

The Political Vision of Contemporary Filipinos: A Ricoeurian Reading of Duterte's Popular Presidency

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Abstract

President Rodrigo Duterte to this day has continued to enjoy popularity among majority of the Filipinos. And this, even as Duterte himself has continually graced the headlines, not for any outstanding humanitarian achievement, but for his typical but highly controversial personal blunders and braggadocios, outrageous remarks, and penchant for informalities. And this, too, even as no less than the U.S. intelligence department tags him as a “threat to democracy” and no less than some influential bishops in the Catholic Church accuse him of already going beyond the bounds of the ethical. What could be the reasons why Duterte is still this popular among many Filipinos despite the many controversies that continue to hound him? Does this mean that today’s Filipinos have become too politically blasé to care about what’s going on in the political arena of their country? Or, could it be that Duterte’s continuing popularity actually reflects the political vision of contemporary Filipinos? To answer these questions, in this paper, I will do a Ricoeurian reading of Duterte’s popular presidency. By Ricoeurian reading, I mean that I will be using selected elements in Ricoeur’s political philosophy as evaluative tools in analyzing: 1) whether President Duterte is indeed a “threat to democracy”; 2) whether the Duterte government still falls within the ethical; and 3) whether Duterte’s popular

presidency actually reflects the political vision of contemporary Filipinos.

Keywords: Duterte, Ricoeur, Political Power, Political Vision, Contemporary Filipinos

Introduction

Since becoming the 16th President of the Philippines after garnering more than 16 million votes in the May 2016 presidential elections, Rodrigo Duterte to this day has continued to enjoy popularity among majority of the Filipinos. In the past two years – from July 2016 to July 2018 – survey after 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 percent approval rating from Filipinos.¹ 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.² And yet, no matter what antics and criticisms they would throw against him on an almost daily basis on national television and on social media, Duterte’s political enemies have not succeeded in bringing the Filipinos to their side. Duterte has remained popular, and this, even as Duterte himself has continually graced the headlines, not for any outstanding humanitarian achievement, but for his typical but highly controversial personal blunders and braggadocios, outrageous remarks, and penchant for informalities. And this, too, even as no less than the U.S. intelligence department tags him as a “threat to democracy” and no less than some influential bishops in the Catholic Church accuse him of already going beyond the bounds

¹ Patricia Lourdes Viray, “Duterte still most approved gov’t official – Pulse Asia,” *The Philippine Star* (July 13, 2018), <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/07/13/1833178/duterte-still-most-approved-trusted-govt-offici-al-pulse-asia>, accessed July 14, 2018.

² The previous Aquino administration belongs to the Liberal Party and practically all its members are hypercritical of Duterte, disapproving almost every political action that he makes.

of the ethical.³ What greatly disappoints his staunchest critics as well is that, even if various international figures have criticized him for his notoriety, none of them have ever convinced the Filipino citizenry to withdraw their support from Duterte.⁴

What could be the reasons why Duterte is still this popular among many Filipinos despite the many controversies that continue to hound him?⁵ Why do majority of the Filipinos continue to express their support for him? Does this mean that today's Filipinos have become too politically blasé to care about what's going on in the political arena of their country? Or, could it be that Duterte's continuing popularity actually reflects the political vision of contemporary Filipinos?⁶ Though these questions do not have black and white answers, in this paper, I will attempt to give them my own answers via a Ricoeurian reading of Duterte's popular presidency. By Ricoeurian reading, I mean that I will be using selected elements in Ricoeur's political philosophy as evaluative tools in analyzing: 1) whether President Duterte is indeed a "threat to democracy"; 2) whether the Duterte

³ Neil Jerome Morales, "Philippines 'concerned' as U.S. intelligence tags Duterte a threat to democracy," *Reuters* (February 21, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-politics/philippines-concerned-as-u-s-intelligence-tags-duterte-a-threat-to-democracy-idUSKCN1G5075>, accessed July 14, 2018. See also Paterno Esmaguel II, "Bishops hit Duterte for calling God stupid," *Rappler* (June 25, 2018), <https://www.rappler.com/nation/205757-catholic-church-bishops-statements-duterte-stupid-god>, accessed July 14, 2018.

⁴ To name a few, we have Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN high commissioner for human rights; Agnes Callamard, the U.N.'s special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings; Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, yet another UN expert on the rights of indigenous peoples; and former US President Barrack Obama. All of them lambasted Duterte for his infamous "War on Drugs" and the so-called extra-judicial killings that took the lives of many people who, in one or another, and whether verified or not, got involved into drugs.

⁵ Even before assuming the presidency, Duterte had been hounded by several controversies while he served as mayor for more than two decades in Davao City, a growing metropolis in the island of Mindanao in the southern part of the Philippines.

⁶ In this paper, I define "political vision" as the shared and collective political outlook, that is, the common preference for a particular political setup. Thus when I speak of "the political vision of contemporary Filipinos", I am referring to the shared and collective political outlook of today's Filipinos, meaning, their common preference for a particular political setup for their country.

government still falls within the ethical; and 3) whether Duterte's popular presidency actually reflects the political vision of contemporary Filipinos.

But why do such a reading? What is special with Ricoeur? What is in the thoughts of Ricoeur that could possibly shed a better light to the ongoing political drama in the Philippines?

According to Pierre-Olivier Monteil, "Paul Ricoeur is rarely considered as a political thinker by his commentators. However, the question of power is constantly present in his thinking."⁷ In fact, as early as 1957 – that is, way before he developed his theory of interpretation for which he would eventually become one of the "giants of hermeneutic philosophy"⁸ – Ricoeur already wrote one of his first, and perhaps most celebrated, political essay: "The Political Paradox."⁹ And albeit it would be much later in his career when Ricoeur would focus his attention on politics, penning down his political thoughts in *Oneself as Another*¹⁰ and *The Just*,¹¹ from the late 1950's to the early 1970's Ricoeur would occasionally publish political essays in various journals. These essays would be gathered together in a single book in 1974. This book is aptly titled *Political and Social Essays*¹² precisely because these writings are mainly concerned with politics. So despite having written only a few *oeuvres* on politics, I would say that Ricoeur is a political thinker of respectable stature at par with Machiavelli, Marx, and Rawls, to name a few. As Todd Mei affirms, "Ricoeur's approach

⁷ Pierre-Olivier Monteil, "Paradoxes in Ricoeur's Political Thinking," in *Eco-etica, vol. 4, Ethics and Politics: With a Third Part on Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by Peter Kemp and Noriko Hashimoto (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2015), 227.

⁸ Don Ihde, "Paul Ricoeur's Place in the Hermeneutic Tradition," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by Lewis Edwin Hahn (Illinois: Open Court, 1995), 59.

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "The Political Paradox," in *History and Truth*, trans. and intro. by Charles A. Kelbley, foreword to the new ed. by David M. Rasmussen (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 247-270.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Just*, trans. by David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Political and Social Essays*, ed. by David Stewart and Joseph Bien (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974).

contributes a different and significant understanding of how socio-political philosophy should conduct its task.”¹³

Thus, to the earlier question “What is special with Ricoeur?” this would be my answer: Ricoeur’s political philosophy offers a unique approach and an altogether distinct perspective to politics. Ricoeur himself is very much aware of the importance of political philosophy in any philosophical endeavor. He declares: “Every great philosophy attempts to understand political reality in order to understand itself.”¹⁴ And so owing to the depth and richness of Ricoeur’s political philosophy, I have chosen some elements from his thoughts as my reading lens in this study. But before I proceed with my discussion on Ricoeur’s political thoughts, I will first present the background context of Duterte’s rise to power and a number of theories – by a well-informed scholar and a respected journalist – which seek to explain why Duterte has remained a popular leader among many Filipinos notwithstanding the number of controversies that he had gotten himself into. I will next present selected elements from Ricoeur’s political thoughts. After this, I will then employ these selected elements to carry out my Ricoeurian reading of Duterte’s popular presidency.

