

FRANCISZEK CZECH
Jagiellonian University

Between Legitimation and Support of Rodrigo Duterte. Understanding Enduring Popularity of the President of the Philippines

Abstract: Rodrigo Duterte, the president of the Republic of the Philippines, has been heavily criticized by the local and international media, primarily for his brutal anti-drugs campaign and suppression of political opposition and journalists. Nevertheless, despite controversial decisions, Duterte remains, as surveys show, extremely popular among Filipinos. In this context, this study aims at answering the following questions: 1. What are the sources of the popularity of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines? 2. What are the mechanisms of legitimation of his actions? Beginning with a theoretical discussion of the differences between legitimation, popularity, support, and trust, the article concludes by pointing out a combination of structural, situational, personal, and technological factors that impact his popularity.

Keywords: the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, legitimation, popularity, trust

Introduction

Much has been said about Rodrigo Duterte since he became the president of the Philippines in 2016. Even before the first half of his six-year term was over, a couple of books dealing predominately with Duterte's presidency were already published (Curato 2017a; Heydarian 2017; Miller 2018; Pforr 2018), in addition to an uncountable number of articles in both local and international media. The academic and media coverage of Duterte's presidency is not only extensive but also unanimously critical. From the very beginning, Duterte is heavily criticized in the international media, primarily for his anti-drug campaign and extrajudicial killings. The official death toll of the war on drugs is around 6,000, but various media and human rights groups claim that Duterte's campaign has cost over 25,000 lives (Johnson and Giles 2019; Talbong 2020). In response, in 2018, the United Nations Human Rights Council called to stop the killings, and the International Criminal Court announced a "preliminary examination" into killings linked to the "War on Drugs." Duterte is also reprobed for his suppression of political opposition. His vocal critic, Leila de Lima, a current senator and former Secretary of Justice, has been imprisoned for more than four years without substantial evidence. Furthermore, he has taken action against local independent media outlets such as the Philippine Daily Inquirer or Rappler and its CEO Maria Ressa, Time Person of the Year 2018, and Nobel prize winner in 2021.

Nevertheless, Duterte remains very popular among Filipino people. According to Social Weather Station surveys, he is the most popular president at the halfway mark of his term since democratization in 1986 (see [Table 1](#)), and his net satisfaction rating is +65% (78% satisfied and 13% dissatisfied) as of September 2019 ([Social Weather Station 2019a](#)). Duterte's ratings remain stable even though 78% of Filipino citizens worry that they, or someone they know, might be a victim of extrajudicial killing ([Social Weather Station 2019b](#)). The Catholic Church, which seems to be an important institution in the Philippines' public sphere, takes a critical stance toward Duterte's presidency, but that has no real effect on his popularity, which remains stable even though Duterte made a pivot in foreign policy from the most trusted USA (+72 of net trust) towards the most distrusted China (-33 of net trust) ([Social Weather Station 2019c](#)). Apparently, whatever Duterte does, the support for his actions remains stable. Neither controversial decisions nor offensive statements have any effect on his popularity. As the Pulse Asia survey shows, even the hardships of the pandemic period have not weakened his support and "the survey, conducted on September 14 to 20, showed Duterte having a 91% approval rating, up from his 87% rating in September 2019" ([Panti 2020](#)). Additionally, as the president cannot be re-elected, at the top of the 2022 presidential survey, his daughter, Sara Duterte, leads the election polls ([CNN 2021](#)).

Table 1
Net satisfaction ratings of the Presidents of the Fifth Philippine Republic
at the mid-point of their six-year term

	President					
	Corazon Aquino	Fidel Ramos	Joseph Estrada*	Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo**	Benigno Aquino	Rodrigo Duterte
Nett satisfaction	+37	+19	+9	+8	+64	+68
Time of survey	Feb. 1989	Jun. 1995	Dec. 2000	Jan. 2004	Jun. 2013	Jun. 2019

* The last survey before the ousting of President Estrada, taken after 2.5 years in power.

** Survey conducted 3 years after vice-president Arroyo was sworn in as president.

Own compilation, source: <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artclidisplay/?artcsyscode=ART-20191009121030>.

Most of the research on Duterte ([Curato 2017a](#); [Curato 2017b](#); [Heydarian 2017](#); [Maxwell 2019](#)) deals with his initial popularity and ability to mobilize Filipinos to vote for him. However, the enduring popularity of Duterte also needs some explanation. He cannot be described just as a populist who can gain power by addressing popular discontent. Duterte has proved that he can keep the power and neutralize unprecedented international and media criticism. In this context, the research problem arises: what is the foundation of Duterte's lasting popularity in the Philippines? Therefore, this article aims at answering the following research questions: What are the sources of the popularity of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines? What are the mechanisms of legitimation of his actions? To fully understand the complexity of the situation, I go beyond focusing solely on Duterte's rhetoric and actions. Contrary to common suggestions that the charisma of populist leaders explains everything, I assume that political success depends not only on supply but also on demand. In other words, this is not just another article on Duterte, but one that looks for the reasons for his popularity in Philippine society. It should be added that the study focuses on the

situation before the COVID-19 reality since it is based on interviews conducted just before the pandemic outbreak. However, in terms of Duterte's popularity, little has changed in those challenging times, which makes his case all the more puzzling.

Between (de)Legitimation & Support—Theoretical Clarifications

Such politicians as Duterte are described as popular. This generally means that a large group of citizens recognize and value him. This catch-all term, often used in surveys, helps us to put complex situations in order and determine whether public opinion on a given political actor is positive or negative. In the case of Duterte, it is evident that he is, for now, popular in the Philippines. However, to understand his popularity, we have to put it into context using different terms such as legitimation, popularity, satisfaction, support, and trust, all of which describe citizens' attitudes toward government, parties, or particular politicians.

