Contested spaces of illiberal and authoritarian politics: Human rights and democracy in crisis

Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr.

History and International Studies, Institute for History, Leiden University, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The global moral appeal of human rights and democratic governance appears to be in severe crisis. In both the Global North and the South, many countries have witnessed the rise of racist, sexist, and illiberal politicians into the highest positions in the government. As one of Asia’s oldest electoral democracies, the Philippines is not an exception in this global pattern of decline in civil liberties and democratic governance. Considering the case of the Philippines, this article addresses the following core question: How and under which conditions do contestations as well as legitimations of the Duterte regime emerge across domestic and transnational spaces? This article examines the transnational and domestic contestations and legitimations of the Duterte regime based on a spatially-oriented analysis of the official results of the 2016 and 2019 elections, while demonstrating the multiphase contestations against and in support of global human rights and liberal democratic norms. While the role of geography and spatialization in the formation of illiberal and authoritarian politics remains underappreciated, this article contributes to the disciplinary fields of political geography, comparative politics, and International Relations. Specifically, the article deploys a spatial approach in understanding the territorially-contingent patterns of contestations and legitimations of liberal democratic politics.

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1. Introduction

The global moral appeal of human rights and democratic governance appears to be in severe crisis. In both the Global North and the South, many countries have witnessed the rise of racist, sexist, and illiberal politicians into the highest positions in the government. These politicians and their allies continue to challenge constitutionally guaranteed norms of democratic governance, peaceful political dissent, and human rights protection including marginalized minority groups. The US-based Freedom House reported in 2019 that global freedoms have significantly declined for the 13th consecutive year, and a wide variety of countries experienced such a deterioration, ranging from supposedly consolidated democracies such as the United States to authoritarian regimes such as Russia (Freedom House, 2019).

In Southeast Asia, home to almost 500 million people, the three largest electoral democratic countries —Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines— have recently witnessed deterioration of its democratic institutions, persistent threats to human rights, and the amplification of anti-democratic discourses in mainstream public sphere (Dressed & Bonoan, 2019; Regilme, 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Thompson, 2019). As one of Asia’s oldest electoral democracies, the Philippines is not an exception in this global pattern of decline in civil liberties and democratic governance (Regilme, 2016). Even before the tenure of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, Rodrigo Duterte was elected as the President of the Republic of the Philippines on June 30, 2016, after the end of Benigno Aquino III’s presidency.

Benigno Aquino III, whose parents were widely credited as heroes of the 1986 People Power Revolution that toppled the two-decade authoritarian regime, is widely known for his commitment to liberal democracy and fundamental human rights. Yet, the rise of Duterte to the presidency is quite unexpected, considering that his decades-long career in provincial politics suggests a mixed record concerning his democratic credentials (Regilme & Untalan, 2016). Before the presidency, Duterte served for almost three decades as the Mayor of Davao City, which is the third-most populous city in the Philippines and the largest city in terms of territorial mandate. During his time as city mayor, Duterte was known for deploying intensified state violence that was supposed to foster peace and order in his city. Although the 1987 Philippine Constitution explicitly prohibits the use of state-sanctioned death penalty and upholds the sanctity of the due process of the law, then-Mayor Duterte has been widely criticized for his alleged involvements in extrajudicial killings of minors, homeless people, and suspected criminals in Davao.

E-mail address: s.s.regilme@hum.leidenuniv.nl.

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Those killings were conducted by a state-sponsored vigilante group called Davao Death Squad (DDS), whose members were allegedly linked to Duterte. Many critics blame Duterte and the DDS as responsible for the deaths of around 700 to 1000 civilians between the period 1998–2008 (Regilme, 2021).

Under the Duterte presidency, various state-sponsored agents systematically killed thousands of civilians in the context of the ‘war on drugs’ (Johnson & Fernquest, 2018; Regilme, 2020; Simangan, 2018). When asked about the war on drugs, Duterte proudly expressed that “Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now there are three million drug addicts … I’d be happy to slaughter them.” (Connan, 2016, p. 2).

Duterte, in his bellicose and often obscene political rhetoric, has consistently expressed his disgust for democratic institutions, peaceful political dissidence, and constitutionally-guaranteed human rights (Associated Press, 2016; Holmes, 2016; Reyes, 2019).

How is it possible that a country that has a relatively rich experience with democratic institutions suddenly elects and supports a presidential administration that has blatantly backtracked from the core democratic identity of the nation? How and under which conditions do contestations and legitimations of the Duterte regime emerge across domestic and transnational spaces? In contrast to mainstream scholarly and public discourses claiming that there is overwhelmingly consolidated support for Duterte, I map out the temporal and spatial distribution of political support of as well as opposition to the Duterte presidency and examines the macro-social mechanisms that were used to consolidate the Duterte regime. I argue that the contestations and legitimation efforts of Duterte’s illiberal and authoritarian regime emerged from various local, national, and transnational spaces. I showed that the electoral victory of Duterte in 2016 cannot be fully attributed to an overwhelmingly public approval of an illiberal and authoritarian agenda. Based on the official results of the 2016 presidential elections and the 2019 midterm elections as well as Duterte’s legitimation tactics in the transnational public sphere, I investigate the basis of political support for illiberal and authoritarian politics in the Philippines.

This article is based on the following organizational logic. The next section briefly reviews the scholarship on comparative democratization and Duterte’s politics, underscores the analytic weaknesses of the relevant literature, and discusses the importance of spatialization and place-based analysis in understanding contemporary challenges of authoritarianism. The empirical section is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the plausible sources of Duterte’s illiberal and authoritarian power based on the geographical distribution of votes during the 2016 presidential elections, while the second part investigates the patterns of votes in support of Duterte’s allies based on the 2019 midterm national and local elections. The third part situates the Duterte presidency in the broader transnational politics of democratic decline vis-à-vis the rise of illiberal and authoritarian power. I conclude by highlighting broader implications of this study to the emerging debates on authoritarianism, political geography, and International Relations.

2. The puzzle: spatializing illiberal and authoritarian politics

A nation of around 110 million, the Philippines emerged as the first country in the Southeast Asian region that transitioned successfully in 1986 from authoritarianism to electoral-liberal democracy (Regilme, 2016). Since the ratification of the 1987 Philippine constitution, six duly-elected Presidents have taken turns, including the incumbent President Rodrigo Duterte. Remarkably, Philippine democracy, even before the time of Duterte, has suffered from systemic flaws, ranging from extreme wealth inequalities to the persistent violent conflict involving state agents vis-à-vis non-state armed rebels (Bello et al., 2004; Regilme, 2016). Aside from his excessive use of abusive language and public tantrums, Duterte has clearly defied liberal democratic norms such as his endorsement of extrajudicial killings, unwavering public support for the Marcos family (whose ill-gotten wealth during the era of dictatorship has yet to be fully recovered by the state), and the unwavering campaign to restore death penalty (Macaraeg, 2019).

