Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Gauging the health of democracy in the Philippines under Bongbong Marcos

Description: As Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr begins his second year as president of the Philippines, how is his administration impacting the lives of ordinary Filipinos? The controversial term of Marcos' immediate predecessor Rodrigo Duterte was marked by a brutal war on drugs that led to widespread extrajudicial killings as well as attacks on activists, media and dissenting judicial figures. So how is the younger President Marcos, the son of a dictator, putting his own stamp on the country's leadership and political landscape? And how much is the enviable economic growth of the Philippines in recent years masking a decline in the health of democracy? Seasoned Philippines watchers Dr Adele Webb and David Lozada join host Ali Moore to scrutinise the Philippines' first year under Bongbong Marcos. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore, this is Ear to Asia.

Adele Webb:

Filipinos have a very interesting relationship with democracy. Their kind of expectations of transformation through democracy are very kind of tempered in the Philippines because why would you have expectation that democracy is going to transform your nation, your life when it really never has. But what I've found is that people are more ambivalent about democracy than they are kind of unconditionally committed to it.

David Lozada:

One aspect of this is also class. If you engage with the middle class in the Philippines or those who are educated, they would say democracy is unhealthy, democracy is however they experience it. But if you look at more of the urban poor or rural poor populations, I don't think they would even have democracy as a concern because they would be so concerned about their everyday living.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, gauging the health of democracy in the Philippines under Bongbong Marcos.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

As we reach the one-year mark since Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was sworn in as president, what's his administration bringing to the Philippines and the lives of ordinary Filipinos? How different is the country under the man commonly known as Bongbong? He won the presidency with an historic majority despite, or perhaps because, he's the son and namesake of Ferdinand Marcos Senior, the President turned dictator so dramatically ousted by the People Power movement of 1986. Bongbong Marcos took over from Rodrigo Duterte, whose populist and authoritarian brand of politics courted global controversy, with a war on drugs that effectively gave the green light to thousands of extra judicial killings. Media outlets, human rights activists, and judicial figures who criticised Duterte were

often made to pay a hefty price, leaving a serious question mark over the country's democratic credentials.

So how is the younger President Marcos putting his own stamp on the political landscape of the Philippines? To what extent is Bongbong continuing the practises and policies of Duterte? And how much is the enviable economic growth of the Philippines in recent years masking a decline in democracy? Joining me to look at democracy under Bongbong Marcos, our Philippines watchers Dr. Adele Webb, Research Fellow at the Centre of Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra, and David Lozada, current PhD candidate at Asia Institute. Welcome Adele and welcome David.

Adele Webb:

Thanks, Allie.

David Lozada:

Thanks, happy to be here.

Ali Moore:

Let's start with a big picture look before we drill down into policy details. A year on, is it a very different government in the Philippines, Adele?

Adele Webb:

I think it probably feels different when you're there, it looks different from the outside. Philippine politics really broadly is a story of continuity and change, so while some things never seem to change, and there's a lot of impenetrability about Philippine politics, at the same time there's always different people on the landscape, different figures, different names, and so on. But of course, in this case, the Marcos name is not a new one in the Philippines story. I mean, the world has changed a lot in the last 12 months. We're no longer at the height of a pandemic, which had such a devastating impact on countries like the Philippines who don't have the contingency to cope like Australia. So the world is just different, politics are too, but some things remain the same.

Ali Moore:

Different but the same. David, do you agree with that characterization?

David Lozada:

Yeah, actually if you talk to a lot of the activists in the Philippines right now, there's two camps. One of them would say it's not different in terms of the economic policies, what Marcos Jr has been doing. But on the other side, some of the activists who are closely monitoring the war on drugs and extrajudicial killings are going to say it's continuing with the killings, specifically targeting different groups. The side that argues for a different side of the story would say Marcos has not done anything as bad as Duterte, which is a very low bar to begin with, but that in itself gives civil society activists some space to regroup and rethink about what they're doing, about their strategies on how to potentially contest government abuses in the future.

Ali Moore:

We'll return to this, and we'll look at how some of those policies are continuing, but David, if I can ask you before we get to those specifics of policy, what was the platform that Marcos actually was elected on? What did he promise?

