



# Undermining *DEMOCRACY*

THE 2019 ELECTIONS IN THAILAND,  
THE PHILIPPINES, AND INDIA

FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH  
July 2019

WELCOME  
PRESIDENT RODRIGO ROA  
REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES  
PONG NG PAGBABAGO-HUGPONG SA T...  
MITING DE AVANCE 1ST DISTRICT-D...  
DIAWO CITY RECREATION CENTER, DIAWO CITY  
10 MAY 2019



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THE PHILIPPINES, AND INDIA

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July 2019

## **Undermining Democracy**

### **THE 2019 ELECTIONS IN THAILAND, THE PHILIPPINES, AND INDIA**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# PROCLAMATION OF SENATORS



FOR THE MAY 13, 2019  
NATIONAL AND  
LOCAL ELECTIONS



Modi For PM

ไม่สนับสุนน  
พรรคพลังประชาชน  
"เผด็จการ"

ขอสนับสุนนพรรค  
ที่ชนะได้ ส.ส. แท้จริง  
จัดตั้งรัฐบาล



Cheating Election

# INTRODUCTION

In the first half of 2019, a great deal of global attention focused on national elections in three countries where authoritarian regimes or personalities were in command of the state: Thailand, the Philippines, and India. The big question was, would voters buck the authoritarian trend or affirm it? In all three countries, there were those who hoped for a “Malaysian surprise,” that is, a repudiation of the ruling regime such as that delivered to the UMNO party dynasty by the voters in Malaysia in 2018.

When the dust settled, the electorates in the three countries had delivered striking, if somewhat divergent results, between Thailand on the one hand and the Philippines and India on the other.

In Thailand, the outcome showed the country to be divided as ever, with almost half of the electorate voting for candidates of opposition parties, a figure that could

have been larger were it not for legal and procedural obstacles placed in their way.

In the Philippines, while President Rodrigo Duterte was not running in the mid-term election, everyone knew that the election was a referendum on him and his policies, particularly his controversial war on drugs, and the electorate gave him an overwhelming thumbs up, with the opposition failing to notch even just one in the 12 Senate seats in contention.

In India, the world’s largest democracy, where there had been a consensus among pundits that the state of the economy would drag down the ruling BJP’s (Bharatiya Janata Party) numbers, the party led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was rewarded with an even bigger majority of parliamentary seats than in 2014, giving credence to party leader Amit Shah’s pre-poll prediction that the BJP would rule for the next 50 years.<sup>1</sup>

This study seeks to shed some light on the electoral outcomes in the three countries in three stages:

First, it examines the national situation leading up to the elections, the key issues that were before voters, and the conduct of the elections.

Second, it seeks to understand the results of the elections by situating them within the dynamics of the broader political process in each country.

Third, it engages in a comparative analysis of the electoral and broader political processes in the three countries, with an eye on drawing out both similarities and differences.

The overall conclusion is that the elections did not achieve their objective of mitigating political polarization in Thailand but were very successful in expanding regime legitimacy in the Philippines and India. The difference in the outcomes

is traced to the contrasting dynamics of politics in the three countries. The Thai election was a continuation of the counterrevolutionary reaction to the lower-class based populism initiated by Thaksin Shinawatra. The elections in the Philippines and India were, in contrast, moments in the transformation of politics by charismatic figures who served as lightning rods for people's discontent and personified hopes and visions for the future while at the same time promoting

the excision or repressive containment of an "Other" or "Others" unto which the ills, problems, and disharmony of society were projected.

Democracy is confronted with great challenges in the three countries. In Thailand, the overriding task is how to change an electoral system that hems in and constrains democratic choice with institutions and procedures that are implicitly backed by the firepower of the army. In India and the Philippines, the challenge is different

but no less daunting. This is keeping democracy alive in an era of charismatic politics, where electoral mobilization becomes an instrument for the transition to less democratic forms of rule.

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1 "BJP Will Win 2019; Will Rule for Next 50 Years:' Amit Shah," *Hindustan Times*, Sept. 9, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bjp-will-win-2019-will-rule-for-next-50-years-amit-shah/story-uqbwTVtGU1osyJxqZ19XKP.html>, accessed May 25, 2019.



# Key Features of Electoral Systems

Thailand, the Philippines, and India display significant variations in their electoral systems. Perhaps the biggest difference among the three is that the Philippines has a presidential system, where the head of state is elected directly by the electorate whereas Thailand and India have parliamentary systems where the executive leadership or government is formed by the major party or alliance of parties in parliament, by the lower house or Lok Sabha in India and jointly by the Senate and the House of Representatives in Thailand. All three have bicameral legislative bodies, though again here there are important differences. In India, the lower house is far more powerful than the upper house or Rajya Sabha; in Thailand, the Senate is meant mainly to check the House of Representatives; while in the Philippines, the Senate might be said to be truly co-equal with the House and certainly far more prestigious, a situation much like that in the US, which colonized and transmitted many of its political institutions to the Philippines.

## THAILAND

Thailand has a bicameral National Assembly, election or appointment to which have been governed by the Constitution and the Organic Law on Elections. Changes in the Constitution and, consequently, the Organic Law on Elections have been responsible for significant changes in the voting system over the years. Thus, whereas under the 2007 Constitution, the Senate had 150 members, 76 of whom were

elected, under the 2017 Constitution, there are 250 senators, all of whom are appointed by the National Council for Peace and Order.

Election to the House of Representatives is via a hybrid “first-past-the-post”/proportional representation system, or “mixed-member proportional representation system.” In the 2019 elections, 350 of 500 seats in play were reserved for

candidates who were “first past the post” or got more votes than anyone else in each of 350 constituencies. One hundred-fifty (150) were allocated to political parties based on their share of the popular vote, a process popularly termed “The party-list.” Under this system, one vote counted twice, once for the candidate and once for his or her party. In calculating the number of party-list seats allocated to a party, the total number of constituencies won was deducted from the total allocation of party-list seats. In contrast to the system of allocating party-list seats in 2011, the 2019 system was regarded by many as discriminating against large parties like the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party.



## THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines has a presidential system, with the president elected for one six-year term, with no possibility of reelection.

Legislation is done by a bicameral Congress. The upper house, or Senate, has 24 seats, half of which become vacant and subject to election every three years. Senators are elected to a six-year term, with reelection possible for one more term.

The lower house, or House of Representatives, is made up of district and party-list representatives who can serve for three consecutive three-year terms. Eighty (80) percent are district representatives elected on a first-past-the-post system. Twenty (20) percent are party-list representatives. The allocation of seats to parties is done according to their share of the votes of those voters who indicate a preference for a party-list in their ballot, not the votes of all who cast their ballots. The number of seats allocated to a party depends on its share of the party-list vote, two percent being a minimum threshold, though this is flexible if the number of seats available cannot all be filled by the parties which achieve the minimum. The maximum number of seats allocated to a party is three, which is given only to parties which gain six percent or more of the party-list vote.

In the 2019 elections, elected positions from the Senate down to the municipal level were in play.



## INDIA

Elections in India take place at the level of the Rajya Sabha, the Council of State that serves as the upper house of parliament; Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament; state legislatures; and local bodies. The Lok Sabha elections are the most consequential since their results determine which party or alliance of parties will get the privilege of naming the prime minister and forming the country's executive leadership or government. Though formally equal with the Lok Sabha, the Rajya Sabha is much less powerful in reality since it is the Lok Sabha that forms the government.

Election to the Lok Sabha is held every five years unless the body is formally dissolved by the president on the advice of the Council of Ministers. The Constitution of India specifies that the maximum number of seats in the Lok Sabha is 552; 543 seats were in play in the May 2019 elections.

Owing to the vast expanse of India and the large number of voters, some 900 million, elections to the Lok Sabha in 2019 were carried out in seven-phases over a six week period and the results were announced on May 23.



# THAILAND

## Elections and Social Polarization

When the Thai military launched a coup that deposed the civilian government in May 2014, it announced that at the most its rule would last for 15 months. It has been in power now for over five years. And in these five years, it has created the framework that would institutionalize its role as the dominant actor in the post-military regimes to come.

### Background to the March 2019 Elections

Twenty-seven years ago, when the regime led by General Suchinda Kraprayoon was ousted following middle-class-led street protests in May 1992, the event was widely expected to have placed an end to the Thai military's propensity to intervene in politics. From 2001 to 2014,

Retired General Prayuth Chan-o-cha beams as he meets the press after receiving his royal appointment as Prime Minister on June 11, 2019. Source: Gen Prayuth Chan-o-cha Facebook available on <https://web.facebook.com/prayutofficial/photos/a.467755783720042/601049910390628/?type=1&theater> under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0> (CC) BY-NC-ND







Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the youthful leader of Future Forward Party, greets his supporters before hearing charges against him at Pathumwan police station on April 6, 2019. *Source: Prachatai available on <https://www.flickr.com/photos/prachatai/47557961411/> under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0> (CC) BY-NC-ND*

however, Thaksin Shinawatra transformed the country's politics. Shinawatra was a business mogul who made the rural lower classes, particularly in the North and Northeast, a firm base of support through popular policies like the enactment of universal health care, a one-million-baht investment fund given to each village, and agricultural subsidies. The traditional aristocratic and bureaucratic elite grouped around the monarchy, what some scholars called the "network monarchy,"<sup>1</sup> naturally felt threatened by Thaksin's accumulation of power. What was decisive in pushing the dynamics of the next few years, however,

was the middle class, which reacted negatively to the political and economic empowerment of the urban and rural poor, and cast its lot with the conservative elite, providing the mass base for the push to remove Thaksin from power.

Elite-led mobilization of the middle class invited military intervention to oust Thaksin in 2006, followed by the Constitutional Court's dissolution of his party, the Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais). After a short period of rule that was widely recognized as incompetent, the military gave way to elections and civilian rule, which resulted in parliaments

being dominated by different electoral incarnations of the Thaksin bloc. After the latter won a majority for the fourth straight time in 10 years in 2011, the anti-Thaksin forces realized that widespread support from the masses would assure the Thaksin bloc a permanent majority under the normal one person-one vote system.

Over the next few months after the 2011 elections, a non-electoral strategy gradually evolved: use the judicial system to paralyze the government with charges of corruption and anti-constitutional moves; get the middle class to stage massive demonstrations in central



Bangkok, which was largely anti-Thaksin territory; and get the military to launch a coup to resolve the political deadlock.

Bangkok in 2013–14 became the site of almost daily demonstrations by the middle class led by the Democrat Party firebrand Suthep Thaugsuban, which were punctuated by instances of deadly violence. As a last desperate effort, the government resolved the crisis through new elections, but demonstrators and thugs sabotaged it by preventing people from voting in many areas of Bangkok and some other strong anti-Thaksin areas. Their rationale expressed in the slogan “Reform before elections” was a sanitized code for devising constitutional arrangements that would prevent the Redshirts, the popular term for Thaksin supporters, from ever coming to power again.

When Suthep’s forces finally provoked the military into ousting Yingluck, Thaksin’s sister who served as a stand-in for him, the military was determined not to repeat the mistakes of the coup-makers of 2006. It quickly and decisively set about promoting an interim constitution, the centerpiece of which was the infamous Section 44, which gave

the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) sweeping powers to do anything that would bring about the “promotion of love and harmony amongst the people in the nation, or the prevention, abatement or suppression of any act detrimental to national order or security, royal throne, national economy or public administration, whether the act occurs inside or outside the kingdom.” Section 44, along with the existing *lese majeste* legislation, section 116 of the criminal code dealing with sedition, and “Head of NCPO order 3/2015, Section 12,” which banned political assemblies of five persons or more, gave the military regime a wide latitude to detain its opponents and critics, leading a number to seek asylum abroad.

The subtext of the military’s rapid fire moves was, “The civilians have screwed things up. Now we’ll fix things so this chaos never happens again.” It was one that resonated with the country’s middle class, but it was not without appeal to some sectors of the Thaksin base that were weary of daily strife.

Political stability, underpinned by the broad support of the anti-Thaksin middle class and with little opposition from a civil society that had split into

pro- and anti-Thaksin factions (some would say, pro- and anti-democracy factions) in the previous 13 years, marked the succeeding period. The military under the leadership of General Prayuth Chan-o-cha quickly moved to set up a set of institutions, namely the National Reform Council, National Legislative Assembly, and the Constitution Drafting Committee to reconfigure the country’s democratic institutions to either prevent the return of lower-class-based populism or to severely handicap it in the event it prevailed through electoral means. In this endeavor, academic collaborators who sought to dilute popular participation aided the military. Among them were right-wing theorists like Anek Laothamatas, who had proposed several years earlier “a balanced compromise between three elements: the representatives of the lower classes who are the majority in the country, the middle class, and the upper class” to have “better democracy” and to avoid the “tyranny of the majority” that had brought Thaksin to power through thumping majorities.<sup>2</sup> Laothamatas, a former communist turned counterrevolutionary thinker, was a member of the junta-appointed National Reform Council.

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”

The product of this tinkering with the machinery of democracy in order to emasculate it was the Constitution of 2017, the key provisions of which were the creation of a Senate of 250 members that would be selected by the National Peace and Order Council; vesting the Senate with the power to veto any bill relating to amnesty passed by the House of Representatives; participation of the Senate in the selection of the Prime Minister during the first five years of the constitution; eligibility for the post of prime minister of a person who had not been elected to the National Assembly; and allowing the head of the NCPO to remain head of the government indefinitely if the National Assembly could not form a government.

The Constitution was ratified in August 2016 through a controversial referendum that posed harsh restrictions on free expression via a draconian Referendum Act that carried potential 10-year prison sentences for “misrepresenting the draft, criticizing its content, or disrupting the vote.”

Supplementing constitutional constraints on future civilian governments were some 444 laws that the handpicked National Legislative

Assembly passed, many of which were related to national security.

### Handicapping the Opposition in the Run-up to the Elections

After at least 10 postponements to allow it to consolidate its hold on political power, the NCPO finally set the elections for Parliament for March 24, 2019.<sup>3</sup> During the campaign period, the regime took advantage of its position of power and systematically harassed the opposition.

