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# How Much Opposition to Aggrandizers? Explaining Differences in Pushback against Three Philippine Presidents

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## Abstract

A major focus of the democratic backsliding literature has been on “executive aggrandizement” in electoral, institutional, and civil societal arenas. An influential explanation of the strength of opposition to aggrandizers contends that the more democratic accountability remains despite illiberal stratagems, the stronger the pushback is likely to be. A single-country temporal comparison of three aggrandizing Philippine presidents—Ferdinand Marcos Sr., Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, and Rodrigo Duterte—demonstrates that this view not only fails to account for stark variation in opposition, it predicts the *reverse* of what actually occurred. Despite election fraud, constitutional manipulation, and protest crackdowns, Marcos Sr. and Arroyo confronted stronger pushback. By contrast, opposition against Duterte gained little traction although elections remained competitive, institutions were left largely intact, and there was little repression of peaceful protests. This suggests that opposition efficacy is more dependent on how effectively it can contest democratic legitimation claims used to disguise autocratization.

**Keywords:** executive aggrandizement; autocratization; opposition; Philippine presidents

## Introduction

Explanations of widespread democratic backsliding around the globe are a relatively recent addition to the comparative politics repertoire (e.g., Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). A major focus of this literature has been on “executive aggrandizement” in which elected leaders manipulate subsequent elections, undermine institutional constraints, and/or crack down on civil society, gradually autocratizing their rule and hampering “the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences” (Bermeo 2016, 10; see also Khaitan 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Berlucci and Kellam 2023).

Given this view of how backsliding takes place, an influential explanation of the degree of opposition to this form of autocratization asks how much democratic

accountability remains despite these illiberal stratagems. Dividing opposition into electoral, institutional, and civil societal arenas, Laebens and Lührmann (2021) argue that the more fair elections are, the more resilient democratic institutions will remain, and that the less repressive a regime is of civil society, the more likely it is that there will be strong opposition to democratic backsliding.

But residual accountability does not explain the stark variation in opposition against three aggrandizing presidents in the Philippines—Ferdinand Marcos Sr., Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, and Rodrigo Duterte.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it would predict the *reverse* of what actually occurred. Despite election fraud, constitutional manipulation, and repression of protests, Marcos Sr. and Arroyo confronted stronger electoral, institutional, and civil societal pushback. By contrast, opposition condemnation of Duterte gained little traction although elections remained competitive, democratic institutions were left largely intact at least formally, and there was no major crackdown on peaceful protesters.

As an alternative, it is argued that the valence of opposition against executive aggrandizement by these three Philippine presidents is best explained by the plausibility of autocratizers' claims to continued democratic legitimacy. Because of obvious electoral and institutional manipulation as well as repression of peaceful protests, both Marcos Sr. and Arroyo proved vulnerable to strong opposition pushback. Bolstered by attacks on their lack of democratic legitimacy, opposition senatorial and presidential candidates were competitive in elections despite irregularities. They were still able to use legislative and judicial institutions—however choreographed through presidential aggrandizement—as opposition platforms. They were also able to mobilize protests, which often grew in size in the face of regime repression. By contrast, Duterte's allies swept senatorial elections (and his daughter Sara Duterte-Carpio as the separately elected vice-presidential candidate won a landslide victory alongside presidential candidate Ferdinand Marcos Jr. who succeeded him). Duterte's allies employed "autocratic-legalism" to disguise manipulation of the legislature and the judiciary, and his War on Drugs (WoD) proved extremely popular, with opposition mobilization against it short-lived. This made it extremely difficult for the opposition to undermine the Duterte administration's democratic legitimacy claims by pointing to its illiberalism.

Another Philippine president who also faced strong opposition, Joseph Estrada, is not considered here because he did not significantly aggrandize power. Estrada, in office from 1998 to 2001, was, however, accused by his opponents of corruption. But this does not serve as a *differentia specifica* to most, if not all other Philippine presidents. Moreover, Estrada's abbreviated presidency is less useful for comparison as, unlike the administrations of Marcos Sr., Arroyo, and Duterte, no elections were held during his time in office. Estrada was toppled by large protests that lasted only four days, different from the two and half years of nearly continuous, often massive protests that proceeded Marcos Sr.'s fall and several years of large demonstrations against Arroyo. Even major protests against Duterte largely took place over several years. While some scholars have emphasized the importance of the anti-Estrada social movement in his downfall (e.g., Arugay 2004), others have stressed that by working together with key generals who turned against Estrada, an opposition cabal led by the Catholic Church hierarchy, business leaders, and opposition politicians undertook what could more aptly be called a people-power-style elite coup (Landé, 2001; Hedman 2001; Thompson 2010; Arugay and Slater 2019).

We might also ask whether, aside from by a president's politician opponents, it is reasonable to expect robust pushback from civil society organizations (CSOs) whose work centers on development, from business groups concerned with the economic environment, and from religious groups with their spiritual focus. But in the Philippine case, various CSOs, business associations, and the Catholic church hierarchy and organizations linked to it have often been intensely politicized. They were central to EDSA People Power which toppled Marcos and EDSA II which ousted Estrada, as well as in the opposition to Arroyo and in the (much weaker) protests against Duterte (Lorch 2021; Thompson 2021; Arugay and Baquisal 2023). Hedman (2005) argued that "secondary associations" linked to the Catholic Church, business groups, and CSO activists formed the core of both the 1986 People Power movement against Marcos Sr. and the later movement against Estrada. Barry (2006) shows how the Catholic Church hierarchy took an overt political stance during the late period of Marcos' rule, anointing itself as "guardian of democracy." Cardinal Sin and other leading Church officials openly embraced "conservative Church reformism," to oppose Marcos Sr., which shared with its big business allies the goals of ending arbitrary repression and extreme corruption. But the Catholic hierarchy put little focus on the failures of development or lack of social reform (Barry 2006). Franco (2004) shows how, after the fall of Marcos Sr., groups close to the Catholic church, mainstream developmentalist groups, and leftist "National Democratic" CSOs sympathetic to the Communist Party (CPP), were often very active in politics. There has also been extensive "crossover" of CSOs from political activism to governmental positions in several administrations (Reid 2018). This crossover followed open opposition against the preceding presidential administration, with members of CSOs who joined the Arroyo administration having previously played a key role in organizing demonstrations against Estrada. In turn, several civil society leaders who were appointed during the second Aquino administration (2010–2016) had abandoned Arroyo and joined opposition protests against her administration until the election of Benigno Aquino III in 2010.

Methodologically, this article employs a single-country temporal comparison. Much of the executive aggrandizement literature has utilized cross-country comparisons to discern general patterns in this form of autocratization undertaken by "democratically elected leaders [who] weaken democratic institutions" (Haggard and Kaufman 2021, 2; see also Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Single-case studies can contribute to this literature given their suitability for hypothesis-testing (Levy 2008). They can provide more added value if they also involve a "temporal comparison of the country across various points in time" (Pepinsky 2019, 192).