David Lozada:

Yeah, that's very interesting because he gave very vague terms and very broad terms in his campaign. He ran on a platform of unity, and during the campaign period he was very distinct in that he didn't even give media interviews, he didn't participate in any of the presidential debates. What he ran on was the broad term of unity, uniting the country after the divisive Duterte presidency, and this was actually reflected in the alliances that he built to become president. Broadly on the economic platforms was infrastructure, continuing the build, build, build programme of Duterte. But a lot of the campaign messaging was mostly on nostalgia of, the Philippines was great during the time of my father, I'm going to do the same. So those were the, in broad terms, the campaign promises. It's very hard to identify specific policies, because he didn't have any. I guess their strategy was less talk, less mistakes, and he's not actively putting a target on his back by discussing specific policy details.

Ali Moore:

Adele, I want to ask you about the father, but before we get there, that unity that David was just referring to, that was really reflected, wasn't it, in the choice of vice presidential running mate, Sara Duterte, daughter of the incumbent prior to Marcos?

Adele Webb:

Yeah, I mean David's right there, there was very little programmatic speech during the campaign. But I want to make the point also that that's not particularly unusual in Philippine politics. I mean, like in many other countries that democracy functions in a similar way, it's more moralistic, personalistic, election campaigning rather than programmatic. So just to give some background, the Philippines has a very weak, if not absent altogether, political party system, in terms of dividing people along ideology or ethnicity, and so on. So it's often the case that election campaigns are run on fairly aspirational slogan-driven language, and in this case, yes, unity is very significant, he just kept coming back to it.

I think there was one case where he did a speech just before the election and you said unity 21 times, people started counting how many times he was saying it. And of course he was doing that with his running mate, Sara Duterte, the daughter of the former president, and together that unity represented, well it represented a number of things, actually, it was a very usable, very convenient term for them. On the one hand it represents this unity of the country. I mean, the Marcoses controlled the North, and Dutertes, of course, are so huge in the South, down in Davao and Mindanao, so it was a unifying of the Philippine Islands and the Philippine Archipelago. It was also a unifying of these two very powerful political families who for a long time people thought these two offspring of authoritarian figures would actually run against each other in this election, but instead Sara Duterte chose to run with Bongbong Marcos.

But I think there's an even more interesting layer to this unity message, because they used it in a way to basically build a narrative that was light, that was positive, and that avoided conversations about human rights abuses, about the corruption of his father during that dark period of martial law, and instead they could say things like, let's not look to the past, we are not into division, we don't want trouble, we want to come together as a country and move forward into our prosperous future, which he of course thinks that he is the custodian of. It's also a very historical narratives that ties into things that his father would've said to appeal to voters successfully in the late 60s, early 70s, so there's this continuity there, but it was a very powerful message, and he's still talking about unity today.

Ali Moore:

So David, even with the weak party system that Adele was just talking about, how can it be that someone who is the son of a man who literally looted the country and was removed by a People Power Revolution, how can the son of the man become president?

David Lozada:

That's a very interesting question. If you ask experts, and certainly for Filipinos on the ground, it's historical revisionism that the Marcos family has been doing for decades. It started during the 2016 elections, even before that, but in the 2016 elections, that was really a test of how a Marcos can win a national post via the vice presidency. He lost by a few hundred thousand votes that time, but that really was setting a tone that a Marcos presidency is possible again. But if you look back as early as the 1990s and the 2000s, the Marcos family wasn't really prosecuted for their crimes. They were able to hold onto their stronghold in the north and build their alliances there. So slowly it was changing the mindset and trying to put in the narrative that what happened during the Marcos senior years was the golden years in the Philippines.

Interestingly, when I ask some of my sources in the human rights space, they said, "If you look at the textbooks that the Department of Education was using, even the way they described the Marcos Presidency at the time, during the 90s and the 2000s, it was described as the golden years." So they're suspecting that the Marcoses even had connections with the publishers of these books to ingrain to the students and to the children that those were golden years. So now that you have voters who went through that curriculum system that didn't teach about the human rights abuses of the Marcos regime, they don't know about it, they don't know about the history of what's happening.

This is a personal question to me also because even my own family, who lived through those years, are always saying, "No, it was a good time to be a Filipino, we had good economic policies during that time." And I guess it's also because the human rights abuses were relatively concentrated in the metro Manila and other metro areas around the country, and the Marcos regime had control of the media. So for the rest of the Philippine population, they didn't really have any idea of what was happening, the human rights abuses that were happening to activists and human rights journalists. So you have that narrative that was changed via social media, but also a longer game strategy in terms of the education system and just their image in general.

