

Book Review

Beyond Will and Power: A Biography of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, by Earl G. Parreño. Lapu-lapu City: Optima Typographics, 2019. Pp. 227. ISBN 9786218161023.

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For an enigmatic man like Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, to write an account of the man's life is surely a demanding enterprise. Independent journalist Earl Parreño boldly took up the challenge and succeeded in constructing a comprehensive profile of the man. Through a laborious gathering of countless interviews and documents, the result is the book *Beyond Will and Power*, a short biography of Duterte focusing on his political and family life prior to his rise to Malacañang.

While a cottage industry around Duterte has been booming among many writers since his presidential victory in 2016, many works produced have barely scratched the surface. This book is both a timely and necessary intervention: the details of his past lives, especially before his time as the infamous Davao City mayor, have yet to be made accessible. The emphasis on the rich political and family life trajectories of the Duterte clan, meaningfully situated in the sociohistorical development of Davao, Mindanao, and the nation, is the book's most significant contributions. However, the book's attempt to decouple Duterte from his destructive legacy to Philippine society is a weak point that cannot be easily overlooked. In this review, I will give a brief overview of the book, followed by a short discussion of what this biography can potentially offer for the study of Philippine politics and society, and ends with a critical reflection on the ethics of writing a political biography.

With 13 chapters and a separate epilogue and prologue, Parreño divides the book into two major parts. The first part consists

of chapters that map the public and personal lives of Rodrigo's parents, Vicente Duterte and Soledad Roa, using their long ancestral histories as a backdrop (pp. 36–102). The chapters in the second part trace the personal and political history of Rodrigo himself from his unremarkable childhood to his spectacular rise as Davao City's kingpin (pp. 104–214).

In part one, we learn about the public involvements and affluent backgrounds of both the Roa and Duterte families as part of the local elites in present-day Cebu and Southern Leyte. Soledad's father, Eleno Fernandez, was municipal president of Liloan while Vicente's father, Facundo Buot Duterte, was a well-connected clerk of court in Cebu. The highlight of the first part is the insightful discussion of the rise and fall of the political career of Vicente, beginning with his brief time as acting mayor of Danao from 1946 to 1948. After years of moving around Cebu, Southern Leyte, and Agusan del Norte, Vicente ended up in Davao to help his cousin, Governor Alejandro "Landring" Almendras, run the province. Benefitting from the large population of Visayan migrants in the region, both Cebuanos helped each other dominate Davao's politics.

Parreño describes Landring as Vicente's mentor. He claims that Vicente "modeled himself on Landring... emulating his townmate from Danao... following the same path that Landring traveled in his quest for political power" (p. 96). Vicente eventually succeeded Landring, both as provincial governor and later as Ferdinand Marcos's secretary of the Department of General Services. But unlike Landring, Vicente did not make it to the Senate despite his aspirations. This great political alliance endured repeated national and local challenges and made both of them powerful provincial bosses. However, Landring double-crossed his friend, cousin, and ally when he betrayed Vicente who ran and lost for his last race in the 1967 election for the newly created Congressional seat for Davao del Sur.

In part two, we are given a behind-the-scenes discussion of Rodrigo's meteoric and brutal rise to power. Returning to Davao after shooting one of his classmates at the San Beda College of Law days before graduating in April 1972, Rodrigo used his father's networks to gain a standing among the city's elites. With the help of his father's colleagues, he found his way to the Davao City Prosecution Office,

first as a special counsel for Military and Police Matters in 1977 and then staying on until 1986 as he rose through the ranks as second assistant city prosecutor. His first post, created especially for him by Marcos and his Minister of Justice Vicente Abad Santos, gave Rodrigo the opportunity to cultivate an eclectic network that will eventually become his loyal political team until today. As he was in charge of investigating cases involving police and military personnel as well as cases of subversion and rebellion during the martial law period, he found emerging allies among the police and military, communist rebels, lawyers, and civil society leaders who all, at one point, crossed paths with him in his time as city fiscal of Davao. These people became part of Rodrigo's political network through mutual exchanges of favors, a story that is common in Philippine politics.

It was, however, his mother's doing that gave Rodrigo a chance in Davao politics. At the suggestion of Soledad, and backed by her outstanding reputation as civil society leader, Rodrigo was appointed as the officer-in-charge vice mayor of Davao by Corazon Aquino's revolutionary government in 1986. He continued his political career as Davao City mayor for almost three decades, initially and ironically assisted by Landring and other known Marcos associates whose betrayal cost his father, Vicente, a Congressional election. The seeds of his legacy in the city, and its extension on a national scale at present, were already planted as early as his first term as city mayor in 1988. Upon inheriting a city that has long been feared as a playground for communist rebels, high-profile criminal syndicates, and reactionary paramilitary units, Rodrigo's top concern was to eliminate all rival sources of violence in the city, especially the criminal gangs. Originally composed of disgruntled members of the special "urban partisan units" of the Communist Party of the Philippines, Rodrigo established control of the city through a squad of hitmen, now famously known as the Davao Death Squad. The rampant killings of criminals, drug peddlers and users, and even street children have become his flagship policy as mayor, and now, even his presidential legacy.

