

Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Weighing up the legacy of Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte

Description: For many, outgoing Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte will be remembered for his call for the extra-judicial killings of alleged drug dealers. He's also gone after his critics in the media, the judiciary, and the legislature. But despite his apparent excesses, Duterte remains popular with ordinary Filipinos. What's been the basis for his enduring popularity? And what are the long term consequences of his attacks on the nation's democratic institutions? Philippines historian Dr Lisandro Claudio discusses the legacy of Duterte with presenter Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Lisandro Claudio:

A guy who really reveled in violence to the extent that Duterte did, I think this is really unprecedented. I mean Duterte has gone beyond Marcos, he's a kind of an Idi Amin figure. And that's not a comparison I make; that is a comparison Duterte himself made. He said that he would be like Idi Amin, and true enough, he has become a kind of an Idi Amin of the Philippines.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, weighing up the legacy of Philippines president, Rodrigo Duterte.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

As Rodrigo Duterte serves out his final months as the 16th president of the Philippines, what will be his legacy? And how will he likely be remembered? For most, for many will be Duterte's so-called war on drugs with extrajudicial killings encouraged as a means of fighting the illegal drug trade. It's estimated some 25,000 Filipinos, mainly poor, have been executed without trial.

In keeping with his strong man image, Duterte has also pursued his critics in the media, the judiciary, and among legislators, specifically targeting people of influence who have taken issue with his methods. On the international stage, Duterte comes across as obsequious to foreign leaders he wishes to court, and vulgar to those with whom he takes exception. Yet, despite all his apparent shortcomings, Rodrigo Duterte remains popular with ordinary Filipinos, a politically engaged people with a history of driving sitting presidents from office. So what's the basis for his enduring support? What are the long-term consequences of his attacks on democratic institutions? And what will be the fallout from his personality-driven approach to foreign policy?

Joining me to look back on the Duterte era and assess its future impact on the Philippines is Dr. Lisandro Claudio, historian of global liberal thought from the University of California, Berkeley, and an alumnus of the University of Melbourne. Welcome, Lisandro.

Lisandro Claudio:

Thank you, Ali. And I'm glad you mentioned that I'm an alumnus of Melbourne Uni. I'm very proud of that.

Ali Moore:

I just described Duterte as popular. Lisandro, can you give us a sense of how popular after six years in office and all that's come with that, a general sense of how he's viewed now, compared to how he was viewed when he first came to power?

Lisandro Claudio:

Well, he's always had majority support, but the latest surveys have shown that that majority support has been dropping. So for most of his time in office, he was in the 80s, sometimes even in the early 90s. But as of October, the latest poll released said that the administration score in handling, for example, the pandemic declined, and the total approval rate declined by 12 percentage point. So that's a significant decline for Duterte. And I think this shows that even if he still has majority support, that he's not as wildly popular as he was in the beginning. Having said that, to have 80 to 90% support for the majority of your term is astounding.

Ali Moore:

It is astounding. And I do want to return also to the impact of the pandemic. But of course, he came to office, promising a war on the drug trade. How big a problem was there when he first took power? And how much of an impact has he had?

Lisandro Claudio:

There were some estimates in 2016 saying that drug usage in the Philippines was no worse than, say, drug usage in Australia. In fact, there was some evidence showing that drug usage in Australia was even worse. But the problem was, the previous administration rarely talked about the drug problem. So for example, if you look at President Benigno Aquino's speeches, all of his State of the Nation addresses, I think he might have mentioned the drug trade only once or twice. But for poor Filipinos, even if it wasn't such a widespread problem, it was a problem that was easy to exploit because a lot of the effects of the drug trade were visible to them. So for example, people in the community whom they feared would commit crimes, a lot of them were on drugs. And Duterte exploited that threat, and he turned that into kind of big issue that suddenly rose up on the list of issues that Filipinos wanted politicians to talk about as a result of his very remarkable 2016 campaign.

Ali Moore:

And when you look at who's been hit by the drug war and how successful, if I can put it that way, it's been, has it focused on the big players or the underlying issues? Who's been hurt by it? Who's been impacted?