In this article, opposition to executive aggrandizement by three Philippine presidents over more than four decades is examined to explore the plausibility of the residual democratic accountability hypothesis. It is then suggested that an alternative hypothesis about the efficacy of opposition attempts to contest democratic legitimacy claims by autocratizers better fits the evidence of these single-country cases. After a brief discussion of two explanations of pushback against backsliding by three Philippine presidents, the extent of opposition is analyzed across electoral, institutional, and civil societal dimensions. By demonstrating the inapplicability of the residual democratic accountability framework in these Philippine cases, this study suggests that further research into attempts to legitimize autocratization democratically and efforts to counter it is necessary to more credibly explain factors that shape variations in pushback against democratic backsliding.

## Explaining pushback: Residual democratic accountability and contesting legitimacy claims

Laebens and Lührmann (2021) explain the degree of opposition pushback based on how much democratic accountability remains despite backsliding. Their framework focuses on three mechanisms: vertical accountability (degree of electoral competition); horizontal accountability (strength of institutional checks); and diagonal accountability (political space available for civil society mobilization and critical media). Analyzing cases of democratic erosion that were halted before democracy fully broke down (in Benin 2007–12, Ecuador 2008–10, and South Korea 2008–16), they argue that these “multiple accountability mechanisms involving pressure from the public and from political elites worked together to avert further democratic decline” (Laebens and Lührmann 2021, 15).

A residual accountability explanation, however, does not adequately explain the strikingly different degrees of pushback against three aggrandizing Philippine presidents. An outright dictator who had declared martial law, Marcos Sr. faced robust electoral challenges, institutional resistance, and a large, sustained protest movement and critical media despite his manipulating polls, upending the constitutional system, and cracking down on demonstrators. By contrast, under Duterte, opposition candidates were defeated, there was little resistance from the legislature or judiciary, and a smaller-scale protest movement could not be sustained while media criticism waned. Opposition was weak although levels of political space (as measured by civil societal participation, electoral competitiveness, freedom of expression and association, and the rule of law) did not decline to anywhere near the levels seen during Marcos Sr.’s repressive rule (see Figure 1). The Arroyo administration was a “predatory regime” with “growing authoritarian features” (Quimpo 2009). Though it did not limit political space as much as Marcos Sr.’s dictatorship had, her administration engaged in electoral manipulation, undertook institutional irregularities, and

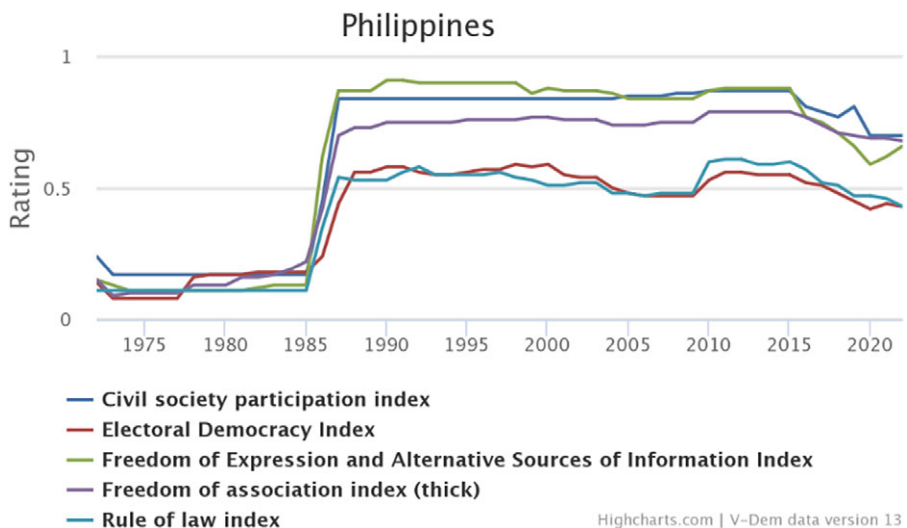


Figure 1. Changes in political space from Marcos Sr.’s martial law declaration in 1972 to the present. Note: Graph generated by the authors through the official portal of Varieties of Democracy.

arrested oppositionists and generally made greater efforts to repress civil society than the Duterte administration would later do. Yet Arroyo also faced much greater opposition in elections, through institutional channels, and in streets protests and media criticism than Duterte would a decade later.

Thus, compared to Marcos Sr. and Arroyo, Duterte's rule had allowed oppositionists greater electoral, institutional, and civil societal space for pushback. Yet they proved unable to utilize this political opportunity despite more residual democratic accountability being in place than against these previous two aggrandizing Philippine presidents. This demonstrates that for these three aggrandizing presidents in the Philippines, pushback against backsliding is the inverse of what the model of Laebens and Lührmann (2021) would lead one to expect.

Instead of focusing on the extent of democratic accountability mechanisms still available as avenues for opposition, an alternative explanation suggests the degree of pushback is strongly impacted by the effectiveness of the opposition in contesting claims to democratic legitimacy despite autocratization (Thompson 2021). Legitimacy—a “bedrock concept of political science”—is still widely understood as Weber (1964) originally defined it in 1922: as a citizens'/subjects' belief or faith in the rightness of a regime's exercise of authority. Making a seemingly pedantic, but in fact quite important counterpoint, Beetham (2013, 11) argues that a regime is “not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy” but rather because a political arrangement “can be justified in terms of their beliefs.” What this means is that legitimacy does not necessarily decline because people's beliefs have changed but because of regime's increasing inability to meet expectations based on those beliefs. In other words, legitimacy is not based on a system of beliefs itself but on the congruence between those beliefs and the actions and ideology of those exercising power.

Thus, a regime exercising authority in step with most people's views may, as it begins to autocratize, come to be seen as violating those beliefs unless it can convince citizens that this process is somehow still consistent with them. But as Mounk (2018) argues, this is not an impossible political trick as the two principles of liberal democracy—individual rights and popular elections—are “increasingly at war with each other.” Around the world, illiberal populists, including Donald Trump in the US, have claimed, as it were, that the popular will trumps liberal principles. By separating popular legitimacy from liberal rights, autocrats assert that they retain democratic credentials even as they engage in backsliding that undermines civil liberties.

Applying this point to the Philippines, Ordoñez and Borja (2018, 1; see also Borja 2023, Pernia 2021; Pernia & Pano 2023) argue that Duterte brought democracy and liberalism into “inevitable conflict” which helps account for his “meteoric rise.” Making a related point, Kenny and Holmes argue that citizens “can be attached to liberal democracy and liberal democratic institutions, but still favor some particular *illiberal policies*” (2020, 15). In the Philippines, opinion poll evidence does not show “Filipinos directly desire this erosion of democracy” but rather that “they tolerate it because they support the war on drugs” (Kenny and Holmes 2020, 16). Duterte's predecessors' broken pledge to eliminate corruption and poverty had set the stage for simplistic solutions to the country's complex social problems. But Duterte warned that his utopian/dystopian drug war as all-encompassing remedy to these ills “comes with a price, and that price can be liberal rights” (Curato 2016, 98).