Ali Moore:

Adele, how do you see it? I mean, I know that the Marcos family has actually been involved in politics for some time, but how do you see the connection between Marcos Jr. and Marcos Sr., and indeed is he his father's son? Are there discernible connections?

Adele Webb:

Yeah, that's a really interesting question. And just to second what David's saying, that this moment of the rise again of the Marcoses, maybe to the outside it looks surprising and even unexpected, but certainly from the inside it's not. They've been back in politics, in positions of politics since 1991, and in fact having expanded their family dynastic control of political positions from the time that his father was in there. But the relationship between the two is really interesting. He often got compared to his father during the campaign, he wore the same iconic red polo shirt, and so on. But he would often say, "I don't want to be judged by history, I want to be judged by my actions," and that was a way of distancing himself from the past. But at the same time, he invoked so much of the legacy of his father in order to appeal to people, so there was this contradiction at the heart of his platform.

But what's really interesting, and it's actually only really becoming clear in the weeks and months that have just passed, especially since the 37th anniversary of the EDSA People Power Revolution that overthrew his father and forced him to flee the country and be escorted by the US to Hawaii, there's this connection that Marco Jr is drawing between his father's regime and his regime, and it's to say that what happened in the middle is a disruption, that was the problem, but now we are back to the agenda of nation building, and now I'm back doing what my father started, and so on. So it's

this really interesting inversion of his story, because actually in that 1986 moment, the hundreds of thousands of people around the country, but particularly centred on metro Manila, supported the defecting military and forced Marcos and his family to flee, and the period after that was considered the burgeoning of Philippine democracy, the birth of new democracy, the invigoration, the confirmation that Filipinos wanted democracy, and so on.

But he's actually turning it around and saying, I'll lay a wreath of flowers on the statue that marks that moment in 1986, but almost doing it in a way to say, let's put to rest this disruptive and terrible part of our history, and let's basically continue to solidify the line between my father and me. So suddenly this moment that has been for the longest time the defining moment, in a good way, in Philippine political history has become, in his narrative, the problem, and he's healing the divisions that it caused. And it's incredible revision, but it's almost more than that, it's this invoking the ghosts of history and denying this amazing juncture that happened in their political life.

Ali Moore:

So David, why do people buy into that revision?

David Lozada:

Well, it's exactly what Adele also said, that period of time, from 1986 to 2016, is seen as the heyday, the height of neoliberalism, policies that were real market and not really focused on social services. So in my own circles, people are tired of the same economic policies that have been used in the Philippines, and they say, to an extent, I'm tired of human rights and all these pro-democracy types of narratives when my life is not improving. So to an extent people are saying it's okay to give up some of my rights in order to have a better life, and this was a narrative that was really apparent during the war on drugs. On the other side of it it's, again, authoritarian nostalgia. Nostalgia of it was good economic policies during the Marcos era, it was the golden years of the Philippines. So because of the failures of the neoliberal regimes in the past, since 1986, Duterte and Marcos are able to say, that failed you, now let's go back to the way it was when it was Marcos Sr. who was our president.

Ali Moore:

Well, let's go straight to the economy, because if part of this is because people's lives and promises of better lives have not been realised, if you look at economic growth in the Philippines, in recent years it's been one of the most dynamically growing countries in the region, 7.6% last year, 6.3% so far this year. So David, let me stay with you for a minute, how much of this is directly connected to government policy? Has there been any substantial shift in economic policy under Marcos Jr.?

David Lozada:

Well, one thing about the Marcos regime is that there's economic policy continuity from the Duterte administration, to the point that he hired the similar technocrats and bureaucrats to be in charge of budget and management, the finance department. So there's policy continuity in that sense. In terms of the middle class, for example, a lot of people like the tax laws that Duterte pushed through, so the TRAIN, we call it the TRAIN law, that really cut down taxes for the middle class and professionals and gave higher taxes to those who are earning higher. So to that extent a lot of people will say we benefited from the tax cuts that the Duterte regime gave us, but also there's policy continuity. It's not as drastic change in policy from the Aquino administration to the Duterte administration, but from the Duterte administration to the Marcos administration, it's definitely the same people, the same policies that are in place.