Lisandro Claudio:

I recall a trip that then head of Philippine National Police General The Rock or Bato dela Rosa made to Colombia a few years back. I think this was in 2017. He came back and he was asked, "What was your experience in Colombia?" And he said, "Yeah, I know the drug war in Colombia was a failure." And he said the key problem with the Colombian drug war was that they were focusing on supply and not demand. And he said that the focus of the Philippine drug war would be on demand. So what is he saying there? What he's saying there is that they were going to focus on the users, and effectively, that's what you got, a focus on the users and not a big focus on the suppliers. Hence, the people who have been targeted by the drug war are disproportionately poor Filipinos in urban areas like Metro Manila.

Ali Moore:

And has it affected demand?

Lisandro Claudio:

We'll have to see. Of course, anecdotally, a lot of poor Filipinos say that the usage of drugs has been reduced in their areas, but I don't think there's robust research to show that that anecdotal evidence is actually the case. What's important here is that a lot of poor Filipinos feel like it's being addressed. And I think that's why he remains popular until today.

Ali Moore:

And who's carrying out the war? I mean, Duterte ordered police to adopt a shoot-to-kill policy, didn't he? Is it all driven by security forces, by police?

Lisandro Claudio:

The way a lot of these drug killings happen is through a method called riding in tandem. So you have people in motorcycles, one is driving and another one is an assassin. So they shoot. This is a technique they borrowed actually from the communist party of the Philippines, with their sparrow units in the 1970s. So that one is a bit hard to tell if it's the security forces, but certain cases, for example, it's very obvious that it's the police. For example, the killing of the high school kid Kian delos Santos, who was begging the policeman that he just wanted to continue doing his homework. There was CCTV footage showing that there was a policeman pointing a gun at this kid, and he's begging the cops, saying, "Officer, I just want to continue doing my homework." And then he gets shot right there and then. So there were some cases of blatant executions by the police.

And I think it should be pointed out, and more research has to be done in this respect, that many of the police generals who are assigned to so-called drug hotbeds came from Duterte's home province of Davao. So from Davao in Mindanao, they moved to Manila. And there is some proof, although it's not conclusive, that the deaths were highest in those areas where you had Davao cops taking over the operations.

Ali Moore:

And Duterte, of course, I mean, he came to power with a very strong law and order promise, didn't he? Based on his experience when he was in Davao.

Lisandro Claudio:

To be fair to some of the Davao voters, after the Marcos period, there were sandbags in Davao because there were killings between communist insurgents and vigilante groups who are targeting them as well. The place was bereft of peace. So one of the reasons why Duterte is still so popular in his own province now, is because Davaoños saw peace start to emerge again when Duterte initially became vice mayor and then became mayor of the province. The problem of course, I think, is that if you take a myopic Davao view and you say that Duterte is a figure of Davao, you miss out on the fact that he is now president of the Philippines and that he has committed most of his crimes actually not in Davao, but in Metro Manila. So he is now kind of Metro Manila president, because that's where he committed these crimes.

Ali Moore:

And you say crimes, these extrajudicial killings, do we have... And I know that I said in the introduction, around 25,000 people who have been executed without trial. I mean, numbers seemed very wildly. Do we really know how many people have died as part of this drug war?

Lisandro Claudio:

No, we don't. We have better documentation as compared to the Marcos period, because there was also a lot of extrajudicial killings during the Marcos period, but a lot of that happened in the countryside. So the number we have of deaths for the Marcos period is actually quite low compared to the Duterte's 3,300 that's documented, but that's because the killings were happening in the countryside so we weren't able to document it. So the reason why Duterte's drug war is relatively better documented is because it seems like the majority of the deaths happened in urban centres like Metro Manila, where you had a lot of reporters who were reporting the deaths.

And initially actually, you even had the police themselves reporting how many people had died in their encounters because they were bragging about this. So there is relatively robust data. Having said that, there is also of course evidence that the drug war spread out of the urban areas into places where documentation was not as easy to come across. But I think this is a lot better documented than the deaths under Ferdinand Marcos, the previous authoritarian president.

Ali Moore:

How does Duterte justify these extrajudicial killings, given the war on drugs is one thing, but these sorts of blatant violence that you've seen that is so well documented?

Lisandro Claudio:

Well, there's a lot of double speak. He'll say things like, "I kill people. I like killing people." And then he'll say, "Police, I order you to shoot to kill." And then, sometimes he'll come out and say, these were not extrajudicial killings because the people in the encounters, they were fighting back and so the police were just defending themselves. Or sometimes, his spokespersons will say things like, "Oh, the president is just hyperbolic; that's not really the case." So what he's done is he's given his supporters a kind of plausible deniability.