Legitimation denotes the most fundamental conviction that an authority has a right to rule. Some citizens may not support or even trust the president, but they can still believe that they have a valid mandate to govern. In other words, legitimation is the subjective recognition that the authority was legally elected and did not break rules of law or the informal contract with citizens. Contemporary understanding of legitimation has been shaped by the classical writings of Max Weber (1978). According to him, any system's survival depends on the continual support from its subjects since "every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an interest (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience" (Weber 1978: 212). Seymour Martin Lipset, developing on Weber's ideas, says that "groups will regard a political system as legitimate or illegitimate according to the way in which its values fit in with their primary values" (Lipset 1959: 86–87). These observations are relevant in the Philippines' case, where substantial groups such as Muslim separatists or the Communist Party of the Philippines declare disobedience because their values are contradictory to the system. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that studies of political legitimacy in the Philippines focus on the social order's violent delegitimation. The perfect example here is provided by Francisco J. Lara (2016). However, the problem in this article is the opposite. Some international media commentators are surprised and often ask why there is no massive movement toward delegitimation of Duterte's harsh presidency. According to them, Duterte transgresses democratic principles and should face massive civic disobedience actions and legitimation withdrawal.

For Weber, the crucial question was whether legitimation exists or not and how different social systems produce it, while Lipset limits his research to democratic systems and focuses on "the extent to which contemporary democratic political systems are legitimate" (Lipset 1959: 87). He observes that legitimation might be gradable from passive or conditional up to the stage of supportive legitimation. If legitimation of a system does not require any action, then support is about a declarative or factual endorsement for a given politician, party, or system. It may be indicated by voting, donating, volunteering, or just approving a discussion among friends or family members. Legitimation does not require this kind of action and might be passive. Legitimation without support resembles tolerance of authorities.

Legitimation remains an important problem in the sociology of politics and related fields. The latest developments include the study of legitimation strategies and legitimation beyond democratic states (Gerschewski 2013; Kailitz 2013; von Soest and Grauvogel 2017). Honorata Mazepus and her colleagues, in their article on hybrid regime, recall that, according to well-established accounts, the survival and legitimacy of authoritarian regimes depend heavily on their economic performance, while the legitimacy of democracies, by contrast, is based mainly on shared ideas about what the political system represents and relatively durable electoral procedures that assure the representation of citizens' interests (2016: 352).

The concept of legitimation has more recently been also used not only in reference to political systems but also as a characteristic of political actors (parties, politicians, organizations) and their actions. Particularly in this context, legitimation is similar to trust and satisfaction. Trust is the more future-oriented of the two and is defined as the assumption that we can rely on someone else's actions because we predict that their results will be beneficial to us (Sztompka 2003). Satisfaction, contrary to trust, is more past-oriented since it is based on an evaluation of a political actor's previous actions. Recent studies on "dissatisfied democrats" by Hans-Dieter Klingemann (2013) and "critical citizens" by Pippa Norris (2011) also show that dissatisfaction may be complex and context-dependent. They persuasively demonstrated that democratic systems might be criticized or even delegitimized by true democrats highlighting democracy deficits. It is one thing to accept the rules, and quite another to accept the practices of different political actors. Therefore, the path from critical assessment of actors to delegitimation of system may be long. A growing number of details blur further the line between legitimation and delegitimation; someone may distrust a president but be willing to legitimize an unperfect political system as the best option possible. On the contrary, it is also possible to legitimize the controversial actions of a charismatic leader who bends the partially accepted law. Additionally, delegitimation is not necessarily equal to revolutionary activity. Democratic systems allow the display of a soft delegitimation of political actors through protests or even civil disobedience. However, some people prefer not to involve themselves in delegitimizing movements as they are perceived as dangerous or unlikely to succeed. Involvement in (de)legitimization activities such as taking part of demonstrations or ballot casting constitutes important factor of political situation. Therefore, new direction of analysis emerged as some researchers focused on social mobilization, which boils down to political behaviors. Social mobilization involves any active support of political actors and social movements, but populist mobilization in the age of social media seems to be one of the most studied problems recently (Gerbaudo 2018; Blassnig et al. 2019).

In summary, there are two ways to learn about citizens' attitudes toward political actors and systems. In the quantitative approach, surveys inform about general positions toward politicians. However, various attitudes are reduced to basic dichotomies (e.g., approval vs. disapproval). It is a simplification since satisfaction or popularity measured in a survey can indicate unconditional support and, for example, legitimation, but without active support and with limited trust. The qualitative approach allows understanding the complex problem by adding context to it. Descriptions of overlapping dimensions enable locating dominant attitudes toward President Rodrigo Duterte somewhere between open (revolutionary)

delegitimation, soft delegitimation (of particular political acts) by democratic means and tools of civil disobedience, passive acceptance combined with basic trust, and full support driven by satisfaction or hope.

Research Design

Since the research aims at understanding the nuances of Duterte's popularity, quantitative research procedures are the most suitable here. It is beneficial to explore the complex relations between political attitudes and the political system using experts' interviews. Most academics agree that "expert interviews offer researchers an effective means of quickly obtaining results and, indeed, of quickly obtaining good results. (...) A shared understanding of the social relevance of the research can then often be assumed, largely eliminating the need for further justification" (Bogner et al. 2009: 2). In this case, a semi-structured version of an expert interview was used.

The study is primarily based on data acquired during field research in the Philippines in 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, where I conducted 12 in-depth interviews with experts in the domain of Philippine politics. My interviewees were seven academics (sociologists, political scientists, and lawyers), three journalists, and two NGO activists who actively commented on politics in the media or on their social media channels. One of my informers was not a Philippine citizen but spent over a year in the Philippines due to professional duties. To diversify the sample, I tried to reach both vocal critics and dedicated supporters of President Duterte. Before starting the interviews, I knew that two of the interviewees publicly praised Duterte and three of them were known for their opposition to the president. I informed all interlocutors about the rules of using the collected materials and assured them that their personal data would not be published (almost half of them said that it is not necessary, because they publicly talked about their attitude towards President Duterte anyway). All interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. I quote the experts (marked as E1 up to E12) extensively on purpose since their interpretations not only allow us to understand attitudes toward Duterte on the academic level but also express subjective positions of opinion gatekeepers in the Philippines.

