Debate

Change without Transformation: Social Policy Reforms in the Philippines under Duterte

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ABSTRACT

This article explores social policy reforms championed by the Philippines’ strongman president Rodrigo Duterte during his first three years in office (2016–19), as a case for examining the transformative potential of social policy expansion under rising new right-wing and authoritarian leaders. By showing how political economy and historico-institutional conditions foreclose the transformative possibilities of the social policy changes effected by Duterte, the author offers a critique of current tendencies in global development discourses to treat all forms of social policy expansion as progressive. In the Philippines case, there is no progressive ideology guiding the reforms, nor are there political movements overseeing the expansion of social rights now inscribed in law. Rather, the reforms institutionally entrench a minimalist approach to universalism and strengthen the foothold of poverty targeting as an organizing principle of social provisioning. Social policy expansion under Duterte manifests aspects of the ‘dark side’ of social policy reforms during the current global political moment, including the use of such policy reforms to legitimize a conservative and authoritarian political order, and the functionality, across the political spectrum, of ‘narrow universalism’ — the type championed by international development agencies — which serves to deepen segmentation in social provisioning.

INTRODUCTION

Curious tensions and contradictions can be observed in the space for social policy reforms and the articulation of citizenship rights in the Philippines

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under President Rodrigo Duterte since he came to power in 2016: while he remains steadfast in his leadership of a civil rights-crushing ‘war on drugs’, he has allocated unprecedented levels of public resources for social spending and signed into law bills that ostensibly strengthen citizens’ social rights. How can someone who has no qualms about waging a war that, as will be shown below, is deeply conservative in its targeting and extermination of poor people, also be responsible for social policy expansion, which could potentially strengthen social rights and the access of the poor to state resources? And what of the transformative potential of these reforms: in particular, following Fraser’s (1995) conception of transformative change, to what extent do they address not just the inequitable outcomes yielded by social arrangements, but also the very framework that generates these arrangements?

These questions are of wider contemporary relevance during this global political moment when rising new right and authoritarian leaders are in a position to structure the space for social reforms in large swathes of the world. In this regard, Fenger’s (2018) findings about how social policy is being championed by contemporary populist radical right parties in European countries and the USA are of interest.1 In most of the countries surveyed (the exception being the USA), he finds that populist radical right parties — while having a conservative view of who ‘deserves’ social assistance (for instance, excluding immigrants) — have opposed austerity measures and professed belief in the continuation of state provisioning of social goods and welfare. In this light, the use of social policy as an instrument for control, mobilization and legitimation by conservative political forces is unique neither to the Philippines under Duterte nor, as will be shown in the final section of this article, to the contemporary conjuncture. To some, this point may be obvious and pedestrian, but it nevertheless serves as an important reminder to temper the currently fashionable tendency — as noted in the introductory essay of this Debate section — to celebrate all forms of social policy expansion as positive and progressive.

That said, it is nevertheless important to understand if there is any possibility for transformative universal systems of social provisioning to emerge from politically inauspicious beginnings, even perhaps as an unintended consequence. This is the analytical task that this article takes on: to explore some of the specific conditions that prevent patterns of social policy expansion from effecting transformative change at the current conjuncture of ascendant right-wing authoritarian populist leaders. It will be shown that while the transformative potential of social policy reforms cannot be

1. Fenger examines the social policy agenda of the following parties: Rassemblement National (National Front) in France; Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom) in The Netherlands; Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) in Belgium; Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) in Germany; Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) in Sweden; and the Republican Party in the USA.
mechanistically deduced from the political agency driving them, the Philippine case nevertheless demonstrates that the political economy dynamics behind agency, in interaction with institutional pathways structuring reforms, may foreclose such possibilities. Social policy expansion under Duterte thereby manifests at least two aspects of the ‘dark side’ of social policy reforms: first, the way such reforms are being used to legitimize a conservative and authoritarian political order; and second, the fact that a narrow approach to universalism — the type championed by international development agencies — is proving functional across the political spectrum, including to strongman leaders like Duterte, and is effectively foreclosing the possibilities for social policy reforms to form the seedbed for transformative change, be it accidental or intended.

In the first section of this article, the seeming contradictions found in the Philippine case, where a strongman figure is both leading the charge in an unjust drug war and overseeing potentially progressive social policy initiatives, are discussed. In the second and third sections, the transformative potential of the social policy changes introduced by Duterte in his first three years in office is assessed with reference, respectively, to the political economy forces that drive the logic of social policy expansion, and the institutional legacies upon which they build. In the concluding section, a wider reading of the Philippine case is provided, bringing it into conversation with historical episodes of similar expansions in social provisioning under illiberal reformers.

‘THE PUNISHER’ AS SOCIAL REFORMER?

