

Featured Article

**A Macho Populist Comes Again?: Robin Padilla and
Radical Politics in the Philippines**

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Abstract

This study focuses on Robin Padilla, an action movie star who won the top seat in a senate election in 2022, and explores why and how he gained high popularity among Filipinos. Padilla seems to present himself similarly to the macho populist politicians in the past, including Joseph Estrada and Rodrigo Duterte. Feature of Padilla's strategy is narrating a story of "*nagbago*" (change), saying he committed misdeeds in his youth, but now he has converted to Islam and is living a righteous life. The story echoes the sentiments of present-day Filipinos who demand discipline and morality. Furthermore, despite Padilla's machismo, there is ontological anxiety behind him, and his religious experience provides moral support for such insecurity. The fluctuations and ambiguities in his identity could present a counter-hegemonic value in Philippine politics while avoiding the danger of populism—dividing people through the construction of exclusive "we" and "they" discourse.

Keywords: Populism, Robin Padilla, Showbiz, Radical Politics

Introduction

"Nagbago ako (I changed). We need a change in government." This was what newly elected Filipino Senator Robin Padilla said during the election campaign. Padilla is an actor who became a big star by playing macho villains in 1980s action movies such as "Anak" and "Bad Boy." In real life, Padilla was convicted of illegal possession of firearms in 1994. The "bad boy," both on and off the screen, ran for senate last year and won the top seat with more than 26 million votes. After being elected, he was widely criticized for his lack of political experience and for being popular only for "his face." His acquisition of political power through masculinity and the fame of an actor overlaps with previous Filipino celebrity politicians including former president Joseph Estrada, or "Erap," and Fernando Poe Jr., Erap's friend who lost by a narrow margin to Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in the presidential election.

This study presents an exploratory analysis of Robin Padilla in Philippine politics. By examining his life story, this study considers the opportunity for populism in the Philippines to open itself to radical politics.

Populism and Radical Politics in the Philippines

After democratization through the EDSA Revolution, populism in the Philippines emerged several times. Fidel Ramos, a military technocrat president was sensationally replaced in 1998 by "Erap," a movie star from Tondo in Manila, a region known for its large population of deprived people. Erap became a "poor-friendly" populist president with mass support. More recently, former President Rodrigo Duterte garnered extraordinary popularity ratings as a strong leader who broke the defective structure in a society dominated by wealthy elites that liberals had failed to change.

The historical backdrop of populism in the Philippines is deeply rooted. Since the incomplete revolution against Spanish colonial rule, the people have not fully developed their identity as a Filipino "nation"

and “people.” This has provided fertile grounds for populist frames that claim to resolve the ambiguities of the past.¹

Though populism is a nebulous concept, this study refers to the term as a “political style” that pits “the people” against “the other” by invoking crises or threats conveyed through controversial forms of speech, including “bad manners.”² Populism threatens to undermine democracy by intensifying social divisions and disregarding the rights and interests of those considered “the other.” Nevertheless, it can also create alternative “us” and “them” frames for social reforms because populism and radical democracy are in close proximity in terms of resisting conventional liberal democratic values. Yamazaki Nozomu,³ a Japanese political scientist, argues that while authoritarian populism emphasizes the moral politics of cultural issues, radical democracy theory shares common ground in politicizing various cultural issues. Moreover, from a populist point of view, they both insist on the “construction of the people” and have in common the reexamination of established authority.⁴

According to Reynaldo Silvestre,⁵ Duterte is radical because, as empirically defined, he opposes an established political structure wholly or partly, has a vision of a better order, and acts to achieve what he envisions. The rise of Duterte was a hegemonic challenge for those who felt “left behind” against elitist democracy, which led to exclusive growth at the expense of public services through laws and regulations manipulated by the rich and highly centralized political structure of “imperial Manila.”⁶ Ryan Maboloc⁷ argues that the biased

¹ Adele Webb and Nicole Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” in Daniel Stockemer ed., *Populism around the World: A Comparative Perspective* (Springer, 2019), 52-55.

² Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 8.