Ali Moore:

So how does that fit with the narrative of a return from one Marcos to another Marcos to a better time?

David Lozada:

I think it's a matter of framing it. The way that the Marcos presidency frames it is that it's going to benefit people, the way we manage our taxes, and also his promises on the economy was to provide more jobs in the industrial sector, in the agriculture sector, in the tourism sector. He hasn't even chosen an agriculture secretary, so Marcos Jr. is in charge of the agriculture department right now. So yeah, it's a matter of framing it, like we're doing more jobs. I would say it's still quite hard to say whether there's change in those areas, because he's only been in power less than a year, so I guess we'll see more in the coming years whether that's actually changed, whether he's actually created more jobs for Filipinos.

Ali Moore:

And Adele, if we look at a healthy economy, if you like, how much is it key to a healthy democracy that you need strong economic participation to have a healthy democracy?

Adele Webb:

Yeah, I think political sociology would say it's really important, and actually kind of imperative. And I think the connection between the economic elements and the political, or democratic elements, are really important here. The big picture of Philippine economic growth has always been that despite GDP being impressive, it was impressive under Aquino, and it continues to be very respectable, the inflation is incredibly high at the moment, people are really struggling to just buy the rice that they need and the other things that they need to feed their family, and the Gini coefficient remains incredibly high, so inequality is incredibly high. So the capacity of the institutions of the economy, and the political institutions, to distribute any economic gains that the country might make is very weak, and it has remained weak.

And so what we are not seeing is the addressing of these fundamental institutional problems of distribution, and those things probably, to be honest, would only have been tackled, in a hypothetical scenario which didn't emerge, Leni Robredo, the competitor of Bongbong Marcos, had of won the presidency, because she was serious about that sort of policy reform. But Marcos, Duterte, Aquino, these are dynastic families, they belong to the elite, and they are going to give away very little in terms of institutional reform that would distribute wealth, because at the moment, not to be too cliche about it, but that's how the system is oiled, that you can take large amounts out of it. For example, there was a new natural gas project approved in the part of the South China Sea very recently that China doesn't control. I mean, the corporation that's in charge of that is owned by an elite figure who's friends with the politicians, and so on.

So I guess it really does come down to the capacity of any growth to be delivered to people on the ground, and if that doesn't get addressed, then looking at GDP growth as a figure is-

Ali Moore:

It's hollow.

Adele Webb:

Yes, exactly.

Ali Moore:

And, Adele, on that issue of the elites, and this of course is nothing new, and it's not unique to the Philippines either, but if certain sections of society benefit from power, have those elites changed at all under Marcos, or is it the same beneficiaries who have benefited from Duterte and from regimes before?

Adele Webb:

Oh, that's an interesting question, and David might be able to speak more to the specifics of that, but certainly, I mean, what you often see is not a change, but a reshuffle. So even just in recent days or weeks, there's been reshuffling of people from one political party to the other. This is what we mean when we say political parties don't have the same kind of function as we might expect them to have in other places, and that would be about posturing to try and do a little play on power. But at the end of the day the money stays in that elite circle, but the configurations change, people jump from political party to the other. And I don't know, David, if you have greater insights into this recent jump of Sara Duterte with Bongbong's sister and the former president, it's very interesting.

David Lozada:

Well, if you look at it, the Philippine Congress, which is the House of Representatives and the Senate, are the most evident representations of the elites from the provinces and from the capitol. And you're exactly right, there has been a reshuffle, it's not really some elites are completely thrown out of the picture, it's just which elites are more powerful this time. What's happening now is interesting because Gloria Arroyo was a former president before Aquino, and she was key to this alliance between Sara Duterte and Bongbong Marcos in the 2022 elections. People call her the godmother of that alliance. But now we're seeing fractures within that alliance between Sara Duterte and the president.

We also know from sources that the president and his sister currently are not on the same page in terms of some economic policies. I think what's happened with Gloria Arroyo is a power play within the House of Representatives in terms of who controls the speakership, because the House speaker in the Philippines has control over all the pork barrel funds, all the largess from the executive. So it's a power play, definitely, so it would be interesting how the politics of this evolves. I think definitely Sara is positioning herself to run for president in 2028, so we'll see how that goes.