Sources of Popularity

Experts have identified plenty of factors determining the popularity of Rodrigo Duterte, which allowed him to win the 2016 presidential election. There were no considerable differences among their diagnoses in this respect. Most of the factors complemented rather than excluded each other. Moreover, most of them were repeated by several of the interviewees. First of all, many experts agreed that Duterte is charismatic. "He is clever. He would not be mayor for so long and eventually become president without what you might call a high level of natural intelligence" (E8). Another interlocutor put it this way: "He has his dynamic personality. Charismatic people are really like that; they are psychopathic almost, they are extremely dynamic, they can switch different faces, they can compete.

Duterte is very much like that. He is a dynamic speaker, he just has this dark magic effect on people” (E1).

A couple of experts associated Duterte’s charisma with his specific way of communication: “He doesn’t project the impression that he is educated. He doesn’t seem concerned about being a statesman. Thus, in that sense, people enjoy identification with the ordinary man from the streets. The way he talks is a way of talking that he perfected when he was a mayor. He had a four-hour program every Sunday on TV, and he was competing with the priests in the pulpit every Sunday. So, he was pontificating the way he does today, and people enjoy that TV program because of the folksy way in which he communicates, those dirty jokes, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He doesn’t mind cursing people, disrespecting institutions. My impression is that because of all of these things, he seems to express for the ordinary people the resentment and anger that they feel for everything about the establishment in this country” (E2). These remarks lead to the conclusion that a charismatic speaker does not have to be a perfect or smooth speaker. It is more about being natural, authentic, attracting attention, and having their own style, which corresponds with the delivered message.

However, one of the experts suggested that the oratory gift mastered by Duterte *en passant* through the years as a mayor is not enough and that at least some aspects of Duterte’s style were carefully designed for the campaign. *I have a sense that the president, like whenever he feels like the crowd is going bored, he is just going to say the P-word, and everyone is awake. And it’s actually a tool of rhetoric for him* (E11). The expert even proposed the hypothesis that Duterte copied his most popular curse from “Heneral Luna,” a huge historical blockbuster in the Philippines during the year before the election, in which the main character extensively swore with the same word, *putang ina*. This hypothesis seems to be wrong, however, since Jonathan Miller claims that Duterte used to swear in his Davao times just as much as he does now. According to a quoted Davaoño fascinated by this habit, Duterte’s record was 48 curses in a 45-minute speech (Miller 2018: 144). On the other hand, on some occasions, Duterte constrains himself from swearing, which might mean that he uses it on purpose. His dirty jokes, insults toward his opponents, and word choices regarding Pope Francis or Barack Obama create an impression of him as a tough guy who does not care about convention; one who seems to be above the law, or at least to be different from mendacious politicians.

Another factor contributing to Duterte’s final success was his clear and decisive message. The observations of most interviewees lead to the conclusion that Duterte played the moral panic card very well. Stanley Cohen initially characterized it as a situation when a group, usually on the basis of exaggerated disturbing news, emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values. This legitimizes a harsh crusade against the group, which is typically disliked or devoid of advocates, becoming a “folk devil” (Cohen 2002). Duterte correctly defined security as the primary concern of the Filipinos and was able to pinpoint an accountable group. He *offered a very good scapegoat target, those who are in drugs. So, those who supply the drugs, those who use the drugs. That’s probably a matter of imagination of people. You don’t have to think very hard to have a very easy pattern to explain all these problems* (E3). It may be assumed that if Duterte had not run for the presidency, the problem of drugs would not be on the agenda. It wasn’t a burning issue

before. Most of the experts tended to think . *We do have a drug problem in this country, but I would say it is not the main problem* (E12). Duterte was able to bring attention to drugs and show them as a major cause of crime, violence, and even destabilization of the reportedly “narco state,” which needed to be eradicated. It is hard to find such a diagnosis in Philippine media before Duterte entered the presidential race, but in the last months of the campaign, it gained the status of a popular narrative.

His narrative could work only because it was convincing. He was known only as the long-term president in Davao, *the only safe city in a region torn by violent conflicts on every level in terms of ethnicity, religion, and ideology* (E10). As one expert with a critical stance towards Duterte confessed: *This is a nice place, it's very liveable. It's not enormously prosperous, but it's beautiful. People actually obey the law. It's insane, people don't smoke. People follow the traffic rules. Have you ever heard of such things in the Philippines?* (E4). Duterte was perceived as a man who can introduce law and order, or at least clean up the house and make the Philippines a safer place to live. He utilized his experience in a bold way; for instance, at his final campaign rally, he said: “Forget the laws on human rights. If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as mayor. You drug pushers, hold-up men, and do-nothings, you better go out. Because I'd kill you. I'll dump all of you into Manila Bay and fatten all the fish there” (Regino 2016).

Having a convincing narrative is one thing but bringing it to the mainstream is another. Since Duterte was mainly recognized in Davao, a scandal appeared to be an excellent strategy to attract some attention. As one expert commented on Duterte's quotas: *He would constantly put himself in the news, in the headlines, he doesn't have comparable resources like the other candidates. So, what he had to do was essentially to attract free press coverage and he knew how to easily push the button. It was enough to say something crazy. Publicity, every publicity is good publicity, right?* (E1). All experts agreed that Duterte, as the only candidate, could fully tap the potential of social media. *The educated, the more Western-oriented, more professional, politically savvy politicians like Mar Roxas, Grace Poe, and the others, they did not see the importance of tapping into social media. They were present, but not to the same extent. When I wanted some reference on how this guy affected the voters and his audiences, all I needed to do was turn to YouTube. All the campaign speeches are there, they are still there, posted and reposted on YouTube. This guy really was able to tap into social media* (E2).