The Background Context of Duterte’s Rise to Power

In his recently-published book *The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt against Elite Democracy*, Richard Javad Heydarian claims that one of the primary factors that catapulted Duterte to power is “the deepening public dissatisfaction with business-as-usual practices of the (democratic) political elite.”¹⁵ As Thomas Pepinsky observes, under the administration of then president Benigno Aquino, “growth rose modestly and macroeconomic performance was sound, but sharp inequalities lingered to feed

¹³ Todd S. Mei, introduction to *From Ricoeur to Action: The Socio-Political Significance of Ricoeur’s Thinking*, ed. by Todd S. Mei and David Lewin (London: Continuum, 2012), 2.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, quoted in *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵ Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt Against Elite Democracy* (Quezon City: Palgrave Pivot, 2018), 5.

popular frustration.”¹⁶ In fairness to the former president, however,

Aquino was widely viewed as honest and not beholden to particular interest groups. He was aided by a generally competent cabinet and skilled congressional leaders such as Senate president Franklin Drilon and House speaker Feliciano Belmonte. Aquino’s approach to politics could confound friends and foes alike: He had good political instincts, including a heathy (*sic*) disregard for the opinions of Manila’s many political pundits... The Aquino administration has been recognized for its sound macroeconomic management, which produced GDP growth rates that averaged 6.1 percent annually. Equally important, improvements made in fiscal and budgetary management allowed the administration to significantly increase the government’s “fiscal space”—that is, the resources available to initiate and expand national government programs. This allowed the government to ramp up spending on social services and infrastructure, as well as transfers to local governments.¹⁷

But then despite all these “good achievements” and positive plaudits from his supporters and the political elite, Aquino did not win the heart of the Filipino masses; rather, they were by and large discontented with his presidency. During his term, Aquino was seen as no different from the presidents who came before him; he “did not prioritize finding solutions to the complex and highly political problems afflicting the country’s agricultural sector.”¹⁸ In addition, Aquino’s “administration also failed to respond adequately to important problems such as severely inadequate infrastructure, low agricultural productivity and incomes, and persistent poverty.”¹⁹ Then came one of the biggest blows to the already suffering popularity of the Aquino

¹⁶ Thomas Pepinsky, “Southeast Asia: Voting Against Disorder,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2 (April 2017): 121.

¹⁷ David G. Timberman, “Elite Democracy Disrupted?” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no.4 (October 2016):136.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

presidency: the Maguindanao Massacre, wherein, 44 soldiers died in the hands of rebel groups due to a poorly coordinated military operation. This happened on January 2015, roughly a year before the 2016 elections.²⁰ That same year before the election, too, crime rates surged in the whole country and often, the criminals were in one way or another involved in drugs.²¹

Thus, against the backdrop “of simmering public dissatisfaction with the post-Marcos ‘elite democracy,’ which miserably failed to live up to its initial promise of social justice and sustainable development,”²² when Duterte decided to run for the highest public office in the Philippines, he saw exactly where he needed to strike to win over the Filipino populace. He made a bold “campaign promise: To restore peace and order within three to six months by any means possible, including extrajudicial killings and a declaration of martial law.”²³ This instantly clicked with the masses so that Duterte

enjoyed particularly strong support from taxi drivers, small shop owners, call-center agents, and overseas workers (with more than 70 percent of the last group voting for him). Such voters were worried that they would lose their fragile gains from the Philippine’s years of economic growth unless “order” could be restored.²⁴

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ To read on the surge of crime rate in the Philippines in 2015, see Bobot Sison Jr. and Cecille Suerte Felipe, “Philippine crime rate up by 46%,” *The Philippine Star* (August 2, 2015), <https://www.philstar.com/metro/2015/08/02/1483869/philippine-crime-rate-46>, accessed July 14, 2018. This increase in crime rate in 2015 is in stark contrast to the drop in crime rate since Duterte became president. To read on the drop of crime rate in the country this year, see Catherine Gonzales, “PH peace and order improved, crime rate dropped – PNP,” *Inquirer.net* (July 3, 2018), <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1006473/ph-peace-and-order-improved-crime-rate-dropped-pnp>, accessed July 14, 2018. See also Julio C. Teehankee and Mark R. Thompson, “Electing a Strongman,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 4 (October 2016): 125.

²² Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte*, 10.

²³ Teehankee and Thompson, “Electing a Strongman,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 4 (October 2016): 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

And the result, in the words of Jonathan Miller, was: “On election day, Duterte won 16.6 million votes, 6.6 million more than his closest rival, and more than any other president in Philippine history, bar the rigged re-election of Ferdinand Marcos in 1981.”²⁵ From the beginning, “Duterte’s agenda was stridently populist, and it appealed to the masses of impoverished Filipino voters fed up both with government corruption and the ongoing societal problem of drug trafficking.”²⁶ It would be wrong, however, to conclude that Duterte’s victory is thanks solely to the votes from the lowest strata of the Philippine electorate, meaning the poor, the jobless, and the uneducated. As Nicole Curato reveals, based on data from surveys, Duterte equally gained strong support from those who come from the middle and even the higher class of society.²⁷ On account of this, Julio Teehankee explains that

[t]he Duterte phenomenon was not a revolt of the poor but was a protest of the middle class who suffered from lack of public service, endured the horrendous land and air traffic, feared the breakdown of peace and order, and silently witnessed their tax money siphoned by corruption despite promises of improved governance.²⁸

Hence, the Duterte presidency did not only become a reality but also a phenomenon.²⁹ Duncan McCargo argues that this Duterte phenomenon could be due to Duterte’s “authenticity and masculinity” that the Filipino masses admire in him.³⁰ However, Heydarian contends that

²⁵ Jonathan Miller, *Duterte Harry: Fire and Fury in the Philippines* (London: Scribe Publications, 2018), 22.

²⁶ Ted Galen Carpenter, “The Populist Surge and the Rebirth of Foreign Policy Nationalism,” *SAIS Review* 37, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2017): 41.

²⁷ Nicole Curato, “We Need to Talk About Rody,” in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency*, ed. by Nicole Curato (Quezon City: BUGHAW, 2017), 15.

²⁸ Julio Teehankee, “Was Duterte’s Rise Inevitable?” in *ibid.*, 52.

²⁹ See Ramon C. Casiple, “The Duterte Presidency as a Phenomenon,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (August 2016): 179-184.

³⁰ Duncan McCargo, “Duterte’s Mediated Populism,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (August 2016): 188.

[t]he rise of Duterte... can't be understood in isolation. It has to be situated within a broader context of how populism takes root in rapidly modernizing nations like the Philippines, because Duterte is, first and foremost, a populist... And the rise of populists like Duterte is part of a global trend, which has inundated the establishment in both fledgling and developed democracies.³¹

Whatever the case, Duterte's ascension to power came to be because he seized "the exact moment" when the Aquino-led regime "was most vulnerable."³² In short, Duterte won it big time because he "struck the right chords" at the right time.³³

Duterte's Popular Presidency

Since Day 1, Duterte has continued to enjoy a wide popularity among many Filipinos. Ronald D. Holmes calls this sustained Duterte popularity as "remarkable" and this is "because Duterte's approval and trust ratings remained unchanged despite the contentious issues his regime faces."³⁴ Miller enumerates the most controversial issues that hounded Duterte since he became president, among them: Duterte's infamous bloody war on drugs which has claimed more than 7,000 lives including that of an innocent teenager, 17-year old Kian Loyd delos Santos; Duterte's giving a go-signal for the late dictator Marcos to be buried in the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* (Heroes' Cemetery); Duterte's cursing of the Pope when the latter caused heavy traffic in Manila for his Papal Visit; Duterte's rape joke and constant polemics against the Catholic Church and its leaders, etc.³⁵

³¹ Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte*, 9. According to Benjamin Moffitt, a populist is a politician whose "political style that features an appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite', 'bad manners' and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat." For further reading, see Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 45.

³² Teehankee, "Was Duterte's Rise Inevitable?" in *A Duterte Reader*, 52.

³³ Casiple, "The Duterte Presidency as a Phenomenon," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (August 2016): 182.

³⁴ Ronald D. Holmes, "Who Supports Rodrigo Duterte?" in *A Duterte Reader*, 58.

³⁵ Miller, *Duterte Harry*, passim.

Going back to Holmes, he himself made a meticulous research on all the Performance and Trust Ratings surveys made during the first year of Duterte's presidency. Holmes's findings show that Duterte has consistently enjoyed "high approval and trust ratings" throughout his first 365 days in office.³⁶ As for the reason why, Holmes theorizes – based also on the survey data that he had gathered – that it could be partly because the public believed that Duterte was able to fulfill his campaign promises, especially the fight against criminality and the proliferation of drugs.³⁷ Another factor that Holmes saw that contributed to Duterte's continuing popularity is the public's appreciation of how Duterte has been helping the poor.³⁸

In an online article for *The Saturday Paper*, Hamish McDonald lists a number of reasons why Duterte continues to be popular among the majority of Filipinos based on surveys and his personal interviews with Peter Wallace (an Australian businessman who has been living in the Philippines for more than 40 years) and Carlos Conde (a Manila-based researcher for Human Rights Watch). First, there's the fact the Filipinos are generally "remarkably tolerant" so that even if Duterte continues to curse and speaks vulgar language in his speeches, the people do not mind.³⁹ Even the recent controversy that Duterte himself caused after he called God "stupid" for having also created the serpent and the apple of sin that would only lead to the downfall of Adam and Eve,⁴⁰ McDonald believes that Duterte will most likely "get away with it."⁴¹ Second, there's the people's perception

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁹ Hamish McDonald, "What makes the Philippines' Duterte popular," *The Saturday Paper* 212 (July 7-13, 2018), https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2018/07/07/what-makes-the-philippines-duterte-popular/1530885_6006512, accessed July 15, 2018.