This article addresses the following puzzle: Where does Duterte’s support base come from? How and under which conditions do contestations and legitimations of the Duterte regime emerge across domestic and transnational spaces? Considering space constraints, I provide exploratory arguments concerning the spatial and political bases for the endurance and limits of Duterte’s illiberal and authoritarian politics. Defying simplistic generalizations often found in mainstream media and Philippine studies literature, the core argument states that Duterte’s political base of support varies across geographical spaces within and beyond the Philippine archipelago and over time. This variation can be explained by using temporal and spatial frames, and those frames, unfortunately, have been largely ignored by the dominant scholarship on authoritarian politics, in general, and on the rise of Duterte, in particular. First, during the 2016 national presidential elections, Duterte emerged as the winner, with 38.6% of the total votes, with the largest vote contributions emanating from the greater Metro Manila region and Mindanao in southern Philippines. I demonstrate that the Duterte presidential campaign deployed a justificatory narrative that advocates for exceptionalist politics of violence, particularly by legitimizing extraordinary measures of state violence as extremely necessary for peace and economic development. Second, the 2019 midterm elections delivered a landslide win for many Duterte allies in Congress (Senate and House Representatives) and local government positions, which can be explained by two factors: (1) the convergence of mainstream political parties’ conditional support for Duterte due to fear of political retaliation, and (2) the systematic state repression of political dissent that systematically paralyzed the emergence of a broad and credible opposition coalition. Third, the article analyzes, in broad strokes, how Duterte’s illiberal and authoritarian politics has been legitimized and contested in the transnational public sphere.

Amidst the global decline of democratization and the surging electoral victory of far-right politicians (Lührmann et al., 2019), Rodrigo Duterte appears amongst the growing roster of world leaders, who openly defy liberal democratic principles. Those principles include democratic checks and balances on the power of the government’s executive branch, constitutionally guaranteed human rights, toleration of peaceful political dissent, and political equality of all citizens (regardless of gender, ethnic background, religion, and other personal identity-markers). How can we classify the Duterte regime in terms of its procedural and the idealational-substantive properties? Procedural aspects pertain to the governance processes of the state’s executive administration, particularly in how it manages and negotiates the contestations, demands, deliberations, and social mobilizations amongst competing political actors within and beyond the state’s claimed political territories. As Schumpeter (1947, 269) notes, the procedural component of democracy refers to the “institutional arrangement for arriving at political discussions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote”. In contrast, idealational-substantive properties refer to the ideological, normative, and justificatory beliefs and principles that underpin the ruling government’s exercise of power over its subjects. Whereas the procedural component refers to the question of how governments deploy its power, idealational-substantive element raises the question of why governments behave the way they do. Rainer Forst (2017, 12–18; 21) calls the idealational-substantive realm as the ‘normative order’, whereby he emphasizes the ‘justificatory’ nature of humans as political beings and the role of justifications in governing communities. I argue, however, that the careful analysis of both the material and idealational-substantive contestations of a governing body’s legitimacy has to be seriously considered. Considering Forst’s (2017) emphasis on idealational justifications and Schumpeter’s (1947) focus on procedural elements, I conduct instead a more holistic examination of Duterte’s politics by referring to what I call as its regulative order, or the collective bundle of normative justifications, rules, institutions, and mechanisms of why, how, and under which conditions governmental power is exercised.
Several scholars have proposed various descriptive terms to understand Duterte politics: populist regime (Arugay & Slater, 2019; McCoy, 2017; Fernia, 2019; Tenorio et al., 2020); illiberal ‘law-and-order’ regime (Thompson 2016); fascist regime (Bello, 2017); an outlaw, dependent on social bandit-like morality (Kusaka, 2017); dismantled liberal constitutional order (Dressel & Bonano, 2019); emerging oligarchic democracy (Regilme, 2019a, p. 14); and genocidal in nature (Simangan 2017). None of the aforementioned terms, however, productively capture the ideational and procedural aspects of Duterte’s political regime, or more precisely, its regulative order. As Marlies Glästis (2018, 517) maintains: “authoritarian practices primarily constitute a threat to democratic processes, while illiberal practices are primarily a human rights problem”. The term authoritarian primarily captures Duterte’s attempts to curtail the openness of the political system as well as to prevent the dispersion of power amongst the branches of the state and within the public sphere. Yet, invoking the notion of authoritarian alone does not neatly capture the ideational foundations of the regime’s human rights problems, thereby requiring the careful interrogation of the Duterte administration’s discourses and policy record on liberalism (or the lack thereof).

I classify the Duterte regime as an illiberal and authoritarian regime. On its ideational-substantive aspects, the regime is illiberal due to its ambivalent, if not resistant, stance on individual freedoms and the dignity of the human person regardless of their socio-economic background. For instance, the administration’s genocidal actions in the Philippines’ ‘war on drugs’ (2016 – present) dehumanized poor people, delegitimized their human rights claims, and systematically killed at least 12,000 civilians (Regilme, 2020; Simangan, 2018). Those state actions suggest the glaring patterns of illiberal practices of the Duterte regime. Two years after he assumed presidency, Duterte publicly confessed: “my only sin is extrajudicial killings” (Ellis-Petersen, 2018, 2). Although his official spokesperson later on remarked that Duterte was just being “playful” and therefore the latter’s words should “not be taken literally”, Human Rights Watch Asia Director Brad Adams contended that the remarks “should erase any doubt about the culpability of the president” (Ellis-Petersen, 2018, 6–7). On procedural features, the Duterte regime has continued to defy the sanctity of liberal constitutional principles, particularly the 1987 Philippine Constitution — the same constitutional framework that emerged right after the 1986 People Power Revolution, which facilitated the collapse of the two-decade old dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. As such, Duterte “uses social media to tarnish opponents, deploying an army of internet trolls to pounce on anybody who publicly criticizes him, a move that serves to intimidate those who have not yet spoken out” (Bernstein, 2020, p. 11). Duterte’s authoritarian practices included jailing opposition leaders for their principled political dissent (e.g. Senator Leila de Lima), harassing independent media outlets and critical journalists (e.g. the forced closure of ABS-CBN, which is the country’s largest media company, and fabricated legal charges against Rappler as the influential web-based news agency founded by another staunch Duterte critic, Maria Ressa), and persistently diluting the autonomy of the judicial and executive branches as constitutionally mandated constraints on executive power (e.g. the unjust impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno and systematic pressures to eliminate opposition forces in the Senate and the House of Representatives).