Popularity is not only a function of the actor's actions and characteristics. A majority of the experts indicated the role of structural factors and highlighted the importance of economic inequality and social exclusion. *Basically, I think it has come to the point where the people are just tired not of administrations but of the system as a whole. I mean, even if you say under Aquino there was economic progress, there was less corruption, there was decency in government, but why is it that people are still poor?* (E3). Another expert adds in a similar vein: *I'm surprised, someone like Duterte did not come earlier. The Philippines has the highest level of growth concentration in Asia. Yet, 74% of integrated growth goes to 40 families, the 25% goes to people like me for all the tier B, and the rest of the population barely gets anything* (E1). As a consequence, democracy fatigue syndrome gradually builds up and Duterte could utilize his “*I am your last card*” rhetoric very well. *Additionally, as one informer pointed out, data collected through the Aquino administration*

showed a “downward trend in experience incline, but an upward trend in fear” (E4). This is precisely the case explored by Barry Glassner in *The Culture of Fear* (1999). He demonstrated that in the U.S., while concerns were growing, the crime rate had already fallen for a half dozen consecutive years due to the growing number of drug, crime, and disaster stories on the TV. The digital revolution in the Philippines could have had a similar effect. Thus, with its algorithms and bubbles, the internet might be seen as a game changer since it contributed to creating the demand (growing concerns) and provided a perfect stage for a man of the people offering a golden pill to solve every problem.

Interviewees generally agreed that the socio-economic and political situation made the Philippines vulnerable to a strongman. However, disagreement appeared in terms of its explanation. One of the experts proposed a culturalist approach and quoted Mahathir Mohamad’s “Asian values” thesis, according to which non-Western societies prize hierarchy and community values over individual liberties and human rights, which are crucial for liberal democracy. Another expert who was asked about this non-liberal Asian understanding of democracy replied: *Yes, I would like to buy that idea. (...) But you know what, if we pin our explanation to culture, it is a way of saying there are some things we cannot change. That’s not right. That is quite unfair. I’d rather take an institutional approach (...). I think this is a trend or a pattern or is a characteristic we see in many developing countries contending to their own development phase. What do I mean by that? If you recall Maslow’s hierarchy, you have to first be mindful about your basic needs, how to create jobs, how to feed the hungry. You quite thinking about the democratization, freedom etc.* (E5). Perhaps the gap between these two positions would be smaller if Asian values were not understood essentially and universally but as a cultural outcome of a specific time and situation.

The final key factor of Duterte’s legitimation listed by most experts relates to the peculiarities of the Philippine political system: *structurally in the Philippines, we don’t have strong political parties. While there are political families in other countries, political families here are stronger if compared to loyalties to political parties and ideology. The support of political dynasties is important, but there is also space for celebrity politicians* (E10). According to this argument, in the “partyless democracy,” ideology is present on the fringes of the system in the form of groups such as Muslim separatists and the Communist Party of the Philippines, while ordinary people vote with their emotions and often support familiar celebrities. This is a pattern beyond the victory in presidential elections of a former TV star, Joseph “Erap” Estrada and even Benigno Aquino, elected on a wave of nostalgia after his iconic mother’s death (who became the first president of the Fifth Republic not because of her ideological position, but as the widow of the assassinated heroic opponent of Marcos). Someone like Duterte, cocky and smart-mouthed, with simple solutions and little interest in ideological nuances, has a better chance in this personality-oriented race than, say, in Germany, where the president and federal chancellor are elected indirectly. However, a couple of interviewees brought attention to Duterte’s suggestions that he comes from outside of politics. *He’s been in power for the past 32 years. He’s been for a district representative. And then from there, after his term, most of the time, he’s either mayor or holding positions. His father served as a secretary in the Marcos government and was Governor of Davao. (...) Duterte has a political dynasty, no question about it, but he*

was never part of the tier one elite. He was tier two elite. (...) He cannot act without the support of these powerful political figures and families, who also supported him in 2016, so you have Villars, you have the Marcoses, you have the Arroyos (E9).

One of the academics remarked that Duterte gained less than 40% of the total votes available in the 2016 elections. It is not an impressive mandate for a strong constitutional position of the president in the Philippines. Moreover, Mar Roxas and Grace Poe, two allies of former president Aquino, had the support of respectively 24% and 21%. *I think, if there was a runoff election, as in other countries, he might have received the majority of the electoral population, or he might have lost. This is the problem because the non-Duterte forces were all divided against one another. But even so, it remains a puzzle to understand why he seems to still be very well accepted by a large portion of the public (E2).*

Puzzle of Perpetual Popularity

The rise to power of populist leaders is well described in the academic literature. After all, Duterte is not the first controversial candidate to be elected. However, in many cases, the support of an elected tribune gradually evaporates as it becomes apparent that easy solutions do not solve existing problems. The decline of support is more probable if the new leader makes unpopular decisions or starts multiple struggles with the media, the Catholic Church (which has always been reputed to have a strong influence on public affairs in the Philippines), and traditional allies such as the United States. Therefore, the issue of stable support for Duterte seems to be even more interesting than the question of sources of his popularity. One of the informers told me: *Well, you can have 70% satisfaction or approval rating in the surveys and at the same time, be criticized by the educated population. I mean, look at all the media—with the exception of a few newspapers, they are all consistently against Duterte (E2).* In this context, it is even more interesting that Duterte can keep his acceptance rates high despite attacks from international and local media. Even the COVID-19 pandemic and poor policy response have not changed the trend. Nevertheless, as in the previous section, experts have identified plenty of complementary factors which determine the enduring popularity of Duterte after his four years in office.