⁴⁰ For further reading on Duterte's "God is stupid" remark, see John Sharman, "Rodrigo Duterte sparks outrage by calling God 'a stupid son of a bitch,'" *Independent* (June 26, 2018), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-god-stupid-son-bitch-philippines-catholic-country-christian-a8416746.html>, accessed July 15, 2018.

⁴¹ McDonald, "What makes the Philippines' Duterte popular," *The Saturday Paper* 212 (July 7-13, 2018),

of Duterte as truly one of them even if he comes “from a well-off political family and has a law degree from one of the country’s top universities.”⁴² “That’s been his appeal, and the reason for his continuing popularity is that he is genuinely from them, and they know that,”⁴³ McDonald quotes Wallace as saying. Third, surveys continually show that “most Filipinos actually feel safer under Duterte, whereas there had been a perception of rising crime under his predecessor Benigno Aquino.”⁴⁴ Ironically, this is because of the killings which Duterte himself promised during his campaign. In a country like the Philippines where the justice system is as slow as a snail, the killings are the swifter way to justice. The killings are thus a major factor to Duterte’s continuing popularity. “If you take away the killings,” McDonald quotes Conde, Duterte would have been a mere ordinary, no-fuss, “provincial politician.”⁴⁵ And fourth, the people sees Duterte as not corrupt; he “is not someone who cares about making money. This stands in sharp contrast to his predecessors,” says McDonald, since “corruption is a theme of presidential downfalls in the Philippines, from Ferdinand Marcos to Joseph Estrada and Gloria Arroyo.”⁴⁶

Indeed, despite his enigmatic personality, President Duterte has successfully endeared himself to the Filipino populace, not because his presidency has been near perfect, but because the Filipinos have faith that he “possesses the important leadership attributes that previous presidents lacked.”⁴⁷ As respected philosophy professor from Mindanao Christopher Ryan Maboloc writes,

the trust and confidence of the Filipino people in Duterte remain high because they think that he delivers on his

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2018/07/07/what-makes-the-philippines-duterte-popular/15308856006512>, accessed July 15, 2018.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, “The Radical Politics of Nation-States: The Case of President Rodrigo Duterte,” *Journal of ASEAN Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018): 112. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v6i1.4458>.

promises. The problem is that the critics of the president express things without realizing that their judgments appear to be impositions of standards that are bred in the West.⁴⁸

The Paradox of Political Power⁴⁹

As I mentioned earlier in this paper, citing Monteil, despite Ricoeur's late focused engagement in political philosophy, "the question of power is constantly present in his thinking."⁵⁰ Ricoeur himself affirms that, "Power is the central question of politics."⁵¹ But what is political power? Commenting on Ricoeur, Bernard Dauenhauer defines it as "the power that people who belong to a geohistorical community accrue together by acting in concert to preserve and improve it."⁵² Simply put, political power is "power in common", that is, it is something that arises from the "collective or shared will [of the people] to live together" in peace and harmony.⁵³ As such, it ideally entails a "more participatory form of politics."⁵⁴ That is to say, where power is held in common, the governed are not mere spectators; rather, they actively participate in the "collective approval or disapproval of political

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁹ A major portion in this section is based from my forthcoming article "Ricoeur's Hermeneutics: Transforming Political Structures into Just Institutions through the Critical Appropriation of Political Power."

⁵⁰ Monteil, "Paradoxes in Ricoeur's Political Thinking," in *Eco-etica, vol. 4, Ethics and Politics: With a Third Part on Paul Ricoeur*, 227.

⁵¹ Ricoeur quoted in Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Paul Ricoeur: The Promise and Risk of Politics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 32.

⁵² Bernard P. Dauenhauer, "Elements of Ricoeur's Early Political Thought," in *Phenomenology of the Political*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Lester Embree (New York: Springer Science, 2000), 78. To read more on Ricoeur's thoughts on political power, especially in his later career, see Ricoeur, *The Just*, 80ff.

⁵³ Ricoeur cited in Molly Harkirat Mann, *Ricoeur, Rawls, and Capability Justice: Civic Phronesis and Equality* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 20. Political power as "power in common" is originally Hannah Arendt's concept which Ricoeur also adopts. For details, see Hannah Arendt, *The Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 143.

⁵⁴ Mary Abascàl-Hildebrand, "The Forming of a Civic Sensibility in Public Administration: Implications of a Ricoeurian Ethics Test for Democratic Economic and Politics," *Administrative Theory & Praxis* 24, no. 4 (2002): 665.

decisions.”⁵⁵ Nonetheless, it is obvious that “political power, as power-in-common, is fragile. It exists only so long as people continue to act together... [and] so long as people want to live with and for one another.”⁵⁶ It is necessary, hence, that there should be cooperation, collaboration, and dialogue among the people; otherwise, things will go awry because in Ricoeur’s view everything political is fragile.⁵⁷

In itself, then, political power is not evil; Ricoeur even sees it as something that advances “the public good”⁵⁸ and likewise considers it as “the highest of all the levels of power.”⁵⁹ This is because, as Dauenhauer explains, political power is there to prevent discord and conflict in society.⁶⁰ And yet, as history would also attest, it can happen that in the exercise of such power, the ones possessing it start to dominate, constrain freedom, and inflict violence. Thus political power becomes evil; “it becomes power over other people.”⁶¹

This is the paradox of political power: on one hand it is good, because it is necessary in holding together political structures; on the other hand it is evil, because it is prone to perversion and abuse.⁶² As David Kaplan paradoxically affirms, “Political power is both rational and irrational.”⁶³ It entails both opportunity and risk because political power can either turn a political agent into a tyrant or into a “true magistrate.”⁶⁴ This is the invariable nature

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 668.

⁵⁶ Dauenhauer, *Promise and Risk of Politics*, 155.

⁵⁷ David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 185.

⁵⁸ Paul Ricoeur, “The Moral, the Ethical, and the Political,” in *Paul Ricoeur & the Task of Political Philosophy*, ed. by Greg S. Johnson and Dan R. Stiver (London: Lexington Books, 2013), 22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁰ Dauenhauer, *Promise and Risk of Politics*, 186.

⁶¹ Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* (London: Routledge, 2003), 124.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 111. For further reading on the paradox of political power, see Ricoeur, “The Political Paradox,” in *History and Truth*, 247-270.

⁶³ Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory*, 131.

⁶⁴ See Dries Deweer, “Ricoeur on Citizenship: A Picture of a Personalist Republicanism,” in *Paul Ricoeur & the Task of Political Philosophy*, 38. See also Paul Ricoeur, “Consciousness and the Unconscious,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations*:

of political power: it was, it is, and it will always be a paradox. As Ricoeur reflects,

[t]he surprise is that there is no real political surprise. Techniques change, human relationships evolve depending upon things, and yet power unveils the same paradox, that of a twofold progress in rationality and in possibilities for perversion.⁶⁵

So whether we like it or not, political power has both a positive and a negative side. Because of this, Ricoeur cautions that for us to arrive at a wholistic reflection of political power, it is not correct to solely emphasize either its positive or its negative dimension. We need to take into account both, preserving the paradoxical character of political power. Ricoeur himself categorically confirms that, "It is necessary to hold out against the temptation to oppose two styles of political reflection, one which stresses the rationality... the other emphasizing the violence and untruth of power... This paradox *must* (my emphasis) be retained."⁶⁶ The two sides of the paradox have to be equally considered.

Having a wholistic perspective of power, however, does not mean that we will now casually allow political evils to flourish. On the contrary, it remains our duty as citizens to see to it that politics does not become a breeding ground for great evils.⁶⁷ This is why Ricoeur would advise the citizenry to be politically vigilant. It is every citizen's responsibility to ensure that political power is justly exercised and "kept within its boundaries."⁶⁸ As Timothy Maddox warns, if we don't stay politically vigilant, it could lead to

Essays in Hermeneutics, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 112, 114.