For instance, despite Prime Minister Prayuth being the head of state and paid 125,590 baht per month for performing this function by royal decree,<sup>4</sup> the Ombudsman ruled that the prime minister was not a government official, thus allowing him to circumvent the law that required government officials to resign their posts in order to run for office.<sup>5</sup> This enabled Prayuth to combine his government-financed official duties with his campaign sorties and use official means of communication, such as a weekly compulsory television program carried by all television channels, to deliver his campaign propaganda.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most crippling instance of harassment visited on the opposition was the Constitutional Court's dissolution of the pro-Thaksin Thai Raksa Chart Party for nominating Princess Ubolratana as its candidate for prime minister on the grounds that the act was "hostile to the monarchy," which was supposed to remain "above politics."<sup>7</sup> The party had intended to contest 174 of 375 constituencies, so that the ruling left the pro-Thaksin bloc unable to field candidates in a great number of these areas since the deadline for registering new parties had passed. Thai Raksa Chart had been formed to stand alongside its ally, the Pheu Thai Party, to get around electoral rules disadvantaging large parties.

Analyst Paul Chambers saw the court's move as designed to prevent the Thaksin bloc from gaining a majority in the National Assembly. "We must remember that the judges now sitting on the Constitutional Court were endorsed by the junta," said Chambers.<sup>8</sup>

The Future Forward Party also faced harassment. This was not surprising, though, for among Future Forward's priorities was reducing the size of the army, with 400,000 officers to be cut

down to 200,000. The party's program called for the cutting of 60 billion baht from the defense budget that could be used to fund a universal welfare system "with pensions for the elderly, the extension of health care to all citizens, free education, and a commitment to lift every family above the UN-defined poverty line."<sup>9</sup>

Chief party leader Thanatorn Juangroongruangkit was, however, very clear that the aim of the proposed budgetary move was to "make coups part of history... to establish that civilian government is above the army."<sup>10</sup> The message apparently played well as the campaign progressed, especially with the younger generation who flocked around Thanatorn like he was a rock star. It did not play well with the military.

The NCPO's agents went after Thanatorn and Future Forward for alleged violations of the election law and Constitution, among which were the posting of a misleading claim on Facebook that Thanatorn had been president of the Federation of Thai Industries,<sup>11</sup> "defaming" of the NCPO by claiming, also on Facebook, that it was poaching former MPs to defect to the pro-regime

Palang Pracharat Party (PPR), funneling of personal money to Future Forward's campaign fund, and holding of shares in a media company while campaigning for office, a violation under Section 98 (3) of the 2017 Constitution.

Thanathorn and the FFP either contested or denied the last three charges, but after the elections, the Constitutional Court went on to suspend Thanatorn based on the last charge, preventing him from carrying out his duties as an MP, even as regime officials sought to prosecute him on the other charges.

Pointing out that seven out of nine judges of the Constitutional Court had either been appointed or had their terms extended by the NCPO, a spokesman for the Asian Parliamentarians for Human Rights, said, "In the context of the many politicised charges against Thanathorn, it is difficult not to see the Constitutional Court's move as another attempt to silence a voice critical of the junta. For Thai people to have faith in their country's democratic process, authorities must show that they respect the outcome of the recent vote. This means allowing those elected to take part in public life, no matter how 'inconvenient' their opinions are."<sup>12</sup>



Protesters in Bangkok demand impeachment of members of the Election Commission of Thailand for alleged irregularities during the March 24 elections, March 31, 2019.

Source: Prachatai available on <https://www.flickr.com/photos/prachatai/40540066923/> under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0> (cc) BY-NC-ND

In addition to legal harassment, Future Forward became a victim of a concerted black propaganda campaign on the internet, the most brazen example of this being the circulation of an audio clip purportedly showing Thanatorn negotiating with the exiled Thaksin over ministerial positions. This was aired on Nation TV, a channel known to be close to the NCPO.

The clip was proved to be fake.<sup>13</sup>

## Election Day Irregularities

Though it was constitutionally handicapped and the law book was thrown at it, the opposition went on to contest the March 24 elections. While largely peaceful, there was apparently a disturbingly







Voters eligible for early voting cast ballots at a polling station in Sukhothai province on March 17, 2019.

Source: Sukhothai Public Relations Office, available on <http://thainews.prd.go.th/th/news/detail/TCATG190317182225005>

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large number of irregularities, most of them associated with the conduct of the elections by the Election Commission (EC). A number of these are presented in a post-election report produced by the civil society organization Forces of Renewal Southeast Asia (FORSEA) that claims the irregularities were documented by ordinary citizens and had been checked for authenticity. The irregularities included vote-buying, fake and inaccurate ballots, government efforts to influence voters, tampering with ballot boxes, irregularities connected with the transportation of ballot boxes, and Election Commission “malfunctions.”

While only a few examples of each type of irregularity are presented, these can reasonably be expected to be samples or a microcosm

of a broader problem. For instance, the report includes a screenshot of a military-connected Facebook chat group with posts ordering its members, presumably military personnel, to vote for the government party Palang Pracharat.<sup>14</sup> Also reproduced is a memo from a unit in the Interior Ministry encouraging its recipients to vote for parties with a pro-NCPO agenda.<sup>15</sup> While not all irregularities reported are attributed to pro-NCPO actors, there are enough examples to suggest a pattern of pro-NCPO irregularities: 16 reported attempts by government officers to influence voters were documented, which amount to 22 percent of all reported frauds and irregularities.<sup>16</sup> These documented instances have become the basis for FORSEA’s call for the invalidation of the elections.

The Election Commission has come up against heavy criticism from many quarters for many “malfunctions” on election day, but especially for its “discovery” of extra ballots after the initial tally. These discovered ballots added to the total votes for a number of parties, including those for Palang Pracharat. Also eliciting anger has been “the long delay in the announcement of the [official] results, which seems to suggest an intentional delaying strategy by the military government.”<sup>17</sup> It was already nearly six weeks after the elections when the official tally was announced May 7.

## Results Show Continuing Polarization

In the final results announced by the EC, the opposition Pheu Thai Party, as expected,

came out on top with 136 parliamentary seats, followed by Palang Pracharat with 116, Future Forward with 81 seats, and the Democrats with 53. However, when it came to the popular vote, Pheu Thai came in second, with 7,881,006 votes, while Palang Pracharat was first with 8,413,413.<sup>18</sup> What this meant was that while the pro-Thaksin vote remained solid, there was also significant support for the military regime, with the likelihood that many supporters of the pro-coup Democrats had transferred their loyalties to the military-backed Palang Pracharat.<sup>19</sup>

For a party that had been formed just a few months before the elections, Future Forward's performance was impressive. It disputed Bangkok with Palang Pracharat, with these two parties reducing the Democrats to marginal status in a district that was once their stronghold.

Overall, the political polarization of the country remained in place, leading to an intense numbers game to build a winning coalition even before the elections took place. Immediately after the initial results were out, seven parties, led by Pheu Thai and Future Forward, announced the formation of a "Democratic Front" that said it had the numbers—255 out

of 500 seats in the House of Representatives—to form a governing coalition.

## The Party-List Controversy

As the battle to create a government unfolded after the elections, the EC again came under fire, this time on the issue of the allocation of the party-list seats. There are 500 seats in the House of Representatives, 350 of which are given to those who get "first past the post" or get more votes than anyone else in each of these constituencies; 150 are allocated to the parties based on their share of the popular vote.

While the EC begged for understanding owing to the alleged complexity of the formula for allocating party-list seats, many have suspected it of manipulating the votes to favor the regime. Some have claimed that prior to the 2019 elections the EC had specified that the minimum threshold of votes for a party to qualify to have a party-list seat was 70,000.<sup>20</sup> Using this benchmark, only 15 parties were qualified to receive seats.<sup>21</sup> Of these parties, those that made up the opposition front of seven parties would have been entitled to an allocation of party-list seats that, added


to their constituency seats, would have pushed their total seats to around 255 seats.

However, there was enough legitimate confusion around the allocation of party-list seats owing to the fact that both the 2017 constitution and the organic law on elections dealt with the allocation of party-list seats with words rather than numbers, leaving room for subjective interpretation of numerical outcomes not covered by the written rules. This subjective interpretation of the rule laid in the Constitution and organic law on election concerned the allocation of the remaining but undistributed party-list seats. Based on its interpretation, the EC brought down the minimum threshold to 30,000 from the traditional benchmark of 71,000, benefitting 10 small parties that so happened to lean right rather than left, thus helping tip the parliamentary numbers in favor of the regime.

The upshot of this mix of confusion, subjective interpretation, and coincidence is that the opposition coalition only secured about 245 seats against the 253 of a possible pro-regime coalition.<sup>22</sup> In a strongly worded editorial, the *Bangkok Post* has called this a case of EC "hijacking," which is not entirely untrue.<sup>23</sup>



Six parties—Pheu Thai Party, Future Forward Party, Saree Ruam Thai Party, Prachachart Party, Puea Chat Party and PalangPuang Chon Thai Party—form the Democratic Front on March 27, 2019.

Source: Prachatai available on <https://www.flickr.com/photos/prachatai/47424799502> under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>. 

While much commentary on the elections have registered disapproval, there are those who see a silver lining in it, which has to do mainly with the Future Forward “phenomenon.” While the Palang Pracharat resorted to old-fashioned electioneering mechanisms, such as relying on local “godfathers” and cascades of “canvassers,” the FFP did not reach out to godfathers and had no canvassers, yet came in third. According to one experienced observer,

*Those of us who have seen the patron-client system as one of the*

*biggest barriers to democratic development in Thailand have just seen it smashed. And not just among the urban millennial LGBTQ-friendly social media addicts. Look at the by-election result in Chiang Mai province where FFP creamed the PPR party machine. And this is not Chiang Mai City. There aren’t enough trendy lefties there to pull this off by themselves.<sup>24</sup>*

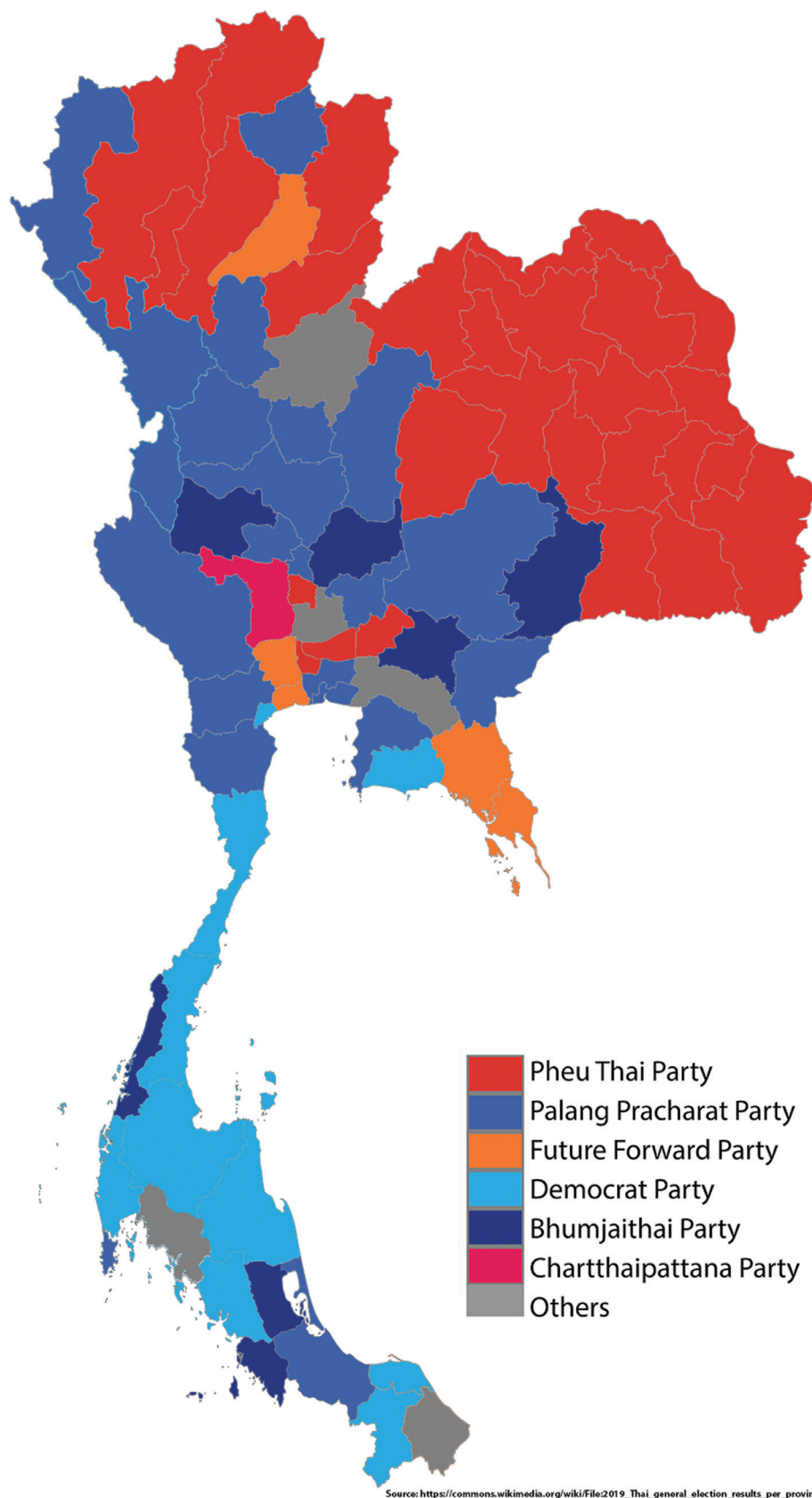
FFP’s reliance on social media has been suspected to be one of the key factors. This,

however, has not been a Facebook or Twitter-driven process. Most likely, as in Brazil, it was because of applications like WhatsApp and Line becoming the mobilizing tools, their “invisibility” giving them the potential to “wrest elections away from the kind of top-down control that both PPR and PT have been using.”<sup>25</sup>


## The Struggle to Form a Government

In the weeks after the March elections, the contending blocs engaged in intense





Political map of Thailand according to constituency seats won by different parties.