The expert quoted above also pointed to the fact that *all the previous presidents, with the exception of Arroyo, had tremendous popularity, acceptance, and satisfaction, at least for the first three years of their time. In the case of Aquino, Benigno Aquino, her son; their names were very popular until the end of their terms with the exception of the last few months (E2).* As the data available in **Table 1** suggests, it is generally correct, although Duterte still has the highest acceptance rate. Thus, it might be seen as a kind of unspoken rule of Philippine politics. As one of the informants metaphorically said: *Filipinos usually bow to authority. Duterte has no competitor after the elections, people naturally bow to the king after the crowning. So, they use that mentality. To keep up the high popularity rating to get the punch from the Duterte (E8).* The tendency to support a ruler might be explained by the Asian values of loyalty and respect towards authority figures, as suggested by another expert. However, another explanation refers to partyless democracy: *This is our problem, there is no opposition narrative or leader, there is not even an opposition ideologue, there*

is nothing. Whoever is the newly elected president, people will just shift towards him (E10). Hence, it was not a massive surprise that after the defeat of Roxas in 2016, over 80 of 116 Liberal Party MPs joined Duterte's bandwagon (Cabacungan 2016). It is clear that Duterte has a powerful position and can appoint numerous other positions, decide on pork barrels or other assistance for the district of a given MP. Thus, usually, *the moment you start your fourth year and then the fifth year, is the beginning of being seen as a 'lame duck' period because there is no re-election* (E5). Some groups might start to withdraw their support for the incumbent president and reorient toward a new leader. For that reason, popularity, as measured by opinion polls, might be misleading. A high acceptance rate at the beginning of the term has a different meaning than at its end. Nevertheless, Duterte has already entered the last year of his presidency and no "lame duck" effect can be observed.

As for now, however, he does not have such firm and unanimous support as some international commentators, misled by opinion polls, suggest. To a certain degree, it is more of an acceptance or even a wait-and-see attitude than the unconditional support of the masses. Experts, during their interviews, indicated the existence of various groups which are sceptical of the president but preferred not to admit it openly. Among them are opinion leaders such as bishops, generals, and some parliamentary "supermajority" members, supporting Duterte only on the surface. On the other hand, pro-Duterte candidates won by a landslide in the 2019 midterm election, which serves as a de facto referendum on his presidency. The nature of Duterte's popularity is well captured in the following opinion expressed by one of the experts: *So, my sense also is that, yes, seven out of ten would say they are OK with Duterte, but not all of them are excited about him. If he calls on people to hear a speech, millions will not show up. I have a big doubt Duterte can do that. [Narendra] Modi probably can, Jokowi [Joko Widodo] could bring them. I doubt Duterte can bring as many people. I mean, look at Duterte's values, they're pathetic. (...) So, let's be very clear, the level of enthusiasm is very important. I'm not saying he is unpopular, he's not unpopular, it's just a question of the quality of the popularity. And for a populist, you need to actually have enthusiasm, so that you can bully your opponents. '>Oh, you don't let me do it? I'll bring one million people to the streets<. This is not his kind of popularity* (E1). At the beginning of his term in early 2017, about 200,000 people joined a pro-Duterte two-day assembly at Luneta Park as a response to the 20,000 strong "Walk for Life" organized by the Catholic Church (Palatino 2017). However, it was a one-time significant mobilization of Duterte's supporters (outside the social media).

Although Duterte's popularity might not be of the highest quality, it is true that, without a doubt, even his most controversial actions are widely popular. Until early 2020, there was no anti-Duterte protest bigger than the pro-Duterte assembly at the Luneta Park. The media, together with some priests and non-governmental organizations, criticize the war on drugs and other presidential actions, but it seems to be "business as usual." There is no overwhelming moral outrage or cycle of protests as in Hongkong or the yellow-vest marches in France. There is no cordon sanitaire resembling the one made against Jörg Haider in Austria. In the case of Duterte and his policy on drugs, *there's the implied consent from the public. In other words, public silence legitimizes it. You cannot say, president, stop it. Your silence is an acquiescence, it's an act of acquiescence. So, it's just like saying, go ahead. Come on, let's be realistic* (E5).

Duterte's anti-drug operations need closer consideration since, as the most controversial and highly publicized aspect of his presidency, they can have a crucial impact on his popularity and legitimacy. Experts indicated four different factors of acceptance for his policy. First of all, supporters of Duterte claim that the streets are safer now than in the past. Even one of the interviewees who is sceptical of Duterte admitted this. However, the SWS data on the experience of victimization is not so unequivocal (SWS 2019d). There was indeed a downward trend in experiencing crime at the beginning of Duterte's term. However, the perception of victimization has now returned more or less to the situation before the 2016 presidential campaign, suggesting that the campaign successfully extended concerns. The same increasing trend during the presidential race can also be identified during other presidential campaigns in the Philippines, but in the past, its scale was much smaller than during Duterte's drug-profiled campaign. For that reason, among others, we should bear in mind that even a question on the "experience of crime" does not allow us to conclude objective reality. It indicates perception, which is always mediated by media coverage and essential others. For a subjective act of legitimation perception, that there is a downward trend in crime from day one of Duterte term is enough.

The feeling of growing security is crucial for enduring legitimation. Usually, any president's most significant challenge when promising a simple solution to complex problems is to maintain people's hope that the change is possible, even if the solution is not working as promised. Initially, Duterte claimed that six months was enough to solve the drug problems. However, later on, he also admitted that he failed to accomplish the aim. Nevertheless, since people feel safer during his term, they could say that there is some progress. Moreover, Duterte might be prized as an honest and ambitious president since he sincerely admitted that he is not satisfied with his anti-drug campaign results. Above all, he is perceived as someone who tries hard to change the situation. This is the second factor of his acceptance. *A lot of Filipinos say we disagree with what the president exactly does, but it is OK because he has the intention to do something, and maybe over time he gets it right. So, there's also that kind of thinking; at least this guy is doing something* (E1).