⁶⁵ Ricoeur, "The Political Paradox," in *History and Truth*, 248.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 248-249.

⁶⁷ See Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc Launay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 98.

⁶⁸ Ricoeur, *The Just*, 80. See also Deweer, "Ricoeur on Citizenship: A Picture of a Personalist Republicanism," in *Paul Ricoeur & the Task of Political Philosophy*, 40.

the rise of dictatorships.⁶⁹ And for Ricoeur, this is a “critical task.”⁷⁰

According to one Ricoeurian scholar, political power “is always open, an always unfinished project, but it is also unavoidably risky.”⁷¹ For this reason, political vigilance is imperative.⁷² The paradoxical nature of political power is such that foregoing political vigilance would immediately mean courting danger and perhaps even disaster. Moreover, when the citizenry are politically vigilant, they are able to “participate in the care for the just exercise of political power.”⁷³ But how is it done? What can the citizenry concretely do to ensure that their political leaders will not become megalomaniac tyrants? For Ricoeur, this is where ethics comes in.

The Role of Ethics in Politics

Since for Ricoeur politics is fundamentally Janus-faced owing to “the two-sided nature of political power,”⁷⁴ something has to be done “to minimize the impact of political paradox.”⁷⁵ Ricoeur, following the political philosophy of his contemporary Eric Weil, insists that ethics should be efficiently integrated into politics.⁷⁶ The reason for this is that it is ethics that “provides rational order and curbs the violence that politics engenders.”⁷⁷ That is why

⁶⁹ Timothy D.F. Maddox, “Recognition, Legitimization, and the Suggestion of Tacit Slave-Ideology Today: A Ricoeurian Investigation, in *Paul Ricoeur & the Task of Political Philosophy*, 147.

⁷⁰ Ricoeur, “The Moral, the Ethical, and the Political,” in *ibid.*, 24.

⁷¹ Dimitrios E. Akrivoulis, “Paul Ricoeur,” in *Palgrave Advances in Continental Political Thought*, ed. Terrell Carver and James Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 232.

⁷² Ricoeur, “The Political Paradox,” in *History and Truth*, 261.

⁷³ Deweer, “Ricoeur on Citizenship: A Picture of a Personalist Republicanism,” in *Paul Ricoeur & the Task of Political Philosophy*, 40.

⁷⁴ Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, 97.

⁷⁵ Ruby S. Suazo, “Ricoeur’s Ethics of Politics and Democracy,” *Philosophy Today* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 700.

⁷⁶ See Deweer, “Ricoeur on Citizenship: A Picture of a Personalist Republicanism,” in *Paul Ricoeur & the Task of Political Philosophy*, 39.

⁷⁷ Suazo, “Ricoeur’s Ethics of Politics and Democracy,” *Philosophy Today* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 701.

ethics and political vigilance are closely linked to one another. Ethics is the primary instrument of political vigilance. The essence of political vigilance is, in fact, none other than this: keeping a careful watch on how well (or how badly) ethics is incorporated, observed, and preserved in political affairs.

Ricoeur's notion of ethics, however, should not be misinterpreted as akin to moralism. In Ricoeur's view, ethics and morality are not exact synonyms. Ethics precedes morality.⁷⁸ Ethics is what tells us the ideal *telos* of our being a political animal, which is: "*aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions.*"⁷⁹ Morality, on the other hand, is what tells us what our obligations and duties are so that we can attain the ethical aim.⁸⁰ For Ricoeur, only when we have passed through ethics and morality is it possible to arrive at *phronesis*, the practical wisdom that lets us anchor politics on justice.⁸¹ As it were, "politics is always a struggle in some ways."⁸² Thus without *phronesis*, it is extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, to realize a just politics, because justice entails that political authorities and institutions should "hold together the multiple interests and goals of its members."⁸³ This explains why in Ricoeur's ethical theory, ethics, morality, and *phronesis* should always go together.⁸⁴ Subsequently, the ethics that should be well integrated into politics has to already contain both morality and *phronesis*.⁸⁵

Ricoeur, of course, is realistic enough to recognize that a politics that is able to perfectly integrate ethics into its sphere is a

⁷⁸ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 170. Briefly, Ricoeur defines ethics as "the *aim* of an accomplished life" and morality as "the articulation of this aim in *norms*." Hence, the two are related but they are not exactly synonymous.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 172. Emphasis by Ricoeur.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² David Pellauer, *Ricoeur: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2007), 105.

⁸³ Dauenhauer, *Promise and Risk of Politics*, 24.

⁸⁴ See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 170-194.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

utopia.⁸⁶ Be that as it may, Ricoeur believes that this utopia is not something that will forever remain a dream, always out of human reach. The utopia of a just politics is possible. To make this utopia into a reality, the ethical aim has to be realized; but for it to happen, the ethical aim has to first pass through “the sieve of the norm.”⁸⁷ This means that the ethical desire has to be translated into a moral “ought” through the aid of *phronesis*. While this moral “ought” takes time and relentless effort to be fully realized, there are concrete indicators that signify “*the actualization of the ethical intention in the political sphere.*”⁸⁸ These include the following: 1) those in power fulfill their promises;⁸⁹ 2) the people have the freedom to openly agree or disagree with the government;⁹⁰ 3) there is an independent media, and hence, press freedom;⁹¹ 4) the people have “free access to sources of information, knowledge, and science;”⁹² 5) there are “free elections in a multi-party system;”⁹³ 6) there is an independent judiciary;⁹⁴ 7) there is “minimum violence” because only “legitimate violence” is permitted;⁹⁵ and 8) the people enjoy safe and peaceful living, without having to fear any threats against their persons and properties.⁹⁶

⁸⁶ Ricoeur, “Ethics and Politics,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 334.

⁸⁷ Dauenhauer, *Promise and Risk of Politics*, 175.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* Emphasis by Ricoeur.

⁸⁹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 124.

⁹⁰ Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, 141.

⁹¹ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 268.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Dries Deweer, *Ricoeur's Personalist Republicanism: Personhood and Citizenship* (London: Lexington Books, 2017), 66.

⁹⁴ James Wiley, *Politics and the Concept of the Political: The Political Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 99.

⁹⁵ See Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 234. See also Deweer, *Ricoeur's Personalist Republicanism: Personhood and Citizenship*, 81.

⁹⁶ See Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 163. Ricoeur stresses that the first rule of every sovereign state – meaning, not only ethical states – is “to provide security for all its members.” Meanwhile, in addition to the eight indicators I listed above, there are still other indicators which I can no longer include here for lack of space (I will elaborate the above indicators in the next section).

All these indicators constitute what we might call the “yardstick” of political vigilance because their presence or absence in a political domain is what any conscientious exercise of political vigilance has to carefully watch out for. For example, when press freedom is suspended by the ruling politicians: that should already be a signal for everyone to be on their toes. Or when the people begin to constantly fear for the safety of their persons and properties: this should be the cue for the citizenry “to assert its power over the governing authority by compelling it to do its tasks.”⁹⁷ In other words, these indicators are what tell whether ethics has been successfully integrated into politics. We can thus call these indicators the “marks” of an ethical state, a state where “freedom *and* justice” reign supreme.⁹⁸ It is therefore paramount to keep in mind how important these indicators are. They are what will safeguard the “spaces of freedom” in the political sphere.⁹⁹ And where these “spaces of freedom” are intact, there is also “the good life.”¹⁰⁰ And where “the good life” is found, that is precisely where justice blossoms; for “justice is organically bound to the wish for a good life.”¹⁰¹

So, ethics for Ricoeur, is not about moralizing. Its role in politics is more on ensuring that “freedom *and* justice” are well and alive in the state.¹⁰² It is for this reason that political vigilance necessarily involves ethics. Ethics provides morality and *phronesis*, the essential ingredients in making political vigilance an efficient instrument in containing the possible negative effects of the paradox of political power.

⁹⁷ Suazo, “Ricoeur’s Ethics of Politics and Democracy,” *Philosophy Today* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 704.

⁹⁸ Wiley, *Politics and the Concept of the Political: The Political Imagination*, 99.

⁹⁹ Ricoeur, “Ethics and Politics,” in *From Text to Action*, 334.

¹⁰⁰ Dauenhauer, *Promise and Risk of Politics*, 293.

¹⁰¹ Ricoeur, *The Just*, xix.

¹⁰² Wiley, *Politics and the Concept of the Political: The Political Imagination*, 99.