It has recently been argued that Duterte's record high popularity levels were in part due to many Filipinos “pretending to support” his administration in the midst of a climate of fear the bloody drug war created (Kasuya and Miwa 2023).<sup>2</sup> But it is more

plausible that it is precisely *because* of his regime's brutalities against social outcasts and alleged lawbreakers that Duterte gained and sustained high levels of public backing (Reyes 2016; Curato 2016; Quimpo 2017; Thompson 2018; *The Economist* 2020; Regilme 2020; Kenny and Holmes 2020). The drug war earned strong public approval: a June 2019 survey by Social Weather Stations showed 82 percent of respondents were satisfied or highly satisfied with it (Social Weather Stations 2019). Duterte stepped down in June 2022 as the most popular Philippine president in the post-martial law period (Social Weather Stations 2022).

Duterte's popular illiberal policies, therefore, enabled his aggrandizing regime to continue to claim democratic legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> By securitizing illegal drugs in the country, Duterte achieved over 80 percent approval ratings for most of his term in office with his allies dominating midterm elections and his daughter elected vice president after he left power (Quimpo 2017; Social Weather Stations 2022). Because of Duterte's effective if "violent and simplistic policy strategy" of absolutizing the war on drugs as "the only pathway to peace," the opposition's condemnation of the resulting massive human rights violations failed to resonate (Regilme 2020, 15). Duterte's obscenity-ridden, vulgar-speaking style—including rape jokes—further underlined his political authenticity (Abinales 2015; Szilágyi and Thompson 2016; Curato and Ong 2018; Contreras 2020; Montiel, Uyheng, and Leon 2021; Teehankee 2016). The opposition was thus ineffective in unmasking Duterte's autocratization, thereby allowing him to credibly claim to rule democratically despite his violent and illiberal policies.

By contrast, if regimes cannot plausibly be seen as exercising power democratically despite backsliding, this will come to be seen as incongruent with the democratic beliefs of the population, which presents an opportunity for the opposition to defend civil liberties and call for the restoration of democracy. By declaring martial law in 1972 Marcos Sr. upended the constitutional democratic system. His attempts to regain democratic legitimacy by ending martial rule and holding a heavily manipulated presidential election in 1981, while continuing to exercise extensive "emergency" powers largely failed. After the assassination of opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. in 1983, he held legislative elections in 1984 and then called "snap" presidential elections in 1986—but the widespread belief he had stolen the election led to mass mobilization which toppled his regime: the EDSA "people power" insurrection. Arroyo suffered a similar democratic deficit given her extra-constitutional rise to power, her manipulation of the 2004 presidential elections, and the use of emergency powers against protestors, with opposition candidates, legislators, independent judges, and mobilization campaigns putting her on the defensive (and nearly toppling her from power) throughout her nine-year rule.

The following sections demonstrate that, despite greater electoral and constitutional manipulation and more repression of civil society, opposition was competitive in elections, was able to use institutional channels to express dissent, and successfully mobilized large protests against Marcos Sr. and Arroyo due to their failed efforts to claim democratic legitimacy. By contrast, Duterte's ability to claim democratic legitimacy despite his administration's illiberalism shielded him from greater pushback.

### **Electoral opposition**

As discussed in the previous section, the residual democratic accountability theory of societal pushback against democratic backsliding suggests that the fairer elections

are, the more likely electoral opposition will be strengthened as this allows for anti-regime campaigning and the chance to defeat aggrandizing incumbents. The competing legitimacies account, by contrast, changes the focus to the relative effectiveness of campaign messaging by incumbents and challengers. Though voting manipulation limits opponents' chances of electoral success, at the same time it undermines claims by autocratizing presidents to be democratically legitimated, which in turn may increase opposition competitiveness in subsequent polls. In the Philippines, two presidents before Duterte closely fit the relationship suggested by the second hypothesis. Both long-time dictator Marcos Sr. (1965–1986) and Arroyo (2001–2010) hemorrhaged legitimacy by “stealing” elections to stay in power. Opposition against both presidents, in turn, became increasingly competitive in elections which, despite being manipulated, further bolstered their critique of autocratization.

Marcos Sr. was elected twice in competitive elections—albeit with charges of employing military force to aid his re-election in the controversial 1969 polls—before declaring martial law in 1972, a year before the end of his second and final term in office was to end (Berlin 1982). In 1981, he officially lifted martial law, claiming to have restored democracy, albeit under a new dictator-friendly constitution. He then held a presidential election that year which major opposition groups boycotted, undermining Marcos' efforts to gain legitimacy from this pseudo-democratic exercise (Thompson 1995). But the mass protest movement that began after the assassination of opposition leader Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, Jr. in August 1983 led most opposition politicians to participate in the 1984 legislative polls. While these elections were again extensively tampered with, the pro-democracy messaging of the coalesced opposition enabled them to win 60 of the 183 elected seats despite the hurdles they faced (Carbonell-Catilo, de Leon, and Nicolas 1985; Caoili 1986).

Ninoy Aquino's assassination eventually led his widow Corazon “Cory” Aquino to become the opposition's candidate to oppose Marcos Sr. in the February 1986 “snap” presidential election. When Marcos Sr. again resorted to blatant electoral fraud, 35 computer technicians hired for the 1986 snap election walked out of the tabulation center after detecting the discrepancy between their tabulation records and the figures posted on the tally board (the latter seemingly manipulated by their superiors to favor Marcos Sr.). This was an example of a stolen election leading to a revolutionary situation by mobilizing ordinary citizens, strengthening the opposition, and dividing the regime (Kuntz and Thompson 2009). Contrary to what a residual accountability theory of pushback would suggest—that regime “closure” in terms of manipulating results would weaken opposition—the mass protest that followed the stolen 1986 presidential polls in the Philippines ultimately resulted in the overthrow of a dictatorship.

Like Marcos Sr. in 1986, Arroyo manipulated the 2004 presidential elections. Even before 2004, Arroyo already suffered from a legitimacy deficit as she succeeded to the presidency in 2001 not through a democratic election but after the so-called EDSA II uprising where a military-backed, middle class-led uprising ousted the freely and fairly elected action star-turned-president Joseph Estrada following a corruption scandal but who still enjoyed widespread *masa* support from poorer Filipinos (Landé 2001; Hedman 2001; Arugay 2004). Seeking a full six-year term, Arroyo narrowly defeated a populist candidate—another even more popular movie action star turned politician, Fernando Poe, Jr.,—running on a pro-poor platform with limited campaign infrastructure and financing who was up against an incumbent with all the financial advantages that came with it. But this “victory” proved pyrrhic as it

ultimately led to further erosion of her democratic legitimacy. The 2005 “Hello Garci” scandal stemmed from revelations that she had instructed election commissioner Virgilio Garcillano to pad her total by a million votes, approximately her electoral margin over Poe (Hutchcroft 2008).