Duterte rose to power dubbed by the press as ‘The Punisher’, promising to be tough, decisive and swift in addressing the problems of crime and insecurity. His ‘war on drugs’ could be seen as his key instrument for delivering on this electoral campaign promise, through the treatment of the purported ‘drug menace’ in the Philippines as an issue of criminal justice, rather than as a public health concern. This is a war that has had thousands of casualties — by conservative official estimates of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, it claimed at least 5,050 lives in ‘anti-drug operations’ in the period from July 2016 to November 2018 (Tomacruz, 2018). These operations are widely reported to involve ‘extra-judicial killings’ of suspected drug pushers and addicts by the police and vigilante groups, who thereby render summary judgment on them as criminals worthy of extermination, and ultimately deprived of recourse to due process.

As ‘The Punisher’, Duterte ‘securitized’ a social problem, focusing on the purportedly widespread illegal drug trade as an existential threat to public safety and national security, and with no view to addressing the socially structured impact and drivers of both drug trade and drug consumption. He justified his ‘war on drugs’ by exaggerating the security threats imposed by
the illegal drug trade, and in turn used this war as an instrument to incorporate the national police into his power base (Quimpo, 2017: 147). This also resonates with the rhetoric of a strand of new right and populist leaders with whom Duterte currently shares the world stage. This strand of populism — also associated with Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro — has been described as ‘penal’ or ‘punitive’ (Curato, 2016; Kyle and Gultchin, 2018). It involves the political practice of courting votes by preying on citizens’ anxieties about security and safety, through the promotion of punitive short-term solutions to address criminality, and often at the expense of respecting human rights. In the singularity of his vision for dealing with criminality and insecurity through a drug war that is pursued at all costs, one could understand Bello (2017: 78) describing Duterte as a ‘fascist original’, a strongman ‘with a political project chiefly oriented towards building an authoritarian future’, rather than ‘the reactionary impulse of seeking to restore a mythical past or the conservative vision of defending the status quo’.

But there is more to Duterte’s drug war than illiberal transgressions of civil and human rights; it is in fact deeply conservative in its preservation and defence of the socioeconomic hierarchy, particularly if we consider its main casualties. The continuing drug war is emblematic of the current political order in the Philippines: one that is both authoritarian and conservative. With most of the victims of ‘anti-drug operations’ happening to be denizens of urban slums and disproportionately poor, the drug war has rightly been described by international organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch as a ‘de facto programme of social cleansing’, and a ‘war on the poor’ (Hadro, 2017). In this sense, his unapologetic leadership of the drug war also illustrates how Duterte differs from previous populist politicians in the Philippines. While similarly running under the mantle of advancing anti-trapo\(^2\) politics and casting himself as an outsider from the machinations of ‘Imperial Manila’, Duterte differentiates himself from the populist president Joseph Estrada\(^3\) by eschewing the image of being ‘pro-poor’, and as such, he has laid claims to neither a narrative nor purposive agenda for social reforms.

However, social policy developments since Duterte became president reveal trends that belie this indifference to the social question. In his first three years, Duterte has overseen the highest levels of social spending witnessed in the three decades beginning in 1986.\(^4\) According to the

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2. *Trapo* is the Filipino term for ‘dishrag’ and also links together the first two syllables of the words in the phrase ‘traditional politician’. It is a pejorative term connoting an old and corrupt establishment politician.

3. Estrada was Philippine president from 1998 to 2001, winning the elections using the slogan ‘*Erap para sa Mahirap*’ (‘Erap for the Poor’) — ‘Erap’ being the nickname by which the former movie star is popularly known. For a history of populism in the Philippines in the post-Marcos period, see Thompson (2010).

4. The three decades from 1986 — the year president Ferdinand Marcos was ousted from office after 20 years in power — have been years of democratic transition and consolidation in the
Department of Budget Management, actual levels of spending in 2017 and programmed spending in 2018 would take social spending under Duterte to its highest level for 32 years, both as a share of public spending and as percentage of GDP (DBM, 2019a). Even more tellingly, Duterte also signed into law between 2017 and 2019 bills that seem to contradict the conservative impulses symbolized by his drug war, by strengthening the claims of citizens — particularly the poor — on public resources. These include laws that provide for access to free tuition in public universities, and to national health insurance for all citizens. Since the People Power uprising in 1986, the only efforts to shore up universal rights to social goods and services had come in the form of the enforcement of the constitutional provision of universal access to basic education; attempts at widening the coverage of the national health insurance of the poor; and strengthening non-contributory pensions to elderly who are deemed poor. In this context, the laws signed by Duterte could be broadly interpreted as advancing social reforms in that they strengthen, at least in the formal sense, universal rights to social goods like tertiary education and healthcare. Duterte also enacted a law that regularizes budgetary appropriations for the country’s conditional cash transfer programme, thereby making it a permanent feature of the social protection system. This could be interpreted as leading to the institutionalization of social assistance, which had previously been administratively fragmented and largely subject to the whims of politicians. He also expanded the use of cash transfers as a programme of social protection to compensate the poor for increased indirect taxes

Philippines. Duterte’s rise to power is seen by Bello (2017) and Juego (2017) as a holding to account for the failure of liberal democratic institutions that were established during this period to deliver broader economic empowerment and wealth redistribution.