Reading Duterte's Popular Presidency through the Lens of Ricoeur's Political Thoughts

Having presented some selected elements from Ricoeur's political thoughts, I will now do a Ricoeurian reading of Duterte's popular presidency using these very same elements as evaluative tools in analyzing: 1) whether President Duterte is indeed a "threat to democracy"; 2) whether the Duterte government still falls within the ethical; and 3) whether Duterte's popular presidency actually reflects the political vision of contemporary Filipinos. To carry out my analyses, I will divide my discussion into the following subsections: a) Duterte and Political Power; b) Duterte and the Ethical State; c) The Political Vision of Contemporary Filipinos.

a) Duterte and Political Power

In 2017, *Time Magazine* included Duterte among The 100 Most Influential People.¹⁰³ This inclusion signifies that Duterte's popularity has extended even beyond the Philippines. At the same time, it also signifies that the world has recognized how much Duterte wields political power in his country. However, to the eyes of his critics, the powerful Duterte has almost, if not all, "the hallmarks of dictators."¹⁰⁴ This is because they see him as showing "an increasingly more pronounced authoritarian tendency."¹⁰⁵ He is therefore a tyrannical leader for them. This anti-Duterte sentiment is further bolstered by the U.S. intelligence department's allegation that Duterte is a "threat to democracy."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ See César Gaviria, "Rodrigo Duterte," no date of publication, <http://time.com/collection/2017-time-100/4736340/rodrigo-duterte/>, accessed July 5, 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *Duterte Harry*, 118.

¹⁰⁵ RG Cruz, "Analyst says Duterte has growing dictatorial tendency; Palace say 'nonsense,'" *ABS-CBN News* (July 20, 2018), <https://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/07/20/18/analyst-says-duterte-has-growing-dictatorial-tendency-palace-says-nonsense>, accessed July 31, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Neil Jerome Morales, "Philippines 'concerned' as U.S. intelligence tags Duterte a threat to democracy," *Reuters* (February 21, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-politics/philippines-concerned-as-u-s-intelligence-tags-duterte-a-threat-to-democracy-idUSKCN1G5075>, accessed July 14, 2018.

But to his supporters, who far outnumber his critics, Duterte is a hero, their defender from ruthless criminals and the many evil effects of illegal drugs.¹⁰⁷ And so for them, he is very much a “true magistrate.”¹⁰⁸ As Maboloc puts it, “Duterte carries with him an inner quality that most of our politicians do not possess – political will.”¹⁰⁹

From the viewpoint of Ricoeur, these contrasting perceptions of Duterte are nothing “but an expression of the paradoxical character of the power” that Duterte holds.¹¹⁰ Obviously, the presidency is as much a paradox as any political power, containing both evil and good sides. The right approach to this paradox, according to Ricoeur, is by looking at both sides to avoid overemphasizing just one side.¹¹¹ Apparently, it is only in this way that we can get a wholistic view of the power in question; it is only in this way that we can objectively look at political power without giving in to our political biases.

The problem in Duterte’s case is that mainstream media and most of his critics highlight the evil side of his presidency without giving a slight recognition to its good side. Of course, there is no denying that under Duterte, there have been a number of political evils that offended and angered some Filipinos. These evils are mostly connected to his bloody war on drugs which is blamed for the rise in the spate of killings throughout the Philippines. But it would not be fair to say that Duterte has done nothing good for the country.¹¹² If we take our cue from Ricoeur, a purely one-

¹⁰⁷ McDonald, “What makes the Philippines’ Duterte popular,” *The Saturday Paper* 212 (July 7-13, 2018), <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2018/07/07/what-makes-the-philippines-duterte-popular/15308856006512>, accessed July 15, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Ricoeur, “Consciousness and the Unconscious,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 112, 114.

¹⁰⁹ Christopher Ryan B. Maboloc, “Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte,” *Iqra: Journal of the Al Qalam Institute* 4, no. 1 (2017): 4.

¹¹⁰ Akrivoulis, “Paul Ricoeur,” in *Palgrave Advances in Continental Political Thought*, 232.

¹¹¹ Ricoeur, “The Political Paradox,” in *History and Truth*, 248-249.

¹¹² For a list of some of President Duterte’s achievements, see Jelly Musico, “Gov’t trumpets accomplishments ahead of Duterte’s 3rd SONA,” *Philippines News*

sided view of a paradoxical reality is always insufficient. Therefore, looking at it as a whole, the paradox of Duterte's presidency is that, while his war on drugs has claimed the lives of thousands, it has also saved the lives of millions. This is not necessarily a pro-Duterte statement. The statistics obtained by *Rappler*, a known anti-Duterte social news network, reveal that for the entire 2014 alone, in the whole country, "the total number of reported crimes was 1.2 million."¹¹³ These crimes include murder, rape, robbery, and carnapping, and most of the perpetrators of these crimes have been positively identified as drug users. Why is it that there were no rallies in the streets calling for justice to the more than one million victims of these crimes?

Those who are against Duterte may not admit it, but if truth be told, the real threat to our democracy is the problem of drugs in our society. The U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) matter-of-factly confirms that drug abuse and crime are linked.¹¹⁴ Throughout the world, too, most crimes are committed by those who have a history of drug abuse. That's simply because drugs ruin the mind. Another U.S. agency, the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), reports that the "negative consequences of drug abuse affect not only individuals who abuse drugs but also their families and friends, various businesses, and government resources."¹¹⁵ Let's take the case of a four-month old baby who was raped in Carcar City, Cebu in February 2017: five of the six suspects were drug users.¹¹⁶ Then there's the case of a mother

Agency (July 22, 2018), <http://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1042250>, accessed July 31, 2018.

¹¹³ Pia Ranada, "A look at the state of crime, drugs in the Philippines," *Rappler* (January 5, 2016), <https://www.rappler.com/nation/118004-crime-drugs-philippines>, accessed July 31, 2018.

¹¹⁴ National Institutes of Health, "Addiction and the Criminal Justice System," Fact sheet (no date), <https://report.nih.gov/nihfactsheets/ViewFactSheet.aspx?csid=22>, accessed July 31, 2018.

¹¹⁵ National Drug Intelligence Center, "The Impact of Drugs on Society," Fact sheet (January 2006), <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs11/18862/impact.htm>, accessed July 31, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Nestle Semilla, 4-month-old baby raped in Cebu; Pa, 5 others tagged as suspects," *Inquirer.net* (February 10, 2017), <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/870296/4->

who was killed by her own son in Pardo, Cebu City: the son was not only a drug addict but a suspected pusher as well.¹¹⁷ There was also this “student believed to be high on drugs [who] was arrested for allegedly trying to rape his 81-year old grandmother” in Ilocos Sur.¹¹⁸ These three horrible crimes are not isolated cases. There are many such crimes that have not been reported in the news media. The disconcerting fact is that these crimes are likely possibilities to anyone who lives in a locality where drug addicts abound. Should we be blind to this reality just because we don’t like Duterte? Yet this, ironically, is the harsh reality that Duterte wants to liberate the Filipinos from: that is, the proliferation of drugs in the country that is responsible for the rise of crime rate throughout the archipelago. In spite of this, Duterte’s critics refuse to recognize the drug problem that is afflicting the Filipino citizenry; they seem unconcerned about the widespread pathology of drug addiction and abuse in our society. However, Ricoeur would remind us that political power is precisely meant “to preserve and improve” the people’s lives.¹¹⁹ How, then, can those in power do their mandate of preserving and improving the people’s lives if they don’t do anything concrete to stop the proliferation of drugs that can very much destroy lives and, by extension, also democracy?

I’m not saying that the war on drugs is correct and that it is the only way to address the drug problem in the country. What I’m saying is that Duterte’s use of his political power to battle against this problem is not a pure picture of evil. There is a good side to it. Political power is a paradox; even if we refuse to see the good side, it is just there. And for most Filipinos, the good side is what they see; they are now relishing it. They are now enjoying

month-old-baby-raped-in-cebu-pa-5-others-tagged-as-suspects, accessed July 31, 2018.

¹¹⁷ Ador Vincent S. Mayol, “Mother killed by his own son in Pardo,” *Cebu Daily News* (November 1, 2016), <https://cebudailynews.inquirer.net/110638/mother-killed-by-own-son-in-pardo>, accessed July 31, 2016.

¹¹⁸ Raymund Catindig, “Student held for rape try on grandma, 81,” *The Philippine Star* (March 19, 2018), <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2018/03/19/1798061/student-held-rape-try-grandma-81>, accessed July 31, 2018.

¹¹⁹ Dauenhauer, “Elements of Ricoeur’s Early Political Thought,” in *Phenomenology of the Political*, 78.