The third reason for Duterte's acceptance is related to the abilities of the system. It is a basic principle that people distrust the institutions and agree with the extrajudicial actions of a leader whom they trust. *By default, if we follow the rules, if we stick to the law, you cannot do anything. It is slow. So, what do you do if you are practical? You resort to cutting corners and make it work your way? Will it have implications? Of course. Will it be bad, or, let's say, would it have negative implications in the long run? Of course. For now, it works. (...) Do you want someone dedicated to democratic values to proceed in unstable institutions? Or do you want someone who will sacrifice some of your freedom and can actually get things done? We have someone like that, actually. (...) In the short term, this is good because at least we know something is happening. But in the long run, when the country becomes more developed, when our democratic institutions fall into place, of course, we should not resort to that kind of approach* (E5). This kind of argument is plausible for legitimizing a solid leader's actions in any weak state, where the administration is ineffective, and the justice system is slow. However, this does not automatically mean that Duterte can breach any law to achieve any goal. He does not have absolute power. Instead, Duterte was able to securitize the issue of drugs successfully. According to the

theory of securitization, a more advanced political science version of culturalist moral panic theory, some objects are defined as a threat in the public discourse. This process enables extraordinary means to get rid of them (Buzan et al. 1998). In other words, it is a process of legitimizing usually unauthorized actions. In the Philippines, they do this to reach a substitute of justice not secured in a traditional way: *in this country, it is challenging to implement the rule of law. If you commit a crime and you are powerful, most likely, you will go free. Every now and then, you hear the news of somebody getting killed because they were invaded by the cops and they're into drugs. If you're a typical individual, you would say: oh, this is now justice. It's unconventional, it's not quite justice as it's supposed to be, but nonetheless, it's still justice* (E5).

The final factor mentioned by the experts concerns the culture of violence. The Philippines is involved in internal conflicts with Muslim separatists and Communist fighters. Although a peace process with the mainstream Muslim organizations is underway, the situation is far from stable. Duterte was already president in 2017 when groups of jihadists pledging allegiance to ISIS took over the city of Marawi, and in the five months of fighting that followed, the death toll exceeded 1,200 and a million people were displaced. Moreover, typical for fragile states, private armies are operating in the country and election-related killings are registered before every voting day. At the end of 2019, after ten years, Ampatuan clan members were finally sentenced for killing 58 people, journalists and family members of a rival in local elections. Taking this all into account, violence as a political tool seems not to be so stigmatized here as it is in stable democracies. One of the specialists confessed: *If you ask me, and this is just my personal opinion, President Duterte is worse actually, not because of the atrocities associated with him, but for this reason; he came without an agenda. He doesn't have an economic plan* (E5). It can be assumed that this type of opinion will create a lot of controversy in any liberal democracy. It is a kind of unspoken political rule that any case of political violence, especially killings, or breaches of fundamental human rights, has to be condemned. Whoever undermines the need for condemnation is also suspected. The quoted opinion proclaims that violation of human rights and killing does not have such a special status in the Philippines. The culture of violence makes the Philippines more Machiavellian, and the end justifies the means to a greater degree. According to SWS data, 82% of adult Filipinos are satisfied with the campaign against illegal drugs, and at the same time, 76% express the opinion that there are many human rights cases of abuse such as extrajudicial killing in the course of the war on drugs (SWS 2019e; SWS 2020).

To better understand the popularity of Duterte, we have to go beyond the war on drugs. It seems that poor standards of democracy explain the acceptance of Duterte's stance toward the media or the jailing of Laila de Lima, similarly to the culture of violence explaining the acceptance of a harsh drug policy. For many Filipinos, it is nothing radically inappropriate or unusual. Everyone knows that election-related violence and dirty tricks happen. An expert who publicly praised Duterte's actions commented on the jailing of Laila de Lima as follows: *I don't believe in the cases against her. It is so precisely because of jailing Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. It was De Lima who put Arroyo in jail when she was Secretary of Justice in Aquino's team. One of the things that Duterte promised Arroyo was, you'll get revenge, I'll put her in jail* (E7). This is the way many Filipinos think. Another expert

agreed that jailing de Lima was political revenge for Arroyo and her vocal criticism of Duterte, but he also tried to assess the accusations' validity. However, if someone limits himself to a personalistic perception of politics, it leads to the impression that this is only *a quarrel in the elites' democracy* (E10). The media attacks him with their critical articles, so he responds as he can, with charges and emotional rants. *In the United States, you have the CNN and ABC, with the exception of Fox News. They're all anti-Trump and yet, he enjoys some measure of popularity. It is possible in the age of social media for people like Duterte* (E12). Hence, one thing is "poor democratic standards" and the other is a simplified and personalistic vision of politics in the age of social media.

It appears that other controversial issues are also not enough to force people to skip their wait-and-see attitude, or at least undermine Duterte's popularity. His "specific charm" is still working. Moreover, even though he is labelled as a gross speaker outside the Philippines, he is evaluated by most experts as a savvy politician who knows how to communicate with people. For example, he is very good at the blame game. *Populists are also very good in terms of deflecting blame; every time something goes wrong, they say it's a conspiracy of the ancient regime. That type of rhetoric works very well if you have a President like Duterte* (E1). Additionally, *Duterte constantly tests the water, he constantly tests, he talks about regime change, a revolution in government, and he looks at the reaction* (E1). On the other hand, if needed, he has an instinct to skip some topics. For example, *when the price of rice in the Philippines went up, somehow the president became silent about the drug war because if he did, his popularity would really dwindle, why? Because you cannot evoke your issues against an angry mob* (E5). Another expert pointed out that Duterte decided to lower the profile of his anti-drug operation after events indicating the moral degradation of Anti-Illegal Drugs Group members, such as the killing of South Korean businessman Jee Ick-Joo. He was kidnapped for ransom by policemen, or "ninja cops," who recycled the illegal drugs seized during police operations. In other words, Duterte knows how to attract attention and what to do to keep acceptance rates high. Moreover, he is an experienced politician, and he knows that to maintain power, being positively regarded by certain critical groups is also crucial. Therefore, according to three experts, since Duterte is aware that the Armed Forces of the Philippines are suspicious about him and his presidency, he appoints numerous retired military officers to various posts and has increased the police's budget and salaries in the military. Experts agreed that beyond his bold drug campaign and rhetoric, Duterte can be subtle, a behind-the-scenes player. *He knows how to avoid direct orders. (...) And this is what some of his friends say, he never tells anyone to do anything. He just gives them the list, it's up to them what they do with it (...). The military asks for an order in writing, and because he never gives it in writing, they never have to join. They said twice, 'that's interesting Mr President, could you give us the written orders,' and nothing then happens* (E4). One expert suggested that as a lawyer, Duterte is aware that in order to avoid an impeachment trial, documents are more important than his rhetoric and even verbal admission to killings, which can always be turned into a crude joke.