His supporters, when they're talking to people, who are convinced of the need for a violent drug war, they might admit that he's killing people, but when they're confronted with people who are defending human rights and say that Duterte could be prosecuted under the ICC, they have an out, they'll say, "That's his humour." And the thing that needs to be said about Duterte is that he's actually a very funny president for his supporters. Now, I don't personally like his humour. I think it's sexist. But if you watch a Duterte speech and he has a lot of supporters, the supporters will shift from clapping to shouting, to laughing because they find him really funny.

Ali Moore:

That ICC, the International Criminal Court, I'll come back to that as well. We started the interview talking about how popular Duterte is. Does that popularity come across to support for the drug war, support for these killings in a broad sense?

Lisandro Claudio:

Yeah, I think there's also majority support for the drug war. It's always been slightly below his approval, but it's close to the approval. But here's the scary part: 60% of respondents in these surveys know that the drug war has led to extrajudicial killings, and yet they still support the drug war. So that means that there is a moral failure on the part of my people, on the part of Filipinos because they accept the fact that there are extrajudicial killings, and yet they still endorse the process. I don't think there are two ways around it. I think you need to condemn a certain segment of the Philippine population for accepting extrajudicial killings.

Ali Moore:

How do you explain that? How do you explain that support for something even in the face of the blatant evidence? What is it? Is it a means to an end? Is it because it's such concern about violence? Is it because it doesn't touch them?

Lisandro Claudio:

I think sometimes even if it touches them, they think that it's just for the good of the community because they feel like without drugs, their communities would become more quiet. And I think Duterte has also encouraged a kind of very myopic viewpoint of what security means, a kind of individualistic idea of security. As long as my neighbour is not a drug addict, it's okay, that's fine. And so that has really contributed to the erosion of morality in public discourse.

Ali Moore:

The judiciary, where do they sit on the drug war? And there's also the Catholic church, given the vast majority of the Filipino population identify as Roman Catholic. What does the church say?

Lisandro Claudio:

Let's begin with the judiciary. The Supreme Court... Duterte was lucky there were a lot of retirements during his term. So he's basically packed the Supreme Court, and he even got rid of the Supreme Court justice who was appointed by the previous president. So you have an essentially very pliant judiciary with respect to Duterte.

With respect to the church, of course the church has been at the forefront of fighting the drug war. And the reason for that is quite simple. So in places like Caloocan, for example, the city of Caloocan in Metro Manila, where there are a lot of victims of the drug war, the people there who are poor, they have nowhere else to turn to, but the church or their parish priest. So they run to their parish priest, they ask for shelter, sometimes they ask for help with respect to livelihood because, for instance, it's very common that you'll have a mother, her husband died because he was a victim of the drug war. Her eldest son died because he was a victim of the drug war. And now she's the only breadwinner for a family of, say, three or four. Right? And so who else does she run to? They run to the church.

And so the church has actually been forced to confront the realities of the drug war. You'll hear many bishops and parish priests talk about this, that they are opposed to the drug war because their flock approached them, and they had to respond to it. From 2010 to 2016, the Catholic church, what they were doing is they were opposing reproductive health. So, that was a kind of very myopic Catholic church. But in the Duterte period, they've been opposing killings. And I think this is the Philippine Catholic church at its best, at its most beautiful.

Ali Moore:

And is that having an impact though when we go back to that, what you call the moral failure of Filipinos still supporting the drug war? What does that say about the influence of the church?

Lisandro Claudio:

I think the influence of the church culturally won't wane because people go to mass, people celebrate the Catholic holidays. So the Philippines is still culturally Catholic. Even somebody like myself, I identify as an agnostic, but I go through many of the Catholic rituals. But in terms of Catholic doctrine and whether or not people listen to Catholic doctrine, or things like the value of life, we have to see. We have to see because I'm not sure. It is also possible that the popularity of Duterte's transitory, it could be possible that he was just popular for his six years or five to six years as president. And then in his post presidency, he won't be as popular anymore. I mean, that's what happened to Benigno Aquino III, former President Aquino, he was popular for about five years, and

then in his post presidency, he wasn't popular anymore. So something like that could happen to Duterte.

Ali Moore:

At the same time though, six years is a long time in politics. Isn't it?