³ Nozomu Yamazaki, “Seijuku syakai ron’ kara ‘care no rinri to radical democracy no setsugou’ e [From ‘Theory of Mature Society’ to ‘The Articulation of Ethics of Care and Radical Democracies’],” in *The Annuals of Japanese Political Science Association* 70.2 (2019), 24.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Reynaldo V. Silvestre, “Duterte’s Radicalism,” in *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 1 October 2016. (<https://opinion.inquirer.net/97803/dutertes-radicalism> accessed 10 November 2023)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ryan C. Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte* (Cotabato City: Elzstyle Publishing, 2022).

distribution of hegemonic power in the Philippines is rooted in colonial Manila centrism, and the post-EDSA narrative inherited it. Duterte represented the experiences of the people in Visayas and Mindanao, which did not fit into the dominant narrative.⁸ According to Nicole Curato and Yvan Ysmael Yonaha,⁹ Duterte took up people's potential anxieties and frustrations, including drug and public transportation issues. Julio Teehankee¹⁰ argues that the new middle class, which has been struggling between the elite and poor masses, became the core of "the people," the imagined collective entity formed by Duterte's radical politics.

However, Duterte's politics were also seriously problematic. Duterte presented himself as a macho leader who defeated Manila's elites and criminals. Specifically, he strengthened the policy of the violent exclusion of "evil others," who were drug sellers and users, launching a deadly "war on drugs." From July 1, 2016, to September 30, 2017, more than 16,000 drug users or sellers had been killed in the war on drugs, and Philippine human rights advocates claimed the "homicide cases" were extrajudicial killings.¹¹ These human rights violations were not only directly committed by the president's private army but also escalated by those who supported Duterte's "we" and "they" discourse. Curato and Yonaha¹² note that Duterte's attitude slid from a "macho populist" during the election campaign to "authoritarian practice" that overtly eliminated critical media and political opponents. In this sense, the hegemonic challenge was meaningful for Philippine politics aimed at social reform; however, we

⁸ Ibid. See also Patricio N. Abinales, "Pisting Yawa," in *UNITAS 100: Where Scholarship Stands the Test of Time* 95.2 (2022), 232-264.

⁹ Nicole Curato and Yvan Ysmael Yonaha, "Rodrigo Duterte: Macho Populism and Authoritarian Practice (born 1945)," in Klaus Larres ed., *Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power across Global Politics* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 391-392.

¹⁰ Julio C. Teehankee, "Was Duterte's Rise Inevitable?" in Nicole Curato ed., *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency* (Quezon City: Bughaw, 2017), 52.

¹¹ Alexis Romero, "Duterte Gov't Probing over 16,000 Drug War-linked Deaths as Homicide, not EJK," in *Philippine Star*, 27 December 2017. (<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/12/26/1771944/duterte-govt-probing-over-16000-drug-war-linked-deaths-homicide-not-ejk> accessed on 10 November 2023)

¹² Nicole Curato and Yvan Ysmael Yonaha, "Rodrigo Duterte: Macho Populism and Authoritarian Practice (born 1945)," in Klaus Larres ed., *Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power across Global Politics* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 393-394.

must critique his violent discourse on exclusion and authoritarian governance.

Robin Padilla presents himself as a macho in both movies and real life, has a mediocre educational background, and speaks rough Filipino instead of fluent English. In his campaign pledge for a federal system, he emphasized the need to change the existing system. His style is similar to that of Erap and Duterte. Is Padilla a macho populist, like these politicians?

What this study focuses on is not Padilla's political commitments or the power relations among politicians surrounding him, but rather how his story of "*nagbago*" (change) is narrated and how social sentiments respond to it. The story has continuity from Duterte's administration but remains unstable and fluctuating. Despite Padilla's machismo, there is ontological anxiety behind him, and his religious experience provides moral support for such insecurity. In this way, he represents an emergent subjectivity in contemporary Philippine society.

The Making of "Change"

The previous section provided an overview of populism in the Philippines, while this section looks at what Padilla's story of *nagbago* represents, how he creates and talks about it, and why people are attracted to it.

Activities as a Senator

Padilla was released from prison in 1997, after receiving a conditional pardon from President Ramos. In 2016, an absolute pardon from President Duterte fully restored his political rights, including citizenship and suffrage, enabling him to run for Senate.¹³ In the 2022 election, Padilla ran as a member of the PDP-Laban Party on a pledge to introduce a federal system in the Philippines. The Marcos-Duterte UniTeam Alliance supported him during the campaign.