5. Republic Act 10931, Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, signed into law in August 2017.

6. Republic Act 11223, Universal Health Care Act, signed into law in February 2019.

7. A series of popular demonstrations in the capital city of Manila in February 1986, which led to the end of Marcos’ strongman rule in the Philippines.

8. The Philippine Constitution of 1987 mandates that education gets the highest budgetary allocation (Art XIV, Section 5.5) and that a system of free public elementary and high school education is established and maintained (Art XIV, Section 2.1).

9. This was implemented via the passage of Republic Act 10351, signed into law in December 2012, which allocates 80 per cent of the incremental increase in revenues from excise taxes on alcohol and tobacco to the national health insurance programme, which in turn was used to subsidize premiums of ‘indigents’.

10. Republic Act 9995, signed into law in July 2009, expands benefits from the non-contributory pension system for the elderly, including providing a monthly social pension of 500 Philippine pesos (about US$ 10) for ‘indigent’ senior citizens.

11. Republic Act 11310, Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program — Bridging Programme for the Filipino Family — also known as the 4Ps Act, signed into law in April 2019.

12. Details can be found in the review of social protection expenditure and performance in the Philippines, undertaken by the ILO Subregional Office for South-East Asia and the Pacific (ILO, 2007).
levied on them under a tax reform package passed at the end of 2017 that is meant to generate revenues for planned increases in infrastructure and social spending.\textsuperscript{13}

What are the political economy and institutional dynamics driving social policy expansion under an authoritarian and conservative political order and what do these say about the transformative potential of social reforms under Duterte? The following sections deal with these questions.

POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL REFORM UNDER DUTERTE

The nature of Duterte’s political base and the challenges that he faced in terms of consolidating power in his first two years of office provide the empirical basis for understanding the political economy dynamics behind his championing of social policy expansion during the period 2016 to 2019.

Electoral polling data from the 2016 election suggest that even as he won votes across socio-economic classes, Duterte’s strongest base of support comprised younger, wealthier and more educated sections of the population.\textsuperscript{14} This appears to be borne out by polls conducted a month before the elections, on the basis of which Teehankee and Thompson (2016) opine that ‘the Duterte phenomenon is not a revolt of the poor. It is middle-class driven. It is angry protest most acute among the modestly successful, including call centre workers, Uber drivers, and overseas Filipino workers’. Similarly, Coronel (2019) notes that among Duterte’s most ‘hardcore supporters’ are the ‘new middle classes’, comprising Filipino nannies, nurses, seamen and construction workers working overseas, and the digital underclass working in the booming call centres in Manila and other cities. They constitute a section of the population for whom the global division of labour has provided pathways out of poverty but not necessarily into affluence and security. It is not difficult to see how Duterte’s electoral pitch to deal with issues of criminality and the country’s crumbling urban infrastructure would resonate with them.

To fully understand Duterte’s political base, one needs to examine not just who voted for him, but also sections of the elite that support him.

\textsuperscript{13} Republic Act 10963, the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion Act, signed into law in December 2017.

\textsuperscript{14} Based on the exit polls conducted by Social Weather Stations, Duterte’s lead over his closest rival, Mar Roxas, was 26 points in socio-economic classes ABC, compared to 17 points in class D, and 7 points in class E. His lead over Roxas was 28 points among college graduates, 19 points among those with some college education, 8 points among those with high school, and 7 points among others. His lead over Roxas was 33 points in ages 18–24, 26 points in ages 25–34, 14 points in ages 35–44, 10 points in ages 45–54, and 4 points in ages 55 and up (Mangahas, 2016).
Part of the Duterte playbook for winning the presidency was to articulate the festering resentments against an ineffective national elite and to promise to de-centre power from the national political capital where that elite is largely based. However, once in power, the brunt of Duterte’s ‘anti-elitist’ stance has been directed at weakening elites constituting political opposition. For example, an opposition senator was arrested on drug trafficking charges,\(^{15}\) and an independent-minded Supreme Court justice was ousted from office\(^{16}\) — both were among the most vocal critics of the president’s drug war. In a country where political mobilization is done not through programmatic political parties but through coalitions of prominent families, Duterte leans on a coalition involving sections of the elite who were excluded under the previous administration. Aside from his trusted inner circle from his days as mayor in Davao, he depends on a fractious alliance of political families, which include the family of the country’s first strongman leader, Ferdinand Marcos, and other families previously displaced by liberal-minded elites who held national power under his predecessor Benigno Aquino III (Coronel, 2019). This is an alliance of convenience and, given Duterte’s current levels of popularity, it seems that his allies probably need him more than he needs them. But, what is germane to the analysis of this article is that the elite coalition backing Duterte is not governed by principle or programme, and has no identifiable agenda beyond that of maintaining power and the benefits that come with it. Duterte’s ‘anti-elitist’ stance appears to be directed at those sections of the elite outside his own governing coalition, and thereby embodies no evident ideological basis that could inform the social policy changes he has championed.