Source: NordNordWest and Garam on [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2019\\_Thai\\_general\\_election\\_results\\_per\\_province.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2019_Thai_general_election_results_per_province.svg) under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/> 



competition to form a viable governing coalition. For the Democratic Front, it was an uphill struggle made even more difficult by the loss of several expected party-list seats owing to the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chart and the EC's interpretation of party-list rules. To a number of observers, however, the difficulties the opposition faced in forming a viable governing coalition, even if one could be formed, were so great that expending much energy on it was not justified. There could be so many conflicts of interest to blow up such a diverse coalition at any time and simply keeping it together would detract from the business of governing, though some would say that there are no conflicts of interest that cannot be solved by a generous helping of cash. Moreover, getting the 376 MP votes necessary to outweigh the combined votes of the pro-military members of the House of Representatives and the 250 senators expected to side with them in choosing the prime minister was not within the realm of possibility.

It would be better, in this view, to be in the opposition and make the military-led governing coalition accountable; to let it make

missteps that would erode its credibility. As one analyst wrote, "Let the junta-appointed Senate choose Gen Prayuth and let him rule over a coalition government. And let's see where that goes and how long it lasts. This is a time to let the generals further undermine themselves."<sup>26</sup>

In any event, General Prayuth was elected Prime Minister by the bicameral National Assembly on June 5, 2019, with 500 of the 750 votes going to him, though not after a session that elicited an unprecedented level of criticism of his performance in the preceding five years. His rival, Future Forward leader Thanatorn, got 244 votes. But in a preview of the difficulties facing the alliance of three big parties and an assortment of smaller parties supporting Prayuth, he is not expected to be able to form a government till the end of the month.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, inner-party strife owing to differences over whether or not to support Prayuth has led former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, a Democrat, to announce his forthcoming resignation from the House of Representatives over the Democrats' decision to support Prayuth.

The elections have been necessary to provide the

junta-created regime a veneer of legitimacy. But the failure of the government party to secure a majority and the consequent difficulties to create a viable coalition have led many to question whether in fact the results might not have led to its opposite: to discredit the new order even before it began. It is also questionable if Prayuth's serving as the new regime's leader is not a case of strategic misjudgment, since this is tantamount to giving a military face to what the generals have so assiduously promoted as a post-military civilian regime.

What is certain is that instead of reducing Thailand's social polarization, the 2019 elections have confirmed and deepened this. Despite the political establishment's determined effort to banish it, Thaksin's lower-class based transformative politics has continued to cast its long shadow over Thai society. Ironically, therefore, the establishment's reliance on the military may have increased. In this connection, the appointment of a hardliner like General Apirat Kongsompong as head of the army does not bode well for a peaceful resumption of the stalled democratization of Thailand.

## Conclusion

The middle-class-based street mobilizations led by anti-Thaksin forces provoked the Thai military into launching a coup against the democratically elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra in May 2014. These forces were convinced that elections would simply give the allies of the former Prime Minister a permanent majority. The troubles in the streets reinforced the military's perception of itself as the only institution that could provide stability to the country.

After five years in power, the military regime allowed parliamentary elections to be held last March 24. In the intervening period from since they launched a coup in May 2014 to the recently-held elections, the military created a constitutional and legal framework that would institutionalize their role as the arbiter of and key actor in Thai politics.

The centerpiece of the Constitution of 2017 was a Senate appointed by the current military regime that had extensive powers, which included voting for a Prime Minister and vetoing bills for amnesty that the House of Representatives approved. The aim of the constitutional and legal innovations of

the regime was to prevent a populist government of the Thaksin type from ever coming to power again and, if one did come to power, to hem it in with so many constraints that it would become ineffective.

In the lead up to the 2019 elections, the opposition was subjected to systematic harassment, the most blatant case being the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chart Party for nominating a member of the royal family to run for office. Political and legal harassment were also directed at the up-and-coming Future Forward Party that explicitly campaigned on a platform of "making coups history."

A number of irregularities marked the electoral process on election day, a number of these committed by officials of state agencies encouraging their personnel to vote for pro-regime parties. Documented instances of such acts compiled by the Forces of Renewal Southeast Asia have become the basis of that organization's call for the invalidation of the elections.

The major controversy of the post-election period is the Election Commission's solution to the complex process of allocating party-list seats. A result of the mix of confusion, subjective

interpretation of the law, and coincidence that marked the process was that the opposition had little chance of forming a governing coalition.

The prospects of having a Democratic Front coalition government were quite dim following the elections, leading a number of analysts to suggest that instead of pursuing this fruitless effort, the pro-democracy coalition should focus on being an opposition and making a pro-military regime accountable, letting the latter be the one torn apart by a fractious coalition politics and lose credibility in the process.

In any event, the government coalition led by Palang Pracharat mustered 500 of 750 votes to make General Prayuth the Prime Minister, in effect succeeding himself. There have been questions whether the alliance of three big parties and an assortment of smaller parties will be able to form a stable ruling coalition. Even more problematic is that Prayuth is providing a military face to a regime whose authors have promoted as a post-military civilian government. What is certain is that the elections have not reduced the social polarization that Thaksin's lower-class based transformative politics wrought on Thai society.

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  - 3 "More shadows than lights: human rights commitments of Thai political parties," *Prachatai* (English), March 22, 2019, <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7983>, accessed June 14, 2019.
  - 4 "2014 Interim Constitution of Thailand," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014\\_interim\\_constitution\\_of\\_Thailand](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_interim_constitution_of_Thailand), accessed May 25, 2019.
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  - 9 Dave Kendall, "The Future according to Rising Star Thanathorn," *Bangkok Post*, March 3, 2019, p. 3.
  - 10 *Ibid.*
  - 11 He was president of a provincial branch of the FTI, but this was mistakenly reported on the Future Forward site, a clerical error that was admitted and corrected.
  - 12 Asian Parliamentarians for Human Rights, "Thailand: Regional MPs Urge End to Judicial Harassment of Prominent Politician," Jakarta, May 25, 2019.
  - 13 Forces of Renewal Southeast Asia, *Fraud, Irregularities, and Dirty Tricks: A Report on Thailand's 2019 Elections*, p. 16.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
  - 15 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
  - 16 *Ibid.*, p. 21
  - 17 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
  - 18 The biggest reason for this was that the Pheu Thai contested only 250 out of 350 seats so as not to compete against Thai Raksa Chart, Pheu Tham, and Pheu Chart, which were set up to hoover up party list votes. When Thai Raksa Chart got dissolved, this strategy left the suite of parties short on popular votes and hence party-list seats.
  - 19 An alternative analysis is that PPR engaged in traditional election practices and got the backing of political "godfathers" whose patronage networks would deliver votes on their orders. According to this view, a large number of voters were not so much expressing support to NCPO as voting to please their political patrons.
  - 20 Pravit Rojanaphruk, "Doubts over Election Commission's Party List Allocations Grow," *Khaosud English*, April 8, 2019, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2019/04/08/doubts-over-election-commissions-party-list-allocations-grow/>, accessed May 27, 2019.
  - 21 This was the estimate of Future Forward secretary general Piyabutr Saengknokkul. "Pheu Thai Govt Hope on Ropes," *Bangkok Post*, May 9, 2019.
  - 22 "Game of Seats," *Bangkok Post*, May 9, 2019, p. 1. This figure included the seats of two likely coalition allies that obtained a total of 103 seats, the Democrats and the Bhumjaithai Party, a populist party that sought to legalize marijuana as a cash crop.
  - 23 "EC Seat Move is Hijacking," *Bangkok Post*, May 10, 2019, p. 8.
  - 24 Anonymous source, Bangkok, June 13, 2019.
  - 25 *Ibid.*
  - 26 Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "Anti-Regime? Join the Opposition Ranks," *Bangkok Post*, May 17, 2019.
  - 27 There is speculation that the military may, in fact, have an interest in indefinitely prolonging the formation of a new government since the Constitution allows the NCPO to be the government as long as no government can be put together. This would allow it to continue to escape parliamentary scrutiny and prolong its dictatorial rule.





# THE PHILIPPINES

## Not Electoral Politics as Usual

The three years since the presidential elections of May 2016 had been the most tumultuous years politically of the last three decades. The years following the mid-term elections of May 2019 promise more of the same. The cause of all the

excitement and controversy? Rodrigo Duterte, the authoritarian septuagenarian who has achieved a degree of control over Philippine politics not seen since the era of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970's and 1980's.

President Rodrigo Roa Duterte confers with his children, reelectionist Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte-Carpio and vice mayoral candidate Sebastian Duterte, during a campaign sortie at the Davao City Recreation Center on May 10, 2019. *Photo by Richard Madelo/ Presidential Photo*



PRESIDENTIAL  
COMMUNICATIONS



## Background of the Elections: The Bloody War on Drugs

Duterte was elected president through nearly 40 percent of the votes in 2016. He ran for the most part on a platform of eliminating crime and drugs through draconian methods, his most famous (or notorious) statement being that he would “fatten all the fish in Manila Bay” with the bodies of criminals.<sup>1</sup> While essentially a single-issue candidate, Duterte promised to do away with corruption, lambasted the elite, and called himself a “socialist.” He stayed on the law and order issue, invoking his record of cleaning up the southern city of Davao, where he had been mayor for the better part of nearly three decades. Duterte had been accused of having maintained a death squad that killed hundreds of people in Davao,<sup>2</sup> and he was not shy in alluding to his extra-legal methods.

Since Duterte assumed office in late June 2016, thousands of drug users have been slain by the police or by vigilante groups linked to them, with the police admitting that 2,600 deaths were attributable to police operations while another 1,400 were the work of vigilantes.<sup>3</sup> Other, more reliable sources put the figure

at above 7,000 as of early May 2017.<sup>4</sup> An opposition senator, Sonny Trillanes, citing a government report, claimed that based on an internal government report, the real number of deaths related to the drug war over a year and half was at least 20,322.<sup>5</sup>

What is beyond doubt is that Duterte has brazenly encouraged the extrajudicial killings and discouraged due process. The very night he took his oath of office on June 30, 2016, he told an audience in one of Manila’s working-class communities, “If you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourselves as getting their parents to do it would be too painful.”<sup>6</sup> In October 2016, Duterte told the country, with characteristically sinister humor, that 20,000 to 30,000 more lives might have to be taken to cleanse the country of drugs. Having learned to take Duterte seriously even when he seems to be joking, many observers expect this figure to be an underestimation. On another occasion, to any police officer who might be convicted of killing drug users without justification, he offered an immediate pardon “so you can go after the people who brought you to court.”<sup>7</sup>

Duterte’s massive killing of drug users has been underpinned by an

eliminationist rationale that reminds one of the pseudo-scientific basis of Nazi racial theory. A whole sector of society has been unilaterally stripped of their rights to life, due process, and membership in society. This category—drug users and drug dealers—according to Duterte comprises some three to four million of the country’s population of 104 million. He had written these people out of the human race. With rhetorical flourish, he told the security forces: “Crime against humanity? In the first place, I’d like to be frank with you: are they humans? What is your definition of a human being?”

Drug users are consigned outside the borders of humanity since their brains have allegedly shrunk to the point that they are no longer in command of their faculties to will and think. In his speeches justifying the police killings “in self-defense,” Duterte said that a year of more of the use of *shabu*—the local term for meth or metamphetamine hydrochloride—“would shrink the brain of a person, and therefore he is no longer viable for rehabilitation.”<sup>8</sup>

These people are the “living dead,” the “walking dead,” who are “of no use to society anymore.”<sup>9</sup> Not only do these people turn to violent

crime to slake their drug habit, he said, but they are paranoid and could resist arrest, putting the lives of police officers in danger.<sup>10</sup>

## Other Controversies

The human cost of the war on drugs was not the only controversial issue facing voters as the country entered the electoral campaign period of 2019. Especially alarming was what people saw as his brazen assault on political rights, exemplified by the indefinite imprisonment of his most vocal critic, Senator Leila de Lima, on fabricated charges of being involved in the drug trade and a concerted effort to shut down Rappler, an internet news network critical of the administration.

Equally worrisome was what many regarded as Duterte's assault on the separation of powers. The Senate and House of Representatives were turned by Duterte allies into pliable instruments of the executive while his allies in the Supreme Court willingly cooperated with his subordinates to summarily eject in 2018 the Chief Justice, Maria Lourdes Sereno, whose criticism had angered Duterte.

There were other concerns. After being low and stable

for a number of years, inflation rose in 2017 and hit a nine-year peak of 6.7 percent in October and November 2018, a development partly triggered by the so-called TRAIN (Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion) Law that included a 2.50 peso tax on a liter of gasoline.<sup>11</sup>

Duterte's brazen misogynistic remarks worried many that the president's macho and patriarchal attitudes would set back the gains of the women's movement.<sup>12</sup> Duterte's neglect of the pursuit of the aspirations for autonomy of the Moro people had helped trigger the takeover of the Muslim city of Marawi by fanatics linked to ISIS and led to its destruction in a military counteroffensive that left thousands homeless and displaced.<sup>13</sup> His declaration of martial law throughout Mindanao in May 2017 in response to the Marawi crisis, many feared, would be a prelude to its imposition nationwide.

Then there was Duterte's close relationship with China and worries that loans from the latter would lead to a "debt trap"; that Chinese investors were gaining special privileges; and that the administration was abandoning the country's territorial rights in the West Philippine Sea.

## Opposition Runs a Defensive Campaign

Despite these controversies, the Philippines entered the 2019 campaign period with the president enjoying an amazing 81 percent approval rating, though this had variations by geography and economic status.<sup>14</sup> This had a big impact on the way the opposition was to conduct its campaign. The president's popularity placed the opposition in a defensive position from the very beginning instead of it adopting the principle that an aggressive offense was the best defense.

The head of the Liberal Party (LP), the core of the elite opposition, defined the electoral strategy of the party as "*Project Makinig*" or "*Listen to the People*" project, with the aim of consulting the voters on the shortcomings of the party while it was in power during the previous administration, and during and after the 2016 elections.<sup>15</sup> In the view of some observers, this effectively made the elections a referendum on the party than on the president.