Reflecting upon Koch’s views (2013, 391), which argues that “much social science scholarship has historically (and frequently only implicitly) assumed a mode of conceptualising power and politics along a certain continuum, in which ‘liberal’ or ‘democratic’ politics are conceptually as the opposite of ‘illiberal’ or ‘authoritarian’/‘despot(ic) politics’”, I maintain that a more careful and pragmatic analytic use of such social scientific terms is necessary in this case. First, the bifurcations illiberal/liberal and authoritarian/democratic are useful in capturing a regime’s procedural politics and ideational beliefs, which constitutes a focus on a holistic analysis of a given regulative order. Second, the commonly invoked notion of ‘populism’ appears conceptually thin in capturing the complexity of Duterte’s politics. Cas Mudde (2004, 543) offers the influential definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology, which posits that society is bifurcated between two distinctive and mutually hostile groups: the corrupt elite vs. the people. Accordingly, populist ideology prescribes for politics as the willful representation of the ‘general will’ of the people. In that conceptual rendering, populist leaders can be far-right or far-left; illiberal or liberal; and, democrat or authoritarian (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 4). Merely characterizing Duterte’s politics as populist does not neatly capture his ideological disposition and practices in ways that my classification of his regime as both illiberal and authoritarian does.

There is indeed a rich area studies and political science literature on the state of Philippine politics under Duterte. That literature, however, has failed to appreciate that Duterte’s base of political support is more untenable and volatile than the claims of formidable public support often suggested by many local commentators and scholars. Curato (2016), for example, argued that Duterte’s success depended on his effective use of populist tactics, while the many (if not all) essays in the edited volume by Curato (2017) underscored the particular idiosyncrasies of Duterte without carefully highlighting the variation of Duterte’s support base over time and in distinctive geographical spaces. Montiel and Uyheng (2020) highlighted Duterte’s effective deployment of “public fear” and “salvific hope” in the public sphere, and they further suggested that such emotions may be unique to Global South populism. Similarly, Miller (2018) conducted a biographical examination and situated Duterte’s politics as populist, while Heydarian (2018) maintained that Duterte’s rise to power signaled a populist challenge against post-Marcos elite democracy. Teehankee (2016), in his comparative analysis of Duterte’s electoral victory vis-à-vis previous Philippine presidents, underscores the importance of “political time” and “agency-oriented” analysis in presidential politics. For some scholars, understanding the causes and consequences of Duterte’s politics to the broader constitutional order is a more important analytic endeavor, and rightly so. Dressel and Bonano (2019) rightly characterized Duterte’s actions as unprecedented and destructive of the post-1987 constitutional order, while Croissant and Lorenz (2018) maintain that Duterte upholds an electoralist rather than a liberal-democratic view of politics. Simangan (2018), meanwhile, provided a compelling analysis how and under which conditions does Duterte’s war on drugs could be considered a genocide. Meanwhile, Mark Thompson (2016a&b;2017; 2019) suggests that the Duterte presidency represents a dramatic challenge to the liberal reformist and human rights-focused agenda of the preceding Aquino administration.

The role of space and territorialization as an analytic focus for understanding the formations and contestations of authoritarian politics unfortunately remains understudied1. This analytic gap is unfortunate, especially because political sociologists and geographers have long recognized the importance of socio-political transformation from the dynamic interactions of localizing and globalizing factors (Agnew, 2011, pp. 316–330; Jessop, 2012; Jones et al., 2004; Regilme, 2014a, 2014b). Thus, this article, with an innovative approach that underscores space as a core frame of analysis, contributes to relevant literatures on authoritarian politics, International Relations, and political geography. First, whereas previous studies on Duterte’s politics (and other so-called illiberal populist leaders in the Global South) usually focus on factors from within the nation-state, thereby deploying a ‘methodologically nationalist’ bias, I underscore the role of both domestic and transnational spheres as spaces for contestation and legitimation. My approach avoids methodological nationalism’s analytic weaknesses that persist in mainstream research on authoritarianism and democratization (Regilme 2014a&b). Glästis (2017, 180) underscores how methodologically nationalist studies on authoritarianism unfortunately considers authoritarianism based on a conception of the state “as a collection of

1 An exception, however, is the work of Levitsky and Way, 2010.
people to be governed, more than as a territorial entity’. Hence, Glasius (2018, 180) rightly argues that the “the authoritarian state approaches its populations abroad, and includes or excludes them, as subjects to be repressed and extorted, as clients to be co-opted, or as patriots to be discursively manipulated”. Second, as an understudied analytic frame, space offers a more nuanced territorial variation of contestations and legitimations of illiberal and authoritarian politics (Levitsky & Way, 2010). This focus on spatial analysis builds on the nascent literatures in the social sciences that highlight the dynamic relationship between authoritarian practices and territorial space (Regilme, 2019b; Ovdzuen, 2019; Cole, 2019; Koch, 2017; Dalmasso et al., 2018; Saad-Filho & Boffo, 2020).

My notion of space follows two dimensions. First, space pertains to the dimension of intersubjective relations where, as Massey (2005) argues, multiplicity and coexistence emerges through the fabrication of various modalities and identifications. Second, space refers to a commonly imagined territorial boundary, such as a legislative district defined by a national constitutional order or a region such as Southeast Asia. In effect, thinking about space and power involves questions about how a territorial unit —both its material and discursive (imagined dimensions)—constrains or enables particular political outcomes. That strategy provides insights about the structures of possibilities that could emerge based on the contingent and dynamic interactions of space, time, and other socio-economic factors. This integrated analysis of temporal, spatial, and socio-economic factors is analytically useful especially in the age of heightened global economic and political interdependence. Particularly, various global governance institutions and the increasing formations of transnational public sphere through widespread use of social media networks create tremendous opportunities for contestations of political claims and authority vis-à-vis the spatial differentials amongst competing actors.

The opportunities for and outcomes of political contestations differ across various imagined territorial spaces. Jessop (2012) calls this approach of thinking about space and power as spatial imaginary, whereby a particular political territory is understood as the “co-construction by [of] discursive as well as material factors that give them a more or less coherent imagined identity and social structuration” (p. 13). Thinking about space-power interactions involves two mutually co-constitutive elements of political realities: (1) ideational elements, through territorially bound, collective, and deliberative imaginations of political realities, and (2) material elements, through the differentiated endowments of legal rules, resources, and capacities of the state, civil society, and markets across various geographies. Take the case of Brexit and the United Kingdom’s persistent Euroscepticism. Those who voted to remain in the European Union (EU) primarily came from metropolitan London, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, while voters from rural parts of the United Kingdom, especially in the West Midlands, delivered support for leaving the EU. For instance, using a human cartographic approach, Ballas, Dorling, and Hennig (2017) has shown that Brexit was motivated by socio-economic disparities and austerity policies as demonstrated by various geographical maps that indicate the relationship between spatial position and socio-economic status. Thus, haphazard generalizations about the causes of particular national political outcomes could be avoided by disaggregating the nation-state through an analysis of variations of power distribution and political outcomes across space and historical time within and beyond a national territory.