During the interviews, I asked the experts if they could define the limits of Duterte's popularity or even legitimation. All interviewees forecasted that Duterte will stay in power until the end of his term. Some claimed that his support could gradually decrease in the

“lame duck” period of his term. One of the academics added that the weaker his position would be, the less he can antagonize the *traditional elite and the political families; the Marcoses, the Arroyos, the Villars (...)*, he also cannot antagonize the military and the police because he knows that once they remove their support, then he can be subjected to another prey (E6). Simultaneously, most of them had a problem with suggesting a specific scenario for Duterte’s possible sharp downfall. One of the academics hazily admitted that *Duterte has a high level of resilience, one thing is not going to change his position (...)* He has just done so many crazy things, it’s the new abnormal if I could call it such, but it could be only the culmination of various factors that could bring him down. (...). Therefore, I could imagine a situation whereby a kind of something crazy with China happens, something really exposable, and then, let’s say, some scandal in the family comes out (E1). A more specific scenario was painted by another expert, who claimed that as long as there is no severe economic crisis, people will tolerate his actions. *Jobs, crisis, poverty, those issues. People really care about this. He can talk about the territorial issues in the South China Sea whatever he wants. I mean that’s so far away for them; the meaning is very detached. It’s an issue that is so detached, but if the economy collapses, he cannot do anything about that* (E5). Another specialist predicted that any attempt to force change could lead to his delegitimation if people suspect that he wants to extend his term. Filipinos remember that Marcos’s dictatorship started with extending his rule beyond the constitutional limit. They accept a strong presidency in the unstable situation of military conflicts with jihadists and communists. However, they are suspicious about any change to the constitution, [especially] leading to an extension of the president’s term. This is the reason why any suggestions of constitutional change spurred protests, which led to the dropping of projects by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and other previous presidents.

Conclusions

In the title of his article, Julio C. Teehankee asks: *Was Duterte’s rise inevitable?* (2017). Well, nothing is inevitable in as much as we consider the chimerical nature of public popularity. However, in response to the first research question, various factors determining the initial rise of Rodrigo Duterte’s popularity can be identified. Based on the experts’ opinions, the following factors may be distinguished: structural (deep economic divisions, weak political parties and legal environment of Philippine democracy), situational (rivalry among mainstream candidates), technological (social media emergence), and personal (communication skills and credibility due to biographical experience). Therefore, the structural factors opened up the avenue of popularity for a charismatic leader such as Duterte. Structural and personal characteristics are crucial. That is what we have learned from the well-established theories of populist mobilization. They argue that populism is a symptom of weak democratic incorporation since deprived masses tend to follow charismatic populist leaders when they are not firmly incorporated into political life through strong and stable political parties (Jansen 2011). Hence, Duterte’s communication competency, to deliver plausible securitizing messages, was crucial to make numerous citizens—mostly those dissatisfied with the political system—trust him. Rivalry among

mainstream candidates in the first-past-the-post electoral system has not contributed to his growing popularity but made it sufficient to become president. More important for the growth of Duterte's popularity was the emergence of social media. The technological aspect was not recognized in the theory of political mobilization until recently when social media's emergence opened the window of opportunity wider for candidates treated suspiciously by mainstream media (Blassnig et al. 2019; Gerbaudo 2018). Consequently, these new media echo chambers expanded the instability of political systems in the contemporary world, as the cases of Donald Trump's, Jair Bolsonaro's, and Duterte's popularity proves.

The second research problem deals with the mechanisms of durable popular legitimation of president Duterte's actions. To answer this question, we have to understand what Duterte's popularity in the opinion polls really means. Duterte is popular in surveys, but he does not have fascist-like true believers behind him. He is not charismatic enough to mobilize people to organize a mass revolutionary movement. People declare that they are satisfied with his presidency and uncompromising stance on drugs, but they also express serious reservations if specific questions are asked. Without any doubt, Duterte's actions are widely accepted and legitimized. This is a legitimation of a strong leader in a state full of weak institutions. In terms of legitimacy, the populist syndrome is a situation where people transfer legitimacy from an ineffective system to a charismatic leader, who claims to make the country great again. Some Filipinos definitely perceive Duterte as their "last card" for change. However, it does not mean that Duterte is able to easily install a new regime (even under the legal procedure of charter change). It seems that the imperfect and turbulent Philippine political system secures its legitimation by tolerating even such a controversial president like Duterte. Moreover, perhaps this kind of legitimation is the only way to secure the durability of the imperfect system. Beyond that, Duterte is not the first president of the Philippines with high support ratings. The architecture of political systems induces a wait-and-see attitude of citizens, who are not confident in expressing a lack of support in the culture of band-wagoning. It should be added that the president skilfully takes advantage of the weak institutions by adopting legitimation strategies typical of a hybrid regime, as characterized by Honorata Mazepus and her colleagues (2016). Legitimation has a dynamic character, and Duterte's narratives are changing over time to explain new developments. At the same time, Duterte invariably emphasizes the importance of stability and order. As in hybrid regimes, he exhibits anti-Western sentiments and brands the opposition (media) as enemies and outsiders. These actions are sufficient to explain the ongoing problems and consolidate the power, but that is not enough to mobilize people to support revolutionary change. To sum up; the high acceptance rate of Duterte in surveys proves the legitimation of his actions. However, it does not necessarily equal unconditional and equivocal support for them. Often it is just passive acceptance of the situation combined with a basic trust in Duterte as a person.