Moreover, the marked reluctance of the lead candidate, Mar Roxas, to campaign with the rest of the opposition, apparently

seeking to soften his image as an opponent of Duterte and sell himself instead as an economist willing to work with the administration, was viewed by some as “downright demoralizing.”<sup>16</sup> One analyst observed,

*Individual candidates like Chel Diokno, Florin Hilbay, Samira Gutoc, Gary Alejano, and Erin Tañada did well in television debates, but the opposition never graduated from being perceived as a ragtag group that did not pose a serious challenge to the administration machine... If the polls are showing that it might be difficult for even one of them to reach the “Magic 12,” they have partly themselves to blame. However much people might support what you stand for, they will find it difficult to identify with people who behave like they’ve already lost.”<sup>17</sup>*

### The Administration’s Triumphalist Campaign

The administration, on the other hand, waged a triumphalist campaign, riding on the president’s popularity. Two overlapping slates, PDP-Laban and Hugpong ng Pagbabago, ran with the administration’s blessings,

but the candidates were mainly seen as proxies for a popular president. For those running the administration’s campaign, a candidate’s reputation was a secondary issue since they framed the campaign as a referendum on the president. The president’s daughter, Sara Duterte, expressed in a particularly brazen way the virtual irrelevance of the personalities and records of the candidates. The young Duterte, the campaign manager of Hugpong, said that “honesty should not be an issue” in the elections.<sup>18</sup> That she was serious was evidenced by Hugpong’s inclusion in its Senate slate of Imee Marcos, who had been widely exposed as having fabricated her educational credentials, and of Bong Revilla and Jinggoy Estrada, who had spent time in jail for plundering the public till.

The election results appeared to have proved that Sara Duterte was right: in the elections honesty would be much less important than the “*tatak Duterte*,” or Duterte brand. Despite their tainted past, Marcos and Revilla were elected. Even more telling were the impressive victories of Bong Go, a political neophyte whose only credential was his being in the president’s inner circle and always

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DESPITE THESE CONTROVERSIES, THE PHILIPPINES ENTERED THE 2019 CAMPAIGN PERIOD WITH THE PRESIDENT ENJOYING AN AMAZING 81 PERCENT APPROVAL RATING, THOUGH THIS HAD VARIATIONS BY GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMIC STATUS.

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being photographed by his side in public events, and Ronaldo ("Bato") de la Rosa, the former head of the Philippine National Police who had served as the main implementer of Duterte's bloody war on drugs and thus was roundly condemned by human rights activists.

## Interpreting the Results

The results were a catastrophe for the opposition: it was completely shut out in the Senate, making this the first time since the advent of the post-Marcos EDSA Republic that an opposition slate was totally excluded from the winners' circle. There were, however, interesting developments in the local contests. In its post-election analysis on May 23, Focus on the Global South Philippines team agreed on the following points:<sup>19</sup>

- The president's popularity was the major factor explaining the overwhelming pro-administration results, and not the stands on issues and criminal records of many of those running for office, especially in the Senate race.
- There were, however, some other contributory elements, among

them the universal unpopularity of the main opposition candidate, Mar Roxas, whose elite background, record in public service, and personality militated against him getting a seat in the Senate.

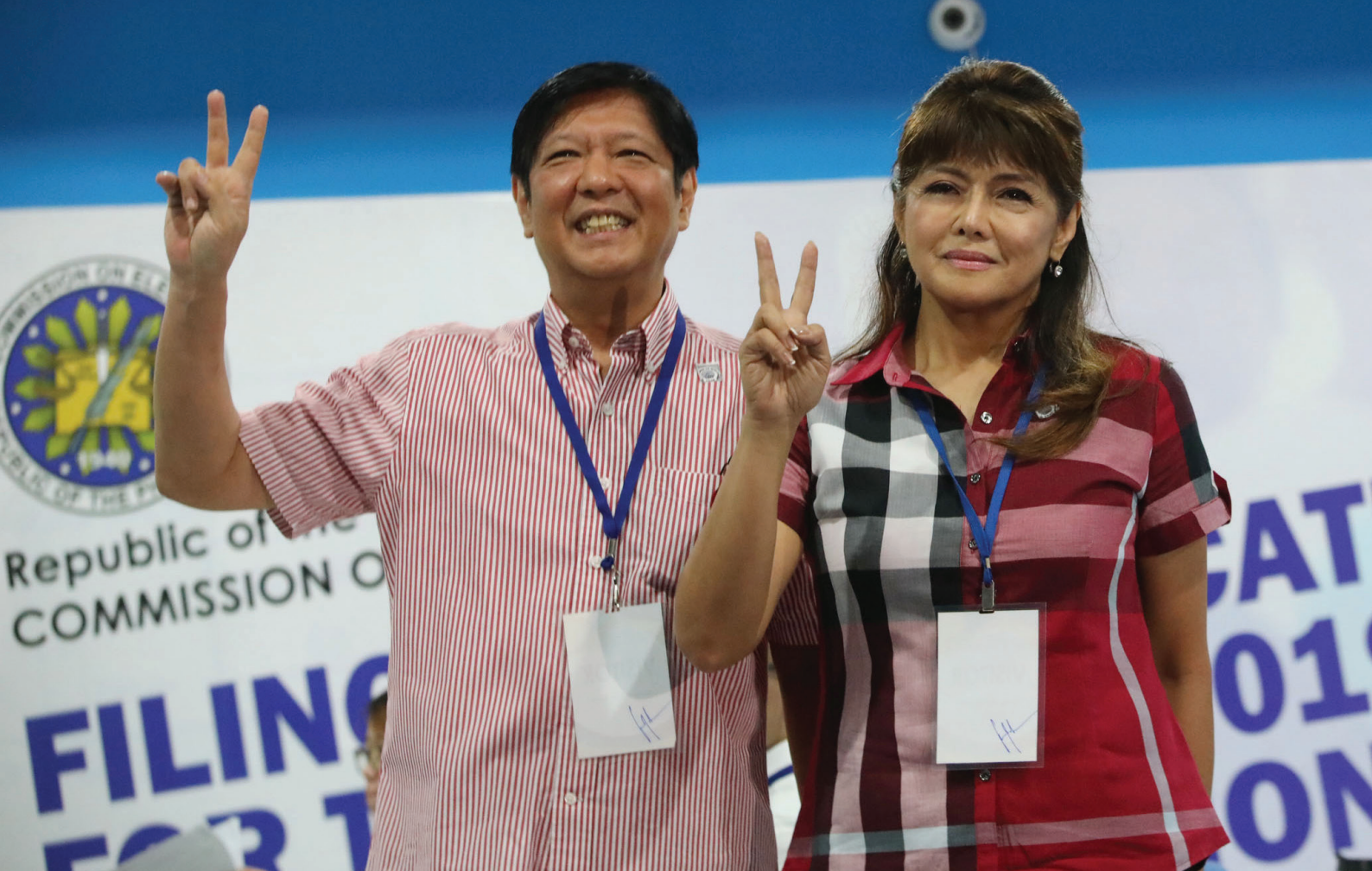
- At the local level, dynastic politics prevailed, though there were some bright spots: Vico Sotto, who ran a progressive, issues-based campaign, unseated the gangster-like Eusebio dynasty in the city of Pasig; Congresswoman Kaka Bag-ao won the governor's race in Dinagat province in Mindanao; and all members of the politically-entrenched Ejercito family (headed by no less than former President Joseph Estrada) lost in the local and national seats they vied for.
- The broad left was dealt a setback, with the militant Makabayan (Patriotic) Bloc losing 1.5 million party-list votes from its 2016 total and the social democratic party Akbayan losing its only seat in the House of Representatives. There was no consensus, however, if this constituted a "repudiation of the left" by the electorate.

- One interesting development was the formation of a common front of candidates from the normally fractious labor movement. Despite the lack of resources, Labor Win waged an impressive campaign focusing on bread and butter issues.

## Violence, Intimidation, and Harassment

Instances of violence were still observed during the campaign period, but apparently not as significant as that in recent past elections. As of May 12, the eve of the elections, the Commission on Elections recorded 43 incidents of election-related violence nationwide. Among the 73 victims of these incidents, 20 were killed while 24 were hurt.<sup>20</sup> There was one high-profile assassination, that of Congressman Rodel Batocabe, who was killed, along with his bodyguard, while waiting at a bus stop. Arrested for his murder was the mayor of Daraga, Albay, whose alleged motivation was to eliminate Batocabe as rival for the mayoralty in the coming elections.

There were apparently many cases of intimidation, some of them reported by candidates and followers of



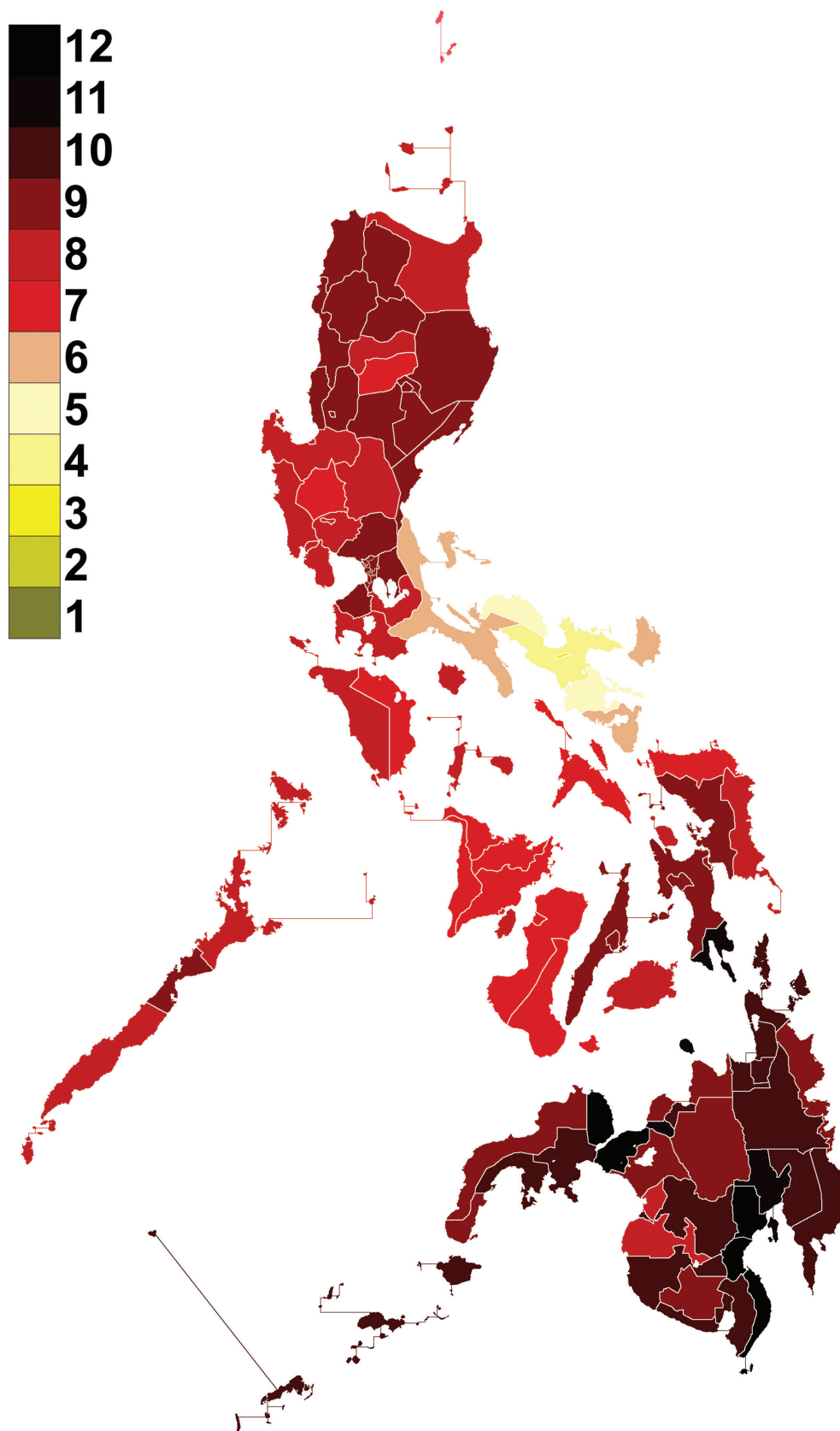
Ilocos Norte Governor Imee Marcos files her Certificate of Candidacy (COC) for senator at the Commission on Elections in Manila with her brother, former Senator Bongbong Marcos; both have been in hot water owing to false claims about their educational credentials, October 15, 2018. Photo by Avito C. Dalan/Philippine News Agency. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bongbong\\_Marcos\\_and\\_Imee\\_Marco\\_COC\\_2019\\_elections\\_filing.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bongbong_Marcos_and_Imee_Marco_COC_2019_elections_filing.jpg)), marked as public domain.

the opposition. According to Senator Francisco Pangilinan, one report said that “people were facing real, even violent, threats just for being associated with LP [Liberal Party].” Pangilinan said that some ended up in Duterte’s narco list; meanwhile the house of a mayor in Davao was supposedly strafed.