Meanwhile, patterns in net satisfaction ratings for the president between 2016 and 2018 also suggest the specific challenges facing Duterte in terms of consolidating his rule. As in the exit polls, data on satisfaction ratings show that contentment with the president’s performance in his first two years in office cuts across classes. Unlike exit polls, which suggest that support for the president was more robust in higher and middle echelons of society, the president’s satisfaction ratings were initially higher among the lower classes. However, while sections of the population from the higher-income groups appear largely unwavering in their satisfaction during his first two years in power, those from the lower classes seem less so. While satisfaction ratings among higher-income classes increased by four points between 2016 and 2018, those among lower classes dipped by 11 points during the same period (SWS, 2019).\(^{17}\) The simmering dissatisfaction in the leadership of

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15. Leila de Lima was arrested in February 2017 (Villamor, 2017) and is still in prison.
16. Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno was ousted from office in May 2018 on grounds that she had failed to fully disclose her personal wealth (Villamor, 2018).
17. Based on SWS (2019), Duterte’s net satisfaction ratings from classes ABC are: +54 in 2016; increasing to +60 in 2017; and decreasing to +58 in 2018. Among class D: +65 in
Duterte during this period among lower-income groups — which, as noted above, constitute a support base that Duterte is still working to consolidate — mostly reflects the conjuncture of political and economic conditions in place when these satisfaction surveys were conducted. But it also partly reflects the fact that the most damaging effects of Duterte’s drug war are being felt among the poorer strata of society.

Given the nature of the political base that brought him to power and sustains him, and the challenges of political consolidation, Duterte has had to address, from early on in his term, the imperatives of broadening and strengthening his base beyond the unorganized mass of frustrated sections of the middle classes and the ultimately unreliable protection afforded by alliances of convenience with sections of the elite. This point is made evident by two initiatives in mass base building that Duterte undertook when he assumed office. First, a key ally of the president, Leoncio Evasco, an ex-Communist guerrilla, was appointed as Cabinet Secretary and tasked with organizing a nationwide mass movement for change soon after the president came to power in 2016. This involved the establishment of nationwide village-level units of what came to be known as Kilusang Pagbabago (KP) — Movement for Real Change. On its Facebook page, KP is described as a grassroots-based movement, meant to partner with the administration in what are key elements of Duterte’s avowed platform for governance: the war on drugs; battling corruption; poverty alleviation; pursuit of the peace process; and the shift to a federal form of government. To support the process of building this mass movement, the president created the Office of Participatory Governance, headed by Evasco, whose personnel were also active in KP (Ranada, 2018).

Second, Duterte made early overtures to give space in the governing coalition to the armed faction of the left in the Philippines, which is at the centre of a 50-year armed communist insurgency in the country and has the most extensive organizational reach of the broad left in the Philippines. This faction comprises an organizational complex that includes the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), its armed guerrilla group called the New People’s Army (NPA), and the National Democratic Front (NDF), which in turn is an umbrella formation of organizations and social movement groups supporting armed struggle. In the run-up to the presidential elections in 2016, Duterte famously declared that he would be the first ‘leftist president’ of the

2016; decreasing to +59 in 2017; and further down to +54 in 2018. Among class E: +63 in 2016; decreasing to +57 in 2017; and further down to +52 in 2018.
18. Evasco was Duterte’s chief of staff when he was mayor of Davao City and served as his presidential campaign manager. The very first executive order signed by Duterte put Evasco in charge of 12 government agencies involved in dealing with poverty alleviation (Ranada, 2016).
19. See: www.facebook.com/pg/KPNational/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed 1 September 2019).
20. Through Executive Order 9, signed by the president in December 2016.
Philippines (GMA News, 2016), the first in the country’s history to make such a claim (Fonbuena, 2017). In his first State of the Nation address, in June 2016, he declared a unilateral ceasefire with CPP-NPA-NDF (Duterte, 2016). Thereafter, he made a series of other grand gestures to signal his commitment to incorporating this faction of the left, including entering into formal peace talks with the group; appointing prominent leftist personalities allied with the group to key government posts in the Departments of Labour, Social Welfare, and Agrarian Reform, as well as the National Anti-Poverty Commission; and overseeing the filing of petitions in court to release about 20 jailed CPP leaders, including those that were to join in the peace negotiations (Fonbuena, 2017).

