INTERVIEWS 30.06.2022

‘A new message of hope against an old, recycled cynicism’

Two authoritarian politicians have come to power in the Philippines — Marcos Jr and Sara Duterte. Ronald Llamas on how to build an opposition

With Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr and Sara Duterte winning the elections not only did the family of the old dictator take power again but also a new family dynasty was established. Will the duo follow the footsteps of their respective fathers?

Basically, yes. The President-elect Marcos just said that he invited Rodrigo Duterte to be his anti-drug-Tsar. Marcos just emphasised that he is willing to continue Duterte’s controversial strategy of extrajudicial killings , which – according to some human rights groups – has surpassed 30,000 deaths. It’s a crystal-clear indication that there won’t be much difference between the previous Duterte government and the Marcos government, especially on question of the rule of law and in terms of human rights.

Sara Duterte made a controversial proposal to revive the two years compulsory military education for young people aged 18 and above, which was discontinued with the fall of the dictatorship. You can also see the militaristic tendency not only in the proposals of the vice-president, but most probably of the next government. I think their first 100 days or their first year in office will be most telling, as I expect that their next move will be to change the Constitution.

Duterte wanted to change the Constitution, which barred him from running for a second term.

I think that will be one of the reasons to change it. The 1987 constitution was created primarily to prevent another dictatorship. No one wanted the possibility of an authoritarian president who could become another dictator. Other reasons for Marcos Jr und Sara Duterte to change the constitution is to liberalise the economy for foreign investments. However, most of the reasons are primarily

reactionary: Some provisions of the constitution were created to protect human rights. With the fall of the dictatorship in 1986, the Commission on human rights was established to investigate the Marcos dictatorship's human rights violations and to prevent them from being repeated. At the same time, the Presidential Commission for good government was established to locate and retrieve Marcos' plunder. It was successfully able to retrieve almost $3bn in Marcos' loot and is still looking for $10 to $20bn more – depending on the interest rates of the past 36 years – which are stored in Swiss banks, North American banks, and so on.

In the election campaign, the dictatorship was not much of an issue. How was Marcos Jr able to work around it?

Marcos Jr never participated in a single debate during the entire campaign. His absence allowed him to avoid the pressure of having to answer any of these questions. Of course, his team released press statements denying all the plunder. In a way, it is not only a restoration but a consummation of a protracted return to power. The Marcoses never really left.

In 1989, a military coup led by Marcos loyalists almost succeeded in bringing down a democratically elected Aquino government. In 1991, the Marcos family returned to the Philippines. And in 1992, Imelda Marcos ran for president and if she had united with another Marcos crony, Danding Cojuangco, she would have won the presidency. In 1998, Erap Estrada, a Marcos supporter, won the presidency by a landslide. In the interregnum, the Marcoses won local seats in their bailiwicks in the north and in the south. Imelda Marcos became a congressman while Bongbong Marcos and Imee Marcos eventually won seats in the Senate. And in 2016, Bongbong Marcos lost the vice-presidency by just a small margin. It was during the Duterte presidency that Marcos was able to wield national power.

Is the memory of the dictatorship and the martial law fading?

One of the weaknesses of the liberal-democratic institutions was their inability to educate the Filipinos, especially the younger generation which was born after the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship, about the evils and ills of the dictatorship in the school and university curriculum. That's why they were able to weaponise social media technology, characterised by fake news, disinformation, troll farms, and a massive revision of history. This was instrumental in effectively convincing people of the Marcos and Duterte narratives.

So, one could say the time was ripe for the return of the Marcos family

to power?

The greatest enabler of the Marcoses was the Duterte presidency. He became president during an authoritarian surge around the world. He was elected almost simultaneously with the electoral victories of Trump, Erdogan, Bolsonaro, Orban, Modi. One of President Duterte's first acts was to give the dictator Marcos a heroic burial and to thank the Marcoses, without whose financial support, he claimed, he wouldn't have become president.

Duterte was very popular with his campaign against drugs, where he killed almost 30,000 alleged addicts and pushers. And this extrajudicial populism was very popular. Together with the incremental growth of the Marcos revival, this marriage was very compelling. Last year, during the candidacy filing, Marcos was at 20 per cent but after the daughter of Duterte joined him as the vice-presidential candidate, his ratings went up to 63 per cent. So, in a way, Duterte together with the Marcos brand, created Marcos Jr.

With Senator Risa Hontiveros, your party holds the only oppositional seat in the senate. What does it mean for your party Akbayan?

Risa Hontiveros will not only be the leader of the opposition in the Senate but in the whole country. The positive thing about being the lone opposition senator in the Senate is that you get to sit in all the committees. This gives her a platform from which to articulate her grievances and her vision. It is her second and last term in the Senate. After the term, she either retires or scales up and runs for the presidency. Vice-President Robredo has transferred the leadership of the opposition to Risa Hontiveros, so she is now in a strategic position to harness the energies of the pink wave and create a new opposition with Akbayan Party as the lead. And, she has the luxury of time compared to the last election where our candidate Robredo only decided to run in the last minute. While the Marcoses and the Dutertes have been preparing for years.

Former vice-president Leni Robredo, who lost against Marcos Jr in her bid for presidency, is trying to build a new oppositional platform. How do her chances look like?

Even though she lost, Robredo was able to generate over 15 million votes. She was able to organise the biggest mobilisations I've seen since the fall of the dictatorship. More than a million people attended her last campaign rally. She has the support of students, professionals, and the middle class. So, they may be less in numbers, but in terms of influence in society, this could be the foundation for a new movement. With Risa as the only remaining opposition, we have a key

role in harnessing the 15 to 16 million voters into a real movement for change. Now, we have six years to prepare, to organise this movement. We have to direct this energy towards the midterm election, towards the next presidential election, towards an advocacy for a democratic ethos against the populist authoritarian ethos, a new message of hope against an old, recycled cynicism.



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Ronald Llamas is a prominent Filipino activist and was the political adviser of late President Benigno 'Noynoy' Aquino III.