Ali Moore:

You are listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics, and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review, it's free to read, and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests, and by many others, plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by Philippines observers David Lozada and Dr. Adele Webb. We're talking about the health of democracy in the Philippines one year into the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.

Let's have a look at some of those very specific policy areas, and we started, David, you were making the point that in terms of how much has changed, you said many of those extra judicial killings are continuing, but Marcos is not as bad as Duterte. In fact, he promised a different approach to the war on drugs, didn't he? I mean, what is happening, and is there any indication of a different approach?

David Lozada:

So my insights from this comes from field work that I just finished last year in the Philippines, talking with victims and survivors of the war on drugs and extra judicial killings. If you ask grassroots activists, they will say that the war on drugs is still continuing, but there has been a shift. So there's

been two shifts in the killings in the war on drugs. The first three years of the Duterte regime, most of those who were killed in the war on drugs, those who were victims in the EJ case, are drug users, so small-time drug users in the slum areas, in the urban poor areas.

And then in 2019, when the Duterte's peace deal with the left fell through, you then have a shift of killings to more activists. So this is where [what] we call red tagging came in the picture, where if the government says you're a communist, you'll be in a list and you can get imprisoned or killed by elements of the police or the military. And then now with the Marcos regime, what they're seeing is it's more vigilante killings. So from the Duterte era it was the police and then some involvement from the military because of the red tagging issue, now it's mostly vigilante killings. And we're still seeing a lot of activists getting killed, so that's why people say it's a continuity.

Ali Moore:

But vigilante killings that are authorised by who?

David Lozada:

That's very hard to say, but I would say recently there's some killings of political elites in the provinces. So we're not sure if it's a strategic policy of killing, or it's just random, just because of the culture of impunity that was created in the Duterte era, that people are now more confident that they can just carry out extrajudicial killings with impunity.

Ali Moore:

So with that, because you also said earlier that there is a certain amount of space being given to human rights organisations because it's not as bad as it was under Duterte, David, in a very practical sense, what does that actually mean? What does it allow them to do?

David Lozada:

It's mostly for them to re-strategize. What were the lessons learned? What did we go through during the Duterte era? Because of all the things that were happening before, they didn't have space to think and reflect on their experiences, so now they're able to craft strategies of how to engage with government, what policy should be in place to protect ourselves. In terms of legal services, what types of legal services can we provide victims of human rights abuses? For the Commission on Human Rights, for example, they're now able to create a monitoring system on how to report these kinds of extrajudicial killings, which they didn't have before, at the start of the Duterte administration.

For those more concerned with the lobbying and the legislative side of human rights, this administration has given them some space to re-strategize also on what their lobbying strategies are, to reconnect with their allies in Congress, and do political mapping of what issues can we possibly propose that would benefit children, for example, or people deprived of liberty.

Ali Moore:

So does the Marcos government engage? Do they allow the human rights organisations to do their own sort of lobbying? And will they engage themselves as a government?

David Lozada:

The lobbying actually was never threatened in a way. During the Duterte era you also had lobbying, especially against capital punishment, especially on the children rights space. So yes, the lobbying still continues, so civil society organisations within that space are able to engage with the legislators

in the House of Representatives. I wouldn't say they would be directly lobbying with the executive department, with the Marcos regime, but it's mostly via the legislators.

Ali Moore:

Adele, on the one hand we're looking at how lobbying is continuing and breathing space being given to human rights organisations, but how does the Marcos administration respond to criticism, and how does it respond to this sort of human rights activism, and how different is that response to what it was under Duterte?

Adele Webb:

Yeah, that's an interesting question, Ali. I mean, David has spoken so insightfully about the machinations on the ground, but if you take a step back, there's no doubt that Bongbong Marcos is a less blustering figure. Duterte went out of his way to make a point about telling the US, for example, to stop lecturing the Philippines about human rights abusers, "Who are you to lecture us about human rights abusers?" Referring to the history of the Americans in the Philippine Islands, but I think there's a different diplomacy or diplomatic tone to this government. But at the same time, when it comes to questions about materially how different is that, I think David has spoken so well to that. So in a sense Marcos is trying to make sure that he stays warm and friendly with the Biden Administration, and so on, so he can't really go around doing what Duterte was doing in telling the UN and Obama to, basically cursing at them and telling them to get out of Philippine business.