¹³ Nestor Corrales, "Robin Padilla Gets Absolute Pardon from Duterte," in *Philippines Daily Inquirer*, 15 November 2016. (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/844594/robin-padilla-gets-presidential-pardon-from-duterte> accessed on 28 September 2023)

Shortly after his victory, Padilla announced the ten first bills to be prioritized in the Senate.¹⁴ The Philippine Divorce Law was filed on September 18, 2023, as the Dissolution of Marriage Act, or Senate Bill No. 2443, spearheaded by Sen. Risa Hontiveros and co-authored by Padilla. He also claimed the need for a law for the equal use of Filipino and English because it is unfair for native Filipino speakers to prioritize English use in parliament.¹⁵ Of course, these achievements were not Padilla's alone. He hired Salvador Panelo, Duterte's former legal adviser, and a spokesperson, as his legislative adviser. Panelo and staff members were assumed to be responsible for the professional activities. However, if we consider him favorably, it can be said that Padilla has at least his own ideals and ambitions for social reform.

Between Reality and Showbiz

During his campaign, Padilla discussed his past on "Toni Talks," a YouTube show hosted by Filipino star and media personality Toni Gonzaga.¹⁶ He explained that he had committed misdeeds in his youth, such as illicit acts, relationships with multiple women, excessive drinking, and smoking, but now he has converted to Islam and is living a righteous life for the good of the world to pay for his past sins. He overlapped his experiences of change with the need for change in the Philippine social system.

Unlike Erap's past success story of rising from poverty, Padilla's is a story of "change," including religious conversion and self-discipline. He stated that every turning point in his life involved religion. For example, Padilla related that he had holed up in the mountains to escape from the police on suspicion of illegally

¹⁴ Maila Ager, "Divorce, Equal Use of Languages among Robin Padilla's First Senate Bills," in *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 July 2022. (https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1622166/divorce-equal-use-of-languages-among-robin-padillas-first-senate-bills?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter accessed on 28 September 2023)

¹⁵ Maila Ager, "Robin Padilla bats for equal use of Filipino, English languages: 'Masyado tayong Amboy,'" in *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 18 July 2022. (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1629936/robin-padilla-bats-for-equal-use-of-filipino-english-languages-masyado-tayong-amboy> accessed on 28 September 2023)

¹⁶ Toni Gonzaga Studio, "What Changed Robin Padilla," *Toni Talks*, 10 April 2022. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXIY4ANCwx8> accessed on 4 October 2023)

possessing firearms and joined the guerrillas of the New People's Army. He finally surrendered at the persuasion of his ex-wife. When he came down to the city, he was surrounded by dozens of city officials and the mayor, and Padilla braced himself for an assault. However, they were devout Born Again Christians, and they instead prayed earnestly for Padilla, the one who committed the crime. Upon seeing this, he cried, realizing how wrong he was.

It was an equally impressive episode where he encountered the teachings of Islam. Soon after filming the 1994 action movie "Mistah," in which he played a soldier fighting against Muslim rebels, Sultan Kiram of Sulu suddenly visited Padilla. Since then, Kiram revisited many times and taught him about Islam and "the way of life." Padilla said, "That was what I didn't have," "It was like full rehabilitation." That experience led him to consider building a drug abuse therapeutic center in prison.

However, Suzuki Hideshi, a convicted Japanese prisoner who served in the same prison as Padilla, revealed a different side to these stories by recounting Padilla's crafty manner from 1995 to 1996. According to Suzuki,¹⁷ Padilla entered prison to shoot a movie. Padilla bribed the guards at the gate to bring in staff and equipment and filmed on days when there were no visitors. Some guards were dispatched to another prison, but Padilla received no punishment.

According to Suzuki, his conversion to Islam also appeared to be a tactic for early release. Padilla said, "If I am granted a temporary release, I want to go to Mecca to learn about Islam and engage in Islamic missionary activities." His statement stirred debate on the clemency for illegal firearms possession. In a petition by the prison director for a presidential pardon of Padilla, the director stated, "Padilla taught prisoners the ways of God and educated them to follow the religious teachings by quitting drugs, smoking, and alcohol."¹⁸ However, none of the prisoners or guards had ever seen Padilla engaging in such activities.