However, these efforts to build a grassroots-based political movement to support Duterte never really gained traction and efforts to draw the armed left into the governing coalition ultimately fell through. In 2018, Evasco resigned from the cabinet (Ranada, 2018), not having survived the turf wars within the Duterte administration and choosing to run as governor of the province of Bohol in the local elections of that year. The Office of Participatory Governance was abolished soon afterwards. Peace talks with the Communists collapsed in 2017, with Duterte signing presidential proclamations declaring the termination of the talks and formally designating NPA as a terrorist group (GMA News, 2017), while leftist cabinet appointees were either rejected by the Commission on Appointments or resigned a few months after the collapse of peace talks. With these failed efforts at base and coalition building, any potential for political formations with mobilizational power and a clearly articulated ideology to inform Duterte’s governance platform — including his social policy reforms — also disappeared.

These failures notwithstanding, such initiatives reveal the conditions under which social policy expansion of the type pursued by Duterte could be seen as an important instrument for legitimation of a populist-authoritarian regime — in terms both of making the political order acceptable and of managing future potential existential threats. The promise of dealing with crime and insecurity, on which satisfaction and trust in Duterte among middle and upper classes appear to hinge, evidently could not guarantee regime stability. The potential sources of future vulnerability are illuminated not only by the dips in net satisfaction rating in 2017 and 2018 among lower-income classes as discussed above, but also by two pressure points that could threaten the ‘animal spirits’ and destabilize the investment climate.

The first is the threat emanating from the international backlash to Duterte’s drug war, which raises questions around the rule of law in the country. The drug war has not only been widely reported and criticized in international media, but key international organizations have also given sustained and critical attention to it, and to other alleged human rights transgressions in the country. In February 2017, the International Criminal Court
Prosecutor issued a statement in which she announced the opening of ‘preliminary examinations’ into the crimes allegedly committed by the state in the context of Duterte’s war on drugs (Bensouda, 2018). In July 2017, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, a bi-partisan formation in the United States House of Representatives, conducted a public hearing on the human rights consequences of the war on drugs in the Philippines (Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, 2017). In June 2019, international human rights experts from the United Nations issued a statement calling on the UN Human Rights Council to investigate the human rights situation in the Philippines, in the face of the ‘staggering number of unlawful killings and official attacks on people and institutions who defend human rights’ (Cumming-Bruce, 2019).

A second threat is that posed by liberally oriented sections of the middle classes, many of whom engage with civil society groups whose members were conscientized as a legacy of the struggle against the authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines (1963–86), and which blossomed in the wake of the People Power uprising of 1986. This is a social force with latent mobilizational power. Such power was exhibited in the series of protests held in Manila and some key cities in the Philippines when Duterte allowed the burial of the remains of Marcos — which had been preserved in a refrigerated crypt in his hometown since 1993 — in the country’s Cemetery of Heroes. While the size of the rallies never grew beyond the thousands, the protest action was sustained for several weeks in November 2017 (Rappler, 2017). The same social forces also came out during EDSA II, the second people’s uprising that occurred in 2001 and led to the ousting of President Joseph Estrada, who was hounded during his presidency by allegations of graft and corruption.

The threats posed by these potential sources of regime instability are currently latent rather than active. The power of these social forces to destabilize the political order under Duterte — in particular, through their capacity to weaken the general economic climate — is partly blunted by other sources of legitimation. Foreign direct investment (FDI) continues to pour into the country — although this may have less to do with approval of the regime, and more to do with the opportunities offered by the government’s ambitious infrastructure spending programme and the momentum resulting from steady economic growth throughout the 2010s. Data from the Central Bank of the Philippines (BSP, 2019) show that total net foreign investments increased in all years that Duterte has been in power so far, compared to their levels in 2015, the last full year of President Aquino’s term. While there have been fluctuations in flows from Japan, the United States, and the European

21. Marcos was democratically elected in 1963, but ruled the country under martial law from 1972 to 1983.
22. Total net direct investments amounted to US$ 5.7 billion in 2015, US$ 8.3 billion in 2016, US$ 10.3 billion in 2017, and US$ 9.8 billion in 2018 (BSP, 2019).
Union, Chinese FDI flows steadily increased from 2015 to 2018, reaching unprecedented levels in 2018 and the first two quarters of 2019.

However, given the historical role that disruptive threats to the investment climate and the mobilizational power of liberal middle classes played in the downfall of Marcos, they remain potential sources of vulnerability that require Duterte to strengthen and broaden his domestic political base in anticipation of future troubles. Given that satisfaction and trust ratings during his first two years in office among his electoral base of support seem to indicate continuing loyalty to the strongman president, it is the vacillating voters among the poor that he needs to win over. In this context, expanded programmes of social spending can be seen as mechanisms to secure loyalty of this section of the population, helping solidify his domestic power base across the widest range of classes.