“So there is a real threat to being a member of the party in the grassroots,” Pangilinan was quoted as saying.<sup>21</sup>

But the most brazen instances of intimidation and harassment were deployed by the administration against parties associated with the left-wing Makabayan Bloc. Even before the elections, the administration and the military had subjected the bloc and its network of mass organizations to a red-tagging campaign, a complete turnaround in Duterte’s warm attitude towards the militant left shortly after the 2016

elections, as seen in his government’s peace negotiations with them and the cabinet positions given to them. The negotiations fell apart soon enough, with the military being perceived as dead set against any deal with the Communist Party and the New People’s Army.<sup>22</sup> In March 2018, the military got the Justice Department to declare some 600 people said to be linked with the CPP and NPA as “terrorists.”<sup>23</sup>



Map shows roughly how many pro-administration candidates for the Senate won per province.  
 Photo by Brentiusatticus. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Philippine\\_2019\\_Senate\\_Elections\\_Results\\_for\\_HNP.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Philippine_2019_Senate_Elections_Results_for_HNP.png)), "Philippine 2019 Senate Elections Results for HNP", <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>



During the campaign period itself, an e-poster on the Facebook page of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Civil Relations Service branded the Makabayan Bloc as the “legal front” of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People’s Army and urged the public “not to return” representatives of the member-parties of the Makabayan Bloc in Congress in the May 13 elections. In response, Makabayan charged the Armed Forces with violation of Section 261 of the Omnibus Election Code, which prohibits government officials from coercing or intimidating their subordinates to vote for or against candidates for public office.<sup>24</sup> The poster, Makabayan claimed, threatened the safety of its candidates and campaigners and sought “to cripple and thus sabotage the campaign and election of the Makabayan in the Lower House and the Senate with the dirty and dangerous tactic of red-baiting.”<sup>25</sup>

## The Advent of “Charismatic Politics”?

Many observers, however, were not convinced that violence and intimidation played a decisive role in determining the electoral results; and that neither did

cheating nor vote-buying, though the consensus seemed to be that these traditional features of Philippine electoral politics were also not insignificant factors. (Duterte did say, vote-buying was an “integral part” of Philippine elections)<sup>26</sup> The elections, though, was clear about on one thing—that the president had a massive mandate. Some commentators could not restrain themselves from blaming the voters, as did one respected progressive journalist:

*We have most of the voters to blame for it. They’re the millions who approve of mass killings, who’re indifferent to the violations of human rights, who despise intelligence and who’ve never read a book. They disparage democracy without knowing what it is and approve of tyranny because they can’t tell the difference. Miseducated and misled, it is they who, wallowing in their apathy, corruption and ignorance, elect every three years the same oligarchs and dynasts that made them what they are: the instruments of their own misery, and their own worst enemies.*<sup>27</sup>

Such opinion, while understandable, still begged the question of

why the voters endorsed a president who had brazenly promoted impunity. One analyst, borrowing from Max Weber, said that under Duterte, the Philippines had moved from the realm of “democratic politics as usual” to the “Brave New World” of “charismatic politics.”<sup>28</sup> He wrote:

*In times of crisis, there is a desperate need for people to believe in something and someone. And after putting up with what they viewed as the corruption, incompetence, and hypocrisy of previous administrations, a great part of the electorate has placed its faith in Duterte to lead them to the promised land.*

*A disgruntled middle class that had high hopes in the post-Marcos “Edsa Republic” and felt betrayed by its failure to deliver on its promises is the driving force of what is essentially an insurgency against liberal democracy, a force that is sweeping most of the rest of the country along with it.*<sup>29</sup>

A key feature of politics in the current period is said to be “the willingness of people to hold their critical faculties in abeyance and allow themselves to be swept away by the hope that an authoritarian leader will lead

Administration and allied  
“independents” 12;  
Opposition 0.

*Photo by Jess M. Escaros  
Jr./Philippine News Agency.  
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commons.wikimedia.org/  
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marked as public domain.*

the country into a future that  
he himself has only vague  
ideas about.”<sup>30</sup> It is this  
element that distinguishes  
Duterte from his authoritarian  
predecessor Marcos.  
Without the charisma that  
could have added to his  
legitimacy, Marcos relied  
mainly on repression  
and blatant electoral

manipulation to stay in  
power. In contrast, Duterte  
has derived legitimacy  
from his popularity, with  
repression serving mainly as  
an adjunct.

It is anticipated that with the  
mandate coming from the  
elections, Duterte’s pet bills  
would be passed in short





order, namely the bills on federalism, death penalty, and the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility to 12. The president's critics are also worried about how he will use this newly-renewed mandate at the polls to shape his rule towards a more authoritarian direction. As in 2016, the irony is how a democratic exercise has been the means to reduce democratic checks on power.

## Conclusion

As the Philippines neared the mid-term elections of 2019, it became clear that it would serve as a referendum on President Duterte and his policies. While the controversial bloody war on drugs was the central issue on which Duterte was supposed to be judged, also important were the state of the economy, his assault on individual rights and the separation of powers, his misogyny, the country's relations with China, and the political crisis in Mindanao.

The administration's campaign was so focused on Duterte that the individual records of those running for the Senate were seen to be of secondary importance. A number of administration candidates were tainted with corruption and mischief, and some were running

solely on the strength of the president's personal endorsement.

The popularity of the president, on the other hand, cowed the opposition, so that even if some of its candidates had performed well in television debates, for the most part they ran a defensive campaign, led by an unpopular candidate who symbolized elitism, arrogance, and incompetence. The 12-0 outcome was the worst showing for an opposition bloc in a mid-term election since the late '80s.

There were many instances of violence, intimidation, and harassment during the campaign period, but they could not negate the reality of massive voter-approval for Duterte and his policies.

The election results are now being seen as indication that the fundamental character and dynamics of Philippine politics have shifted; one interpretation being that the country has moved from democratic politics-as-usual to "charismatic politics," meaning that citizens are willing to hold their critical faculties in abeyance to support a strong leader, though it may not be clear what future this leader has to offer. Ironically, a democratic exercise resulted in the further undermining of democracy.

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# INDIA

## In the Grip of Charismatic Politics

Given the huge numbers of voters, around 900 million, national elections in India were carried out in seven phases in more than six weeks in April and May 2019. More than 8,000

candidates ran for a total of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the national parliament. To form a government, a party or a coalition needed to win 272 seats.

Narendra Modi at a rally in Goa. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/joegoauk72/31758133123/>



JoeGoaUk

Before the counting of the ballots on May 23, there was much speculation that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would win a substantial number of seats but that it would not be able to gain an outright majority as in 2014. Indeed, the BJP might have to rely on its allied parties to form a government.

Conditions leading up to the elections appeared to be inauspicious for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party: the annual growth rate was down to 5.8 percent; the economic crisis triggered by “demonetization,” which involved the sudden withdrawal from circulation of 500 and 1000 rupee notes representing 86 percent of the value of circulating currency, was not over; farmers’ marches reminded the country of the crisis in agriculture; and violence spawned by Hindu nationalism had become commonplace.

After the votes were counted, the whole country was stupefied. The BJP expanded its majority to 303 seats, up by 20 from its 2014 tally. Congress, the main opposition party, was badly beaten, emerging with only 52 seats and with its leader Rahul Gandhi losing in his own constituency, Amethi, in Uttar Pradesh.<sup>1</sup> Modi came out much stronger from an election where he had been

expected to emerge much weaker. The desperate mood that engulfed those critical of Modi was captured in these words of one academic, who claimed that his victory was:

*a moment of dread for Indian democracy. Let us be clear. This is the greatest concentration of power in modern Indian history. Never has a force emerged, not even the Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, where a leader had such unchallenged power in the party, a party organisation this energised, complete control over capital, and a vast set of civil society organisations that are poised for dominance in every institution in every corner of the country. India's fate is now truly in his hands.*<sup>2</sup>

## Before the Elections

The BJP’s coming to power through an outright majority win in the elections of 2014 represented a turnaround in the post-Independence politics of India.

A few decades earlier, the hegemony of the Hindu nationalist right would not have only been regarded as improbable but unthinkable. While not exactly at the fringe, groups associated with the

ideology of “Hindutva” (best translated as “Hinduness”) were marginal players in post-independence politics. Deriving its prestige from the role it had played in the struggle for independence against the British under the moral inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi and the political leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress Party dominated the politics of post-independence India for three decades.

While there were instances when it resorted to communal politics for its own ends, for the most part, Congress espoused the vision of an India that was secular, democratic, and diverse. As Nehru had put it in his speech on India’s achieving independence in 1948: “All of us, to whatever religion we may belong, are equally the children of India with equal rights, privileges and obligations. We cannot encourage communalism or narrow-mindedness, for no nation can be great whose people are narrow in thought or in action.”<sup>3</sup>

On the critical issue of the Hindu-Muslim religious divide, Gandhi and Nehru had pushed for a one-state solution in the period leading up to the British departure, but the chaos that accompanied the latter saw communal hatred and



violence drive the process, leading to the establishment of India, where the Hindus were in the majority, and Pakistan, which emerged not only as Muslim-majority state but would subsequently define itself as an Islamic state.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding the Partition, the Indian constitution, which the Constituent Assembly adopted on November 26, 1949 and came into effect on January 26, 1950, cemented “this inclusive and democratic objective of keeping government equidistant from all the religions of India’s religiously diverse population.”<sup>5</sup>

Hindu nationalism, for its part, was regarded by many Indians as backward looking, its appeal largely confined to the central regions of the country, the Hindi heartland. Moreover, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other Hindu nationalist groupings were plunged into disrepute when a former RSS member, Nathuram Godse, was sent to the gallows for the assassination on January 30, 1948 of Mahatma Gandhi, an act in which their chief ideologue, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, was implicated, though acquitted.

The shocking role reversal, from a hegemonic Congress to a hegemonic Hindu right, was evident in the results

of the 2014 parliamentary elections, which saw Congress getting a much reduced 44 seats in the national parliament, while the BJP gained an absolute majority of 282 seats. This was a veritable revolution, or more accurately, counterrevolution. The peaceful democratic competition, pluralism, and secularism that post-war India had been known for was seen by many as in grave danger of becoming history.

In the next few years, Modi did not disappoint in fulfilling the aspirations of his followers and confirming the fears of his critics.

Hindutva—Modi’s beliefs and politics—was anathema to a pluralistic, secular, and democratic India. Before moving to a discussion of the issues, conduct, results, and consequences of the 2019 elections, it would be useful to say a few words on the fundamental tenets and organization of Hindu nationalism.

## Hindutva

Hindutva, according to Savarkar, the most influential Hindu fundamentalist ideologue, is the fundamental essence of being Hindu. As pointed out by Sathianathan Clarke, this “essence” consists first of an intimate

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BJP rally in Gujarat. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Man\\_wearing\\_a\\_Narendra\\_Modi\\_mask\\_at\\_an\\_election\\_rally\\_in\\_Gujarat.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Man_wearing_a_Narendra_Modi_mask_at_an_election_rally_in_Gujarat.jpg)

sense of belonging to a sacred geography, to a motherland—Hindustan. Second, Hindutva binds all those of the motherland together by a common blood, seeing the diverse peoples of India as parts of a race that shares the inheritance of the Vedic ancestor. Third, Hindutva asserts that as the biological community devoted to this sacred land, all Hindus share a common culture, one that is the cradle of all civilizations.<sup>6</sup> As Savarkar put it:

*We Hindus are bound together not only by the ties of love we bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood*

*that courses through our veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affections warm, but also by the ties of common homage we pay to our great civilization—our Hindu culture...We are one because we are a nation, a race, and own a common Sanskriti (civilization).<sup>7</sup>*

As noted by scholars like K. Satchidanandan, Hindutva is an attempt to deny the many cultural streams that made Indian civilization so dynamic and create an artificial monolithic unity of Hinduness, one that is actually “a colonial construct borrowing elements

from Western Orientalism, the Judaic idea of religion and the fascist ideals of cultural nationalism.”<sup>8</sup>

Like all fundamentalist ideologies, Hindutva makes exorbitant claims, saying that the Vedic teachings, formulated circa 1500 to 500 BCE, already contain the advances of modern science, asserting that ancient Hindus developed plastic surgery and flew airplanes.<sup>9</sup>

If it were just a question of exaggerated claims about the achievements of the Hindu ancients, Hindu fundamentalism would not be so controversial. But

Hindutva was articulated by Savarkar and his followers within a narrative of victimhood, whereby “Muslim invaders and rulers” of all stripes including Afghans, Turks, Persians, and Mughals, then the Christian British, subjugated, repressed, and divided the Hindu nation.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Hindutva was a project of reclaiming the Hindus’ collective identity, creating a Hindu government, and restoring the glory of a culture from the depredations of alien forces, mainly Muslims but also including Christians, westernized liberals, and Marxists.

Savarkar and his followers fashioned Hindutva into an exclusionary ideology and movement that justified violence against the representatives of alien forces residing in the homeland, namely the Muslim and Christian communities. As one analyst put it, “India’s fundamentalists were radicalized by anger over the past and fear for the future.”<sup>11</sup>

The concept of democracy, the relationship of the state to religion, and justice, which are traditional mainstays of liberal democracy, have been reformulated to fit the Hindutva paradigm. Thus, since democracy is the rule of the majority, this means it must serve as an instrument for promoting the interests

of 80 percent of India’s population that are Hindu. The liberal state’s doctrine of separation of Church and State is said to be hypocritical since it protects the rights of religious minorities; it must thus be abandoned and the state must serve the ends of the religious majority.

Achieving justice has also been reformulated to mean rectifying the historical injustice done to the Hindu majority by Muslim and Christian alien invaders, who continue to enjoy the privilege of being protected by the state. “Hindutva ‘justice’ can only be figured through a reversal of time (the destruction of the medieval monument), the assimilation or erasure of minority identity, or the (seemingly brahminical) requirement that the state and minorities be compelled to recognize, distinguish, and honor Hindus.”<sup>12</sup>

### The Hindu Nationalist Organizational Complex

Not only do the Hindu nationalists have a militant ideology and a shared psychology, they also developed the organizational capacity to put it into action. Unlike Congress which has a more secular ideology that rests unsteadily on patronage mechanisms at the regional

and local level, Hindutva has had a highly ideological organization on the ground that eventually has spawned a network of closely related groups—the RSS, which is essentially a paramilitary organization. The complex of organizations that the RSS has developed has come to be known as the Sangh Parivar, or Syndicate, while the two key organizations in this universe, which have complementary functions of “filling” the Indian national space and civil space, are the BJP and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP).

In forging this relationship between a “vanguard” organization and subordinate mass organizations, the Hindu right probably copied the organizational methods of the Marxist left. Whatever may be the case, Achin Vanaik is right to emphasize that the existence of RSS’s disciplined cadres is what distinguishes the Hindu nationalists from other right-wing movements, such as the pro-Duterte and pro-Bolsonaro groups in the Philippines and Brazil, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

Founded in 1980, the BJP is the principal mechanism of the Hindu nationalists in competing for political power in India’s democratic parliamentary system. The VHP, translated as the World Council of Hindus, was



created in 1964 to bring all Hindu sects under the common agenda of creating an Indian nation-state. The VHP is described as having “gone beyond the tight vanguardist structure of the originary RSS, and thereby made communalism (and communal conflict centered around politically constructed identities) into a mass force.”<sup>14</sup>

While the BJP focuses on winning the competition within the current political system, the VHP and RSS are working hand-in-hand to bring about a more strategic aim, which is to “transform not only the content of the entire Indian political culture, but also the legitimate form of that culture.”<sup>15</sup> As one academic puts it:

*This includes changing the nature of the public sphere and its forms of political discourse, the quality of the relation between nationalism, the state, and democratic citizenship, the boundaries between legal and extralegal spheres, the deepest layers of personal and civil society, and the nature of civic association, solidarity, and mass participation. A key aim of the RSS and VHP is to conflate political and civic citizenship, while transforming the understanding of both through a long-term aim to patiently but wholly transform the “body,*

*mind, and intellect” of each Hindu adult and child. This dislocates traditional understandings of family, community, civil society and nation in order to replace them with a vitalist, organismic (and arguably quasi-eugenicist) conception of society and nation.*<sup>16</sup>

While the BJP is given room to maneuver owing to the necessities of alliance politics and political timing, the Sangh Parivar, or “Syndicate” of Hindu organizations, expects the BJP to deliver on its immediate demands: legislate that Muslims and Christians must be incorporated into the common civil code instead of allowing them to live their family lives according to their own traditions;<sup>17</sup> end the special status of Kashmir, India’s only state with a Muslim majority; and complete the construction of a Hindu temple on the site of the old mosque of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, which was destroyed by its militants in 1992.<sup>18</sup>

The last demand reveals the uncompromising ideological character of Hindu nationalism, which is essentially a politics of vendetta whereby “the political and social trajectories of the Sultanate and British rule are not only constructed as a fall from an original state of purity, but the citizens

who today belong to the Muslim and Christian faiths are reduced to standing in for the Invader, the Plunderer, the Desecrator, and are positioned as treasonable subjects to be disciplined and suborned within the nation-state.”<sup>19</sup> Along with Muslims and Christians, liberal and progressive intellectuals are denounced as “sikularlibtards” on Facebook and Twitter; the chief of the RSS in 1999 referred to these people as that “class of bastards which tries to implant an alien culture in our land.”<sup>20</sup> Intellectuals, artists, and journalists who dare to criticize Hindutva and its practitioners are intimidated, if not murdered.