Is the story real or fake? While the audience may be doubtful, they cannot help but listen and be attracted to his narratives that

¹⁷ Hideshi Suzuki, *Ori no naka no yami: Philippine de shikeisyu ni natta nihonjin no gokuchuki* [The Darkness in a Cage: Diary in a Jail Written by a Condemned Japanese] (Tokyo: Syougakukan, 2000), 142-143.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 144-146.

straddle reality and showbiz. Anna Pertierra¹⁹ argues that the affective and emotional dimensions of political dramas provide a connection between Filipino politicians and citizens. In the past, movie stars, journalists, and sports figures successfully defeated political dynasties in local governments and winning seats in the senate. The fusion of showbiz entertainment and politics has created a space for political outsiders to dismantle elitist democracy. Viewers engage “at the intimate level of feeling” through politicians’ gossip, including betrayal, revenge, secret love affairs, and complicated family relationships, constituting everyday lives and soap opera themes.²⁰ In this sense, the candidate becomes a leader not by representing his supporters’ political and economic interests, but rather by making personal connections through intimate feelings.

Those who sympathize with the story of change

Padilla’s attraction is not only that of a wild and exciting life but his story of change also has the power to garner people’s sympathy and trust. In my previous research in a provincial city of Mindanao, Balik-Islam (converts from Christianity to Islam) also said that even though they had made mistakes in the past, their encounter with the “true religion” brought them closer to God and transformed theirs into disciplined lives. They narrated the change in their lives, such as “I used to drink, smoke, and fight in the past, but when I converted to Islam, these bad habits disappeared” or “My husband used to be a womanizer, but not since he became a devout Muslim.” Such a life story, of the “disciplining of life by conversion,” has also been frequently used in the missionary work of Balik-Islam organizations, a testament to the story’s power in attracting a broad audience.

Furthermore, not only converts to Islam but also converts from Catholicism to other Christian groups, such as Born Again Christian, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Jehovah’s Witnesses tell similar stories.²¹ Their motivations for converting vary, but they all share

¹⁹ Anna C. Pertierra, “Celebrity Politics and Televisual Melodrama in the Age of Duterte,” in Nicole Curato ed., *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency* (Quezon City: Bughaw, 2017), 220-221.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

²¹ See Asuna Yoshizawa and Wataru Kusaka, “The Arts of Everyday Peacebuilding: Cohabitation, Conversion, and Inter-marriage of Muslims and Christians in the Southern Philippines,” in *Southeast Asian Studies* 9.1 (2020), 67-97; Marybeth T.

grievances or problems, whether in their religious teachings and practices or in their daily lives, that they seek to redress through conversion as an opportunity to change for the better in this world and in the afterlife.

Not only converts want a change for themselves, *nagbago* for good citizens through discipline was a frequently heard phrase in the Philippine drug war.²² According to Kusaka Wataru,²³ expanding employment opportunities in the global service industry in the Philippines is changing society from one that survives poverty through connections to one that aspires to socially rise through discipline and diligence. Since the days when everyone was poor and circumvented the rules to ensure survival, the sentiment that individuals “want” or “need” to change and be disciplined grew throughout society, echoing the discourse of Duterte’s war on drugs, which excluded criminals or “bad others.” Considering Duterte’s example, we can see continuity in Padilla’s story: Padilla appeals to the sentiments of those who seek devotion, piety, morals, and discipline in general, although he mentions specifically the religion of Islam.

Support from Religious Groups

Padilla’s religious calling indicates a more direct link with religious groups. For example, in a proclamation for newly elected senators at the Philippine International Convention Center, he gave a speech emphasizing that he was a representative of Muslims.²⁴ Until his election, there had been no Muslim senators after Santanina Tillah Rasul, who served from 1987 to 1995. His percentage of votes was the highest in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

Acac, *Balik-Islam in the Philippines: Reversion, Symbolic Negotiation, and Becoming the Other* (Temple University, 2020).