In summary, Duterte’s strongest support emanates from middle to high socioeconomic classes, with whom the electoral promise of decisively dealing with problems of security most strongly resonate. This means that, having taken office, Duterte has had to undertake the political project of consolidating and strengthening a popular mass base while already in power. In this context, his efforts to expand social policy are best appreciated as a regime-legitimating project, and as instrumental means to strengthen his base among poorer sections of the population, where support has never been as strong as among the relatively better-off, and where there is evidence showing erosion of satisfaction in his leadership between 2016 and 2018. They are mostly top-down reform efforts, and not buttressed by political movements making demands from below. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that his pursuit of any of these social policies is governed by a vision of shaking up the social order — be it in the sense of redistributing gains from the economic growth that the country has been enjoying for at least 10 years, or strengthening subaltern classes and weakening the foothold of ‘elites’ in the Philippine political economy. Resources made available for social sectors, policies to provide free public tertiary education and national health insurance for all, and the formal commitment to continue the previous administration’s cash transfer programmes can in this political context be seen as populist instruments to court favour, rather than deliberate and ideologically determined responses to political mobilization and demands from below.

23. The data from BSP (2019) on net foreign investment flows to the Philippines are as follows, with the year in brackets. Japan: US$ 394 million (2015); US$ 1.1 billion (2016); US$ 72 million (2017); and US$ 219 million (2018). USA: US$ 633 million (2015); US$ 84 million (2016); US$ 473 million (2017); and US$ 160 million (2018). EU: US$ 308 million (2015); US$ 107 million (2016); US$ 1.785 billion (2017); and US$ 347 million (2018).

24. Net foreign investment flows to the Philippines from China are as follows, with years in brackets: US$ 570,000 (2015); US$ 11 million (2016); US$ 29 million (2017); US$ 197 million (2018); and US$ 100 million (January to June 2019) (BSP, 2019),
CONTINUING ON THE PATH OF ‘NARROW UNIVERSALISM’

The progressive potential of social policy expansion under Duterte cannot of course be solely gleaned from the logic of political agency driving it, but also needs to be assessed by looking at the substantive content of the reforms in question, including the institutional legacies on which they build. A good starting point for such an analysis is the much vaunted historic increase in social spending under Duterte’s watch, which actually looks less significant when seen against trends in public spending in the years immediately before he came to power. As shown in Figure 1, patterns of public spending in the last 10 years suggest that an important shift in terms of focus on the social sector happened under Duterte’s liberal predecessor, President Aquino, who was in office from 2010 to 2016. Figure 1 shows that spending on social services overtook economic services from the start of Aquino’s term in 2010 and never let up, a trend that Duterte merely followed. The data table below the chart, which shows the shares in total social spending accounted for by key social subsectors, reveals another significant shift: while education still takes the lion’s share of social spending, relative shares of spending on health and social welfare increased significantly during Aquino’s term in office. As explained below, these shifts herald the increasing importance given to social protection provisioning because much of the increase in health...
spending was actually brought about by a policy of enhancing health-related financial protection of the poor.

The institutional characteristics of social policy expansion during Aquino’s term of office, which underpin the shift in social spending described above, prefigure the expansion of social policy under Duterte. First, social policy expansion under Aquino emphasized improved coverage of publicly subsidized service provisioning in two senses. In the case of education, Aquino oversaw an expansion of coverage in terms of benefits: in particular, he enacted a law that increased the number of years covered by compulsory basic education, which is available freely to everyone enrolled in public schools. In the case of health, he was responsible for a significant expansion in national health insurance coverage by allocating 80 per cent of the incremental increase in revenues from new excise taxes on alcohol and tobacco to subsidize the premiums of ‘indigents’, as described above (see footnote 9). Second, he strengthened the foothold of a poverty-targeted modality of social protection: the country’s conditional cash transfer programme became the flagship anti-poverty measure of his administration, with a dramatic increase in the number of households covered by the programme.

One characteristic hallmark of social policy expansion under Aquino was the embedding of the poverty-targeting ethos in welfare provisioning, which is best demonstrated by the co-evolution of systems of social assistance and healthcare provisioning. In particular, Aquino began the roll-out of universal health coverage by prioritizing the inclusion of the poor in the national health insurance programme; they were targeted using the social registry devised for the conditional cash transfers programme. His government also utilized the registry to target the beneficiaries for the newly expanded non-contributory pensions for the elderly. Such uses of the social registry across government programmes are cited as evidence of the unification of a fragmented system. But this unification is happening in a very limited way: not in the progressive sense suggested by Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea (2016: 19) whereby all beneficiaries receive social goods and services in an integrated system — that is, ‘in a similar fashion, and the state plays a major role in defining benefits, acting as provider and effectively regulating the market’ — but only in the administrative sense of streamlining the identification of beneficiaries for government programmes through the artefact of a social registry. Aquino’s healthcare reforms also hew to ‘pro-poor universal health coverage’ reforms, underpinned by the model of ‘progressive universalism’, which is characterized by a narrow focus on first expanding access to only the most essential healthcare services, and then gradually expanding benefits by first targeting the poor as beneficiaries. This is the