With Muslims, Christians, liberal intellectuals, and Marxists seen as fifth column, violence against them is constrained only by public opinion, which can eventually be changed by legal criminal sanctions, the imposition or severity of which depends on who is in power. For the Hindu right, It is also important to devise arrangements to keep violence at an arms-length of the main organizations of the Sangh Parivar. Thus, the VHP has spawned a number of organizations that are tied to it yet enjoy a measure of autonomy, like the Bajrang Dal and Hindu Jagran Manch, both of which have been implicated

in “spectacular forms of violence against religious minorities.”<sup>21</sup> Ideological affinity coupled with this distanced organizational relationship allows what has been called the “genocidal” VHP which aims “to distance itself from these newly named organizations while providing the gestatory womb for them.”<sup>22</sup>

One of the most spectacular cases of Hindu nationalist violence against religious minorities was the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque by Hindu militants in Ayodhya

in 1992 based on the claim that it had been built on a temple of Lord Ram in the 16th century, for which there is limited historical evidence. The Gujarat riots of 2002, an orgy of killing, mainly of Muslims, triggered by the deaths of 59 Hindu pilgrims returning to Gujarat from Ayodhya, would overshadow the Babri Masjid incident. This systematic two-month-long deadly massacre of Muslims in response to the killing of the pilgrims have struck many as methodical, well thought out, and carried out with the support of the

RSS militants  
march in Bhopal.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Path\\_Sanchalan\\_Bhopal-1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Path_Sanchalan_Bhopal-1.jpg)





state whose chief minister then was Narendra Modi.<sup>23</sup> Modi's role has been much debated, but it cannot be denied that "the Sangh parivar...was well prepared and well-rehearsed to carry out the murderous, brutal, and sadistic attacks on Muslim men, women, and children."<sup>24</sup>

## BJP Economics

The BJP's appeal resides not only in its militant advocacy that Hindu identity must be seen as the central factor determining political belief and behavior. Its continuation of the neoliberal policies that Congress initiated in the 1990's has also won it the support of the dominant sectors of the Indian capitalist class. Modi, in fact, has captured the imagination of both local and foreign investors with his promotion of the so-called "Gujarat model" of growth. Under Modi, the state has had a high rate of growth and been friendly to investors, providing them with tax breaks and eliminating or loosening restrictions governing labor, pollution, and the acquisition of land. Yet investment has been capital-intensive, resulting in jobless growth, with formal employment growing minimally (+0.3) in the boom periods 1999-2000 and 2009-2010. With few new jobs in the formal sector, people went

into the low-paid informal sector. In 2011, Gujarat had the third lowest level of wages for casual labor, the reason why many industries flocked to the state.<sup>25</sup>

It was not only India's bourgeoisie that was captured by the image of a dynamic Indian economy breaking free from the shackles of "Indian socialism" associated with Congress. The "privileging of urban India associated with the 'rise' of information technology and business services sector as the most dynamic of the economy,"<sup>26</sup> also won over the middle classes to the BJP. These included the large "aspirational" middle class that may not have qualified as middle class in terms of actual income level but saw middle class status as a goal made possible by the policies of Modi and the BJP. Satisfying the material interests and aspirations of these sectors have had an added but critical effect: it has opened the ethically sterile rich and the middle classes to the ideology of Hindu nationalism.

## Prelude to the 2019 Elections: The Issues

At the beginning of its five-year term in 2014, the BJP's road to hegemony appeared to have been

paved. The next five years, however, proved to be rocky. The economy was one problem, especially in the year preceding the 2019 polls. After hitting a high of eight percent in the middle of 2018,<sup>27</sup> growth slid down in the latter part of the year, hitting 5.8 percent in March of this year. This resulted in the highest unemployment rate in four decades, 6.1 percent at the end of fiscal year 2018.<sup>28</sup>

A key factor that depressed growth was the so-called demonetization of the currency in November 2016. The aims of demonetization, which involved the sudden withdrawal of currency notes of 500 and 1000 rupee denominations, were to render useless money in the hands of criminal syndicates and tax evaders, and encourage digital payments. The move failed in attaining its goals, but the effects were disruptive. According to the International Monetary Fund, "The impact on growth appears to have been more severe and longer-lasting than anticipated with a disproportionate impact on the informal sector."<sup>29</sup> In agriculture, "demonetization aggravated the sector's existing stress points by creating new choke points within the supply-chain. Cash is a critical input in the agricultural production



process and its unexpected shortage had an impact at many levels, including a slowdown in employment of labor and a dip in overall farm incomes.”<sup>30</sup> Demonetization, the opposition assumed, had contributed to the rising indebtedness of farmers, which was a major cause of the phenomenon of “farmers’ suicides.”

Another major issue that the opposition seized on was the fact that instead of a unifier, Modi had been a divisive figure whose nationalist rhetoric encouraged violence. This claim was not, however, simple electioneering on the part of the BJP’s opponents. Under Modi, India had descended into violence.

While nothing of the scale of the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat has occurred since Modi took office, violence against Muslims has become routinized and normalized.<sup>31</sup> According to human rights crusader Harsh Mander, Muslims are “today’s castaways, political orphans with no home...[against whom] open expressions of hatred and bigotry have become the new normal, from schools to universities, work places to living rooms, internet to political rallies.”<sup>32</sup> Most of the more than 40 people reported in newspapers to have been victims of lynching

in the last four years on suspicion of slaughtering, skinning, or transporting cattle, are Muslims.<sup>33</sup> Hatred against Muslims has been deliberately cultivated by false claims like Muslims engaging in “love jihad,” that is, seducing and Islamizing Hindu girls, so that they can give birth to more Muslims in order to eventually tip the demographic balance in their favor.<sup>34</sup>

Despite efforts to tweak or rhetorically “soften” Hinduism’s doctrinal bias against lower caste groups and enlist them in the struggle against Muslims and Christians, Hindu nationalist violence against Dalits and Adivasis spread under the BJP regime, one instance being a much publicized killing in Modi’s home state of Gujarat of a Dalit for riding a horse.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, sectarianism aside:

*[t]he Modi era is witnessing concerted assaults on dissent not seen since the 1975–77 Emergency. Laws against sedition have been used to arrest student union leaders for protesting the execution of a convicted terrorist. The same laws facilitated the arrest of Muslims accused of cheering for Pakistan in a cricket match. Journalists have been killed, subjected to legal*

*harassment, and attacked by police. Civil society leaders associated with secular values have been assassinated. Statues of leaders associated with secularism have been torn down.*<sup>36</sup>

Three members of the secular intelligentsia have been assassinated in the last few years: Marxist intellectual Govind Padharinath Pansare, the playwright Malleshappa Kalburgi, and the crusading journalist Gauri Lankesh.<sup>37</sup> Many have been intimidated into silence, while those who continue to speak out are subjected to cyber vitriol, like author Arundhati Roy, whom one BJP MP said should be used as a human shield by the Indian Army in Kashmir.<sup>38</sup>

“The Modi regime wields far greater legal and extra-legal coercive power than enjoyed by any ruling party in post-independence India,” notes one critic. “It uses every possible constitutional-legal power sans the constraints imposed by democratic conventions: dismissal of unfriendly state governments, use of CBI [Central Bureau of Investigation] and other investigative agencies and, of course, the use of armed forces. This is supplemented by the use of state apparatus for extra-legal coercive measures: harassment and persecution



BJP rally in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh, the Gandhi family stronghold that fell to the Hindu nationalists in the 2019 elections. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Supporter\\_of\\_Bharatiya\\_Janata\\_Party\\_at\\_an\\_election\\_rally\\_in\\_Amethi.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Supporter_of_Bharatiya_Janata_Party_at_an_election_rally_in_Amethi.jpg)

of political and ideological adversaries, protection to vigilante groups, and the misuse of anti-terror laws. The most pernicious aspect of the BJP's use of coercive state apparatus is the silent, everyday form of surveillance, intimidation, and infiltration."<sup>39</sup>

While the use of the state's security forces has been an important element in the Hindu right's repertoire of repression and violence, mob violence plays a special role. Lynching has usually been carried out by Hindu mobs inflamed by rumors about the identity or actions of the victims, usually in relation to

the slaughter or transport of cows, which are invested with a sacred identity by hardline Hindus. These cases of lynching have been gruesome affairs, with the attackers usually filming the incidents and circulating them on the internet. In this connection, the use of information technology to spread and promote lynching and riots is a practice that the Hindu right has become particularly adept at, with devastating consequences, as when the uploading of a fake video by a BJP legislator in Uttar Pradesh purportedly showing a Muslim mob murdering a Hindu youth provoked riots in the city of Muzaffarnagar that

took 47 lives and displaced 40,000 people.<sup>40</sup>

Lynching is not an aberration or deviation from their political project, as senior BJP and regime officials are wont to claim. In fact, lynching, writes Ashok Swain, serves the function of enforcing "inter-group control and to keep the idea and practice of upper-caste Hindu domination." In this context, it does not matter whether the victim is guilty of wrongdoing or not—the lynching serves a larger political objective.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to the state of the economy and the spread of

violence, another issue that the opposition has banked on is Hindu nationalist discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis, the so-called “untouchables” and “tribals” constituting some 20 percent of the population.

Many in these sectors, who have been systematically discriminated against in traditional Hindu culture, have increasingly discovered that the BJP and the Hindu nationalists are deadly serious about reversing their gains in terms of improving their political, economic, and cultural status in the secular, pluralistic Indian order that is now threatened.

Not only has the BJP been aggressively challenging affirmative action policies that rectify historical injustice, the Modi government’s strict implementation of cow protection laws has also exposed Dalits and Adivasis engaged in the cattle industry throughout India to violence from upper caste Hindu mobs. Moreover, even a key law meant to protect Dalits from violence, the 1989 SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, has now been gutted as a result of the Supreme Court of India’s recent ruling barring immediate arrest of those accused of violence against SCs and STs. Under this law, anyone accused of committing an atrocity

against the members of the scheduled castes (SCs) and tribes (STs) had previously been denied bail.

Finally, the opposition pinned their hopes on the continued inability of the BJP to extend its appeal beyond the so-called “cowbelt” or traditional Hindustan. As one critic put it, “Its electoral dominance peters out at the geographical and the social peripheries. The BJP is not a serious contender in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, West Bengal and smaller states like Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and, of course, the Kashmir Valley.”<sup>42</sup>

## Implications of the Election Results

With the election results in, there has been much discussion of how Modi and the BJP were able to defuse the various issues that had threatened a negative vote for the BJP.

### Rural Voters

A closer look at the statistics related to agriculture shows a situation very different from when “rural India” threw out the first BJP-led government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2004 for its prioritization of the needs of “urban India.” One analysis, done before

the elections, contended that “Overall...India’s farmers are doing far better than many realize.”<sup>43</sup>

*One way to gauge the well-being of rural households is to look at how much they’re buying: They now account for 45 percent of the fast-moving consumer goods sector in India. This is remarkable given the vast disparity in disposable incomes between urban and rural households, and it implies that improvements in rural infrastructure, connectivity and digitization are translating into higher demand. Over the last three years, rural sales grew significantly faster than urban sales in both volume and value; consumption growth currently stands at a robust 9.7 percent.*<sup>44</sup>

Contrary to expectations, the 2019 results show that the BJP performed much better than Congress in rural areas; Congress, in fact, performed much worse in places with the highest share of rural population.<sup>45</sup>

An important contributor to the BJP’s ability to win rural voters was the unrolling before the elections of what critics called a “handout program,” the PM-Kisan scheme that would give 6000 rupees a year to hundreds



of thousands of small and marginal farmers up to two hectares of cultivable land.<sup>46</sup>

### **Fighting for the Dalit and Adivasi Votes**

When it came to dealing with the Dalits and Adivasis, to win over or at least neutralize them in the lead up to the 2019 elections, the BJP employed a dual strategy. One was to convince the emerging Dalit middle class that Modi's election would redound to their economic fortunes. The other was a tactical underplaying of the caste issue. As one account put it, "Caste assertion has not been the strategy of the BJP, as it once was. As a matter of fact, on the one hand, they have aggressively negotiated with caste groups, and, on the other, presented the image of a single, powerful leader. Dissociating the image of the leader from the history of the RSS has allowed them strategic maneuverability."<sup>47</sup>

A related tactic was to ideologically downplay caste differences and rhetorically appeal to all Hindus irrespective of caste to unite against the so-called common enemy: Muslims.<sup>48</sup> It must also be pointed out that in what many regarded as an act of supreme opportunism, the Modi government challenged

the Supreme Court's dilution of the 1989 SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act referred to earlier and indeed pushed to strengthen it.<sup>49</sup>

These election period-related initiatives tied in to more strategic efforts to win the Dalits over to the BJP. The RSS, for one, was busy courting Dalits with activities that ranged from cultural efforts that reconfigured Hindu mythology to accommodate heroic figures of Dalit background to extending educational aid to Dalit communities. In Western Uttar Pradesh, for instance, there were said to be 850 *sevakaryas*, or centers, and 500 of them were in Dalit-dominated areas. "From stitching to computer training, these centres that the RSS runs with an affiliate called Sewa Bharti are imparting skills that can help the young to earn a livelihood, claimed an RSS officer."<sup>50</sup>

From initial election results, these containment strategies appear to have worked. The estimated 25 percent of the Dalit votes that went to the BJP in 2014 does not appear to have been significantly altered. As one analysis has pointed out, "The results show that the BJP was ahead in 67 percent of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe reserved constituencies,

where populations of these communities are higher. Though this does not automatically mean members of those communities voted for Modi, it seems unlikely that the party could have won in such numbers if it didn't at least win some Dalit votes."<sup>51</sup>

### **Breaking out of the "Cowbelt"**

In terms of breaking out of the "Hindi heartland," the BJP registered success. Its biggest achievement was in West Bengal, where it increased its share of the votes from 4.8 to 40.2 percent and its share of seats from 4.8 to 42.8 percent. The proportions were the same in Odisha, another strategic target of the BJP's so-called "eastward push." Equally impressive was the BJP's showing in Karnataka, where it won 25 of 28 seats. It also made inroads into Telangana.