²² Wataru Kusaka, “Disaster, Discipline, Drugs, and Duterte: Emergence of New Moral Subjectivities in Post-Yolanda Leyte,” in Seki Koki ed., *Ethnographies of Development and Globalization in the Philippines* (UK: Routledge, 2020), 71-97.

²³ Wataru Kusaka, “Why Filipinos Have Come to Embrace Authoritarian ‘Discipline,’” in *Asia Dialogue*, 3 July 2019. (<https://theasiadialogue.com/2019/07/03/why-filipinos-have-come-to-embrace-authoritarian-discipline/> accessed on 13 November 2023)

²⁴ Dwight De Leon, “Comelec Proclaims 12 Winning Senators,” in *Rappler*, 18 May 2022. (<https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/comelec-proclaims-winning-senators-may-18-2022/> accessed on 13 November 2023)

(56.46%)²⁵, showing that Muslim residents had high hopes for Padilla. In the Philippines, a predominantly Christian country, Muslims in the South have remained marginalized and unrepresented in national politics, leading to separatist movements since the 1970s. Similar to Duterte, a longtime mayor of Davao City in Mindanao who claimed his grandmother was a Muslim and enjoyed considerable support from Muslims as “one of us,”²⁶ Padilla, a Muslim convert, is also supported as their rare representative in national politics.²⁷

In the same speech, Padilla also expressed gratitude to the Catholic Church, Iglesia ni Cristo, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and El Shaddai. He likely received organized support for the elections from these religious groups. While the Catholic Church has officially adopted an attitude of non-involvement in politics and the voting freedom of its followers, Catholic bloc voting has been reported in the past.²⁸ El Shaddai, a charismatic Catholic movement, and Iglesia Ni Cristo, an independent non-trinitarian Christian church founded in the Philippines, are famous for their bloc voting.²⁹ In particular, the support of Iglesia Ni Cristo, which have a church in nearly every town across the Philippines, and three million followers, significantly influence the results of provincial/municipal local politics and senatorial elections.³⁰ Little has been reported on the electoral

²⁵ GMA network, “Eleksyon 2022.”

(<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/eleksyon2022/results/senatorial/PADILLA%252C+ROBIN+%2528PDPLBN%2529/> accessed on 13 November 2023)

²⁶ Jesse Angelo L. Altez and Kloyde A. Caday. “The Mindanaoan President,” in Nicole Curato ed., *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency* (Quezon City: Bughaw, 2017), 116-118.

²⁷ Padilla likely also gained support from indigenous people, estimated to be 14-17 million across the Philippines, because he claimed to have roots in Igorot, as discussed later.

²⁸ Roy Allan B. Tolentino, “Blessed Ballots: Bloc Voting in the Iglesia ni Cristo and the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines,” in *Gema Teologi* 34.1 (2010). (<https://journal-theo.ukdw.ac.id/index.php/gema/article/view/23> accessed on 22 November 2023)

²⁹ See Lynda Jumilla and Maricar Bautista, “Can El Shaddai Deliver Bloc Vote? (Updated),” in *ABS-CBN News*, 20 August 2009. (<https://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/08/19/09/can-el-shaddai-deliver-bloc-vote> accessed on 13 November 2023); Gladstone A. Cuarteros, “Bacolod City: Machine Politics and the INC Advantage,” in Julio Teehankee C. and Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin eds., *Patronage Democracy in the Philippines: Clans, Clients, and Competition in Local Elections* (Quezon City: Bughaw, 2022), 257-280.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 257.

assistance provided by the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, which is said to have four million followers in the country and two million abroad, and has been criticized for abuse and human trafficking. However, as Duterte and Pastor Apollo Quiboloy, both based in Davao, have long been close, and Quiboloy supported Duterte in the 2016 election, the religious group's deep involvement with certain politicians is apparent.³¹

There are two aspects to the relationship with these religious groups. First, the minorities marginalized feel intimately connected to Padilla and support him, and second, institutional support is gained through interest-based agreements with religious organizations or leaders. It is necessary to consider how these religious groups and followers interact with Padilla's populism in more detail.