Ali Moore:

Well, I'll come back to the domestic side of this in a minute, but the international relations picture, which is one that we haven't touched on yet, and in some ways, David, would you say, is that actually perhaps a point of difference between Marcos and Duterte? Because Duterte took the Philippines closer to China certainly at the outset of his rule, and then towards the end he did pivot back to the US. But Marcos is very, I mean, he's close to the US, he's very well schooled in American politics, isn't he?

David Lozada:

Yeah, you're exactly right. I think that's actually a key point of his administration and a point that he's getting praised for among academic circles. Duterte pivoted the Philippines from the US to China, now Marcos is adopting a more strategically ambiguous type of foreign policy. He's expanded the US and Philippines agreement on bases and having an American presence in the Philippines, while also signing economic deals with China. So he's getting a lot of praise for that from local experts for what he's doing. I think it's the right strategy to adopt, especially with what's happening in the South China Sea.

Ali Moore:

Do you agree, Adele, with that analysis?

Adele Webb:

Yeah, I do. I'm not an international relations expert, but I think if we were to be ones, we would call this hedging. It's a hedging policy, and it's the same policy as several other ASEAN nations are taking, and in a way it's saying, don't make us the pawn in your superpower play that's happening in our region. But the complication, I guess, with the Philippines in that kind of ASEAN picture, or amongst other ASEAN nations, is that the Philippines has the most deep and longstanding historical relationship with the US, and at the same time shares the most contested territory with China.

Ali Moore:

Adele, just give people a sense of that, if they're not completely au fait with the history here, because that deep relationship is indeed extremely deep.

Adele Webb:

Yeah, it is. I mean, it's definitely the forgotten story in American history. So Americans, probably most of them not know that they were actually the colonial administrators of the Philippine Islands for more than 45 years, the first half of the 20th century. There's a good reason why it's forgotten in a sense. But yeah, so the Philippines has a deep colonial history, it was colonised by the Spanish for almost three and a half centuries, and then 1898, just at the end of a revolution that the Philippine Islands had fought against Spain and basically had won, there was just bar one fleet of Spanish ships in Manila Bay, the Americans at that time were having a war with Spain, the Spanish-American War, and Spain lost, and they sold the Philippine Islands to the Americans for a sum of money. Of course it wasn't really theirs to sell, but they assumed it was.

Then the Americans were the owners of this archipelago and had two choices, to allow it to continue on its path of revolutionary independence, and there was a strong sense of nationalism and so on that existed in the islands. But the Americans chose the other route, which was to use the Philippines as a landing page, if you like, for their new century of democratic imperialism. So basically saying, we're going to expand, we're going to have an expansive foreign policy really for the first time, at least this far into the Western Pacific, but we're not going to be like those European colonisers, because they were really bad, we are different, we are colonising the Philippine islands in the name of teaching them democracy. So that's how it sat from the beginning of the 20th century until the end of the second World War, there was a policy of colonial democratic tutelage.

Ali Moore:

Ironically though without building the institutions that would've provided the ongoing stability

Adele Webb:

Yeah, incredibly paradoxically, this paradox of colonial democracy. So they did build some institutions, but of course if you build institutions but do it as a colonial authority and deny people autonomy and sovereignty, basically those institutions are compromised from their very foundations. And that is the story of Philippine political institutions, they have done their best to survive and reinvent themselves, but at the end of the day these issues that we're talking about today are not contemporary issues, they're not because Filipinos just can't do politics or are not good at democracy, one has to tell this colonial story of American legacy in the islands, and the legacy of political institutions, in order to understand what's happening today,

Ali Moore:

David, that's right, isn't it?

David Lozada:

Yeah, yeah. I think the key term the Americans used was benevolent assimilation, where they will be the kinder types of colonial power. But if you look at the economic policy post-independence, America had a lot of power and control over how the Philippines can conduct it trade, they had preferential treatment of trade. And also if you look at the problems with our political system, especially the local politics, it was Americans who empowered these local political elites to have the power that they now have. So that's exactly right, you have to look at the history here of the Philippines as a political system and as a society.

Ali Moore:

David, if we can just bring our conversation back into the here and now, and the one year after the election of Marcos Jr. We've talked a little about human rights and the extrajudicial killings, but what about some of the other areas? And I'm thinking, for example, the judiciary, because under Duterte we saw the former Secretary of Justice, Leila de Lima, she was a very vocal critic and she was imprisoned on false charges, she has now been released. Do you read into that that we are seeing greater independence of the judiciary under Marcos?