In the Northeast, previously seen as impermeable to the BJP, the party soared to dominance, winning 14 of 25 seats and its regional allies winning another four.

Of all of India's key states, it appears that only in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala, where a Congress-led alliance won 19 of 20 seats, was there a decisive beat-back of the BJP challenge.

If Congress was humiliated, the Left was reduced to smithereens. India's Communist parties, which won 59 seats in 2004, were reduced to just five seats, their worst-performance to date. Of those five seats, one came from Kerala, where the Communist Party (M) had occasionally controlled government, and four came from Tamil Nadu. As a force in Indian politics, it may be on the brink of extinction.

## The Broader Canvas

Factors specific to the different states, such as the presence of regional parties or how well the BJP and Congress fielded their machines, are important in explaining the BJP's success. This is the case as well with the other explanations, such as the dole-out to farmers, the popularity of Modi's scheme to subsidize the building of toilets for poor households, the provision of free LPG connections to poor families, and the successful organizing strategies among Dalits and Adivasis. These factors do not, however, add up to a viable explanation. Politics in India today is no longer arithmetic. These factors must be placed in the context of a political earthquake, a massive transformative change, a fundamental reconfiguration of politics in India.

Transformation is both a negation and an affirmation. As in the Philippines, the recent election results represent a repudiation of liberal democracy which has created a huge gap between its promises and present inequalities. Much like the Liberal Party in the Philippines, Rahul Gandhi and the Congress Party have come to represent the hypocrisy of the old order. Best-selling author Pankaj Mishra, no lover of both Modi and the Indian Anglophone elite's liberal democracy, expresses this negation:

*Rived by caste as well as class divisions, and dominated in Bollywood as well as politics by dynasties, India is a grotesquely unequal society. Its constitution, and much political rhetoric, upholds the notion that all individuals are equal and possess the same right to education and job opportunities; but the everyday experience of most Indians testify to appalling violations of this principle. A great majority of Indians, forced to inhabit the vast gap between a glossy democratic ideal and a squalid undemocratic reality, have long stored up deep feelings of injury, weakness, inferiority, degradation, inadequacy and envy; these stem from*

*defeats or humiliation suffered at the hands of those of higher status than themselves in a rigid hierarchy.*<sup>52</sup>

Along with this negation is the affirmation of the leadership of a person who has combined in his persona a dynamic personality and ideology of wounded but assertive nationalism that has tapped into a country's feelings of pride and shame, deep disappointment, and persistent hope.

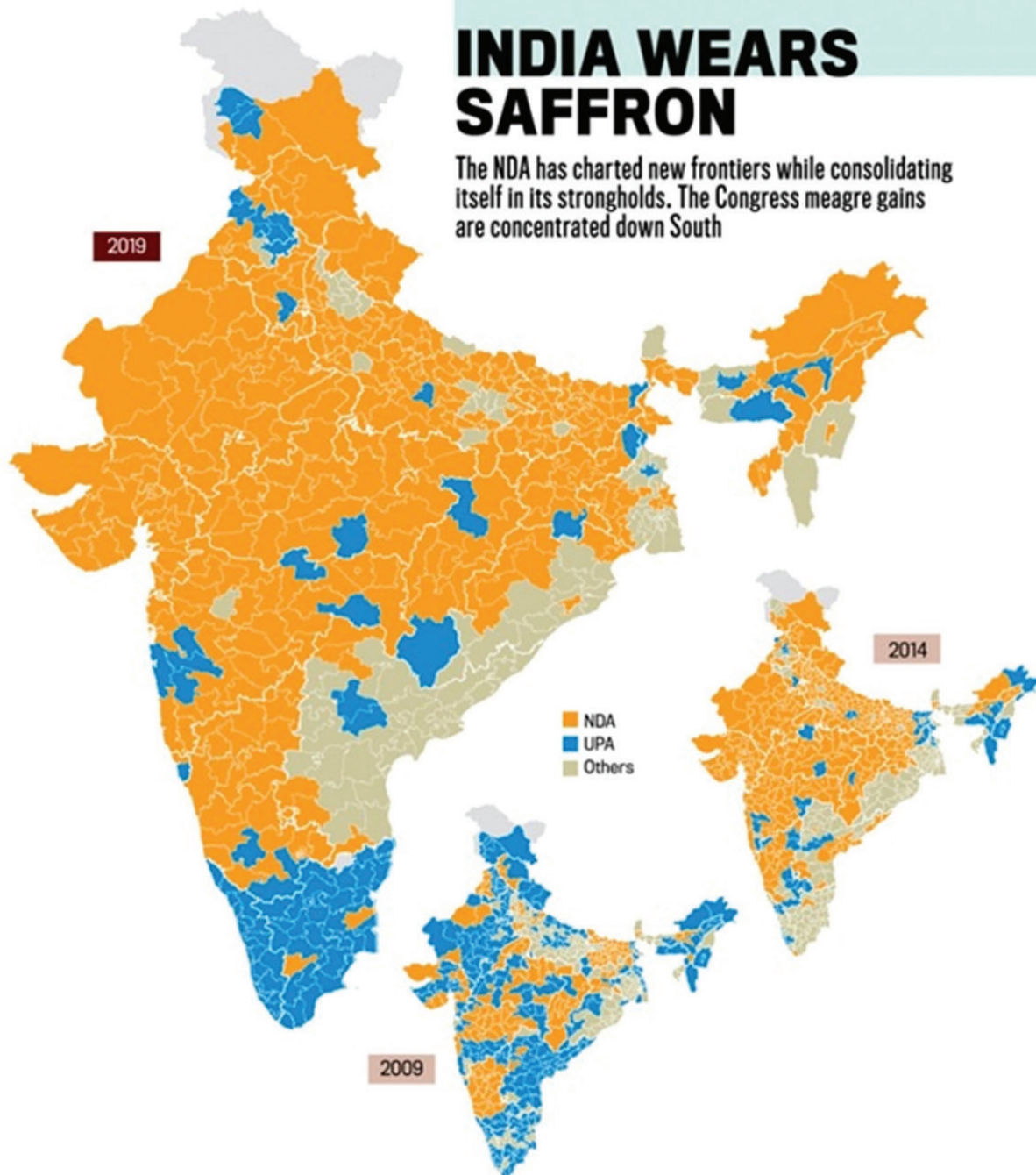
Modi has been able to convert this aggressive nationalism into a powerful electoral force. Earlier this year, in February 26, the so-called Balakot Incident reinforced this; Indian Air Force planes bombed what New Delhi claimed were "terrorist training camps" within Pakistan.<sup>53</sup>

A key feature of the new politics of India, it has been noted, is the willingness of many Indians of all sectors to "outsource their destiny" to the leader.<sup>54</sup>

Another key feature is that while it would be wrong to say that all of them agree with the tenets of the ideology Modi represents, they are willing to hold their critical faculties in abeyance even on such violations of basic values like the lynching of people accused of killing cows or

# INDIA WEARS SAFFRON

The NDA has charted new frontiers while consolidating itself in its strongholds. The Congress meagre gains are concentrated down South



2019			2014			2009		
NDA	UPA	OTHERS	NDA	UPA	OTHERS	NDA	UPA	OTHERS
<b>351</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>125</b>
VOTE SHARE			VOTE SHARE			VOTE SHARE		
<b>45%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>39%</b>

Map from *India Today*, May 25, 2019. NDA stands for the pro-Modi National Democratic Alliance; UPA for the opposition United Progressive Alliance. Saffron is the color of the Hindu nationalist movement. Source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20190603-mandate-2019-the-republic-of-modi-1534275-2019-05-25>



murder of critics of the regime in order to give him the benefit of the doubt, making him relatively invulnerable to criticism. This holding-back is caught by one writer:

*Modi's message of unbridled nationalism and Hindu identity drowned out the sort of issues that would have put any other candidate on the defensive. In the end, the state of the economy or simmering social tensions didn't matter much... Unemployment figures were reported to be the highest in four decades, but exit polls show that didn't seem to make Modi any less of a favorite among India's aspirational 84 million first-time voters, 15 million of them between the ages of 18 and 19... The anti-Muslim rabble-rousing of some top BJP leaders and the lynchings of Muslim cattle traders by violent Hindu mobs did not earn Modi the opprobrium of voters. Even fielding a candidate accused of terrorism—who recently praised Mahatma Gandhi's assassin—did not set either Modi or his party back an inch. The candidate, Pragya Thakur, won her seat with a handsome margin. Even voters who disapprove of Thakur would not penalize Modi for her candidacy. This was the success of his*

*political communication; he was always seen to be above the fray.<sup>55</sup>*

However, the conclusion that this writer and other writers come to—that this was the “success of political communication”—is rather simplistic, just as Pankraj Mishra’s notion that Modi “seduced” voters is. While journalistic descriptions help illuminate the different dimensions of a complex phenomenon, there must be an effort to formulate a more comprehensive and profound sociological understanding of the Modi phenomenon.

## Charismatic Politics in Command

With Modi and the BJP, as in the case with Duterte in the Philippines, it would be useful to harness Max Weber’s concept of charismatic politics. As noted earlier in the section on the Philippines, Weber distinguishes traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic authority. Whereas tradition provides the source of legitimacy in a traditional polity, it is laws and practices derived in a rational process from basic principles that are said to be the foundation of a rational-legal order. While most societies are marked by the dominance of either traditional or rational-legal legitimacy, in

reality, in a concrete society, the two types of legitimacy coexist in a relationship fraught with tension.

Charismatic legitimacy, on the other hand, derives from a dynamic leader and subverts both traditional and rational-legal authority and structures. Charismatic politics takes advantage of the contradiction between traditional authority structures that legitimize inequality and injustice and a rational-legal order based on the principles of democracy, justice, and equality. Charismatic politics is not politics as usual and is a fluid process that moves in uncharted waters until the charisma of the leader is “routinized” into a new set of rules, procedures, and processes which become the source of authority and legitimacy.

Viewed in this light, one can see the emergence of Modi and Hindu nationalism as a response to the unresolved between the on-the-ground traditional sources of power and authority in class, caste, and dynastic inequalities on one hand and the rational-legal order based on equality, justice, and democracy idealized in the Indian constitution on the other.

Modi becomes the fountainhead of a reconfigured Hindu nation

where “harmony” will reign. This charismatic reconfiguration is not a benign process but one which needs an “Other” or “Others” upon whom the evils, troubles, inequalities of the old contradictory political order are projected. In the Modi paradigm, these are Muslims, Christians, westernized intellectuals or “sikularlibtards,” and the Gandhi dynasty. The emergence of this new state of harmony is achieved by the expulsion, transmogrification into alien forces, or repressive containment of the representatives of disharmony.

## Conclusion

The overwhelming triumph of Narendra Modi’s BJP was unexpected. While the BJP was expected to dominate the elections, it was projected to win a smaller number of seats than in 2014, pushing it to rely on its allies in the National Democratic Alliance to form a government. Instead, the BJP won more seats than it had in 2014, achieving a hegemony in Indian politics matching that of the Congress at its apogee in the first 30 years of post-Independence India. The Hindu nationalism associated with the BJP is an ideology that seeks the recreation of an imagined

glorious past of Hindu dominance. The regaining of an imagined harmony is predicated on the marginalization from the body politic of alien forces, notably Muslims but including as well Christians, westernized intellectuals, and Marxists. Murder, lynching, and other forms of mob violence against these sectors marked the BJP reign from 2014 to 2019.

Violence against minorities was one of the key issues that the opposition brought to the campaign against Modi and the BJP. It also hoped to exploit the poor state of the economy and the economic difficulties of farmers. Dalits and Adivasis were also seen as forces that could be turned against the BJP owing to Hindu upper caste discrimination against them. There was also the expectation that the East, Northeast, and South would remain immune to the appeal of the BJP. On all of these issues, sectors, and states, the BJP turned the tables on the opposition.

A number of complementary explanations have been forwarded to explain the victory of the BJP, among them the personality of Modi, the organizational clout of the BJP, the cash transfers to struggling farmers, and the successful efforts to neutralize alienation among the Dalits

and Adivasis. While useful in illuminating some aspects of Modi and the BJP’s success, each of these explanations do not add up to the whole. Political success in this case is not arithmetic.

More useful is an explanation derived from Max Weber that sees the Modi-BJP phenomenon as part of a sea change in Indian politics, whereby the touchstone of legitimacy is shifting from traditional legitimacy and rational-legal legitimacy to charismatic legitimacy.<sup>56</sup> A charismatic figure with a dynamic ideology has emerged who presents himself as the key to the country’s future. People have been persuaded to hold their critical faculties in abeyance and give him the benefit of the doubt, to “outsource” their future to him. Institutions, once seemingly solid, enter into flux. India has, like the Philippines, entered an era of charismatic politics. How long will it be before this volatile period ends and, to use Weber’s term, charisma is “routinized” in new or modified institutions is anyone’s guess at this point.

Will BJP, in fact, dominate India in the next 50 years, as Amit Shah, Modi’s brother-in-arms, predicted? Given where things stand now, that is not an impossibility.