Life with Ontological Anxiety

Thus far, this study has explained why Padilla's "story of change" is popular. This section explores Padilla's roots on his father's and mother's sides from the perspective of the life of modern Filipinos with ontological anxieties

The Political Dynasty

Robin Padilla, whose real name is Robinhood Ferdinand Cariño Padilla, was born in 1969 in Daet, Camarines Norte. According to Padilla, his relatives on his father's side were a traditional political family since the Spanish colonial era. As far as confirmed, his grandfather, Jose Padilla Sr., was an actor and served as congressman and governor of Bulacan Province from 1919 to 1937. His father, Casimero "Roy" Padilla Sr., was a former film director who served as mayor of the Municipality of Jose Panganiban in Camarines Norte and governor of the province. Many of his half-brothers served as provincial governors, municipal mayors, and provincial board members.

Though Padilla had come from a political clan, his family environment was complicated. His father, Roy, had children with three women, including Padilla's mother and former movie actress Eva

³¹ Bea Cupin, "Go: Duterte Gives 'Moral Support' to Quiboloy," in *Rappler*, 22 November 2021. (<https://www.rappler.com/nation/bong-go-says-duterte-gives-moral-support-quiboloy/> accessed on 13 November 2023)

Cariño. In 1988, Roy was murdered by unknown assailants on the eve of the national election.³² Padilla said that he had lived in Baguio City until he was approximately 13 and first appeared in a movie. Thus, it is unclear how close he was to his paternal relatives. In the 2022 elections, Padilla's share of the vote in the Bicol region, including the province of Camarines Norte, was lower than in other regions of the Philippines.³³ The Bicol region is the territory of presidential candidate Leni Robredo, and the incumbent governor of Camarines Norte, Robin's half-brother Ricarte, belongs to the Aksyon Party, supporting Robredo. This would be why Ricarte did not support Padilla who was allied with Marcos-Duterte.

Uncertain Roots of Igorot and Mixed Rituals

Padilla identified himself as half-Igorot³⁴ because his mother, Eva, was an Ibaloi, an indigenous ethnic group in the northern part of the Philippines. When asked about a bracelet-like tattoo on his right wrist during a 2010 ABS-CBN TV program, Padilla said, "It's from Ibaloi, our tribe."³⁵

During familial ceremonial events, he practiced in the way in which Ibaloi, Christianity, and Islam coexisted. When he married his second wife, Mariel, in 2010, they performed three different weddings. The first was an Islamic marriage in Taj Mahal, India, the second was a Born Again Christian-style wedding, and the third was a traditional

³² Elias T. Ramos, "Strain in Filipino Industrial Relations," in *Philippine Studies Discussion Paper Series 1* (1989), 8.

³³ GMA network. "Eleksyon 2022." (<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/eleksyon2022/results/senatorial/PADILLA%252C+ROBIN+%2528PDPLBN%2529/> accessed on 13 November 2023)

³⁴ Igorot means "Mountaineer" in Tagalog. It refers to any of the various ethnic groups in the mountains of northern Luzon, Philippines, all of whom keep, or have kept until recently, their traditional religion and way of life.

³⁵ ANC Digital, "Headstart: Featuring Robin Padilla," 31 May 2010. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTNjb6l53Yc&t=450s> accessed on November 13, 2023)

Ibaloi wedding in Baguio.³⁶ Mariel stated that she was partially practicing Islam after marrying Padilla, but that she would not convert.³⁷ In 2017, they conducted two rituals for their one-year-old child: a Catholic baptism and an Islamic ceremony to celebrate the birth of a child.³⁸

As celebrities, they probably sought news to stimulate controversy and attract public attention. Nevertheless, considering Padilla stated in an interview that “it is the grown child who decides her religion,”³⁹ it is unlikely that the act was intended only to draw people’s attention. Even in the intermarriages between Muslims and Christians in Mindanao that I have researched, it was not rare to find a couple who performed different types of weddings or one that included multiple religious and ethnic elements in the ceremony. Moreover, some families kept their children’s religious choices ambiguous, allowing them to practice Catholic baptism and Sunday Mass, as well as Friday prayers and Ramadan fasting.⁴⁰ These are the results of negotiations in which different values coexist within families and individuals, while maintaining ties and avoiding conflict. In the present-day Philippine society, mixed ceremonial events and religious practices represent how people deal with the flux of social relations and identities that serve as a base for themselves.