Lisandro Claudio:

Yeah, it is a long time. But I think in those six years, the president really just has tremendous signaling in power. So what I think could be the case, is that we've entered a period in Philippine politics where in whoever is elected to the presidency will enjoy some kind of support, that there's just an influence vested onto this office, and Filipinos like this office so they will support the president.

Ali Moore:

We've just talked about the broader support, but who is the core support base for Duterte? And how important are powerful political allies in the structure of Philippines' politics?

Lisandro Claudio:

If you look at the surveys now, so support for him has really spread out. So to figure out who his base is, it might be interesting to begin in 2016, in other words, look at the people who first supported him when he was still a dark horse candidate. And according to a number of political scientists, Mark Thompson and Julio Teehankee, for example, they say that his support base was a kind of lower emergent middle class. So ever since the fall of Marcos, the middle class has been growing in the Philippines. So you have, for example, the business processing outsourcing industry. You have the families of overseas Filipino workers who are sending money back to the Philippines and creating significant amounts of wealth. So there is this band of lower middle class, new wealth that began support Duterte in 2016. So that's one base according to Teehankee and Thompson. And then the other base is of course, Mindanao, because Duterte is the first Mindanaoan president, and so he'll always have 90% approval in Mindanao.

Ali Moore:

It's interesting that on the support base, the extent to which that growing middle class supported Duterte because of economic growth, which of course was one of the fastest growing economies in the region until COVID.

Lisandro Claudio:

We were posting something like 6% growth. Remember in the 90s, we were quite moribund. The reason why we weren't hit by the Asian financial crisis was because we were moribund to begin with. We were like 2% growth. So it didn't matter that there was the decline in the region, we were already slow. But then after that, from the late Arroyo period, until the early Duterte period, it was kind of astonishing economic growth. And you can see it in Metro Manila construction, and also in other secondary and tertiary cities, and that explains partially the growth of traffic, for example.

But, of course, the COVID pandemic kind of destroyed that growth because in 2020, we had the worst economic crisis, first economic downturn since World War II. And the interesting thing is that the Duterte administration, when it ran, it was promising to repudiate a lot of the economically austere policies of the previous administration. In fact, it criticised the previous administration of "criminally under spending". And yet, despite promising to be fiscally expansive when the pandemic hit, they refused to legislate a really bold pandemic response that was supported by the majority of parties in the lower house. And the reason for that, according to the rather conservative secretary of

finance, he said, "We need to keep our powder dry." So essentially, he's saying that we need to preserve our credit for a rainy day.

Ali Moore:

When is that?

Lisandro Claudio:

I don't know what is.

Ali Moore:

Indeed. The critics of Duterte have paid a very heavy price, haven't they? In the media, for example, just recently, of course, the very notable example of the prosecution and persecution of Maria Ressa, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, her news outlet, the Rappler. Can you give us a potted version of what happened, and how it happened to Maria and the Rappler?

Lisandro Claudio:

I have to disclose that I'm a regular contributor to Rappler. I was in fact there during the State of the Nation address beside Maria, in fact, when Duterte first threatened Rappler. And I don't know why he decided to threaten Rappler in particular because Rappler wasn't necessarily the most critical news outlet. The Inquirer was similarly critical, I mean, even The Philippines Star. Many of the mainstream newspapers were critical of the drug war. But I think he might have started targeting Rappler, I don't know, maybe they were asking him difficult questions, or maybe because it was a relatively easy fight to be had because Rappler is a small media organisation. It's an online news organisation. So it's easy for him to turn it into his big enemy.

So I don't think Rappler began as opposition media, but now it is de facto opposition media, because when you have a president who is lying and when you have a president who is violating human rights, any responsible media outfit, like Rappler, has the obligation to call that out. And I think they've just done one of the bravest jobs in terms of doing that because of real strong core of veteran journalists from the Marcos era and young journalists whom they've trained really well to dig into various controversies in the Duterte administration.

Ali Moore:

So tell us the story of what happened to Maria Ressa.

Lisandro Claudio:

It's a famous story now, but various cases filed against her and Rappler. The biggest case of course, is the cyber libel case filed against her because libel is a crime in the Philippines. She's being persecuted for an article she did not write, it just appeared on Rappler. And the local businessman complained about that article, said that it was slanderous or libelous towards him. And she's being prosecuted for it because she published it. The other irony there is of course, that article was published prior to the implementation of the cyber libel law, but it was edited, slightly edited for style after the legislation of the cyber libel law. So she's been prosecuted on a really silly technicality.