Using penal populism, Rodrigo made Davao City not only the economic center of Mindanao but also the third capital of the country while successfully building a feared political dynasty. All his children, save for the young Veronica, have made their way into local and national politics: Paolo represents Davao City's first district

in Congress, Sebastian is vice mayor of Davao City, and Sara is simultaneously Davao City mayor and boss of the currently dominant political alliance *Hugpong ng Pagbabago*.

The book also provides a glimpse of Duterte's day-to-day life as city mayor whose routines of personally providing cash, groceries, and other frontline services to his constituents are remarkably similar to that of other city mayors across the archipelago. The stories and at times the myths that made him nationally popular were also there, including how the mayor would sometimes disguise himself as a cab driver to get an unfiltered feel of the situation on the ground. But what stood out, and what Rodrigo made really infamous, is his reliance on the regular use of many forms of violence in governing the city. Like so many feared dynasties in the country, he gained a monopoly of political control of Davao through the misuse and abuse of police, military, and even a private squad of assassins.

At the end of the book, Parreño makes two arguments throughout the chapters subtly highlighted through excerpts from the philosophical works of Friedrich Nietzsche. To me, however, these two arguments are questionable.

On the one hand, he suggests that Duterte's politics is a product of his family history. He quotes from *Beyond Good and Evil*: "It is quite impossible for a man not to have the qualities and predilections of his parents and ancestors in his constitution, whatever appearances may suggest to the contrary" (p. 35). This interpretation of Duterte's politics is tempting. His style of simultaneously reaching out to many political forces while keeping his cards close to his chest may have been influenced by his experience of the political betrayal of his father. His intimate relationships with Mindanao civil society actors, especially those with the communists, may have been heavily shaped by Soledad's active civic engagements during the martial law years. But without supporting evidence, these are just mere conjectures. It may be more analytically fruitful to situate Duterte's politics within the social forces at play in a young postcolonial democracy like the Philippines, which have similarly shaped the politics of many of the country's political figures and families.

It is apparent, for example, how the enduring forces of patronage and clientelism have shaped the political life of the Duterte

family as much as they did for many Philippine political families. Vicente gained political status through exploiting family ties, as well as networking with local and national elites. His fortunes and misfortunes as a politician, beginning from Danao to Davao to Manila and eventually back to Davao, were the result of wins and losses in political brokerages. The same can be said of Rodrigo whose entry into politics can be attributed to his father's and mother's political networks that long endured his father's fall in politics. This is a lesson that students of Philippine politics are all too familiar with: political ties may become idle, but they can always be resurrected with enough guns and gold. And with weak institutions, families take center stage in politics. There are many other obvious social forces at play here, such as the relationship of bossism and a weak state, in influencing Rodrigo's leadership style, but it is now up to other researchers to use the gems in this biography and to examine these closely.

On the other hand, Parreño implies too that Duterte represents Nietzsche's *übermensch*. In the epilogue, as he was about to detail how Rodrigo finally decided to run for presidency, he quotes a passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "The most careful ask today: 'How is man to be maintained?' Zarathustra however asketh, as the first and only one: 'How is man to be surpassed?'" (p. 215). Duterte, in supposedly pursuing his own values, no matter how controversial or different from others, seeks to live as the *übermensch* whose will is to create a legacy that is larger than one's self—a challenge rarely pursued by ordinary men. Parreño may be right that the legacies of Duterte's presidency will continue to haunt Philippine society even long after he is out of power. But there are dangers in legitimizing as a mere "will to make a legacy" the actions of a morally reprehensible actor like Duterte who has inflicted real and symbolic violence to many communities including that of his home city of Davao. Even for a biography, empathy for the subject must have its limit.

Parreño recounts in the prologue how he laughed when Duterte made a joke, as the latter was preparing for the presidential race in late 2015: "Son of a bitch, all villages in the country now have drug lords. We should kill them all!" (p. 23). Parreño laughed again when Rodrigo made another joke to kill all the police if they refuse to follow his orders. Should biographers, in the name of good writing, laugh when subjects threaten to kill others, and with good reason to believe that it will be done? By the time they had the conversation, Duterte's

notorious “death squad” had already gunned down more than a thousand Davaoeños and by the time this book was being written, more than 20,000 lives have already perished since Duterte’s brutal drug war began in 2016. Is writing a good political biography really about prioritizing interview “ethics” over democratic politics, putting moral relativism above any normative commitments like human rights?

The book contributes new facts to national and global conversations about Duterte from the grounded narrative about the political past of his ancestors to the long process (sometimes forgotten by many analysts) that led him to leapfrog from running a city to governing the whole country. A lot has been written about his personal idiosyncrasies and anomalous policies, but few have taken a longer view of the social, economic, and political foundations of his trajectories as a politician. In this, Parreño’s painstaking effort to build a biography from a wealth of scattered documents undoubtedly paid off.

But just like how Duterte has changed Philippine politics and society, writing a political biography in the era of Duterteismo also has to change. It can no longer be just business as usual. One cannot write Duterte’s personal story bereft of the emphasis on the unnecessary loss of lives, the culture of violence, and the authoritarian tendencies that have characterized his rule in Davao, and now his Philippine presidency.

At a time when gains in human rights and democracy-building are being undone at a spectacular rate, the use of political biography to surface the superhuman in morally reprehensible figures like Duterte must be coupled with conscious attempts not to concede ground to ideas and actions that dehumanize, refuse rights, and inflict violence on others.

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