25. Republic Act 10533, known as the K+12 Act, was signed into law in May 2013 and increased compulsory basic education from 10 to 12 years while also making kindergarten education compulsory.
current model of choice championed by influential voices in global health policy, like the World Bank (see for example, World Bank, 2018a) and the Lancet Commission on Investing in Health (see for example, Bump et al., 2016).26

In general, social policy expansion under Aquino — by effectively promoting ‘universalism’ with a narrow focus on expanding coverage especially of the poor in terms of access to publicly subsidized social goods, and by extending the role of a social registry to identify who has a right to these goods — strengthened poverty-targeting as an organizing principle of social provisioning. Despite claims to ‘universalism’, there is a strong residualist impulse in this approach to social reforms, feeding the tendency to cast public provisioning as chiefly the realm of the poor, oriented towards the alleviation of their penurious conditions. As noted by Fischer (2018: 222), this is in line with the secular shift in the meaning ascribed to universal provisioning, influenced by the World Bank, which takes the position that it is achieved as long as ‘everyone has access to something’ — no matter who provides it or how poor the quality may be. The influence of such thinking in the Philippines is not surprising, given the important financial and technical support provided by the World Bank in rolling out and scaling up the country’s celebrated conditional cash transfer programme, and particularly in the construction of a social registry of the poor, which is being used as the central instrument for ‘progressive universalism’ in health and pensions. Between 2009 and 2019, the World Bank provided some US$ 1 billion to support the strengthening of the Philippines Department of Social Welfare and Development as a social protection agency, to set up the database for the national household targeting system, and to implement the country’s conditional cash transfer programme.27

By all indications, Duterte is carrying on with the spirit of Aquino’s social policy reforms. As indicated in the first section of this article, some of the key social policy reforms championed by Duterte — free tuition in public universities, and the automatic enrolment of every citizen in the national health insurance programme — embody efforts to promote wider coverage of access to social goods and services. Meanwhile, Duterte also continues to entrench poverty-targeted modalities of social protection, by making the country’s celebrated conditional cash transfer scheme a permanent government programme. Besides the law passed to this effect, there is further evidence of this entrenchment in Duterte’s proposals for addressing

26. The Lancet Commission on Investing in Health, chaired by former World Bank chief economist Lawrence Summers, is an independent group of 25 leading economists and global health experts.
27. According to the World Bank (2019), US$ 505 million was made available by the World Bank to the Philippines to finance the Social Welfare and Development Reform Project I from 2009 to 2015. An additional US$ 450 million was made available for the second phase of the project (2016–19), to which a further US$ 300 million has been added to extend support through to 2021.
the inegalitarian effects of a recent round of tax reforms, signed into law in 2017, which decrease rates of direct taxation and the proportion of government revenue taken from them, and increase the role of indirect taxation in revenue generation. With the aid of the social registry established for the conditional cash transfers programme, 30 per cent of the incremental revenues from the new consumption taxes will be transferred as unconditional cash transfers to the poorer sections of the population, who are expected to bear the regressive brunt of the tax reforms. While this has the potential of curbing the regressive impact of the tax reforms, it also worryingly helps to legitimize the regressive turn in the tax system.

Meanwhile, the transformative impact of providing free public tertiary education and universal health insurance is severely limited by the substantial presence of unregulated market options in the delivery of the services in question, which Duterte’s reforms do not address. In the case of institutions delivering tertiary education, 71 per cent of all universities are privately owned (CHED, 2019), charging fees that are largely unregulated. In the case of healthcare provisioning, hospitals in the frontline of service delivery are mostly private. In the Philippines, 64 per cent of hospitals are privately run — and unregulated in terms of price/costing of services — with hospital beds owned by the public sector declining from 54 per cent in 2003 to 47 per cent in 2016 (Dayrit et al., 2018: 127, 131). Poorer sections of the population, who through Duterte’s policy interventions are now granted rights to tertiary education and healthcare, are likely to crowd cheaper public facilities, where there is a danger of producing even poorer quality services. This brings to mind Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea’s (2016: 29) warning against policy interventions that prioritize expanding access as a stepping stone to promoting generosity and equity in social provisioning. They argue that, rather than promoting universalism in social provisioning, these interventions may instead fuel socio-economic stratification and further segmentation of public service delivery, with the better-off exiting poor-quality public services and relying on private options, which in turn delimits the possibilities for the emergence of cross-class coalitions demanding adequate and generous social services for everyone.

28. This relates to the tax reform package mentioned in the first section of this article (see also footnote 13). Changes to the system of direct taxation include simplifying the personal income taxation schedule and decreasing rates of estate and donors’ taxation. Changes to the system of indirect taxation include broadening the base of value-added taxes, increasing excise taxes on petroleum products and automobiles, imposing taxes on sugary drinks, and increasing excise taxes on cigarettes.