Ali Moore:

Because that amounted to a republishing, is that right?

Lisandro Claudio:

Yeah, amounting to a republishing. Yeah.

Ali Moore:

And what will happen to her?

Lisandro Claudio:

I don't know. I think she's been able to successfully post bail. She's not in jail, unlike another critic of Duterte, Senator Leila de Lima, who has been in jail for the majority of Duterte's term. So I don't know, I don't know. I hope that the Nobel Prize protects Maria. There's hope in many corners that the Nobel Prize might do the trick.

Ali Moore:

And of course, Rappler and Maria Ressa, they're not the only media that's been impacted by Duterte's regime. Is that right? I mean, what's the general view of how free and fair the media can be in the Philippines?

Lisandro Claudio:

If you want to talk about this on a technical level, the Philippine Congress did not approve the licence of the largest media conglomerate in the country, ABS-CBN. And that was a very powerful licence because that's where they made their money. Essentially, that's where they broadcast their news, that's where they broadcast their soap operas. And now they've had to move a lot of that programming online, or they've had to work with other TV stations that have licences to show their programmes in those stations.

Now, technically that was an act of Congress, but we all know that Duterte was behind it because the lower house, ever since the American period, has been controlled by the Office of the President because of the power of essentially money politics in the lower house. Anyone who says otherwise is being really disingenuous and doesn't understand how Philippine politics works.

Ali Moore:

Because it was critical? Is that why it was shut down?

Lisandro Claudio:

Well, it was critical, but also because ABS-CBN has been a very easy target. The president who previously shut down ABS-CBN was Ferdinand Marcos, and he said that ABS-CBN was being run by oligarchs, that's rhetoric that Duterte himself has picked up on.

Ali Moore:

We've talked about the media. You earlier referred to the judiciary. You talked about a compliant Supreme court, but we have seen attacks on key and high profile members of the judiciary as well. Haven't we? And indeed, the legislature, you just mentioned, Senator Leila de Lima.

Lisandro Claudio:

Yeah. So Senator de Lima is still in jail. I think people really need to talk about Leila de Lima because she has been such a consistent critic of Duterte. She first caught Duterte's ire when he was in Davao, and she was the chair of the Commission on Human Rights. And she went to Davao and investigated the crimes of the so-called Davao Death Squad there. So there are many critics, and many of them being female critics. Another big critic who's been threatened by the administration, but I don't think they're going to find anything on her, is Senator Risa Hontiveros of Akbayan Party who has been so sharp in these Senate hearings against the mismanagement of pandemic support

and pandemic aid. So a lot of these brave women have stood up and looked Duterte in the eye and said enough is enough.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its society's politics and cultures, it's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

Ali Moore:

I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by Dr. Lisandro Claudio. We're talking about the legacy of Rodrigo Duterte as he nears the end of his controversial term as Philippines' president.

Ali Moore:

Lisandro, what about the administration of Duterte more broadly? Has there been any real social reform? And I note here that he did make the so-called 4Ps Programme, the national poverty reduction programme, a permanent programme of government. He signed another law for free tertiary tuition. How do you rate his social reform programme?

Lisandro Claudio:

You're not going to see the benefits of these programmes anytime soon, and some of the benefits might be questionable. So for example, free tertiary education sounds good on paper. But the thing is, for example, the University of the Philippines already had a very interesting system, wherein the wealthy people would pay tuition and then people who couldn't pay the tuition did not pay the tuition. So it was actually generate some money. So for example, my brother was a student at the University of the Philippines. We were very happy to pay for his tuition, and yet towards the end of his matriculation, he wasn't paying tuition anymore. So even certain things like that are complicated. There are other programmes apart from the ones you mentioned. One programme that I like is the tax reform programme or the TRAIN programme. It's a controversial programme because it did lead to some momentary inflation. And so, critics use it against Duterte, but I'm one of the few critics of the territory who thinks that that was idea because at least, it created spending room for the middle class. I think that might enable us to contribute to growth in the future because our tax system was really archaic prior to that.

Ali Moore:

There's a lot of forecasts around how the Philippines is going to come out of the pandemic and the recovery from last year's recession. Are you optimistic at all about economic growth?