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- 1 He did win though in another constituency, Wayanad in Kerala.
  - 2 P. Mehta, "Staggering dominance: The only authentic analysis of this election is two words – Narendra Modi," *The Indian Express*, May 24, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-lok-sabha-elections-2019-results-bjp-congress-rahul-gandhi-5745371/>, accessed June 2, 2019.
  - 3 Quoted in Sathianathan Clarke, *Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), pp. 104-105.
  - 4 Gandhi and Nehru did not want Partition but were not prepared to accept any power-sharing federated arrangement with Jinnah's Muslim League to avoid this. Much recent history puts greater blame for Partition not so much on Jinnah as on Congress.
  - 5 *Ibid.*
  - 6 Clarke, pp. 101-102.
  - 7 Quoted in Clarke, p. 102.
  - 8 K. Satchidanandan, "The Idea of India: The Case for Plurality," in John Dayal, Leena Dabiru, and Shabnam Hashmi, *Dismantling India: A Four Year Report* (New Delhi: Media House, 2018), p. 27.
  - 9 Clarke, p. 112; Misrah, p. 269.
  - 10 Muslim rule is the main historical enemy and British rule seen as more of an overlay on this more fundamental enemy which is why the RSS never fought as an organization against colonial rule. Savarkar, an ideological fountainhead of Hindutva, did fight against the British but as a price for his release after being imprisoned, made peace with the British. Hindutva's main anger has been directed to Christian missionaries and their institutions rather than British colonial rule.
  - 11 Edna Fernandes, quoted in Clarke, p. 99.
  - 12 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
  - 13 Comments at Transnational Institute strategy meeting, Soesterberg, The Netherlands, June 7, 2019.
  - 14 Parita Mukta, "The Public Face of Hindu Nationalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2000), p. 443.
  - 15 Bhatt, p. 142.
  - 16 *Ibid.*
  - 17 While the Hindu nationalists seek to incorporate Muslims in a Uniform or Common civil Code, they do not talk of further reform of the Hindu personal law which was only partially reformed since Hindu women face continuing discrimination in matters of marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance, etc. The focus is on Muslim and to a lesser extent on Christians. It is not enough for Hindutva forces to play the 'politics of historical revenge'. They also have to create a sense of anger and fear against a Muslim minority that is among the most deprived sections of Indian society and cannot remotely be said to be a political threat of ruling over the religious majority through representatives. So they create contemporary grievances by pointing out to 'unfair' treatment by the state e.g., getting away with their own unreformed personal law or the only Muslim majority state in India of Jammu and Kashmir getting special autonomy status.
  - 18 John Harriss, "Hindu Nationalism in Action: The Bharatiya Janata Party and Indian Politics," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2015), p. 714.
  - 19 Mukta, p. 445.
  - 20 Mishra, p. 162.
  - 21 Mukta, p. 444.
  - 22 *Ibid.*
  - 23 Clarke, p. 123.
  - 24 Paul Brass, quoted in *ibid.*
  - 25 Christophe Jaffrelot, "Gujarat Model?," *The Indian Express*, Nov. 20, 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/gujarat-assembly-elections-2017-bjp-demonetisation-gst-industrialists-businessmen-4945328/>, accessed August 4, 2018.
  - 26 Walker, p. 558.
  - 27 This figure is hotly contested as the Modi Govt changed the methodology for computing GDP figures. So, in essence, many claim that even this was an inflated number.
  - 28 "India's economy stumbles badly as Narendra Modi begins his second term," *CNN*, May 31, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/31/economy/india-gdp-economy-q4/index.html>, accessed June 3, 2019.
  - 29 Quoted in Rajrishi Singal, "How demonetisation impacted the Indian economy," *Livemint*, Aug 30, 2018, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/uCSwoIE7ugfGfuv2O0wWbN/How-demonetisation-impacted-the-Indian-economy.html>, accessed June 3, 2019.
  - 30 *Ibid.*
  - 31 The closest communal crime approaching the Gujarat bloodbath took place in the city of Muzaffarnagar in the state of Uttar Pradesh in September 2013, which took 47 lives.
  - 32 Harsh Mander, quoted in John Dayal, "Lynchings and Other Consequences of Targeted Hate," in John Dayal, Leena Dabiru, and Shabnam Hashmi, *Dismantling India: A Four Year Report* (New Delhi: Media House, 2018), pp. 36-37.
  - 33 *Ibid.*, p. 31. The situation became worse after January 2017, According to a recent India Spend survey, between January 2017 and July 5, 2018, [M]job violence in India has killed 33 people and injured at least 99... Muslims have been the target of 51 percent of violence centered on cow-related incidents during 2010 to 2017. The vast majority of those killed in such incidents were also Muslims. India Spend's survey said 97 percent of these types of attacks were reported after Modi's government came to power in May 2014. Most of those killed by hard-line Hindus were accused



- of trading cows for slaughter or transporting or storing beef... Orthodox Hindus regard cows as holy and their slaughter is banned in most Indian states. Since Modi's party assumed power in 2014, the ban has been used by Hindu nationalists to justify attacks on Muslims in public. In many cases those people killed for beef were actually storing mutton or water buffalo meat." "Indian PM Condemns Lynchings but Critics Say it's too Late," UCAN, August 16, 2018, <http://india.ucanews.com/news/indian-pm-condemns-lynchings-but-critics-say-its-too-late/37963/daily>. Accessed August 16, 2018.
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# CONCLUSION

## Elections, Authoritarianism, and Charismatic Politics

This brief study of elections in Thailand, the Philippines, and India reveals that elections have played a central role in the repertoire of the ruling regimes in the three countries. Elections have been used to legitimize the existing configuration and correlation of power. Measured by this yardstick, how successful have the ruling elites been in the three countries?

### Elections and Polarization in Thailand

In Thailand, deriving legitimacy from the polls has been problematic. The results of the election reproduced the existing social and political polarization. Despite their having given assent to a new constitution that severely handicapped the opposition, a large number of voters continued to vote for the latter. The anti-regime forces won nearly half the seats and nearly half the popular vote, figures

that would have been higher had the Constitutional Court not dissolved the Thai Raksa Chart party.

It is likely that pre-poll polarization has become more severe owing to the brazenly pro-regime moves made by agencies of the state in the run-up to the elections as well as the insistence of the pro-regime forces to have a military figure, General Prayuth, lead what had been promoted as a post-military civilian government. Indeed, the constitutional handicapping, the irregularities committed by the Election Commission and the Constitutional Court, and the post-election maneuvering to ensure the transition to a post-military regime headed by a military figure were widely regarded as designed to prevent a truly democratic election out of fear that this would yield pro-Thaksin majority.

In India and the Philippines, on the other hand, the ruling regimes had much

less need to manipulate the electoral process owing to the popularity of the incumbent leaders. Elections were seen as a mechanism to expand the popularity and legitimacy of the regime, and widespread irregularities would have undermined that process. Indeed, the elections were viewed as a mechanism to elicit voters' spontaneous approval of charismatic leaders. The freer the process, the greater the legitimacy would flow to the authoritarian personalities at the helm.

The results in Thailand, the Philippines, and India cannot be interpreted without reference to the underlying political dynamics. The elections in Thailand were a continuation of a political counterrevolution based in the middle class and against an insurgent populist movement rooted in the lower classes. The military regime of the last few years must be seen as an effort to freeze destabilizing class conflict while the military,

traditional elites, and middle-class intellectuals tried desperately to devise a political system that would provide constitutional mechanisms to institutionally prevent the coming to power of a lower-class based movement through free and fair elections. The latter, unable to mount a critical mass of opposition in response, opted to cease confrontational mobilizations and wait for an electoral opening. No matter how biased the electoral rules were against them, they saw the 2019 elections as an opening which could be widened with the emergence of a civilian regime.

It was unlikely that the establishment forces saw themselves winning significant sectors of the pro-Thaksin electoral bloc. Theirs had been purely a defensive strategy to preserve the current correlation of power, where they had the edge. Yet, the entry of new forces into active politics threatened to upend the unstable correlation of forces, and these were forces, like younger voters from both the middle and the lower classes, likely to be alienated by the elites' brazen efforts to rig the electoral rules. Seeking to preserve the current political equilibrium, the establishment was likely to have created the conditions

for rupture in the medium and long term.

## **Elections and Charismatic Politics in the Philippines and India**

Likewise, the elections in the Philippines and India must be seen as moments in a longer political trend. This political movement is also counterrevolutionary in character but rather than being directed against an insurgent lower-class revolution, it is aimed at a liberal democratic order that is widely seen as having failed to deliver on its promise to bring about popular empowerment and greater equality. It seeks an authoritarian alternative, but central to legitimizing this movement are elections.

The alternative is one whose coherence is less at the level of the rational than the emotional. This is the reason charismatic figures such as Duterte in the Philippines and Modi in India are central to the unfolding process, for they act as lightning rods for popular discontent as well as serve as the personification of a vision of the future, no matter how unclear that is at present.

While Thailand is stuck in class conflict, the Philippines

and India have entered an era where charismatic politics is in command. The central feature of this politics is the willingness of citizens to hold their critical faculties in abeyance and "outsource" their destiny to an authoritarian figure. While they may not agree with all aspects of his program, there is a willingness to give him the benefit of the doubt.

To understand contemporary processes in India and the Philippines, we have relied on Max Weber's discussion of the features and dynamics of three kinds of authority: traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic authority. Tradition provides the source of legitimacy in a traditional polity; in contrast, it is laws and practices derived in a rational process from basic principles that serve as the foundation of a rational-legal order. Although most societies are marked by the dominance of either traditional legitimacy or rational-legal legitimacy, in reality, in a concrete society, the two types of legitimacy coexist in a relationship fraught with tension and conflict.

Charismatic legitimacy, in contrast, derives from a dynamic leader and subverts both traditional and rational-legal authority and structures. Charismatic leaders perceive



and take advantage of the huge contradiction between the persistence of traditional authority structures that legitimize inequality and injustice and the ideal of a rational-legal order based on the principles of democracy, justice, and equality in their quest to create a new order. Charismatic leaders may not themselves be clear as to where they are leading society, but their followers are willing to “outsource” their destiny to him or her. Charismatic politics is not politics as usual and is a fluid process that moves in uncharted waters until the charisma of the leader is “routinized” into a new set of rules, procedures, and processes which become the source of authority and legitimacy.

Charismatic legitimacy is not always benign. It is often tied up with the imaginative recreation of an “Other” or “Others” upon whom the ills, contradictions, and disharmony of society are projected. The achievement of social harmony is dependent on the excision or neutralization of the Other or Others—in the case of the Philippines, drug users, liberal politicians (“dilawan” or “yellows”), and communists; in the case of India, Muslims, Christians, westernized intellectuals, and communists. To be sure, there are features

of charismatic politics unique to India and the Philippines. One does not encounter in the Philippines the intense nationalism of the Hindu ideological forces. Nor does one have in the Philippines the equivalent of the disciplined cadres of the RSS, whose work on the ground has created fertile ground for electoral mobilization. Indeed, the absence of both these features—fervent nationalism and a disciplined, almost “Leninist,” party—may in the end prove to be the Achilles Heel of the pro-Duterte movement.

Elections are often regarded as the quintessential expression of citizenship in a democracy. But even if the trajectory of charismatic leadership is towards authoritarianism, elections, referenda, and plebiscites are seen as important mechanisms for expressing the “rule of the majority,” which is seen as the foundational principle of democracy. Other institutions of liberal democracy may disappear or be rendered hollow but elections are likely to remain an important mobilizing instrument for a majoritarian regime, much like how referenda or plebiscites remained a major instrument of legitimization of charismatic rule in Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic France,

a mechanism that linked authoritarianism to its democratic heritage while hollowing out the latter.

## Confronting Authoritarian Politics

Democracy is confronted with great challenges in the three countries. In Thailand, the overriding task is how to change an electoral system that hems in and constrains democratic choice, and institutions and procedures that are implicitly backed by the firepower of the army. The pressures for change are great. It appears that what many see as the brazen rigging of the electoral process and the imposition of a military figure as prime minister in what was trumpeted as a post-military era has created even greater popular alienation, and this may eventually bridge the divide between the middle and lower classes. Then there is the emergence into politics of a younger generation that sees both the military and traditional politicians as obstacles to the future of the country. These pressures may find extra-electoral outlets, raising the prospects of violent clashes.

In India and the Philippines, the challenge is different but no less daunting. This is keeping democracy alive in

an era of charismatic politics, where electoral mobilization becomes an instrument for the transition to authoritarian rule.

How should partisans of democracy respond to the challenge of charismatic authoritarian politics? A defense of democratic processes, due process, and individual rights must be mounted, and mounted aggressively. The perils of a non-aggressive defense are illustrated in the case of the Philippines, where a good case can be made that the opposition's defensive posture, which made them look like losers even before the elections were held, was not something that inspired confidence among voters. Democrats must realize that they represent enduring values, values that may be temporarily eclipsed by the concerns and fears that charismatic figures stoke, but they are values that people eventually return to, even if that takes a generation.

In this sense, the struggle between democracy and

charismatic authoritarianism may be viewed as the displacement of one set of values centered on freedom, democratic choice, and due process by another set centered on security and the desire for recognition and for strong leadership. The hegemony of the latter is temporary, and once social conditions change, society will once again put a premium on the former.

Aggressive defense of democratic values is, however, not enough. People fall for authoritarian figures not only out of the need for personal security and collective recognition that the strongman fulfills by an all-out "war" on crime and drugs, scapegoating of certain groups, and stoking of reactionary nationalism. They are also responding, in frustration, to the huge gap between the vision of popular empowerment and genuine equality offered by the liberal democratic order and the reality of continuing gross inequality and concentration of power in the hands of social elites. As

is clear in the cases of India and the Philippines, people identify vicariously with the strongman's denunciation of the hypocrisy of liberal democratic discourse, oftentimes going as far as applauding the brazenly politically incorrect language he employs.

The antidote to authoritarianism cannot be a compromise with its crushing or curtailment of democratic rights and freedoms. But it has to have something to offer people that will reawaken that side of them that values freedom, justice, cooperation, and self-rule. It cannot be a return to a flawed liberal democratic past but a move towards a future where popular empowerment and equality are truly realized, whether one calls this state socialism, substantive democracy, or social democracy. In a very real sense, what Rosa Luxemburg said humanity faced at the beginning of the strife-ridden 20th century is also true today, that we face the choice between "socialism or barbarism."

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