message, he was an attention-grabbing and compelling candidate, who was able to tap into and to some extent manipulate middle-class frustrations and "latent anxiety," particularly about drugs and crime. Although the

assertions of middle-class frustration seem valid for anyone who has lived in Metro Manila, Cebu, or the handful of other cities that are home to most of the Philippine middle class, the extent to which this sense of frustration and anxiety was national in scope is relatively less clear.

3.2. *Application to Itao's The Vision of Contemporary Filipinos: A Ricoeurian Reading of Duterte's Popular Presidency*

In this article, "The Political Vision of Contemporary Filipinos: A Ricoeurian Reading of Duterte's Popular Presidency is not distant from the idea of the researcher because for me, "the war on drugs" is a way towards a perfect society. President Rodrigo Duterte sees society as a place where Filipinos work and live (Presto & Curato, 2024). His knowledge about drugs is to stop because it will ruin society, and most especially the minds of the Filipino people. The issue of drugs begins at different levels of people because many Filipinos are in a state of confusion about society. Society needs a brave person to prevent this problem (Thompson, 2016). President Duterte represents to us the importance of our society and the people's faithfulness. Many anti-Duterte assert that Duterte is an immoral leader and a threat to democracy because, in his words, he is always prone to speaking words that are not relevant to his speech. He even said that "God is stupid" (Lanuza, 2020). These words create a negative side in the minds of the Filipino citizens.

But let us remember that Power is the central question of politics, which many people argue about (Dano, 2024). Power is a liberation of pride, which many argued about, and even put themselves at the top. For Paul Ricoeur, it reminds us that "political power", as power-in-common, is fragile (Leavitt, 2010; Ross, 2020). It means that political power is delicate; every person has the authority to have freedom. It should have a proper commitment, dialogue, cooperation, and collaboration of all the people within the society because it brings harmony and peace.

Many Filipino citizens are not yet ready to accept those rampant problems in our society, and this is the problem of the "war on drugs," those persons who independently ask for justice for all those victims of drugs (Labastin et al., 2022). They are the Filipinos who criticize Duterte for stopping these killings. "Yes, to life. No, to drugs." Many Filipinos have their rally (gatherings) about these rampant issues because they want to stop this problem. These are the people who are anti-Duterte, but they cannot stop this without the amendment of our President (Cabañes, 2020). This attitude is equal to that of other people because he will not accept the democratic country of the Philippines being ruined by a tyrannical government because of this social problem, and Duterte is the best person to put a stop to these illegal activities and issues in our country.

According to some recent works (Purdey et al., 2016), Duterte is right in his stand because it will preserve justice in our society if the Filipino people are not against his platform of "No to drugs, Yes to life". Applying these ideas to Ricoeurian perspectives, Duterte is right because, in Ricoeur's concept of political power, "Power is common within the people" in society. Those people who act will also morally demand social justice, and for those people who are victims of corruption will strive to safeguard our nations, and even our lives, since killings and corruption are the subject of this problem. The immorality of a human person defines his existence once he has seen the common issues that exist, and yet, morality also defines his human preservation of life against the people who are handling a common good (Ricoeur, 1992). Thus, in the Ricoeurian perspective, every human being is moral, and it is society that corrupts the minds of the people when they are in a place.

4. Conclusions

To end this paper, it is good to say that President Rodrigo Duterte is an ethical person because he knows the demands of his country. Only those Filipinos who cannot accept him as an ethical person become the treat of his Presidency. Thus, many Catholic Persons imposed their criticisms against him because they did not recognize Duterte's advocacy in our country. However, to have a peaceful and utopian society, many of the Filipinos condemn Duterte as a "threat to Democracy" because of his anti-drug war and other works under his Presidency. This is what the citizens are concerned about, and making Duterte an immoral president in our democratic country.

Moreover, from the paradox of political power of Paul Ricoeur's political explanation, he said, "the question of power is constantly present in his thinking. Ricoeur himself affirms that "Power is the central question of politics," that which human beings possess. On this

side, for me, power is present in Duterte's democracy because he uses his political power as a means to help the Filipino citizens. However, a lot of Catholic Priest disregards Duterte's form of democracy in our government, like the issue of "Oplan tokhang", he uses his power to diminish those Filipino people who are involved in drugs. This is the problem of Duterte's Presidency that even the Catholic Bishops are against it. However, for me, it is right and good that President Duterte does his task to protect our country and to keep alive these things in conceptualizations of life.

Therefore, Duterte's advocacy refers to all those people who are afraid and even fear the issues of drugs, and they cannot even go out of their homes because of fear of the issues about drugs. For me, Duterte's presidency gives a clear understanding that Filipino citizens should not have to be feared, and there is nothing to be worried about because a lot of his protectors are members of the Philippine National Police. And their task is to stop those persons involved in this illegal harassment against life. Lastly, for me, Political power in Duterte's Presidency is an aid to have a peaceful country and not a "threat to democracy".

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