The May 2007 senatorial elections (elected nationally in the Philippines) showed how weak Arroyo’s legitimacy had become. Making Arroyo’s unpopularity the major focus of its campaign, the Genuine Opposition (GO) alliance defeated the Arroyo administration’s TEAM Unity by winning seven of the 12 contested Senate seats, with two independents linked to the opposition also victorious. This was the biggest opposition election win in the upper chamber in 56 years. When Arroyo left office in June 2010, she was the most unpopular president in the post-Marcos Sr. period (Social Weather Stations 2010). Additionally, in the 2010 presidential election, her anointed candidate Gilbert Teodoro performed poorly (placing fourth out of the nine candidates) with the opposition candidate, Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III winning the election with a large plurality.

Unlike Marcos Sr. and Arroyo who manipulated electoral processes and encountered strong pushback as a result, Duterte did not need to resort to outright fraud to win office or help his allies to victory (Teehankee and Kasuya 2020). But Duterte did employ a standard “toolkit” of executive aggrandizement which included undermining constitutional checks and balances (including intimidation of the judges inclined to decide cases against the administration) and “the systematic use of legal procedures to erode personal liberties and freedoms, influence elections, and prosecute dissent” (Dressel and Bonoan 2019, 146). Yet the popularity of his illiberal agenda was sufficient for him to be elected in generally free, fair, and competitive elections in 2016 in which he won nearly 40 percent, a comfortable plurality in multi-candidate polls. In 2019, his allies, who relied more on Duterte’s popularity than on the presidential patronage, the normal coin of Philippine politics, defeated *all* opposition candidates in the Senate midterm elections, demonstrating his domination of the electoral sphere (Teehankee and Kasuya 2020; Hutchcroft 2019). This was the first time this had occurred since 1941, during the pre-World War II Commonwealth era. Pro-Duterte senatorial candidates included the national police chief who oversaw the drug war campaign. The rights-based campaign of the electoral opposition failed to gain traction with opposition senatorial candidates Jose “Chel” Diokno and Samira Gutoc epitomizing this lost cause as a well-known human rights lawyer and civic leader, respectively. This is unsurprising, given that Duterte played to citizens’ law-and-order concerns by claiming they could only be “fully resolved through the full reliance on state violence” while disregarding “human rights commitments” (Regilme 2020, 9).

Table 1 shows Senate mid-term election results from the first election after the fall of Marcos Sr. in 1987 until the most recent mid-terms under Duterte in 2019. Already in 2001, opposition candidates did relatively well, winning five seats in the 2001 mid-terms shortly after Arroyo acceded to the presidency in an extra-constitutional fashion. By 2007, following the “Hello Garci” 2004 election rigging scandal and a series of mass protests against her regime, the opposition easily defeated pro-administration bets winning 8 of 12 seats, with pro-Arroyo candidates winning only two. By contrast, pro-Duterte administration (9) and independent candidates (three) who later allied with the Philippine president shut out all opposition candidates in 2019.



**Table 1.** Seats won by opposition and administration-affiliated candidates in mid-term Senate elections

Election year	Total # of open Senate seats	Seats won by the electoral opposition	Seats won by administration-affiliated candidates	Seats won by other candidates
1987	24	2	22	0
1995	12	3	9	0
2001	13	5	8	0
2007	12	8	2	2
2013	12	3	9	0
2019	12	0	9	3

Sources: Teehankee 2002; Commission on Elections 2019, 2021a, 2021b.

### Institutional pushback

By declaring martial law in 1972, Marcos Sr. destroyed the constitutional basis of post-independence Philippine democracy with Congress abolished and the Supreme Court pressured to provide legal cover for his power grab. A new constitution “approved” a year later under heavy intimidation by a show of hands in village councils (*barangays*) gave Marcos Sr. continued authoritarian powers even after he officially lifted martial law in 1981. Yet, as discussed above, with the official end of martial rule Marcos moved to claim that he was restoring democracy, first by holding presidential elections in 1981 (boycotted by the opposition as discussed above), and then by holding the 1984 *Batasang Pambansa* legislative elections. In the latter polls, the opposition won nearly a third of the elected seats, giving them an institutional channel to challenge the regime. Opposition legislators were able to revive the pre-martial law practice known as “fiscalizing”: “the militant criticism, castigation, or impeachment of the work, purpose, or integrity of a public agency or official, or a private individual or group in the name of public interest” (Agpalo 1975, 5–6). Anti-Marcos legislators used the “question hour” as an opportunity to criticize the regime, including the highly sensitive issue of the dictator’s health (it was later revealed he suffered from the incurable kidney ailment lupus erythematosus) (Caoili 1986, 54). The Committee of the Opposition also filed impeachment proceedings against the president.

Another partial check on the Marcos Sr. regime were two dissenting justices in the Supreme Court whose minority opinions won them opposition support. Cecilia Muñoz-Palma, the first woman on the Philippine Supreme Court, was appointed by Marcos Sr. shortly after he declared martial law. Yet she was soon writing dissenting opinions to key pro-government decisions. Upon retirement from the court she became a leading oppositionist; she was elected in 1984 to the *Batasang Pambansa* and later became chair of the Constitutional Commission which drafted the post-Marcos Sr. constitution passed in 1987 (Siytangco 2020). The other “activist” justice was Claudio Teehankee, Marcos Sr.’s former Secretary of Justice whom he then appointed to the Supreme Court. He also turned on his benefactor, taking the lead in writing key dissenting opinions. Because of his critical views, Teehankee was bypassed twice by Marcos Sr. to become chief justice (and only became so after Marcos Sr. was toppled) (Cruz 2000). Thus, by the end of the Marcos Sr.’s regime, despite very limited institutional space due to the regime’s authoritarian character,

the opposition had engaged in effective pushback both within the legislature and through the Supreme Court.

Turning to Arroyo, due to her extraconstitutional rise to the presidency as vice-president after Estrada's overthrow in EDSA II, mentioned above, she possessed a "weak initial mandate" (Hutchcroft 2008, 141). This was worsened by an insurrection by Estrada supporters, discussed in the next section. Throughout her nine years in office, Arroyo had solid majority support in the House of Representatives given the usual practice of legislators of shifting to the president's party to gain access to pork barrel (Holmes 2018). Both after the 2005 "Hello Garci" scandal and the anomalous USD 329-million national broadband network deal between the Arroyo government and the Chinese firm ZTE (known as the NBN-ZTE scandal) which became public in 2007, impeachment charges were filed by opposition legislators. But both these attempts were crushed by Arroyo's allies in the House. The opposition was more effective in the Senate after dominating the 2007 midterm elections, as detailed in the previous section. This larger bloc of opposition senators was able to stymie the Arroyo regime's proposal for a constitutional change which could have potentially allowed her to extend her term in office (Hutchcroft 2008).