Methodologically, my spatially-oriented analysis of Duterte’s basis of support does not depend on the regular public approval surveys conducted by Pulse Asia and the Social Weather Stations (SWS), which are the most influential survey organizations in the Philippines. Instead, I use the final and official electoral results of the 2016 and 2019 national elections as raw sources of analysis and bases for formulating inferences concerning Duterte’s political support base. There are two key reasons for this choice of evidentiary material. First, reliable social scientific research requires publicly accessible data sources, compelling justifications for its methods, and transparent disclosure of its funding sources. Yet, the datasets from SWS and Pulse Asia remain “as either confidential or proprietary and therefore not fit for public disclosure” (Palabrica, 2017, p. 11). Although reliable scientific research guarantees opportunities for public verification of data, electoral polls and public satisfaction ratings from SWS and Pulse Asia do not have that possibility for intensive public verification. As Palabrica (2017, 12) rightly argues, in the absence of public access to datasets, we are, unfortunately, forced to “have to take the research companies’ word at their face value and believe the survey results as presented”. Although they release the electoral polls and public satisfaction ratings of the incumbent President, those survey firms’ public announcements usually include aggregated results (sometimes disaggregated based on regions), without extensive and compelling justifications for its data sources and notes on its funding sources. In fact, the SWS and Pulse Asia sometimes contradict each other on public satisfaction ratings of Duterte’s presidency (e.g. 67% positive rating for Duterte according to the SWS that confirmed an 18-pt drop vs 80% according to Pulse Asia that claimed a dramatic increase based on the third quarter 2017 surveys). Thus, I avoid those methodological issues as there is no way that their results could be subjected to further verification by prospective researchers in ways that publicly accessible official electoral results can. Second, a large proportion of academic and non-academic commentaries use those surveys to make claims about Duterte’s legitimacy, while there is a dearth of systematic comparative analysis of the results of the two national elections during Duterte’s tenure. Using electoral data provides better opportunities to make more meaningful inferences concerning the supposedly full spatial distribution of political support in ways that surveys (based on very small, supposedly representative samples) could not.

The next section analyzes the spatial differentiations of political support for Duterte’s candidacy using the official results from the 2016 and 2019 national elections, particularly by referring to the open-access information from two independent media news outlets: Rappler (2016, 2019a) and GMA News (2016, 2019). In spatializing the transnational exercise of Duterte’s illiberal and authoritarian practices, I investigate how justificatory discourses and mobilization of political support for illiberal and authoritarian regimes transcend national borders. Whereby other scholars call this politics of subjugation as ‘extraterritorial authoritarian power’ (Dalmasso et al., 2018), I call such practices instead as the transnational exercise of illiberal and authoritarian power — whereby the latter pertains to the international mobilization of political support for both anti-democratic and anti-human rights practices of an illiberal and authoritarian regime. Specifically, such a regime appeals for support from: (1) constituents (with formal citizenship status) and (2) the transnational public sphere, primarily to more powerful third-party states and groups. Such a regime instrumentalizes their formal citizens into mere tools that can be used to consolidate the power of illiberal and authoritarian regimes. Such regimes treat their diasporic individuals “as subjects or outlaws; as patriots or traitors; as clients and as brokers, but never as citizens” and penalize “regime critics … as subjects, to be repressed when rebellious” (Dalmasso et al., 2018, p. 96). Hence, I analyze the primary sources of transnational contestations and legitimations of the Duterte regime based on several case study vignettes from the Filipino diaspora as well as the 2016 voting patterns of registered overseas Filipino voters.

3. 2016 national elections: Duterte’s ascent to power

Similar to Indonesia and Japan, the Philippines is a relatively large archipelagic country, with at least 7640 islands. Next to Indonesia, the Philippines has the largest number of registered voters (61.8 million in 2019) in Southeast Asia. The Philippine archipelago, in terms of the electoral map, constitutes several distinctive geographical regions, with varying sizes of voter populations. Considered as the national capital region with 16 constituent cities, Metro Manila is the largest region with
the highest number of eligible voters in 2016, with around 6.3 million registered voters. As the home province of the Duterte family and the country’s second most populated city, Davao City serves as the largest territory in terms of population of the Davao region, with 2.7 million registered voters. As the third most populated city in the country, Cebu City constitutes the vote-rich territory of Cebu region, in central Visayas that has 4.3 million registered voters.

The 2016 national general elections, which took place on the 9th May, includes the contestations for seats in the executive and legislative branches of the government, including the much-coveted positions of president and vice-president. Unlike the US, where the elected president and vice-president come from the same political party, Filipino voters separately elect their preferred candidates for those positions. The 2016 elections recorded 84% voter turn-out, which was the highest percentage of turn-out since automation was first introduced in 2010 and the second highest since the first post-Cold War election (at 86%).

As shown in Fig. 1 above, the official results of the 2016 elections suggest several key insights. First, Duterte’s electoral support primarily emerged from the southern parts of the archipelago (Mindanao) and in Metro Manila. In the country’s capital, Duterte received 2.1 million votes (44%), while liberal-centrist frontrunners such as Grace Poe (995,000 or 21%), Mar Roxas (691,000 or 14%), Jojo Binay (670,000 or 14%), and Miriam Defensor-Santiago (332, 814 or 7%) trailed behind. Duterte garnered the largest number of votes in 16 out of the 17 cities in Metro Manila, while then-Vice President Jojo Binay ranked first in Makati, where the latter served as the former mayor for at least two decades. Second, Mar Roxas’ support base is more widely distributed than Duterte’s bailiwick. Roxas emerged as the winner in some parts of Luzon (northern part of archipelago, including Palawan as the long and narrowly shaped island facing the South China Sea), majority of the Visayas region (central islands), and the two provinces in the Mindanao. Meanwhile, two other liberal candidates Grace Poe and Jojo Binay obtained electoral victories in the northern provinces. Although Mar Roxas was the official candidate of the then incumbent President Benigno Aquino III’s Liberal Party, the three aforementioned rivals of Duterte appeared to have a relatively strong commitment to liberal democratic principles of the 1987 Constitution and a relatively pro-United States (US) foreign policy (see Fig. 2 below).

Second, the majority of electoral provinces in the Luzon and Visayas regions overwhelmingly voted for liberal-centrist candidates, particularly Roxas, Binay, and Poe. In addition to Metro Manila, the Ilocos region in the northernmost part of Luzon offers interesting results concerning Duterte’s contested legitimacy. The Ilocos region is the political bailiwick of the Marcos family — whose patriarch, Ferdinand Marcos, was the dictatorial leader known for his ill-gotten wealth and for being deposed in 1986 during the bloodless People Power Revolution. Yet, the Marcos family has been seeking to resurrect their political dynasty through the formation of alliances with politicians at the national level. Despite her clear commitment to traditional liberal democratic values, Poe has long been rumored to be the biological daughter of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, but has denied that rumor and reaffirmed her background as the adopted daughter of a famous action star and a well-known drama actor. Senator Grace Poe topped the poll in 3 of the 4 provinces in the Ilocos Region: Ilocos Sur, La Union, and Pangasinan. Although Duterte won the support of Ilocos Norte, Senator Grace Poe ranked first in three of the provinces in the Ilocos region, particularly Ilocos Sur, La Union, and Pangasinan. A well-known ally of the Marcos family, Duterte enjoyed the political support of voters in Ilocos Norte. In Ilocos Norte, Duterte got a mere 34% of the votes, while his three liberal-centrist candidates (Roxas, Poe, Binay) received 20% each of the shares of total number of votes. Yet, the Ilocos region is indeed quite a large electoral district. Once a longtime mayor in Mindanao with no national political credentials, Duterte faced initial difficulty in garnering support beyond Mindanao and the support from influential political brokers such as the Marcos clan in Ilocos region proved to be necessary. In some vote-rich parts of the Visayas region, including Cebu, Duterte received 50% of the votes, while the votes for Roxas (27%) and Poe (12%) did not suffice to undermine Duterte’s bid therein.