“the good life” that they never experienced before when they could not simply go out into the streets at night.¹²⁰ That is why they are giving Duterte’s war on drugs their collective approval. And since for Ricoeur political power is fundamentally power in common, then this collective approval signifies that most Filipinos do not see Duterte’s exercise of political power as a threat to their freedom or to democracy at large, but rather as a source and sign of social security.

I would therefore say that the U.S. intelligence department, whatever their bases for it, got it wrong when they tagged Duterte as a threat to democracy. It should be remembered that democracy is a government *of* the people, *by* the people, and *for* the people. In Ricoeur’s terminology, it is “power in common.” If the sole basis of the U.S. intelligence department is the notoriety of Duterte’s war on drugs, then they have failed to consider that despite the fatalities, most Filipinos are giving it their full support. “Duterte’s popularity and the people’s acceptance of his militant ways,” Maboloc explains, “are the results of the desire to eradicate the menacing presence of thugs in Philippine society.”¹²¹ In short, it is the people who have spoken: Duterte is the kind of leader that they want. For them, he is never a threat to Philippine

¹²⁰ In his writings, Ricoeur did not provide an exact or fixed definition of “the good life.” He merely describes it as being characterized by the presence of just institutions. But even the idea of “just institutions” is left undefined by Ricoeur in categorical terms. This is what George Taylor stresses in his study: *Ricoeur did not give a specific definition of “just institutions.”* Ricoeur’s idea of justice, too, as Geoffrey Dierckxsens proves, is just as ambiguous. I am pointing these out because anti-Duterte Ricoeurian scholars could always argue that “this” or “that” is not what Ricoeur really meant by “the good life.” But if we be honest, Ricoeur’s philosophy is continuously open to various interpretations. In my interpretation, “the good life” is the peaceful and worry-free life that the people enjoy in common; and in my opinion, this is the kind of life that most Filipinos now enjoy under Duterte. They are now living peacefully and are worry-free because they know they are now safe from the possible attacks and assaults of drug addicts and drugged criminals. See George H. Taylor, “Ricoeur and Just Institutions,” *Philosophy Today* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 571ff. See also Geoffrey Dierckxsens, “The Ambiguity of Justice: Paul Ricoeur on Universalism and Evil,” *Ricoeur Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): 32ff.

¹²¹ Maboloc, “Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte,” *Iqra: Journal of the Al Qalam Institute* 4, no. 1 (2017): 13.

democracy. On the contrary, Duterte is even at the forefront in protecting the country's democracy.¹²²

So even if Duterte's presidency has given rise to many political evils, it remains one side of the coin. There is still another side: the good, though less acknowledged, side. The majority of Filipinos who continue to support Duterte believe that his style of governance represents "the very idea of what constitutes good government."¹²³ This is the reason why, despite the controversies, Duterte remains a popular president in these past two years that he has been in office. Anti-Duterte groups and individuals, however, cannot and perhaps will never get to understand the practical wisdom of entrusting the highest office of the country to a man like Duterte who has all the signs of "a new dictator in the making."¹²⁴ But for Ricoeur, that's how politics goes, especially in a democracy like the Philippines. Wherever we go, politics is always a risky business, and perhaps even more so when your country's president is named Rodrigo Duterte. Setting all biases aside, though, is Duterte really a threat to democracy? As far as my Ricoeurian reading of his presidency goes, I don't think so.

b) Duterte and the Ethical State

One of the foremost issues of Duterte's critics with him is that he appears to have no care for ethics. Since he became president, thousands who got involved into drugs – whether proven or merely suspected – have been killed as he himself had promised during the campaign period. Duterte, it seems, is a leader who wants to be above the law. Precisely, he came to be considered as a strongman because he wants to run politics in his own unconventional way.¹²⁵ From a strict religious standpoint, there is no question that Duterte has long crossed the boundary of the ethical. Even if reports and statistics show that criminal activities have significantly lessened and drug problem has considerably

¹²² See Pia Ranada, "Duterte on Independence Day: Protect democracy, cherish PH sovereignty," *Rappler* (June 12, 2018), <https://www.rappler.com/nation/204667-rodrigo-duterte-2018-independence-day-message>, accessed July 31, 2018.

¹²³ Pellauer, *Ricoeur*, 89.

¹²⁴ Miller, *Duterte Harry*, 16.

¹²⁵ Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte*, 9.

lowered, the killings remain ethically unjustifiable.¹²⁶ From a Ricoeurian standpoint, however, this may not be the case. The Duterte government may still be well within the ethical. Let us examine why.

As I explained earlier, the ethical for Ricoeur, especially in the realm of politics, is not about following to the letter certain religious precepts; rather, it is more about ensuring that “freedom *and* justice” thrive in the state.¹²⁷ One of the marks of an ethical state is when its political leaders stay true to their promises. As Samia Hesni elucidates,

[m]aking a promise is inherently ethical. It lies in “the obligation to safeguard the institution... and to respond to the trust that the other places in my faithfulness.” Keeping one’s word... serves as something that remains through time; it is “the perseverance of faithfulness.”¹²⁸

In politics, we know that promises are usually empty rhetoric. But for Ricoeur, promises are sacrosanct. When I make a promise, I should do my best to fulfill it because the ones who receive my promise, “in counting on me, on my capacity to keep my word, calls me to responsibility, renders me responsible.”¹²⁹ Now in the case of Duterte, Curato attests that his “appeal lies in his promise to overcome the corrupt bureaucracy in the justice system and deliver peace and order in a swift and decisive manner.”¹³⁰ And this appeal has not waned to this day because Duterte is fulfilling his promises, among them: to aggressively fight the worsening drug problem in the country; to curb corruption in the government; to build, build, and build more infrastructure

¹²⁶ See Rambo Talabong, “Except for killings, all crimes drop in Duterte’s 1st year,” *Rappler* (August 13, 2017), <https://www.rappler.com/nation/178494-crimes-killings-pnp-statistics-duterte-first-year>, accessed July 5, 2018.

¹²⁷ Wiley, *Politics and the Concept of the Political: The Political Imagination*, 99.

¹²⁸ Samia Hesni, “Personhood, Promises, and the Politics of Narrative: A Ricoeurian Critique of Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*,” *Philosophy Today* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 87, quoting Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 124, 123.

¹²⁹ Ricoeur, *The Just*, 7.

¹³⁰ Nicole Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte’s Rise to Power,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 100.

projects throughout the country; to address the long-standing Mindanao problem by signing the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL); to increase the salary of the police and the military; to extend the validity of passports from 5 to 10 years, etc. In spite of his “bad mouth”, Duterte is true to his words. He is delivering on his promises and the Filipino people can see that happening right before their very eyes. From a Ricoeurian point of view, then, Duterte’s staying true to his promises – at least this side of him – is an indicator that he is ethical. This contention may seem quite simplistic at first sight, but if we dig deeper, what Duterte is doing is actually something that former presidents were unable to do, especially the weak Noynoy Aquino. If it were not for his unbending political will, Duterte would not have fulfilled a single promise. But Duterte is a man who has a firm determination to keep his words, and for Ricoeur, that’s what every ethical statesman ought to be. Of course, it can always be argued that Duterte actually failed to fulfill some of his promises, like his promise to end the country’s drug problem in six months once he gets elected to the presidency. Still, that does not erase the fact that in general, he has stayed true to his promises. Therefore, because of Duterte’s wholehearted dedication to give flesh to his words, I would consider the government under his watch as ethical – at least in this aspect of being able to fulfill given promises.

Another mark of an ethical state for Ricoeur is the people having the freedom to openly agree or disagree with the government.¹³¹ I think the objective truth about the country’s situation does not require much elaboration, and that is, Filipinos in the minority who are anti-Duterte still retain their voice; they can still freely criticize Duterte all they want, even using the harshest and foulest language that they could think of against him. And they are doing it every day, noisily airing their *ad hominem*s and innuendos against Duterte without restraint in various social media and on national television. Even Senator Leila de Lima: she may be one of Duterte’s most outspoken critics, but she has not lost her voice albeit she is now imprisoned; she still continues to criticize the president and the government behind bars. And her imprisonment is not because of her

¹³¹ Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory*, 141.

criticisms against Duterte; she is accused of being involved in the illegal drug trade while she was Secretary of Justice of the previous administration. The same can be said of Senator Antonio Trillanes: until today, he still appears almost daily on national television to criticize Duterte. The government's amnesty granted to Trillanes for his acts of rebellion may have been revoked by the president, but such revocation does not deprive Trillanes of the right to freely and daily recite his repetitive litany of polemics and invectives against Duterte and his government. The leftists and other political activists are still also enjoying their freedom to openly disagree with the government. In Ricoeur's view, where differing voices and opinions can still be heard and expressed, this denotes not only a healthy democracy but also an ethical state.¹³² Thus, in my Ricoeurian reading of the present political affairs in the country, the Philippines qualifies as an ethical state – at least in this aspect of being able to safeguard this fundamental cornerstone of democracy which is freedom of speech or expression.