The Supreme Court had provided Arroyo with a judicial fig leaf for her extraconstitutional assumption of the presidency in 2001 by claiming her predecessor Estrada had in effect resigned, when in fact he had been removed from office by a people power-style but elite coup (Landé 2001; Hedman 2001; Arugay and Slater 2019). This was an attempt by the high court to "legitimize the illegitimate" (Querubin, Muhi, and Gonzales-Olalia 2003). But reversing course in 2006, the Supreme Court unanimously threw out as unconstitutional an Arroyo government order—issued the previous year after large anti-government demonstrations about vote-rigging—which allowed police force to break up nonviolent opposition rallies, saying it violated the right to assembly. In a not too subtle challenge to Arroyo's democratic legitimacy, its decision said the order "must be struck down as a darkness that shrouds freedom" (Associated Press 2006). A month later, the high court ruled Arroyo's declaration of "state of national emergency" partially unconstitutional, stressing the importance of judicial vigilance "in safeguarding the constitutional rights of the citizens, specifically their liberty" (Philippine Supreme Court 2006). Arroyo also encountered pushback from the Civil Service Commission (CSC). In 2008, Arroyo-appointee and then-CSC chair Karina Constantino David criticized Arroyo for her questionable choice of government appointees and the worsening politicization of the bureaucracy (Domingo 2008). When Arroyo made nearly a thousand appointments within her last six months in office, David and other retired bureaucrats condemned Arroyo's "midnight appointments" as undermining the integrity of the government.

Despite his bloody "war on drugs," Duterte backslid democracy more subtly than Marcos Sr. or Arroyo had by employing "lawfare" or "autocratic legalism," meaning the use, abuse, and non-use of laws "in service of the executive branch" (Corrales 2015, 38). Even when Duterte repressed his political opponents and critical media, most notably against the online newspaper *Rappler* (discussed below), his allies presented their actions as legal by weaponizing existing laws against his opponents. This allowed Duterte to deny that he was engaged in autocratization by claiming to be abiding by constitutional procedures, although he was in fact hollowing out democracy in practice (Dressler and Bonoan 2019; Curato 2021; Fernandez 2021). This stratagem was employed against vocal opposition senators—most notably Leila de

Lima who criticized the drug war and later faced dubious drug charges which led her to be jailed until late 2023. De Lima was maligned, removed as chair of the Senate Justice and Human Rights Committee investigating the drug war and then arrested, implausibly charged with drug smuggling.<sup>4</sup> Dissent in the Senate subsided after Duterte's allies shut out the opposition in the 2019 midterm elections as discussed in the previous section.

Early on, the Supreme Court had demonstrated its political fealty by dismissing plunder charges against Arroyo, who had become Duterte's ally, in the first month of the strongman's presidency. The only obstacle Duterte faced was former Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, who the chief executive declared as his "enemy" for having criticized his publicly naming of judges supposedly involved in the drug trade without following legal procedures (Dressel and Bonoan 2019). At the urging of Duterte, Sereno was duly removed through a highly irregular technicality.

In terms of independent institutions, Ombudsman Conchita Carpio-Morales accused Duterte of legitimizing police killings of drug suspects. But her successor, a Duterte loyalist and fraternity brother, stopped criticisms of the drug war. The Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines was one of the few bulwarks of horizontal accountability during the Duterte regime. Though lacking any enforcement powers, it documented the mass killings of the drug war. It also decried police overzealousness when enforcing strict pandemic measures in which hundreds of activists and supposed lockdown violators were arrested (Agojo 2021; Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines 2021). This led to a drumbeat of criticism from Duterte who called for its abolition although it was anchored as an independent institution in the constitution, with his congressional allies nearly defunding the agency (Gavilan 2022). Given the failures of electoral opposition and the "legalistic" constraints exercised within state institutions, only the possibility of decisive push-back remaining was from civil society.

### **Civil societal opposition**

The assassination of opposition leader Ninoy Aquino in August 1983 at the Manila International Airport upon his return to the Philippines from exile "unleashed a wave of protests which rocked the Marcos regime to its very roots" (Hernandez 1985, 907). An estimated two million people paid their final respects in defiance of the government as a flatbed truck that served as a hearse for Aquino's corpse traversed Metro Manila streets for 12 hours before his funeral (Diokno 1988, 133). The Marcos Sr. government estimated 165 mass demonstrations took place in the first five weeks after the assassination alone (Thompson 1995, 116). Observers began noticing that it was no longer radical activists who made up the majority of the participants. Most protesters now came from the "middle forces" defined as "formerly apolitical middle-class and upper-class groups that joined the struggle mostly after the assassination of Ninoy Aquino" (Claudio 2013, 60). The Catholic Church hierarchy, which previously had a policy of "critical collaboration" with the Marcos Sr. regime, became politicized after the Aquino assassination, taking on a self-anointed role as "guardian of democracy" (Barry 2006, 157 and 166). Catholic bishops joined forces with dissident big business leaders to back alternative print media and radio stations set up after the Aquino assassination, helping circumvent a sanitized mainstream press dominated by Marcos Sr. allies. This so-called "mosquito press" often stung the Marcos Sr. regime with its

muckraking revelations of repression and corruption, further undermining its legitimacy claims (Georg 2016; Gavilan 2018). After Marcos Sr.'s blatant manipulation of the 1986 election and attempt to arrest military rebels angered by Marcos' personalization of the military, Manila Archbishop Jaime Sin called on Manileños to come out onto the streets (Thompson 1995). Following a four-day standoff, Marcos Sr. fell from power and Cory Aquino was sworn into office, beginning a transition to democracy.

Arroyo also faced strong civil societal mobilization. Barely three months in office, Estrada's *masa* (poorer Filipinos) loyalists joined a huge counter-revolt against Arroyo, inevitably dubbed EDSA III, which attempted to re-install him as president. While it failed, the revolt "served as an immediate repudiation" of the EDSA II uprising just a few months previous against Estrada, which had elevated Arroyo from the vice-presidency to the presidency (Claudio 2014, 540).