Lisandro Claudio:

Until there's a big spending package, no, I'm not optimistic about economic growth. Having said that, a lot of the things that made the Philippines grow prior to the pandemic, I think they'll still be there after the pandemic. We have a young population. We have a relatively educated population. We're English speaking. We have money coming from abroad. So a lot of those things will remain. But I think after this, the Philippines really has to think about a kind of new industrial policy to accelerate growth. And I think that nobody talks about industrial policy anymore. But for a country, like the Philippines, that is kind of so dependent on, for example, foreign labour or business processing, we really need to think about how we grow the economy through drivers that are more internal.

Ali Moore:

Is the economy front and centre, or will it be front and centre, do you think, of the presidential election?

Lisandro Claudio:

To a certain extent. I mean, if you look at the surveys now, the issues that Filipinos want addressed are economic issues like employment, inflation, for instance. But we know that even if those are kind of constants that Filipino people are asking for, another issue can arise almost overnight. So for example, in 2016, that's what Filipino voters were looking for, somebody who could address these gut economic issues, but then Duterte ran and suddenly everyone started caring about drugs. So we don't know, but as of now, that is still at the forefront. And of course, tied to that is the pandemic response because pandemic response of course relates to those gut issues of employment, for instance.

Ali Moore:

If I can broaden this conversation out now to the international stage, and Duterte has absolutely been notable for his use of incredibly undiplomatic language, and that's putting it politely, but also for coming to power and announcing that he was cutting Manila's military and economic ties with Washington, and he was realigning with China. He said at the time it was the only way. What drove that move towards China?

Lisandro Claudio:

I think, on the one hand, there was a real intellectual support within his group for a kind of independent foreign policy, that's what they were calling it, that was able to deftly negotiate two competing superpowers in Asia, the United States and China. On the other hand, there was also just an animosity on Duterte's part, relative to the United States. And that comes from various places. One, he's a kind of baby boomer who was educated in the 1960s, 1970s, at the height of anti-Americanism in Manila, and he kind of drank from that well of anti-Americanism, kind of Maoist well actually. Remember, he was also very close the Maoists initially. And then, also, there were incidents of him getting to trouble with the Americans in Davao. There's a lot of rumour there, and I'm not entirely sure which stories are true. But he's always been a kind of knee-jerk anti-American.

The other thing is that I think he admires the kind of authoritarianism of Xi Jinping and also Vladimir Putin. He did say himself that he idolise Putin. And then when he was asked, "Why do you idolise Putin?" he said, he didn't really answer the question. He just said, "I idolise Putin." But I think it's clear to see that this guy is an authoritarian and he admires the machismo of other authoritarian leaders across the world.

Ali Moore:

And yet, as his term ends, is it fair to say that Duterte has sort of backflipped again? He seems to be aligning the Philippines back with the US. He's reinstated security ties, he's restored the Visiting Forces Security Agreement, for example.

Lisandro Claudio:

My sense is that, that has always been bluster because if you look at, for lack of a better term, the deep state, or not even the deep state, just the bureaucracy of the Philippines. The bureaucracy of the Philippines is really aligned to support the United States and to continue various partnerships with the United States. So for example, his defence secretary, who's been around since 2016 so from the beginning until the end, the guy is clearly pro US. He spent a lot of time in the US, and he is at the forefront of what are called the Amboys or the American boys in the Philippine military. His

secretary of foreign affairs also has a reputation of being pro US. So even if his default position is to dislike the US, kind of bureaucracy of the Philippines is such that it's geared towards this partnership with the United States, and it's not very easy for him to walk away from that.

The other thing is that Filipinos overwhelmingly like the United States. I'm not sure if this is still the case, but I think in the 2010s, there were surveys asking which countries love the United States the most. Second in that list was the United States, first in that list was the Philippines. So Filipinos have a history of loving the United States more than the United States itself.

Ali Moore:

Do you think that in the last six years, that the relationship with the US has really changed? Or because those structures remain the same despite the talk of Duterte, what sort of a relationship do you think is being handed to the next president with the US, particularly right now when it's so important with the US and China jostling for position?

Lisandro Claudio:

I think it's going to be an okay enough relationship, especially since the United States also wants to win the Philippines back. If you look at the Biden administration. It's clearly foregrounded its need to focus on Asia and to win allies in Asia in a long protracted war of influence against China. And they're going to need the Philippines there, their longest ally in the region.