Complicating matters further, a representative of the Ibaloi Cariño Clan in Baguio announced that Padilla’s mother was not an Ibaloi. In July 2010, Padilla traveled to Baguio with his family and staff

³⁶ Robin Padilla Instagram. 19 August 2020. ([https://www.instagram.com/p/CEC7XYA\]cIn/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=d333b3db-6312-4636-b2bc-eb2d8cd40acc](https://www.instagram.com/p/CEC7XYA]cIn/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=d333b3db-6312-4636-b2bc-eb2d8cd40acc) accessed on 13 November 2023)

³⁷ ABS-CBN News, “Mariel Gives up on Church Wedding, Won’t Convert to Islam,” 10 May 2011. (<https://news.abs-cbn.com/entertainment/05/10/11/mariel-gives-church-wedding-wont-convert-islam> accessed on 28 September 2023)

³⁸ Reggee Bonoan, “Anak nina Mariel at Robin 2 beses bininyagan; katoliko na, muslim pa [The Child of Mariel and Robin was Baptized Twice: Catholic Already, Still Muslim],” in *Bandera*, 25 November 2017. <https://bandera.inquirer.net/169492/anak-nina-mariel-robin-2-beses-bininyagan-katoliko-na-muslim-pa> accessed on 13 November 2023)

³⁹ ABS-CBN Entertainment, “Push Now Na: Chikahan with Robin Padilla Part 2,” 1 December 2017. (<https://push.abs-cbn.com/2017/12/1/videos/push-now-na-chikahan-with-robin-padilla-part-2-11327> accessed on 13 October 2023)

⁴⁰ See Asuna Yoshizawa and Wataru Kusaka, “The Arts of Everyday Peacebuilding: Cohabitation, Conversion, and Intermarriage of Muslims and Christians in the Southern Philippines,” in *Southeast Asian Studies* 9.1 (2020), 67-97.

members to seek out his ancestors' relationships with the Cariño Clan of Baguio. However, their long-documented genealogy did not mention Eva Cariño, who gave birth to a son named Robinhood.⁴¹ Nonetheless, the people of Ibaloi Cariño have taken the stance that they are not closing their doors to the possibility that Robin Padilla is one of their own, expressing goodwill and hospitality towards him, who came in search of a connection with them.⁴²

The case of Padilla is reminiscent of Duterte, who said during an election campaign that he had Maranao roots. This statement was likely a strategy to demonstrate the strong power of governance in organizing diverse groups. I initially thought Padilla's case as the same, but Padilla went to the community himself to identify his family's roots and seemed to be tracing the process of ensuring his fluctuating identity base.

Padilla's story and behavior are certainly showbiz-styled. However, rather than a scripted showbiz scenario, it appears to be a trial-and-error attempt to define a life for himself. That is why people sympathize with it. It is becoming increasingly essential for politicians in the Philippines to create life-staking dramas by interacting with viewers and voters.

The Future of Robin Padilla and Philippine Politics

As of November 2023, Vice President Sara Duterte became one of the leading candidates in the next presidential election, despite the issue of secret funds and her father threatening one of the members of Congress. If Padilla continues gaining popularity as expected, running Sara as president and Padilla as vice president could proceed.

Padilla has strong ties with former president Duterte, becoming the first celebrity to publicly support Duterte's campaign in 2015.⁴³

⁴¹ Joaquin Cariño, "Robin Padilla is not an Ibaloi, Eva Cariño is not Related to the Cariños of Baguio," Facebook post, 15 March 2021. (https://www.facebook.com/notes/498474631109815/?paipv=0&eav=Afb7-iaO3T7CmEhIOEBLwp_770Vq7S6B74GhxWzJpVMydFkezczo-4IOlum7-YNW2ok accessed on 28 September 2023)

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bea Cupin, "Longtime Duterte Defender Robin Padilla Joins PDP-Laban," in *Rappler*, 5 October 2021. (<https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/robin-padilla-joins-pdp->