Despite this, Arroyo initially enjoyed backing from many key CSOs, with several of their prominent leaders appointed to her government (Reid 2018). But this changed after revelations about "massive interference" in the 2004 election in which Arroyo was elected to a full six-year term, with key civil society leaders resigning from her cabinet after the 2005 "Hello Garci" tapes became public (Lorch 2021, 90). Leading CSOs joined the "Black and White Movement" which organized a series of street demonstrations across the country and called for Arroyo's resignation. The biggest one took place in July 2005 with an estimated crowd of 50,000 (Sipress 2005). As mentioned previously, Arroyo declared a "state of national emergency" in February 2006 due to an alleged coup conspiracy involving the political opposition, communist rebels, and military adventurists to unseat her from the presidency. Undeterred by the proclamation, several CSOs and an estimated 5,000 marched to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of EDSA "people power" but also to call for Arroyo's resignation (CBS News 2006). Two years later, in 2008, several large demonstrations took place in the wake of NBN-ZTE corruption scandal, with the largest with an estimated 75,000 on 28 February. On October 28, 2009, an estimated 40,000 protestors demanded Arroyo's resignation (Crimmins 2008; *Voice of America* 2009).

While she completed her term through 2010, strong opposition pushback put Arroyo on the defensive throughout her nine-year presidency. She had to resort to deft distribution of patronage among her allies for political survival (Holmes 2018). Arroyo also had to empower the military (by allowing them to hunt down legal leftists supposedly linked to the underground communist New People's Army) and deliver material inducements to the Catholic Church (by gifting sports utility vehicles to some bishops) to secure their loyalty amid strong opposition to her scandal-ridden administration (Reyes 2022, chap. 3; Rufo 2012). Arroyo's democratic legitimacy deficit catalyzed a strong demand for change as evidenced by waves of large demonstrations, poor opinion poll ratings (the lowest since Marcos Sr.), the victories of opposition senatorial candidates in 2007 and the eventual triumph of an opposition candidate, Noynoy Aquino, in the 2010 presidential election.

By contrast, major civil society protests against Duterte occurred during the first half of his presidency, with only four attended by an estimated 20,000 or more protestors, about half the size of the largest protests against Arroyo and dwarfed by the millions who attended the major anti-Marcos Sr. demonstrations (see Table 2). After the 2019 mid-term senatorial elections, protests became smaller despite continued human rights violations associated with extra-judicial killings (EJKs) by police vigilantes in the WoD and later through "red tagging" of legal leftists after

**Table 2.** Largest demonstrations during the Marcos Sr., Arroyo and Duterte Presidencies

Protest/demonstration	President	Date	Estimated attendees	Source
Burial of Ninoy Aquino, Jr.	Marcos Sr.	Aug. 31, 1983	2 million	Diokno 1988, 133
EDSA “People Power”	Marcos Sr.	Feb. 22–25, 1986	2 million	Thompson 1995
EDSA III after Estrada’s arrest	Arroyo	Apr. 25 –May 1, 2001	100,000	Gloria 2015
“Hello Garci” election fraud	Arroyo	July 13, 2005	50,000	Sipress 2005
NBN-ZTE corruption scandal	Arroyo	Feb. 28, 2008	75,000	Crimmins 2008
Arroyo resign protest	Arroyo	Oct. 29, 2009	40,000	<i>Voice of America</i> 2009
“Walk for Life” against drug war	Duterte	Feb. 18, 2017	20,000	Palatino 2017
National Day of Protest	Duterte	Sept. 21, 2017	20,000	Talabong 2017
3rd State of the Nation Address	Duterte	July 23, 2018	25,000	Ballaran 2018
4th State of the Nation Address	Duterte	July 22, 2019	25,000	De Vera and Noriega 2019

the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Act in 2020, with political assassinations of activists increasing dramatically during the course of his presidency (Iglesias 2023; Tanyalak 2023). While this might be attributed to the restrictions imposed after the outbreak of Covid-19, it is important to recall protests in the Philippines began to decline dramatically before the outbreak of the pandemic. Also, three striking counterexamples in the Southeast Asia of protests despite Covid restrictions raise doubts about this objection. In Thailand, large youth protests occurred from 2020 to 2022, despite pandemic restrictions, and from 2021 there were huge protests in Myanmar after a military coup and in Malaysia following an abrupt unseating of an opposition-led government and popular outrage at the handling of the pandemic. Based on these Southeast Asian examples, Lorch and Sombatpoonsiri (2023, 613) “challenge the conventional wisdom that COVID-19 and related legal restrictions invariably reinforce a global trend of shrinking civic space.” This corresponds with findings beyond the region that globally, civil society in fact retained much of its dynamism despite pandemic disruptions and that the pandemic in fact catalyzed activism in many countries (Brechenmacher, Carothers, and Youngs 2020).

Yet opposition mobilization momentum had seemed to be building with the Catholic Church-led “Walk for Life” protest against the drug war killings in February 2017. After the murders by the police of unarmed teenagers Kian delos Santos, Carl Angelo Arnaiz, and Reynaldo de Guzman were caught on CCTV footage and confirmed by witness accounts, as well as the killings of several other minors amidst anti-illegal drug operations, a series of demonstrations took place in August and September 2017. The National Day of Protest on 21 September 2017 drew an estimated crowd of 30,000 who not only commemorated the forty-fifth anniversary of martial law declaration but also criticized the drug war violence as a massive violation of human rights (Talabong 2017).

But Duterte skillfully countered these criticisms by apologizing and giving compensation to the minors’ victims’ families, promising “rogue police” would be brought to justice, and arguing that inevitable “collateral damage” should not lead the supposed successes of the drug war to be overlooked (de Guzman 2017). He

accused the opposition of being overly concerned about the rights of criminals while his administration was intent on safeguarding the collective good, specifically of the vast majority of “law-abiding” citizens. Duterte thus redefined who deserved to be accorded state protection (Reyes 2016). Pointing to his continued popularity at the height of the drug war, Duterte effectively used his democratic legitimacy to deflect the opposition’s human rights criticisms (Ordoñez and Borja 2018; Borja 2023, Pernia 2019, 2021; Pernia and Panao 2023; Kenny and Holmes 2020). Although two more major protests took place during the Duterte administration (after his 3rd and 4th State of the Nation addresses), protests against the WoD itself grew smaller (Iglesias 2023).<sup>5</sup>

Some human rights-oriented CSOs were even reluctant to criticize the drug war as many of their members actually *approved* of the drug crackdown (Lorch 2021). Moreover, a major ally of centrist CSOs, the Catholic Church hierarchy, was not as active as they had been during the late Marcos Sr. presidency. Duterte easily outmaneuvered the church by threatening to expose its sex scandals, claiming as a child he had been abused by a priest (Rufo 2013). Archbishop Socrates Villegas, President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, initially called for “vigilant collaboration” with the Duterte administration, reminiscent of the church’s official stance of “critical collaboration” during the early Marcos Sr. dictatorship (Williams 2018). Although the church leadership later turned against Duterte (Coronel 2017), by then they had been largely marginalized.