Ali Moore:

And the relationship between the Philippines and China, where does that stand at the end of Duterte's reign?

Lisandro Claudio:

Well, this is really going to be dependent on who the next president is going to be, because right now the forerunner for president is unfortunately Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son of the late dictator, which is again, evidence of the fact that kind of Duterte project of authoritarianism still has some appeal, because people are inclined to vote for somebody who is running on a very similar platform to Duterte. And Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has said that he will continue the kind of foreign policy approach of bringing the Philippines closer to China. I think, on the part of the Marcoses, they're not big fans of the United States because the Reagan administration withdrew its support from the Marcoses in '86, and I think they're still nursing those wounds.

Ali Moore:

What about China's approach to the South China Sea though? And to what extent does that make it difficult to push a pro-China approach in the Philippines?

Lisandro Claudio:

I think Filipino see the incursions and they see this not simply as disputes between two countries. They see these incursions as incursions into their territory. So Filipinos are very nationalistic, relative to China. There is some racism there, but there is also this idea that China has emerged as a kind of bully and imperialist power, and they don't like that. And as a result, Duterte is going to have a hard time justifying to the public, his pivot to China, and he has had a hard time justifying to the public his pivot to China.

Ali Moore:

So you just talked about the question of who comes next, who will replace Duterte, and I guess the impact of his six years on who Filipinos choose to support. You talked about the candidacy of Marcos Jr. How popular is he right now? Is he the front runner?

Lisandro Claudio:

He is the front runner, but the opposition is currently led by Vice President Leni Robredo. So we elect our vice president separately from the president. And usually, the Filipino people elect the vice president who will serve as a check to the president. And that's been the case for Vice President Robredo, and she's running on a very clear cut anti-Duterte platform. And it's going to be interesting because she can beat Marcos. We know this because she beat Marcos for vice president. But of course, Marcos, the interesting thing, I think the reason why Marco has gained some popularity is because after Leni, Vice President Robredo beat him for the vice presidency, he started to claim that Robredo had cheated him out of the vice presidency. And so, he created this kind of big lie, similar to Trump, and the campaign is now being fueled by that big lie that he was cheated for the vice presidency.

Ali Moore:

You still look at the Philippines and you look at the experience of Marcos Jr's father, Ferdinand Marcos, I mean, decades a dictator, thrown out by popular protest. And yet, here, a few decades later, his son is popular.

Lisandro Claudio:

A lot of it is that people have forgotten. A lot of it is because of fake news. I mean, people say crazy things like for example, the Marcoses are rich because they received Yamashita's gold. And his supporters actually believe that, that he was not a crook; he's just lucky, and then he got a lot of gold. So there's a lot of fake news. And then there's also the continuing appeal of authoritarianism, which people think can be articulated with wealth. So the vision of Marcos is not just authoritarianism, it's also a promise of wealth. He's saying that the Philippines, if it had stayed under his father, would've been the next Singapore. So there's always been a kind of Singapore fantasy in the Philippines, this kind of bizarre sense that if we could just be as authoritarian as Singapore, we'd be as wealthy as Singapore. And they're tapping into that.

Ali Moore:

And does this also go back to what you talked about in terms of the appeal of the presidential office for Filipinos? And if it does, does it also tie into wanting a strong man leader? Is that where the Philippines is still at after six years of Duterte? Is there any desire for anyone who might be more unifying? Or do they like that dictatorial single big talking leader?

Lisandro Claudio:

Yeah. I think that it might have something to do with that. Historically, it also has something to do with kind of disillusionment with the liberal democracy of 1986 until 2016, because Marcos fell in 1986, and then you had successful elections from that point onwards, and you had the semblance of liberal democracy in the Philippines. And yet, for the majority of Filipinos, they don't think that their lives have significantly improved over those 30 years. And maybe now, they're asking for replacement. So it's going to be a while before Filipinos realised that authoritarian doesn't work, because right now the big sentiment is that we have tried a kind of softer approach to governance. Maybe that doesn't work for Filipinos. So the key word that politicians like Duterte and Marcos Jr. use is the word discipline, right? Filipinos just need to be disciplined, and everything's going to be fine.