David Lozada:

I would say yes, to an extent. I talked to some of the people who were behind the lobbying for that release, and they're saying yes, the Marcos presidency is more receptive to these kinds of issues, for example, so we might see some more judicial independence during this time. Also relevant here is the cases against Rappler and Maria Ressa.

Ali Moore:

Indeed, your old workplace. But there are still outstanding charges against Maria Ressa, aren't there?

David Lozada:

Yeah, there still are, it's more the libel complaint, I think that's in the Supreme Court level already, and also the order to close Rappler in itself. But yeah, I think you would see more judicial independence from the Marcos presidency, but also because the Duterte administration packed the Supreme Court with so many justices. I forget the specific number, but I think the majority of justices now were appointed by the Duterte presidency. So as long as there's no difference between the policies between the two administrations, I wouldn't see any reason why the judicial system would be negative towards Marcos, or would have an oppository tone against the Marcos presidency.

Ali Moore:

So does that mean that those who are victims of human rights violations don't have any better recourse than they did under Duterte?

David Lozada:

I would say so. So what they're doing now is most of the victims are joining the case in the international criminal court, they're filing statements of what happened to their families. So the number one recourse that most victims would see now is the international level. Those who choose to engage in the local courts, they file mostly administrative cases against the perpetrators, against the police, because administrative cases take faster to get resolved. I think none of the criminal charges that the victims are engaged with filed against policemen responsible for the war on drugs have gotten positive results, whereas those who engage in administrative cases got the results immediately. But because it's an administrative case, it's not a criminal case, so the police would just get reshuffled, or they would lose their benefits, or they would get fired, they wouldn't really go to jail for what they did.

Ali Moore:

So there's no great accounting under the new president for what went before?

David Lozada:

Not yet.

Adele Webb:

It's interesting, kind of symbolic, that when I was there in 2015, I was talking with some older people who were still waiting to get compensated for their human rights abuses under Marcos Sr., because 70,000 people were imprisoned and 34,000 estimated were tortured during those years of Marcos Sr., and they were still waiting. That was 1972 to 1981, and in 2015 I met people waiting for that compensation, or the acknowledgement that it had happened, and so on. So this is the timeframe that we are dealing with here, so it gives you some picture of the expectations that people might have of accountability.

Ali Moore:

As you say, historically the timeframe, what we're seeing now would not surprise anyone. But are you hopeful, either of you, that there is momentum, that there will be change?

Adele Webb:

Look, in terms of accountability for these sort of things, I have to say no. I think the past is the best predictor of this, and I don't see any reason why there will be a change from the inertia of the past. But I still go back to that idea of continuity and change, because some things are changing, and they're not necessarily the things that we might see on the surface or be able to detect tangibly, but it might be at the level of attitudes changing, as opposed to institutional changes. Those things are very slow.

David Lozada:

Yeah. I think from the point of view of victims of the war on drugs, they're more hopeful now for the international case because they know how slow the domestic judicial system is. Some of the victims' organisations don't even actively file cases anymore, they're more focused on rehabilitation, trying to move on with their lives, improving their livelihoods, just because they know how difficult and how long it'll take for the judicial system to work. So yeah, what Adele was saying, not really a lot of institutional change, but more of the attitudes

Ali Moore:

Against that backdrop, and against, going back to the beginning of our podcast and Adele's comments about the weak party system and not really divides along ideological lines, how do ordinary Filipinos, the people in the street, how do they feel about the health of their democracy and how much do we actually know about that? Because of course it's a massively generalised question. Adele, if I can go to you first?

Adele Webb:

Yeah, it's a really interesting question, there's lots of layers to unpack in it, and also, talking to people on the street, might belong to very different sections of society and have a very different perspective from that. Keeping in mind, more than half of Filipinos I think are, David, would it be right to say, would be statistically living below the poverty line.

David Lozada:

Yeah.

Adele Webb:

But Filipinos, in my perspective, have a very interesting relationship with democracy, so I think the complication there is that when we ask that question, we have an idea of what we mean about

democracy in our minds, and then we think that if they say, "Yes, I really like democracy and it's going really well for us," we think that they are judging it according to the criteria that we ourselves might have, and that's how we've got to a situation where outside observers, even lots of the academic literature, would call the Filipinos' impressions on democracy, that all is well, it's going really well, naive, gullible, confused, unsophisticated, you name it, this language gets used.