Using a strategy of autocratic legalism similar to that which it had employed against his critics in the Senate and Supreme Court, questionable cases were filed against *Rappler*, an independent online news site known for critical coverage of the drug war. In 2018, the government revoked its business registration over contrived foreign ownership issues. A libel complaint filed under the Cybercrime Prevention Act was brought against its editor, 2021 Nobel Peace co-winner Maria Ressa. In the midst of this assault on press freedom, however, most of the mainstream media remained tame. Cognizant of Duterte’s popularity among their audience, the National Press Club refused to condemn the government’s judicial harassment of *Rappler* and Ressa (Bacungan 2018).

Stronger pushback could have occurred in the digital sphere, which had recently emerged as an alternative space for social movements. But pro-Duterte internet trolls were more influential, pushing narratives which painted not only Duterte but also Marcos Sr. in a positive light at the expense of accurate information (Hapal 2019).<sup>6</sup> Cabañes and Cornelio (2017, 231–39) show that while some trolls were paid professionals, others were “individuals who happen to believe in and, consequently, participate in propagating the concerted messages laid out by professional trolls.” Duterte’s messaging had already been ascendant during his 2016 presidential campaign on Facebook, the dominant social media platform in the Philippines, with 64 percent of election-related conversations taking place on this site (Kho 2019, 4). Conspiracy theories propagated by pro-Duterte and pro-Marcos online communities have been blamed for Duterte’s popularity (Coronel 2022). Yet recent research suggests misinformation reinforces rather than changes existing opinions (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). Instead, the roots of Duterte’s appeal were in being widely seen to be fulfilling his campaign promise to voters to “free” the nation of the “scourge” of drugs (Kenny and Holmes 2020).

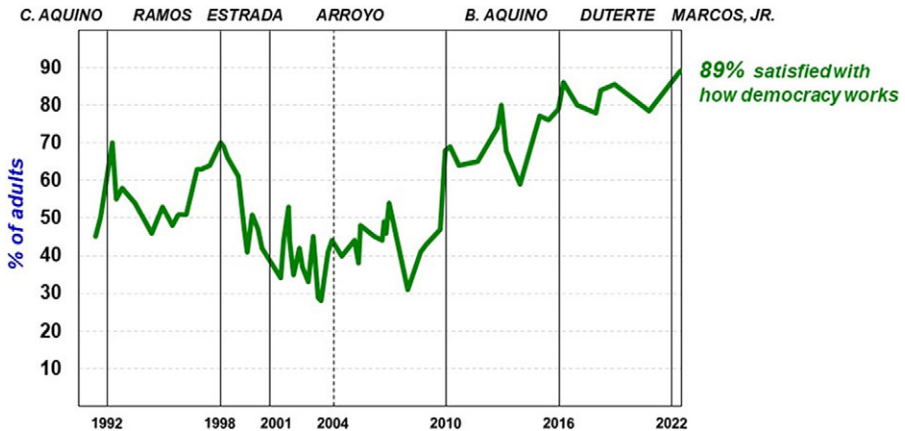
## Conclusion

Employing a single-country temporal comparison of opposition against three aggrandizing Philippine presidents, this article has argued that a residual democratic accountability hypothesis does not explain stark variation in pushback against them. In fact, the degree of opposition against these presidents is the opposite of what this theory would lead one to expect. Marcos Sr. and Arroyo confronted stronger electoral, institutional, and civil societal pushback than Duterte despite these earlier administrations resorting to election fraud, constitutional manipulation, and repressing peaceful protests.

Instead, it was argued that the extent to which the opposition could contest a president's claims to democratic legitimacy despite autocratization better explains the degree of pushback against backsliding. Both Marcos Sr. and Arroyo faced strong electoral and civil societal as well as some institutional pushback after facing legitimacy challenges after stolen elections, constitutional manipulation, and attempts to repress protests. Mass demonstrations culminated in Marcos Sr.'s overthrow through EDSA "people power" after "snap" presidential elections while Arroyo was put on the defensive during most of her presidency by electoral challenges and protests.

Duterte's presidency was overtly illiberal with tens of thousands of Filipinos killed extra-judicially by police vigilantes in the anti-drug campaign (International Criminal Court 2021). But Duterte did not manipulate elections, covertly undermined constraints by legislature and the courts through "autocratic legalism," and placed few constraints on mainstream civil society (although there was later a repressive "anti-terrorism" campaign against far-left activists). Despite having more political space than during Marcos Sr.'s or Arroyo's presidency, a divided opposition was only able to push back weakly given that its human-rights-oriented messaging gained little traction against Duterte's plausible claims to democratic legitimacy despite his highly illiberal rule.

Additional evidence supportive of this legitimacy-based explanation can be found in a series of surveys by Social Weather Stations in the Philippines about "satisfaction with democracy" over the past three decades for all post-Marcos Sr. administrations through Duterte (Abarca 2023). In this survey, "democracy" is not precisely defined. This suggests that the survey results reflect the outcome of contesting claims between incumbent administrations (who claim to be ruling "democratically") and opposition counter-claims against aggrandizing presidents. In the post-Marcos Sr. period, Filipinos' satisfaction with democracy was lowest under Arroyo at 28 percent after her extra-constitutional ascension to power and following the EDSA III protests against her administration. Satisfaction with democracy rose somewhat after she had apparently "won" a full term in 2004, finally giving her a democratic mandate. But democratic satisfaction then sank dramatically when revelations of massive vote-rigging surfaced through the "Hello Garci" scandal. By contrast, the lowest level of satisfaction with democracy under Duterte was 79 percent, nearly three times as high as under Arroyo. Democratic satisfaction under Duterte decreased after witness accounts and CCTV footage confirmed the deaths of teenagers delos Santos, Arnaiz, and de Guzman in the hands of the police during anti-drug operations. But it soon recovered as Duterte regained the upper hand in terms of his legitimacy claims by robustly defending the drug war against human rights criticisms (instead



**Figure 2.** Percentage of Filipino adults satisfied with the way democracy works, November 1991–December 2022.

Source: Social Weather Stations report, December 10–14, 2022, National Survey.

charging human rights activists with coddling criminals) and then with his allies sweeping the 2019 senatorial election. The 85 percent satisfaction with democracy as Duterte left office in mid-2022 was the highest in the post-Marcos Sr. era (see Figure 2).

The inapplicability of the residual democratic accountability framework to understanding variations in opposition to these three aggrandizing presidents in the Philippines suggests further research about other country cases of pushback against backsliding is needed. Instead of a formalistic account of the degree of (electoral, institutional, and civil societal) political “space” available to the opposition, analysis should focus on the extent to which the opposition is able to contest backsliding regimes’ legitimacy claims.

These Philippine cases show that this can be most effectively done by decrying electoral manipulation while still contesting polls and outperforming expectations despite irregularities. Pushback can also be undertaken through institutions if, notwithstanding constitutional irregularities, opposition representatives in the legislature and independent-minded judges are able to weigh in against backsliding. Finally, if civil society can continue to mobilize against the regime despite efforts to repress it, the repression-mobilization nexus may work in its favor, with protests increasing in size amidst government crackdowns.