Further, four other marks of an ethical state according to Ricoeur include: an independent media, and hence, press freedom;¹³³ the people having “free access to sources of information, knowledge, and science;”¹³⁴ “free elections in a multi-party system;”¹³⁵ and an independent judiciary.¹³⁶ None of these have been repressed or suppressed by the Duterte government. From the moment Duterte was elected president until the present, ABS-CBN, *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, *Rappler* and other anti-Duterte news media have never let a day pass without releasing a negative report against the former Davao City mayor. This only goes to show that press freedom in the country is very much alive. Otherwise, we would not have heard or read a single iota of negative report against Duterte from these media

¹³² See Abascàl-Hildebrand, “The Forming of a Civic Sensibility in Public Administration: Implications of a Ricoeurian Ethics Test for Democratic Economic and Politics,” *Administrative Theory & Praxis* 24, no. 4 (2002):667.

¹³³ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 268.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Deweer, *Ricoeur's Personalist Republicanism: Personhood and Citizenship*, 66.

¹³⁶ Wiley, *Politics and the Concept of the Political: The Political Imagination*, 99.

until today. But that is not the case. Meanwhile, less than a month into his presidency, Duterte signed *Executive Order No. 02*, also known as the Freedom of Information (FOI) Program, that requires the full disclosure of all public documents and any information requested by any Filipino from all government offices under the executive branch.¹³⁷ This is a tangible testament of Duterte's commitment to give the public free access to sources of information. Then on August 3, 2017 Duterte also signed *Republic Act No. 10931* or the "Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act" that allows any deserving Filipino to enroll in any of the state universities and colleges all over the country, free of charge. With the passage of this law, Duterte has given free access to sources of knowledge and science to millions of Filipino youth. No anti-Duterte individual can ever deny this.

Furthermore, the Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections were successfully held on May 14, 2018 after having been earlier postponed. Certainly, not all those who won were pro-Dutertes; there were also many anti-Dutertes elected into office. This speaks that democracy is still at work in the country. The May 2019 elections, too, are a sure thing to happen. Both pro- and anti-Duterte political hopefuls are already done filing their Certificates of Candidacy (COC) for the upcoming elections. On the other hand, judicial independence remains a reality in the Philippines under Duterte. Critics say that this independence was under threat when Maria Lourdes Sereno was ousted from her post as chief justice, but all their suspicions and accusations are mere speculations. None of these critics could categorically say that the judiciary is no longer independent. That is because it is not true. Sereno's ouster was more because of her own arrogant personality which angered her colleagues in the Supreme Court, rather than because of any external pressure from the Duterte government.¹³⁸ Moreover, the recent Makati court ruling on

¹³⁷ To read the full text of *Executive Order No. 02* or the FOI Program, go to <https://www.foi.gov.ph/downloads/EO-2-s-2016-signed-copy.pdf>. The Congress, for its part, has not yet passed its own FOI Act, applicable to all government offices under the legislative as well as the judiciary branches.

¹³⁸ See, for example, Lian Buan, "De Castro disses Sereno, quo warranto oppositors," *Rappler* (June 1, 2018), <https://www.rappler.com/nation/203897->

Trillanes, which rejects the Department of Justice's motion to have Trillanes arrested, has been hailed by many, including Trillanes himself, as a sign that the Philippine judiciary is still independent. So despite being under Duterte's "iron fist" rule, the Philippines still has an independent media, and hence, press freedom; the people have "free access to sources of information, knowledge, and science;"¹³⁹ there are "free elections in a multi-party system;"¹⁴⁰ and there is also an independent judiciary. Now based on these marks of an ethical state from Paul Ricoeur, I would say that the Duterte government is still very much within the ethical – at least in this aspect of being able to preserve or improve press freedom, free access to information, knowledge, and science, free elections, and judicial independence.

My analyses would be incomplete, of course, if I would fail to include the other remaining marks of an ethical state in Ricoeur's political philosophy. These are: there is "minimum violence" because only "legitimate violence" is permitted;¹⁴¹ and, the people enjoy safe and peaceful living, without having to fear any threats against their persons and properties.¹⁴²

The number one target of criticisms against Duterte is, without doubt, the so-called new culture of violence that his controversial war on drugs has allegedly brought about in the country. His loudest critics continue to insist that the war on drugs has already long exceeded the allowable "minimum violence" that the state may exercise. Besides, they also say that Duterte's alleged extrajudicial means are never acceptable as "legitimate violence." My Ricoeurian reading of this contentious issue, however, runs counter to the anti-Duterte views. I'm not denying the incidents of violence and killings that have become a regular news feature in mainstream media. As a matter of fact,

[teresita-leonardo-de-castro-bar-oath-taking-speech-sereno-ouster-quo-warranto](#), accessed July 31, 2018.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Deweer, *Ricoeur's Personalist Republicanism: Personhood and Citizenship*, 66.

¹⁴¹ See Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 234. See also Deweer, *Ricoeur's Personalist Republicanism: Personhood and Citizenship*, 81.

¹⁴² See Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 163.

one of those who got killed was the father of one of my former students. In any case, to approach this bone of contention objectively, I believe that a central component of the standard operating procedure (SOP) in Duterte's war on drugs should not be taken out of the picture, namely, *TokHang* – the government's main anti-drugs operation whose moniker is derived from *toktok* (knock) and *hangyo* (plead). True to its name, the normal SOP of *TokHang* is clearly to first go to the house of suspected drug personalities in order to knock (*toktok*) and then plead (*hangyo*) to these individuals “to stop their illegal drugs activities and submit themselves to the government for their recovery.”¹⁴³

Inflicting violence or intentionally killing is not part of the real rationale of *TokHang*. Inevitably, there were a number of killings, but it should not be forgotten “that the police have the right to defend themselves if there is a threat to their lives” during these *TokHang* operations.¹⁴⁴ And it should not be forgotten, too, that despite the inevitable casualties, *TokHang* has been such a massive success. The anti-Duterte *Rappler* reported that from July 1, 2016 to October 10, 2017 *TokHang* yielded more than 1.2 million drug addicts surrendering to the government.¹⁴⁵ And of the 110,395 anti-drugs operations conducted from July 2016 to September 2018, the number of individuals being arrested was 158,424 whereas the death toll was just 4,948 – a mere 4.48% of the total anti-drugs operations if we do the math.¹⁴⁶ This 4.48% objectively tells us that in reality, there has only been “minimum violence” involved in the war on drugs. And this “minimum

¹⁴³ Third Anne Peralta-Malonzo, “What you need to know about Oplan Tokhang,” *SunStar Philippines* (January 28, 2018), <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/416123>, accessed August 15, 2018.

¹⁴⁴ Maboloc, “The Radical Politics of Nation-States: The Case of President Rodrigo Duterte,” *Journal of ASEAN Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018): 118. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v6i1.4458>.

¹⁴⁵ Rambo Talabong, “8.8M homes covered by TokHang when PNP led drug war,” *Rappler* (November 28, 2017), <https://www.rappler.com/nation/189753-homes-covered-oplan-tokhang-pnp-led-drug-war>, accessed September 1, 2018. The anti-Duterte *Rappler* was unable to ignore this fact.

¹⁴⁶ Rhodina Villanueva, “PDEA: 4,948 deaths recorded in anti-drug operations,” *The Philippine Star* (October 24, 2018), <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/10/24/1862685/pdea-4948-deaths-recorded-anti-drug-operations>, accessed October 25, 2018.

violence”, it can be argued, is “legitimate violence” because it was necessary in certain situations.¹⁴⁷ For this, my Ricoeurian reading of this hotly debated issue lets me conclude that the Duterte government still falls within the ethical – at least in this aspect of ensuring that there should just be “minimum violence” because only “legitimate violence” is permitted. As for the so-called extrajudicial killings, none of them were officially sanctioned by the government; this is why the government does not recognize them.¹⁴⁸ If ever Duterte uses extrajudicial means, it is a mere allegation for now, and his critics do not have concrete evidence to show for it.