But in fact what we need to do is take a step back and think, when we ask that question, what democracy are people imagining? What do they think and expect of democracy that is meeting their criteria and enabling them to say, yes, it's going well? So when we reframe it like that, we can see that the expectations of transformation through democracy are very tempered in the Philippines, because why would you have expectations that democracy is going to transform your nation and your life when it really never has? So I guess that's one layer of it.

But in my own work what I've found is that people are more ambivalent about democracy than they are unconditionally committed to it, and that is to say that they basically, and I did my research mostly amongst middle class Filipinos, that there's this very stable, very long-term and deep-seated ambivalence, which is, like I say, literally a saying of yes and no to democracy. So yes, I like democracy, yes, democracy is great, yes, we want to be a democracy, democracy means freedom. At the same time, remaining open to and even tolerant of top-down government and authoritarian forms of governance and being permissive of that, and that in itself is kind of a reflection of the more complex attitudes that people in places like the Philippines, with the colonial history that they've had, this is the empirical reality, that people are not either for or against democracy, they have a much more complex and nuanced and historically embedded relationship with democracy.

Ali Moore:

Indeed, Adele, you've written an entire book called The Philippines' Long Journey to Democratic Ambivalence. And David, do you agree with that? And is there that, it's almost like a foot in both camps, I'll have a bit of democracy, I'll have a bit of autocracy.

David Lozada:

Oh, very much so, I think Adele made a lot of very good points. But also, one aspect of this is also class. So if you engage with the middle class, or those who are educated, they would be able to answer that question and say, okay, democracy is unhealthy, democracy is, whatever, however they experience it. From my experience in my circles, a lot of the middle class, or some of those who are educated middle class young professionals, because of the Marcos presidency, because Marcos won, are now all trying to leave the country. There was that surge of emotions of trying to leave the country. But if you engage with more of the urban poor, or rural poor populations, I don't think they would even have that as a concern, democracy as a concern, because they would be so concerned about their everyday living. It's a question that can only be answered by a specific class, I would say.

Ali Moore:

So I wonder then whether you can answer this question, David, would you, and this, I suppose, goes back historically to, for example, the hopes and the dreams for the Philippines after Ferdinand Marcos Sr. left the country, but would you describe the Philippines as a beacon for democracy?

David Lozada:

Good question. I would say yes, I would still say yes, because if you look at it, some of the institutions, democratic institutions, are still in place. People and civil society activists still have some mechanisms that they can go through to pursue justice, for example. And Marcos and Sara Duterte won via elections, so it may not be the results that we wanted, but it's the result that people chose, the majority of Filipinos chose, so I would say it's still a beacon for democracy in that sense.

Ali Moore:

Adele?

Adele Webb:

Yeah, that's a really interesting question, and I agree with David, and it almost, even this idea of ambivalence, I don't mean it negatively, I actually think it can be understood positively, because there's a narrative or a story in which the Philippines completely abandoned democracy and chose not to throw out Marcos Sr., for example, in that moment, and to do what most of the other nations in their region have done, and they haven't. So in other words, maybe being ambivalent, having an ambivalent position towards democracy, is how you stay in the game, and you don't throw it out all together. Neither do you be so naive as to say, yes, whatever you want to do, that's fine, I'll accept it, because Filipinos are very engaged in politics, a lot of them.

So I think, yeah, there is a sense in which we could say that democracy is very much alive and well. It might not meet our standards from the outside of what we would like to see, but I think we have to just change the way we ask that question and we think about what we're seeing. But certainly I think it's bucking the trend in the region, and in that sense, yes, it's still a beacon in the region.

Ali Moore:

Look, it's an absolutely fascinating look at the Philippines, and I guess with five more years left of the younger Marcos as president, there's plenty of opportunity for us to have this conversation again and to watch the progress of Marcos Jr. as president. An enormous thank you to both of you for your insights. Thank you very much, David, and thank you, Adele.

Adele Webb:

You're welcome.

David Lozada:

Thank you.

Ali Moore:

Our guests have been Dr. Adele Webb from the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra, and David Lozada, current PhD candidate at Asia Institute. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Podcasts. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find us and helps spread the word on social media.

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