However, when an illiberal chief executive wins electoral victories without noticeable manipulation, effectively employs “autocratic-legalism” to disguise institutional manipulation, and tolerates peaceful protests, then pushback against backsliding is likely to face major obstacles.

**Competing interests.** The authors declare none.

## Notes

1. Marcos Sr., Arroyo, and Duterte are grouped together as aggrandizing presidents, understood as chief executives weakening checks on their power by manipulating institutions/elections in order to weaken



opposition challenges to their rule (Bermeo 2016). This aggrandizement occurred in different ways and at different speeds. Here, a comparison is offered between a president, Marcos Sr. who had declared martial law in 1972 to rule as a dictator but then lifted it in 1981, although retaining many of his authoritarian powers. He held presidential elections that year (which most oppositionists boycotted) and then legislative elections in 1984 (in which most oppositionists participated). After the assassination of leading oppositionist Benigno Aquino Jr. in 1983, Marcos also eased repression (although there were still periodic crackdowns) as huge demonstrations took place until his fall. This differs from Arroyo who, though she took power extra-constitutionally after the overthrow of president Joseph Estrada in 2001, was plausibly accused of manipulating the 2004 election in which she “won” a full six-year term, and gradually eroded checks on executive power as challenges to her administration mounted. Duterte’s presidency (2016–22) represented a rupture with the at-least-formally-liberal democratic order with his flagrant violation of human rights through his “war on drugs” although he did not manipulate mid-term elections or those for his successor. Yet, there is a common denominator of aggrandizement in all three cases of leaders claiming democratic credentials—underlined through holding elections and allowing enough political space for peaceful protests—while still significantly eroding democratic constraints, either through electoral manipulation or violations of civil liberties or both.

2. Kasuya and Miwa (2023) suggest that Duterte’s high popularity levels were inflated due to social desirability bias which they attempted to demonstrate through list experiment surveys. This conclusion has proved controversial (with much of the debate taking place on the pages of this journal). Some scholars have questioned the methodology (Dulay, Hicken, and Holmes 2022, 544–45) while others have pointed to obvious indicators (e.g., the results all major surveys and election results) of Duterte’s overwhelming popularity (e.g., Reyes 2016; Thompson 2018; Hutchcroft 2019; Kenny and Holmes 2020; Teehankee and Kasuya 2020; Arguelles 2023).

3. Another explanation of Duterte’s popularity is his regional base in Mindanao and, of even greater electoral significance, his strong support among Cebuano speakers, who are not just concentrated in western Mindanao but also the Central Visayas (Dulay, Hicken, and Holmes 2022). Ethno-linguistic voting bases have long been identified as *the* crucial factor in voting behavior in the Philippines (Landé 1996). However, this explanation does not significantly distinguish his popularity from the other two aggrandizing presidents analyzed in this article. Marcos Sr. (as did his son Marcos Jr., who won a landslide victory as president in 2022) had a strong ethno-linguistic bailiwick among his fellow Ilocano speakers in Northern Luzon. Arroyo had a political base amongst her fellow Kapampangans but also among Ilonggo speakers of Western Visayas from her maternal grandmother’s side of the family. These ethno-linguistic ties proved a crucial base. But in order to win the presidency, stay popular once in office, and help allies win mid-terms and the successor presidential race, one had to build support that transcended these ethno-linguistic ties. Duterte succeeded in this undertaking, but Marcos Sr. and Arroyo ultimately failed as, by the end of their presidencies, they had lost much of their popular support beyond their regional bailiwicks.

4. As chair of the Senate’s Justice and Human Rights committee, de Lima decried the country’s descent into “complete inhumanity” due to huge numbers of extrajudicial killings in the drug war (Quismundo 2016). In response, Duterte vilified de Lima by maliciously exposing an affair she had with her driver (a dual sin in the sexist and classist terms common in the Philippines) and speciously claimed she had conspired with drug lords. Charged in 2017 based on fabricated testimony (later largely recanted), she was jailed as a “prisoner of conscience” (Caparas 2022) for nearly seven years before being released on bail in November 2023. The United Nations’ Human Rights Council Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (2018) concluded she had been detained arbitrarily, without any legal basis. However specious these drug charges were, they reinforced the Duterte administration’s claimed determination to combat illegal drugs, even if this involved charging an elite politician. De Lima was roundly defeated when she ran for re-election in the Senate from prison in 2022, indicating Duterte’s continued control of the anti-drug narrative.

5. Iglesias, however, argues that although the anti-drug war protests diminished after 2017, killings in the WoD also declined, suggesting the partial success of pushback aided by some support among some Duterte allies for an investigation into the killings of minors in the drug war. Exact figures on deaths in Duterte’s WoD are impossible to gather given that after a brief “acclamatory” phase when police bragged to the press about those killed, domestic and international criticism saw officials deliberately obfuscate data to foil accurate counts (Thompson 2023; *Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism* 2017). In addition, some killings were

carried out by police but others by vigilantes linked to law enforcement. However, perhaps the most systematic effort to document the WoD—the Dahas project group of The Third World Studies Center of the University of the Philippines Diliman and the Department of Conflict and Development Studies of Ghent University—shows drug war killings were highest during Duterte’s first six months as president, then declined from early 2017 before again rising through 2018 before falling somewhat in 2019 but then again rising from 2020–2021 (Dahas 2022). Data gathered by Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) shows similar trends in drug war killings (ACLED 2021). This data suggest that the 2017 anti-drug war protests were *not* a decisive turning point in the intensity of this bloody campaign which continued throughout Duterte’s presidency.

6. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the origins and nature of nostalgia for Marcos Sr. which was crucial to the election of his son, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to the presidency in 2022 (for an analysis see Teehankee 2023). But nostalgia for the elder Marcos can be linked to the strong democratic legitimacy enjoyed by Duterte despite his illiberalism, analyzed in this paper. Duterte shared the impulse to “discipline” democracy which proved very popular with Filipino voters concerned about widespread criminal “disorder” (Garrido 2021; Pepinsky 2017). In addition, Marcos Jr. was seen as a “continuity” candidate to Duterte with his running mate being none other than Duterte’s daughter, Sara Duterte-Carpio (Arguelles 2023). However, Marcos Jr., like Duterte, but different from his father, has proved more adept at maintaining the appearance of democratic legitimacy. Marcos Jr. has continued two key illiberal policies from the Duterte era, the WoD and the killings of legal leftists justified by a still existent “anti-terrorism” law which gives wide discretion to police and armed forces to treat such left opponents as terrorist combatants even if they are not engaged in armed conflict. But both domestically and internationally his administration has received favorable reviews, partially for geo-strategic concerns (his hardened stance against China) but also because of his ability to disguise continued autocratization through a more liberal sounding discourse of “unity” (Claudio 2023; Grossman 2023).

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