In Mindanao, the southernmost island group and the perceived bailiwick of the Duterte clan, the electoral results suggest a more contentious if not weak support for Duterte’s presidential bid. In Davao City, where Rodrigo Duterte served for more than three decades as Mayor, Vice-Mayor, and Member of Congress, only 38.6% of the total number of votes were registered for Duterte, while Roxas (23.4%), Poe (22%), and Binay (13%) received quite substantial vote shares too. If the vote shares of the three liberal-centrist candidates were to be combined (around 58.4%), then Duterte would have lost the support from his fellow residents in Davao. Moreover, the 2016 electoral results from Mindanao suggest a much more variegated and fragmented political support for Duterte’s presidential bid. Whereas Lanao del Sur overwhelmingly delivered 81% of the total number of votes for Duterte in addition to Bukidnon with 59%, other large provincial regions therein
did not approve Duterte’s bid and supported instead Liberal Party’s Mar Roxas. In Agusan del Sur, Roxas registered 52% of the votes, while Duterte only got 41%. Later on, however, Agusan del Sur’s influential local political clans, which previously supported Roxas, would shift their support to Duterte. Right after the 2016 elections, provincial officials jumped ship to Duterte’s PDP-Laban party and “had nothing but good words and praises for Duterte” (Avendano, 2018, pp. 6–7). In Zamboanga del Norte, liberal-centrist candidates Roxas (39%) and Poe (12%) diluted the expected consolidated political support for Duterte, who only received 38.9%. In Misamis Occidental, Roxas emerged as the clear winner with 49% of the votes, while Duterte only received 40%.

The 2016 spatially-based electoral data suggest the following tentative findings. First, Duterte’s uneven electoral win across various electoral provinces illustrate his campaign’s careful coalition-building with the ruling political clans in those particular provinces rather than a clear and consolidated public support for Duterte’s anti-liberal democratic platform. Second, the electoral victories for individual liberal front-runner candidates, particularly Roxas, Binay, and Poe, indirectly suggest a quite substantial support for liberal democratic policy agenda. If those votes for the three liberal front-runners were to be added together, then Duterte’s path to the presidency may have been deterred. Thus, it is likely that Duterte’s electoral victory primarily emerged from the disintegration of electoral support for liberal and relatively progressive politicians.

Duterte’s electoral victory emerged primarily from the country’s largest urban metropolitan areas — particularly Metro Manila, Davao City, and Cebu City. The Duterte campaign highlighted the need for a leader who can effectively promote peace and order amidst the perceived increasing crime rates as the key cause for political instability and uneven economic growth. Although David (2016, 8) argued that Duterte called for the rejection of a supposed urban elitism of Manila-based politicians may have galvanized substantial support beyond his hometown, it is likely that voters in urban areas find Duterte’s alleged mayoral track record in Davao (low crime rates, good infrastructure, and peace and order) as compelling evidence for his ability to address the perceived increasing crime rates and traffic situation in Metro Manila and Cebu as well (Cook & Salazar, 2016, p. 5; The Economist, 2020). As shown in Fig. 1, the considerable support for Duterte from Mindanao and the major urban regions suggests the effectiveness of his campaign for intensified state violence. That likely resonated well amongst urban voters, as “Duterte has wooed voters by portraying himself as the panacea to crime, drugs and corruption” (Campbell, 2016, p. 8).

4. 2019 mid-term elections: Duterte’s consolidation of power

Three years since Duterte started his presidency, the 2019 midterm elections demonstrated the geographical and institutional distribution of political support for the administration. Around thousands of candidates contested the 18,071 elective posts during the midterm elections.
The legislative branch consists of two chambers. The Senate (upper chamber) comprises of 24 seats, whereby 12 of those were open for national contestation during the 2019 elections through simple majority vote of the top 12 candidates, while the House of Representatives (lower chamber) includes at least 245 Representative positions, each of which is elected through simple majority vote in each electoral district in the Philippines, and several other representatives nominated by winning party-lists coming from various sectoral groups. All of the 245 seats in the lower chamber were open for contestation during the 2019 midterm elections.

This section addresses the question on how and under which conditions did the Duterte administration consolidate its power across the country and within various competing branches of the Philippine state. Based on the 2019 midterm electoral results, especially in the legislative branch, as well as the Duterte administration’s machinations to influence the other branches of the state, this section offers several tentative insights that suggest Duterte’s mechanisms for regime consolidation.