Critics say that the 2016 pardon for Padilla was in return for his support in the presidential election.⁴⁴ Moreover, behind Padilla, former President Arroyo can be seen. Arroyo is now the kingmaker behind various political maneuvers and has reportedly paired Sara with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in the 2022 presidential election.⁴⁵ After the 2022 election, Padilla posted on his official Facebook page, calling Arroyo his “secret weapon” and appreciating her support during the campaign.⁴⁶ Arroyo and Padilla’s family recently took a joint vacation trip, and media reports have shown their close relationship.⁴⁷

If Padilla gains more influence in Philippine politics in the future, what kind of “the people” and “the other” would he potentially construct? Thus far, Padilla seems to have succeeded in adopting Duterte’s political stance. For example, he shares Duterte’s policy of harsh punishment for crime and introducing a federal system to reform Philippine society by ending Manila-centric and elitist politics. Padilla may create an imagined community of “people” who hope to be changed, using criminals and elites as enemies. However, because he is linked to the criminals, minorities, and dynastic political family as an “involved” and his identity has fluctuated, Padilla can disrupt the clear and static categorization of “the people” and “the other.”

Furthermore, performing as a strong leader with the blustery rhetoric and behaviors of Duterte is too risky for Padilla to gain public trust. Unlike the former president, who successfully governed Davao City, some question Padilla’s political experience and ability. He has

laban/#:~:text=Actor%20Robin%20Padilla%2C%20a%20longtime,members%20of%20PDP%2DLaban.%E2%80%9D accessed on 28 September 2023)

⁴⁴ Jhesset O. Enano, “Padilla: No Politics behind Absolute Pardon from Duterte,” in *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 16 November 2016. (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/844821/padilla-no-politics-behind-absolute-pardon-from-duterte> accessed on 13 November 2023)

⁴⁵ Bea Cupin, “From GMA to Sara Duterte: The Ties that Bind,” in *Rappler*, 20 May 2023. (<https://www.rappler.com/nation/gloria-macapagal-arroyo-sara-duterte-history/> accessed on 13 November 2023)

⁴⁶ Robin Padilla Official Facebook, 18 June 2022. (<https://www.facebook.com/ROBINPADILLA.OFFICIAL/posts/pfbid0Z3FCEHMhdDsC4bP7XcGzjDYNfHCpChLUjL38x3BCKgWnwcDeBnUD68j7ZHS6XhtLl> accessed on September 28, 2023)

⁴⁷ Jeel Monde, “Robin Padilla and Family Receive Balesin Trip From The Arroyos,” in *Philippine News*, 17 July 2022. (<https://philnews.ph/2022/07/17/robin-padilla-family-receive-balesin-trip-arroyos/> accessed on 13 November 2023)

also been criticized for his past criminal record and for receiving private benefits from the president over his pardon. As for his personal life, netizens point out that he might have converted to Islam to marry a second wife without divorcing his ex-wife, which would be “bigamy.”⁴⁸ He has also been criticized for spreading “toxic masculinity” by stating, “It’s natural for men to cheat if there is temptation.”⁴⁹ Padilla cannot win by simply being a macho populist. His future will depend on whether he can prove his abilities and achievements as a politician and convince people that he is truly living a disciplined life as a Muslim—that is, whether he has genuinely changed in his public and private life. Otherwise, those who currently sympathize with Padilla will leave.

Philippine politics have long sought to counter-hegemonic values. This study views the potential of populist politics in the Philippines in that politicians continue to dynamically construct “the people” by nimbly grasping at the desires and anxieties of the masses. That is why it is so vulnerable and dangerous. Focusing on Robin Padilla could provide insights into the future of Philippine politics.

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⁴⁸ Rappler Facebook, “Converting to Islam to marry a Second Spouse is Bigamy, SC Rules,” 23 March 2022. (<https://www.facebook.com/rapplerdotcom/photos/a.317154781638645/5585658044788266> accessed on 13 November 2023)

⁴⁹ Stephanie Bernardino, “Robin Padilla Explains Viral ‘No Man Can Resist Temptation’ Statement,” in *Manila Bulletin*, 29 July 2021. (<https://mb.com.ph/2021/7/28/robin-padilla-explains-viral-no-man-can-resist-temptation-statement> accessed on 13 November 2023)

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