29. Reforms to devolve political power and administration in the 1990s have led to the fragmentation of healthcare delivery in the Philippines. Those reforms demolished the integrated referral system and placed the burden of primary healthcare provision onto fiscally weak local government units. As a result, there is a dearth of primary health facilities, and hospitals are the most significant providers of healthcare in the country.
Duterte’s social policy agenda bears all the hallmarks of ‘narrow universalism’, focusing on expanding access to public goods and social services and demonstrating the preferential use of poverty-targeted modalities of social protection. The institutional imprints of reforms begun by the liberal Aquino can also be detected in those introduced by the illiberal Duterte. This underscores the worrying tenacity of a model of social policy expansion, forcefully championed by international development organizations like the World Bank, that does not address the imperatives of transformative change — in particular, the historically rooted fundamental dysfunctionalities in an unintegrated system of social provisioning that have largely rendered publicly provided goods as only good for the poor, to be avoided by those who have the capacity to pursue the market option.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This article has used the case of social policy expansion under Duterte’s strongman rule in the Philippines to reflect on the possibilities for transformative change through social policy expansion at this global political moment, when populist figures with authoritarian tendencies control the space for social reform in many parts of the world. The transformative potential was examined with reference to the interaction between political economy dynamics of social reforms and the historico-institutional legacies they build on. The former provides an indication of the logic and ideology (or in the Philippine case, the lack thereof) informing social policy expansion; the latter shows the institutional pathways that structure the transformative potential.

The Philippine case serves as a stark reminder that not all forms of social policy expansion can be celebrated as progressive. Social policy can be used as an instrument for political control, legitimation and mobilization by agents of all ideological persuasions. That social policy expansion is happening under an illiberal and conservative political order is unique neither to the Philippines nor to the contemporary historical juncture. History is replete with examples of the expansion of social rights, despite the failure to institutionalize political and civil rights. For example, Forrat (2012: 2–3), who advocates for the theoretical conceptualization of ‘authoritarian welfare states’, reminds us that some of the first comprehensive welfare programmes were introduced under monarchies in the late 19th century in Germany and Austria; that a non-democratic regime in the post-World War II Soviet Union gave access to social policy goods that remained inaccessible to the best organized labour movements in the industrialized world; and that a regime in pre-reform Maoist China similarly oversaw the launching of many essential social policies. Moreover, social reforms in developed countries, that in some cases laid the grounds for universalist welfare provisioning, were historically pursued in the name of quite conservative goals or by
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authoritarian early social reformers. For example, the Bismarckian social insurance programme in late 19th century Germany is widely interpreted as a measure intended to build workers’ loyalty to the imperial state and to weaken support for the emergent social democratic party (Bump, 2015; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Rimlinger, 1971).

Some of these historical examples show that universal systems of social provisioning — for example, in European welfare states — managed to emerge from such inauspicious political beginnings. Could this happen in the Philippines, too? There are reasons to be pessimistic. In the Philippine case, we see social policy changes being driven by a populist politician who has not risen to power on the back of political mobilization of the poor or by implementing political choices that are shaped by a clearly articulated ideology. Social policy expansion in the first three years of Duterte’s term in office has not been a product of the political struggle of lower classes, but a top-down process that largely reflects the strongman’s concern to widen and consolidate his political base in anticipation of future sources of regime vulnerability. Moreover, in his functionalist deployment of social policy as a tool for political legitimation, Duterte does not veer far from the institutional modalities of provisioning also pursued by his liberal predecessor, focusing almost exclusively on the expansion of access to social goods and services and on strengthening the foothold of social registries of the poor as a technology for determining who has rights to social policy goods. This demonstrates that the narrow rendering of universalism has proven functional and appealing across the political spectrum. This model is propped up by international development agencies like the World Bank, not only through the financial support they provide in the promotion of poverty-targeted modalities of social protection and social provisioning in the Philippines, but also through ideational mechanisms. For example, the laudatory impact evaluation reports of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank suggest that the Philippine conditional cash transfer model is to be celebrated and seen as worthy of emulation (see for example Chaudhury and Okamura, 2012; Schelzig, 2015; World Bank, 2013, 2018b).

The Philippine case exhibits some of the conditions that foreclose the possibilities for social policy expansion to effect transformative change under the current world order. While historical examples show that the transformative potential of social policy reforms cannot be mechanistically deduced from the political agency driving them, the Philippine case nevertheless demonstrates that the political economy dynamics behind agency, in interaction with institutional pathways structuring reforms, may forestall such potential. There are two particular forces that limit the possibility for transformative outcomes. First, there is neither a progressive ideology guiding social reforms nor any political movement overseeing the expansion of the social rights now inscribed in law. Repressive and punitive political conditions currently delimit the possibilities for such progressive ideas or movements to flourish. Second, instead of shaking up the social order, the types
of social reforms championed by Duterte serve to institutionally entrench a narrow form of universalism that fails to address the forces that lead to a segmented system of social provisioning. And as long as segmentation in social provisioning is not addressed, social policy reforms will do little to effect any meaningful change that truly transforms the lives of the poor.

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