First, various key developments in party politics illustrate the ways that consolidated the Duterte regime during its first three years in power. Rodrigo Duterte won the 2016 presidential elections under the PDP-Laban political party, which only had 2 Congress members (Koko Pimentel in the Senate and Lino Cayetano in the House of Representatives) ranked 12th, with 14.5 million votes. As an incumbent in the Aquino administration (daughter of former Vice-President Jojo Binay under the recent Duterte regime. It is likely that the decreased membership in the Lakas- Christian Muslim Democrats Party (Lakas-CMD). The membership of the NUP and Lakas-CMD do not constitute the inner circle of the Duterte regime. It is likely that the decreased membership in the PDP-Laban signals lawmakers’ strategic move in demonstrating conditional support for Duterte (by being publicly seen as supportive of the coalition) but also securing some form of insurance for political survival in case Duterte’s popularity dwindles by the end of his presidential term in 2022. In the Senate, meanwhile, no opposition candidate from the “Otso Diretso” progressive coalition (8 anti-Duterte and liberal-progressive opposition candidates) made it into the top 12 candidates, who are eligible to take the 12 vacant seats. As the frontrunner of the opposition coalition, Liberal Party candidate and incumbent Senator at that time, Bam Aquino secured only the 14th spot, with 14.1 million votes (300,000 votes short from the ranked 12th candidate). As a former presidential candidate and Liberal Party head, Mar Roxas experienced a disappointing loss by being merely ranked 16th (9.6 million votes) in the Senate elections. The electoral support for Roxas and Aquino were sparsely distributed in various regions of the archipelago, but a substantial majority came from traditional Liberal Party bailiwicks such as the Bicol region and some parts of the northwestern half of the Visayas region. Two independent candidates — Grace Poe and Nancy Binay — did again for senatorial elections (as their terms ended by 2019) and emerged victorious as part of the top 12 candidates. Poe — one of Duterte’s strongest contenders in the 2016 elections — enjoyed 46.58% of the votes (22 million votes), while Nancy Binay (daughter of former Vice-President Jojo Binay under the recent Aquino administration) ranked 12th, with 14.5 million votes. As an independent candidate and former movie star, Lito Lapid secured the 7th spot, with 16.9 million votes. Despite Duterte’s well-oiled political machinery and persistent political harassment of the opposition, the victory of independent candidates, especially Poe and Binay (who are both critics of the ‘war on drugs’), suggests that Duterte’s authoritarian agenda does not have full nationwide support. Despite the very few high-ranking legislators who are outspoken critics of Duterte’s poor human rights record, the majority of the Senators and Members of the House of Representatives likely chose to cooperate with Duterte’s allies out of fear of political retaliation, including the deprivation of easy access to the national budget that may be used for projects in the legislators’ respective electoral districts. This fear of retaliation was demonstrated by the widely-televised November 2019 interview of Duterte-allied House Member Joey Salceda, who claimed that the current government is “authoritarian” and asserted that “it’s like with us congressmen, we vote as the President wishes out of fear of him”. When pressed by Karen Davila, the well-known progressive journalist, to clarify his statement, Salceda responded: “Authoritarian … authorita — … decisive is the better word. Ikaw talaga pinapahamak mo ko! (You’re putting me in danger!)”. After perhaps realizing that the term ‘authoritarian’ could earn him the ire of Duterte, Salceda quickly used the adjective ‘decisive’ as a more benign term for describing the government (Cepeda, 2019; 11).

Salceda’s remarks suggest a much wider pattern of various political parties’ conditional support for the incumbent president’s political party. As shown in Fig. 3 below, the Duterte-led PDP Laban maintains varying degrees of support from the various national political parties except the Liberal Party. In 2018, Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte (daughter of President Duterte) established the HNP (‘Coalition for Change’) party and later on led the outing of Speaker of the House of Representatives Pantaleon Alvarez, who is a key ally of the President and a prominent leader of the PDP Laban party. The feud between some key members of the PDP Laban and the HNP suggests the shaky foundations of the President’s grand coalition of political parties. In 2016,
before the national elections, the Liberal Party constituted the majority of the House of Representatives with 116 members (out of 297), while Duterte’s presidential victory eventually pushed many LP elected representatives to shift temporarily their allegiance to Duterte’s grand coalition that includes Lakas and NUP parties. This persistent alliance shifting illustrates the long-standing norm amongst local politicians, who easily defect to the winning president’s side (Thompson, 2016a, p. 52). Because of the potential losses in budgetary support of the central government to their home provinces in case of appearing as supportive to the losing presidential candidate, House of Representatives members usually tend to show their support for the incumbent President. As shown by Fig. 3, Duterte’s own party, PDP Laban, does not have an overwhelming support across many provinces, and it has to rely on a provisional alliance with Congress members.

Second, Duterte has enjoyed conditional support from the country’s most influential political dynasties and extremely rich families in various key regions of the country and has systematically challenged non-allied economic elites. In Luzon, Duterte enjoyed the political support from the Marcos family in the Ilocos region as well as the Cayetano, Villar, and Estrada political clans based in Metro Manila. In Luzon, Duterte’s legitimacy has been contested by the Aquino and Binay political clans, both of which are known for their liberal democratic commitments that gained traction after the 1986 People Power Revolution. Similarly, in the Visayas region, the Osmeña family in Cebu has an ongoing political feud with the Duterte family, despite the fact that the political career of Duterte’s father benefitted from the initial political support of Sergio Osmeña Sr. in the late 1940s. Another source of Duterte’s contested legitimacy comes from the perceived threat posed by extremely rich families that are generally known for their liberal and progressive causes. For instance, the Metro Manila-based Ayala family, with a net worth of approximately 3.1 billion USD, and Manny Pangilinan, with a net worth of 5.9 billion USD, have faced threats and bullying from Duterte, who forcibly demanded to sell their majority shares in the country’s largest water distribution companies (ABS-CBN, 2019). Duterte and his allies have promoted the idea that the Ayala family and Manny Pangilinan constitute the liberal opposition that threatens the legitimacy of his administration.

The Duterte administration succeeded in weakening the influence of the Lopez family, which is allied to more progressive political factions in the Philippines, particularly by coercively shutting down ABS-CBN Corporation (the country’s largest media giant) in two ways. The first mechanism pertains to the weaponization of the executive government’s regulatory powers, when the National Telecommunications Commission issued on May 2020 a cease-and-desist order that mandated the termination of all broadcasting operations on the basis of the expiry of its 25-year Congress-approved operation franchise. The second mechanism consists of the eventual denial of a new legislative franchise on July 2020, when 70 Duterte-backed Congress members voted against ABS-CBN’s application to operate (while 11 legislators supported approval). The closure of ABS-CBN symbolizes an attempt to weaken political dissent against Duterte and press freedom, especially with the disappearance of a media conglomerate that has the widest reach nationwide (free-to-air national TV and 19 radio stations across the archipelago). Duterte asserted that he was “very happy” because he “dismantled the oligarchy” in the country “without declaring Martial Law” (Aurelio, 2020). Duterte later on referred to several extremely wealthy Filipinos (Ayala family, Conunji family, Lopez family, and Manuel Pangilinan) as targets for his systematic dismantling process of the oligarchy. Duterte sought to challenge the business interests of these widely perceived liberal elites, considering that extremely rich Filipino individuals, especially those that are based in Metro Manila, have been perceived as pivotal in toppling previous presidencies of Marcos and Estrada. The so-called “People Power Revolutions”, which constituted large-scale protests in the EDSA district of Metro Manila, toppled the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 and the short-lived presidency of Estrada in 2001. The Duterte administration distinguished itself from its post-Marcos era predecessors by weaponizing the legal system and by deploying the state bureaucracy to harass journalists and independent media organizations (Pangue, 2020).

Third, political opposition members and various critics within and beyond the state apparatus have experienced bullying and persecution from the Duterte administration. In the judicial branch, the Duterte administration succeeded in impeaching Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, who was a staunch critic of the war on drugs. In the Senate, several opposition members have faced curses, threats, and bullying on national television from Duterte and his political allies. Senator Leila de Lima, who is Duterte’s most prominent critic and former chair of Commission on Human Rights, was sent to jail on the basis of legal complaints, which were widely perceived as fabricated by the Duterte government. Beyond the state apparatus, various journalists have also suffered under the Duterte regime. In fact, since the start of Duterte’s term until December 2019, state agents have allegedly killed 15 journalists, while many journalists have experienced online harassment, libel cases, murder attempts, and exclusion from coverage (Rappler, 2019). Many state-initiated killings of journalists reportedly occurred in various parts of Mindanao, and a lot of these media agents were local journalists and student reporters covering the war on drugs (Barrera, 2017; Ranada, 2017; Tusalem, 2019). In June 2020, a Manila court convicted Maria Ressa, the founder of the online news site Rappler, of cyber-libel — a court decision that is widely seen as a deliberate attempt of Duterte’s systematic repression of press freedom. Respected for its high-quality journalism, Ressa’s Rappler has been known for its in-depth coverage of corruption and human rights abuses of the Duterte regime.