And finally, survey results consistently show that under the Duterte administration, most Filipinos now feel secure. They are now enjoying safe and peaceful living, without having to fear any threats against their persons and properties. This is a strong sign that the Philippines has one of the marks of an ethical state according to Ricoeur.¹⁴⁹ No less than the anti-Duterte *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported this, seemingly symbolically, on June 12, 2018 – the country’s Independence Day – as if to confirm that the Philippines is indeed celebrating its freedom from the menacing presence of drug personalities.¹⁵⁰ In that said report, *Inquirer* cited then presidential spokesperson Harry Roque that “Gallup surveyed 148,000 people from 142 countries on their perception of safety and the Philippines scored 82, up from 76 points in 2014.¹⁵¹ From this objective basis, I can say that the country is still very well within the ethical – at least in this aspect of being able to let the people enjoy safe and peaceful living, without having to fear any threats against their persons and properties.

¹⁴⁷ See Deweer, *Ricoeur’s Personalist Republicanism: Personhood and Citizenship*, 81-82.

¹⁴⁸ Eimor P. Santos, Gov’t: Don’t fear, no extrajudicial killing under Duterte admin,” *CNN Philippines* (October 7, 2017), <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2017/10/06/extrajudicial-killings-Duterte-govt.html>, accessed October 25, 2018.

¹⁴⁹ See Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 163.

¹⁵⁰ Christine O. Avendaño, “People feel safer under Duterte administration – Palace,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (June 12, 2018).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Putting together now all my Ricoeurian ethical analyses, notwithstanding religious protestations to the contrary, I cannot but say that the Duterte government falls seamlessly within the ethical, having all the marks of an ethical state. This is my Ricoeurian reading of today's Philippines under Duterte, a reading not based on hearsays or biased political sentiments, but on facts and objective statistics.

c) *The Political Vision of Contemporary Filipinos*

When Duterte won the presidency, the 16.6 million votes that gave him the victory were actually only 39 percent of the whole electorate. As McCargo calculates, had Duterte's election rivals "Roxas and Poe also been willing to join forces at an early stage, as Aquino had urged in the final days of the election, Duterte might even have lost: far more people voted against him than for him."¹⁵² But then the next surveys from the last quarter of 2016 up to the middle of 2018 consistently show that more than 80 percent of Filipinos approve Duterte's style of governance. This is in large part thanks to the people's perceived connection with Duterte – they see him as one of them as Wallace tells us through McDonald – and also to the people's sense of security under the Duterte government.¹⁵³ But does this mean that Duterte's popular presidency actually reflects the political vision of contemporary Filipinos? Ricoeur's political thoughts can shed some light to this question. The estimable studies of Maboloc on Duterte's radical politics also provide some helpful insights on this issue.

In Ricoeur's political philosophy, political power should ideally be "power in common." The primacy of "power in common" in Ricoeur's political thoughts springs from his long-held belief that politics should "hold together the multiple interests and goals of its members."¹⁵⁴ He further believes that

¹⁵² McCargo, "Duterte's Mediated Populism," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (August 2016): 189.

¹⁵³ McDonald, "What makes the Philippines' Duterte popular," *The Saturday Paper* 212 (July 7-13, 2018), <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2018/07/07/what-makes-the-philippines-duterte-popular/15308856006512>, accessed July 15, 2018.

¹⁵⁴ Dauenhauer, *Promise and Risk of Politics*, 24.

when power is held in common, the chances are less for political evils to propagate. This explains why Ricoeur prefers democracy, because it is “the political system that best responds to the political paradox.”¹⁵⁵ It is democracy’s task “to ensure that power-over is under the control of power-in-common.”¹⁵⁶ Democracy, however, “will succeed only if each citizen exercises his or her power.”¹⁵⁷ This means that the measure of a democracy’s success is when the people act in concert to create the kind of political environment that they will together.¹⁵⁸

Relating Ricoeur’s thoughts to the present Philippine political drama, it can be argued that Duterte’s presidency is a victory to the country’s democracy. The Filipino citizenry has successfully exercised their “power in common” by acting in concert not only to elect Duterte to office but also to support him until this very day. Hence, Duterte at the helm of Philippine politics is a crystal reflection of the political vision of contemporary Filipinos. This is because it is Duterte who they really want. His style of governance is what they prefer. But what really led the Filipinos to adopt such a political vision? What further reasons could explain why most Filipinos envision Duterte’s Philippines as the picture of the Ricoeurian ethical state? Maboloc’s two meticulously researched articles on Duterte’s radical politics are very informative on this point.

In “Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte,” Maboloc suggests that Philippine politics is a product of “local thinking... [and] does not come from abstract rationalizations.”¹⁵⁹ In Duterte’s case, his election was largely brought about by the strong sense of solidarity of the Bisaya-speaking Filipinos of the south, many of whom are also in Luzon,

¹⁵⁵ Suazo, “Ricoeur’s Ethics of Politics and Democracy,” *Philosophy Today* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 704, citing Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory*, 125.

¹⁵⁶ Deweer, “Ricoeur on Citizenship: A Picture of a Personalist Republicanism,” in *Paul Ricoeur & the Task of Political Philosophy*, 40.

¹⁵⁷ Suazo, “Ricoeur’s Ethics of Politics and Democracy,” *Philosophy Today* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 704.

¹⁵⁸ See Carlos Alfonso Garduño Comparán, “Arendt and Ricoeur on Ideology and Authority,” *Ricoeur Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 68.

¹⁵⁹ Maboloc, “Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte,” *Iqra: Journal of the Al Qalam Institute* 4, no. 1 (2017): 6.

who collectively felt that the time had finally come for someone like them to take the rein of Philippine politics which had always been dominated by the Tagalog-speaking Filipinos of the north.¹⁶⁰ This, plus “the aspirations of the general public for public safety and security”, makes Duterte a very good leader in the eyes of the Filipino citizenry because they see him as protecting their very own interests.¹⁶¹

In “The Radical Politics of Nation-States: The Case of President Rodrigo Duterte,” Maboloc deepens his analyses on Duterte’s radical politics and argues that

[m]illions of Filipinos have long been repressed by an old order that continues to ignore the plight of the poor. It is not just the rising middle class that pushed Duterte’s prominence to a higher level prior to the national elections. Rather, it is the failure of the second Aquino administration to recognize the just demands of ordinary Filipinos that paved the way for all the troubles that we find in contemporary Philippine politics.¹⁶²

The success of Duterte, therefore, mirrors the kind of politics that most Filipinos hunger for. As Maboloc further argues, “Filipinos trust the president because they have been fed up by a rotten system that only caters to the elite but has deprived the ordinary citizen the opportunity to enjoy one’s entitlements and socio-economic rights.”¹⁶³ From Maboloc’s two erudite studies on Duterte, then, it is all too clear that the people’s continuing all-out support for the president is an illustration of their tenacious conviction that the current political setup in the country is a picture of how Philippine politics should be: not anymore elite-centric but people-centric. The Filipinos, after all, have already grown sick and tired of being constantly powerless in steering the trajectory of political priorities of the government in their

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶² Maboloc, “The Radical Politics of Nation-States: The Case of President Rodrigo Duterte,” *Journal of ASEAN Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018): 121. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v6i1.4458>.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 122.

direction. But now with Duterte, the people have found a unifying point of reference; their collective support for his presidency has become the common voice and strength of the masses. In Ricoeurian parlance, the people have reacquired and reasserted their “power in common.”

Conclusion

Duterte has roughly three and a half more years before his term ends on June 30, 2022. The past two and a half years, he has been extremely popular among majority of the Filipinos. In my personal view, Duterte’s popularity will continue until his last day in office. His is not a perfect presidency, but as Paul Ricoeur would remind us, political power is inherently a paradox: it has an evil-side but it has a good side as well. The popular presidency of Duterte is not without its evils, but what his critics fail to recognize are the many good things that the Filipinos now enjoy, thanks in part to his iron political will. Because of this, the Filipinos do not see the president as a threat to the country’s democracy. Instead, they remain steadfast in their support for him and his government, even if anti-Duterte publicities abound all over the country.

Many of the anti-Duterte polemics are religious-based. Citing strict religious doctrines and morals, these polemics label Duterte and his government as unethical. However, based on Ricoeurian criteria, especially the marks of an ethical state, the Philippines under the Duterte administration remain – “surprisingly” I would say – within the boundary of the ethical. The staunchest critics of Duterte can and will never accept this, but that is also because they are never open to see the other side which most of the Filipinos see.

What the Filipinos see in the current Duterte government has so far satisfied them. They are not complaining, and it is because they now have precisely what they were asking for: the feeling of security and freedom that they did not experience in the country before Duterte’s election to the presidency. This is the reason why they continue to give their all-out support for the president. The

popular presidency of Rodrigo Duterte is actually a reflection of the political vision of contemporary Filipinos.

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