Ali Moore:

So at the end of six years of Duterte, how strong are the democratic institutions of the Philippines, and to what extent has Duterte impacted that strength?

Lisandro Claudio:

Well, a lot of the problems of the democratic institutions predated Duterte. So for instance, earlier, I mentioned the problem with the lower house, that it's essentially a chamber that supports anything the president does because of the power of pork barrel. But in another sense, I think he's made things a lot worse because I think he's the first president to use the rhetoric of Asian values to denigrate human rights. And what I mean by that, is that he is doing something similar to what Lee Kuan Yew or Dr. Mahathir was doing in the rest of Southeast Asia, where they say that the circumstances of Asia are different from the West and the values of Asia are more collectivists relative to the more individualistic West, and therefore, human rights are anathema to the kind of politics we're promoting.

And that is a very insidious discourse that Duterte has promoted, and he's done it through various ways. I mean, he said things like that. He said things like, "If it's human rights, I don't give an F." He's also kind of defenestrated Commission of Human Rights. So now the reputation of that commission, which is a very valiant constitutional commission, the reputation of that is that it's the commission that supports drug lords and drug addicts, and that abets criminality in society. So it's very scary, and I don't know where that's going, but it's definitely tainted the reputation of human rights in the country.

Ali Moore:

Do you think that will last beyond Duterte?

Lisandro Claudio:

I think it will, especially if Ferdinand Marcos Jr. becomes the next president, because he's probably going to trade in that fantasy as well.

Ali Moore:

So how do you think Duterte is going to be remembered, and I guess that obviously depends who you ask, but the great majority of Filipinos?

Lisandro Claudio:

So as I alluded to a while ago, it is possible that next year, people just forget about Duterte and will dislike him, because President Aquino was very popular until the end. There was a dip in his ratings towards the end as well, similar to Duterte. And then after his presidency, he was considered toxic. The senators who were running under his banner, they weren't appearing in videos with him. He wasn't raising their hand. Nobody wanted to be seen close to President Aquino, so that could actually happen to Duterte.

Ali Moore:

And does that mean that despite this quite extraordinary six years, he then effectively disappears?

Lisandro Claudio:

It is possible because, again, that's what happened to President Aquino, a kind of extraordinary popular for 5.5 years, and then he disappears.

Ali Moore:

How do you think Duterte is going to be remembered by the rest of the world?

Lisandro Claudio:

I hope he gets remembered as the kind of first real criminal against humanity of the Philippines because that's the accusation against him in the ICC. So we've had murderers before, Ferdinand Marcos was definitely a murderer, but a guy who really revelled in violence to the extent that Duterte did, I think this is really unprecedented. I mean, Duterte has gone beyond Marcos. He's a kind of Idi Amin figure. And that's not a comparison I make, that is a comparison Duterte himself made. He said he would be like Idi Amin, and true enough, he has become a kind of Idi Amin of the Philippines.

Ali Moore:

Indeed. Lisandro, you did say you're not very optimistic about the economy. Are you optimistic about the future of the Philippines?

Lisandro Claudio:

I think the institutions have been around for a while, so it's going to take a long time to completely erode them. So I am invested in a kind of liberal democratic culture that we've had for the longest time. So I'm invested in the idea that Filipinos have thought of themselves as democratic for the longest time. Filipinos have been proud of, for example, their relatively free press. Filipinos have been proud of the adversarial nature of our politics. Filipinos have been proud of the polemical nature of democratic and political discourse. And I think those things are going to endure, and so that makes me think that there is still some good left in my country and that there are still some things to look forward to.

Ali Moore:

Dr. Lisandro Claudio, thank you so much for your time and your insights and for talking to Ear to Asia. And before I let you go, let me ask, if listeners are keen to find out more about the work that you do, where can they find you? Where can they look for you on social media?

Lisandro Claudio:

I've started to extricate myself from social media so... Well, you can follow me on Facebook, I'm Leloy Claudio there. I rarely post now. I hope that people read my work. My book is about the history of liberalism in the Philippines, called *Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking the State in 20th-Century Philippines*.

Ali Moore:

Well, thank you so much for talking to us. It's been absolutely fascinating. Thank you.

Lisandro Claudio:

Thank you. It's a pleasure, Ali.

Ali Moore:

Our guest has been Dr. Lisandro Claudio, specialist in the history of global liberal thought from UC Berkeley.

Ali Moore:

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