5. Duterte’s illiberal and authoritarian politics in the transnational sphere

Another space for contestation of Duterte’s illiberal and authoritarian agenda pertains to the global public sphere, where strategic partnerships with other supportive transnational actors are made. There are two key motivations that facilitate transnational coalition-building: (1) mobilization of support by a powerful state that uphold fairly similar legitimating principles and political practices with that of the Duterte regime and (2) the suppression of criticisms from other states and transnational actors. President Duterte introduced a transformative agenda in Philippine foreign policy. During the early phase of his presidency, while publicly expressing his admiration for Adolf Hitler’s genocidal policies, Duterte has expressed his personal disdain of the European Union, the United Nations, Pope Francis, the United States, and other key world actors that pressure the Philippine government to comply with its commitments to human rights, multilateralism, and democratic governance.

The Duterte administration has forged closer bilateral relations with Chinese President Xi Jinping, while sidelinining more than a half-century old Mutual Defence Treaty-based alliance with Washington DC and cordial relations with consolidated liberal democracies in the Global North (Coronel, 2019; McCoy, 2016). One possible explanation for that shift pertains to the suspicion that continuing the close bilateral relations with the US could potentially challenge the legitimacy of the Duterte government. By winning the support of Beijing, the Duterte administration strategically deflects criticisms from more progressive factions within the US government, especially Democratic members in the legislative branch. Despite the Trump administration’s blatant disinterest in the human rights record of America’s strategic allies (Regilme 2019), US civil society actors and Democratic Party politicians have been consistent in criticizing Duterte’s war on drugs for its wide-spread human rights abuses. In fact, US Democrat Senators Patrick Leahy and Dick Durbin led the successful resolution in the 2020 budget that mandates the US State Department to deny the entry to the US of any Philippine official who is responsible for the political harassment of prominent critics such as Senator Leila De Lima and renowned journalist.
Maria Ressa. Eventually approved by Trump, the resolution led to the invocation of the Global Magnitsky Act 2016 that empowers the US government’s executive branch to implement travel and visa entry restrictions on any officially recognized human rights violators abroad in entering US territory.

Despite the consistently favorable image of the US amongst the Filipino public, as evidenced by the Pew Research (2020) surveys in the last 10 years, Duterte defied that public sentiment by persistently demonizing the US as the Philippines’ former colonizer. During the early months of his term, Duterte made an official visit to Xi Jinping and delivered the following remarks in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People: “Your honors, in this venue, I announce my separation from the United States … both in military, but also economics … I will be dependent on you” (Mollman, 2016, p. 8). After US President Obama expressed his concerns on the human rights violations emerging from the war on drugs, Duterte quickly branded Obama as a “son of a bitch” and promised that: “I will not go to America anymore. We will just be insulted there … So time to say goodbye my friend.” (Blanchard, 2016, pp. 25–28). Those remarks demonstrate Duterte’s attempts to delegitimate the US as the potential supporter of anti-Duterte activists and critics within and beyond the Philippines. The increasingly cordial Philippines-China bilateral relations have emerged amidst the overwhelmingly strong domestic public support for the Philippine government to defend its claims for territorial ownership in some parts of the so-called South China Sea (SCS, or partly the West Philippine Sea). Duterte, in his cordial relations with Beijing, has been reluctant from invoking the 2016 legal victory in the Philippines v. China case, whereby The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration junked Beijing’s claims for territorial ownership in the highly disputed SCS maritime area (Regilme, 2018b). Dutertes may have deemed it more prudent to seek the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration junked Beijing’s case against Duterte for his pivotal role in extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, 2019). It appears that Duterte fully understands such a risk thereby limiting his official visits since 2016 to Asia-Pacific countries as well as Peru and Russia, and he has never attempted to visit any country in Western Europe, where his illiberal and authoritarian politics attracted strong opposition amongst European leaders. Remarkably, Duterte remains determined in quashing international human rights groups that are very critical of the human rights abuses in the Philippines. On August 16, 2017, Duterte accused human rights activists of “obstructing justice” and ordered the Philippine National Police to “shoot those who are part of [drug activity]. If they [members of human rights organizations] are obstructing justice, you shoot them” (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 1). In addition to targeting domestic human rights activists, such threats aim to intimidate international human rights advocates (including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International) as well as foreign journalists, who are determined to investigate the causes and consequences of Duterte’s abuses.

Leading the Philippines as having one of the world’s largest sources of migrant workers (Regilme, 2013; Tyner, 2004), the Duterte regime systematically mobilized political support from the Filipino diaspora and repressed political dissent abroad. Since the 2016 electoral campaign, the Duterte regime has employed a “keyboard army” of around 400 to 500 individuals, who are tasked “to spread propaganda for presidential candidate Duterte during the election” and to “spread and amplify messages in support of his policies now he’s in power” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017, p. 15; Williams, 2017). Duterte reportedly admitted in July 2017 that his political party (PDP-Laban) paid at least 10 million PPh (200,000 USD) for a social media campaign that defended him against critics and promoted him in various social media networks, with thousands of contributors (TV celebrities, journalists, and opposition politicians) of the Duterte administration have been harassed by Duterte’s “cyber-troll armies” (Dumlao, 2020). Many overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) have left the country due to political discontent and economic insecurity at home. Perhaps that is the likely reason why Duterte’s “keyboard army” has been apparently effective in inciting support from OFWs, many of whom rely heavily on social media networks as they have limited access to a wider range of credible news sources. Duterte’s “keyboard army” aims to demonize prosecution. In January 2020, Sabio sent another letter to the ICC, whereby he officially withdrew his claims in the 2017 document and asked to stop the ongoing investigations (Santos & Gregorio, 2020). Sabio claimed that the 2017 ICC official communication was “just part of the political propaganda” of former Senator Antonio Trillanes IV (a prominent anti-Duterte politician), who employed Sabio for legal services in the case of Edgar Matobato (a self-confessed participant of the ‘Davao Death Squad’) whose testimonies were included in the correspondence to the ICC (Esquerra, 2020). Meanwhile, Trillanes and other political opposition members maintained that Duterte’s allies may have had coerced Sabio to retract his support for the ICC case, considering that it was widely reported that Sabio received death threats in 2017, or as soon as he filed the official communication to the ICC. Sabio’s retraction and the Philippines’ membership withdrawal from the ICC suggest how Duterte has weaponized domestic and international legal systems in pursuit of two key goals: (1) delegitimization of international human rights principles and institutions as well as state accountability to its citizens, and (2) repression of political opposition by weakening domestic and transnational political dissenters.