Funding

This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, grant 2018/02/X/HS5/02375 "Political legitimization of Rodrigo Duterte presidency in the Republic of the Philippines."

References

- Blassnig, S., Ernst, N., Engesser, S., and Esser, F. 2019. Populism and Social Media Popularity How Populist Communication Benefits Political Leaders on Facebook and Twitter Power Shift?, in: R. Davis and D. Taras (eds.), *Political Leadership and Social Media*. New York: Routledge, p. 97–111.
- Bogner, A., Littig, B., and Menz, W. 2009. Introduction: Expert Interviews—An Introduction to a New Methodological Debate, in: A. Bogner, B. Littig, and W. Menz (eds.), *Interviewing Experts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 1–15.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., and de Wilde, J. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Cabacungan, G.C. 2016. 80 LP members hop on Rody bandwagon, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 23 May. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/787021/80-lp-members-hop-on-rody-bandwagon>.
- CNN. 2021. Sara Duterte leads May 2022 presidential, VP elections survey, *CNN*, February 23. Accessed February 23, 2021. <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/2/23/sara-duterte-leads-octa-presidential-vice-president-survey.html>.
- Cohen, S. 2002. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. London: Routledge.
- Curato, N. (ed.). 2017a. *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Curato, N. 2017b. Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47(1): 142–153.
- Gerbaudo, P. 2018. Social media and populism: an elective affinity?, *Media, Culture & Society* 40(5): 745–753.
- Gerschewski, J. 2013. The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes, *Democratization* 20(1): 13–38.
- Glassner, B. 1999. *The Culture of Fear. Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. New York: Basic Books.
- Heydarian, R.J. 2017. *The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt against Elite Democracy*. Singapore: Palgrave Pivot.
- Jansen, R. 2011. Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism, *Sociological Theory* 29(2): 75–96.
- Johnson, H., and Giles, Ch. 2019. Philippines drug war: Do we know how many have died? *BBC*, 12 November. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50236481>
- Kailitz, S. 2013. Classifying political regimes revisited: legitimation and durability, *Democratization* 20(1): 39–60.
- Klingemann, H.D. 2013. Dissatisfied Democrats: Democratic Maturation in Old and New Democracies, in: R.J. Dalton, and Ch. Welzel (eds.), *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizenship*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lara, F.J. 2016. *Insurgents, Clans, and States. Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Lipset, S.M. 1959. Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy, *The American Political Science Review* 53(1): 69–105.
- Mazepus, H., Veenendaal, W., McCarthy-Jones, A. and Trak Vázquez, J.M. 2016. A comparative study of legitimation strategies in hybrid regimes, *Policy Studies* 37(4): 350–369.
- Maxwell, S.R. 2019. Perceived threat of crime, authoritarianism, and the rise of a populist president in the Philippines, *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 43(3): 207–218.
- Miller, J. 2018. *Duterte Harry. Fire and Fury in the Philippines*. Melbourne, London: Scribe.
- Norris, P. 2011. *Democratic Deficit. Critical Citizens Revisited*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Palatino, M. 2017. What Do the New Philippine Protests Mean for Duterte?, *The Diplomat*, 27 February. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/02/what-do-the-new-philippine-protests-mean-for-duterte/>.
- Panti, L.T. 2020. Duterte gets 91% approval amid COVID-19 pandemic—Pulse Asia, *GMA News Online*, 5 October. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/758474/duterte-gets-91-approval-amid-covid-19-pandemic-pulse-asia/story/>.
- Pforr, Ch. 2018. *Dutertenomics: Growth, Wealth and Inequality Under President Rodrigo Duterte*. Manila: Pantas Publishing and Printing Incorporated.
- Regino, A. 2016. The Philippines Strongman Syndrome, *Diplomacist*, 13 December. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://diplomacist.com/2016/12/13/the-philippines-strongman-syndrome/>.

- SWS. 2019a. *Third Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Pres. Duterte's Net Satisfaction rating at "Very Good" +65*. Social Weather Survey, 9 October. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://www.sws.org.ph/sws-main/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20191009121030>.
- SWS. 2019b. *Fourth Quarter 2018 Social Weather Survey: 78% of Pinoys worry about becoming victims of extrajudicial killings or EJK*. Social Weather Station, 1 March. Accessed February 19, 2021. https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20190301201652&mc_cid=759f535a87&mc_eid=828f3ce9c3.
- SWS. 2019c. *Third Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Net trust for China falls to "Bad" -33...* Social Weather Station, 20 November. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20191120154738>.
- SWS. 2019d. *Third Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Families victimized by common crimes subside to 5.6%*, Social Weather Station, 30 October. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20191030164733>.
- SWS. 2019e. *Second Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Net satisfaction with anti-illegal drugs campaign at "Excellent" +70*. Social Weather Station, 22 September. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20190922154614>.
- SWS. 2020. *Fourth Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: 76% of Filipinos see many human rights abuses in the administration's war on illegal drugs, 24% see few*. Social Weather Station, 12 January. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20200112221436>.
- Sztompka, P. 2003. *Trust: A Sociological Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Talbong, R. 2020. Unreal numbers: Around 2,000 drug war deaths missing in Duterte gov't tally, *Rappler*, 11 September. Accessed February 19, 2021. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/missing-drug-war-deaths-duterte-government-tally>.
- Teehankee, J.C. 2017. Was Duterte's Rise Inevitable?, in: N. Curato (ed.), *Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- von Soest, C. and Grauvogel, J. 2017. Identity, procedures and performance: how authoritarian regimes legitimize their rule, *Contemporary Politics* 23(3): 287–305.
- Weber, M. 1978. *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Biographical Note: Franciszek Czech (Ph.D.), is a sociologist and political scientist at the Institute of Intercultural Studies, Jagiellonian University in Cracow. In his research, he focuses on political culture and discourse analysis (mainly in context of conspiracy theories). His research interests also include global studies and the Philippines' contemporary socio-political situation.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9499-4007>

E-mail: franciszek.czech@uj.edu.pl