The ICC, however, dismissed Sabio’s withdrawal, asserted its jurisdiction over Duterte despite the Philippines’ withdrawal from the Rome Statute, and continued with the ‘preliminary examination’ of the case, as of July 2020. Similar to Duterte’s loss in the UNHCR resolution, The Hague-based ICC’s ongoing examination of the Philippines’ human rights situation continues to serve as a source for transnational contestation against illiberal and authoritarian politics, in general, and the Duterte regime, in particular. Renowned Filipino human rights lawyer Chel Diokno raised the possibility of Duterte’s arrest in any ICC-member state, despite the Philippines’ withdrawal from the Rome Statute (CNN Philippines, 2019). It appears that Duterte fully understands such a risk thereby limiting his official visits since 2016 to Asia-Pacific countries as well as Peru and Russia, and he has never attempted to visit any country in Western Europe, where his illiberal and authoritarian politics attracted strong opposition amongst European leaders. Remarkably, Duterte remains determined in quashing international human rights groups that are very critical of the human rights abuses in the Philippines. On August 16, 2017, Duterte accused human rights activists of “obstructing justice” and ordered the Philippine National Police to “shoot those who are part of [drug activity]. If they [members of human rights organizations] are obstructing justice, you shoot them” (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 1). In addition to targeting domestic human rights activists, such threats aim to intimidate international human rights advocates (including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International) as well as foreign journalists, who are determined to investigate the causes and consequences of Duterte’s abuses.

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liberal democratic politics and their prominent supporters in the country. Consequently, the 2016 overseas absentee voting results delivered an overwhelming victory for Rodrigo Duterte with 313,346 votes out of the 432,706 votes (Hegin, 2016). While Duterte’s troll armies may have been successful with OPWs, local Filipino residents have a much wider access to various credible news outlets, including the multimedia giant ABS-CBN network that has been critical of the government. Many online dissenters and celebrity activists who oppose Duterte, however, appear to have been gaining traction, as demonstrated by the intensified resistance against the failed policies of the government in handling the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Duterte-induced closure of the TV and radio broadcast operations of ABS-CBN network (Hapal, 2020). Amidst the COVID19 pandemic, the country’s most prominent actors and celebrities have mobilized their fans online to report or block pro-Duterte “online trolls” who spread fake news about the pandemic and delegitimize press freedom. Those coordinated actions were orchestrated through the creation of two very prominent hashtags: #WeBlockAsOne and #StarveTheTrolls, both of which emerged as top national trends on Twitter. In addition, ABS-CBN’s closure represents Duterte’s attempt to reduce the power of independent journalism in the transnational public sphere. Specifically, ABS-CBN owns The Filipino Channel, which is the only global media network exclusively catering to millions of Filipinos abroad.

The Duterte regime exercises its authoritarian power and promotes its illiberal views over its subjects abroad by suppressing political dissent of critical Filipino workers. For instance, Elenel Ordor, a Taiwan-based Filipino caregiver, has been very active on social media, particularly in posting critical commentaries about the abuses and policy failures of the Duterte regime (Gotina, 2020). As such, the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment (through its labour attaché based in Taipei) formally asked the Taiwanese government to deport Ordor for the crime of cyber-libel. Harry Roque, Duterte’s spokesperson, responded that Taiwan is part of China and that Taipei should immediately deport Ordor. The Taiwanese government insisted that it is a sovereign country and respects freedom of speech as its core principles. To save his regime from further public outcry, Duterte shied away from directly commenting about the case and shifted the blame to the individual mistake of the labour attaché, while Ordor remains in Taiwan as of April 2020.

6. Conclusion

The case study of Duterte contributes important insights to the disciplinary fields of political geography, comparative politics, and International Relations. First, it introduces preliminary findings from the use of spatial approach in understanding the patterns of contestations and legitimizations of illiberal and authoritarian politics. In political science, whereas comparative politics scholars often focus on the causes and consequences of key political processes within the nation-state, International Relations scholars, meanwhile, methodologically highlight the transnational dynamics of political transformations. Alternatively, I show how both transnational and domestic spaces, as structural conditions, generate as well as discredit illiberal and authoritarian politics. Second, this study bridges the nascent literatures on authoritarian and illiberal politics from geography and political science, thereby demonstrating the importance of how physical and imagined space structures the range of constraints and possibilities for transformative political actions. Thus, spatializing illiberal and authoritarianism requires the identification of contesting political actors and tracing how those transformative processes generate incumbent leaders’ legitimacy (or the lack thereof) over time.

I examined how the contestations and legitimation efforts of Duterte’s illiberal and authoritarian regime emerged from various local, national, and transnational spaces. Contrary to the popular yet simplistic characterizations of Duterte’s uncontested public support amongst Filipinos, I showed that the electoral victory of Duterte in 2016 cannot be fully attributed to an overwhelming public approval of an illiberal and authoritarian agenda. Rather, the total number of votes for anti-authoritarian candidates splintered amongst three candidates, thereby suggesting a substantial public support for an alternative liberal democratic agenda, at least at that time. Although the 2019 midterm elections meant a historic loss for all the opposition candidates in the Senate, the victory of three independent candidates — two of whom are outspoken advocates of human rights (Poe and Binay) — showcased the remaining viability of liberal democracy in the country. That remaining electoral support for liberal democratic candidates is remarkable despite the government’s massive propaganda campaign that demonizes constitutional democracy, glorifies the Marcos dictatorship, and publicly vilifies peaceful dissent against state-initiated human rights abuses. Hence, one way of enriching our understanding of illiberal and authoritarian politics pertains to schematizing how contestations of such politics vary across territorial scales and units. The prospects of political survival of Duterte’s authoritarian regime does not only depend on local support, but also through the persistent delegitimation of human rights advocacy from the European Union and the US and by seeking the support of similar authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China. Thus, it is likely that the potential success of restoring liberal democratic politics in the Philippines does not only depend on homegrown, localized, and persistent opposition from within the country, but also through transnational coalition-building that are supportive of local opposition groups.

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Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme Jr. (born 1986) is a tenured International Relations scholar at the Institute for History, Leiden University. He is the author of *Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia* (University of Michigan Press, 2021), co-editor of *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers* (Routledge, 2017), co-editor of the forthcoming volume *Human Rights at Risk: Global Governance, American Power, and the Future of Dignity* (Rutgers University Press), and the author of peer-reviewed articles in *International Studies Perspectives, Third World Quarterly, Human Rights Review*, among many others. He received in 2015 his joint PhD in Political Science and North American Studies from the Freie Universität Berlin and previously studied at Yale, Osnabrück and Göttingen. He is the 2019 Winner of the Asia-Pacific Best Conference Paper Award of the International Studies Association.