

The Philippine Left Has an Opportunity to Break the Country's Political Mold

BY

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For too long, the Philippine left has been sucked into giving support to different factions of the ruling elite. An unprecedented left-wing campaign in this year's presidential election is a chance to break with that approach and put forward a radical agenda.

National elections are taking place in the Philippines this May, and the political stakes are high. The six-year stint of Rodrigo Duterte as the country's president is finally coming to an end.

However, recent polls show that the clear front-runner in the race to succeed Duterte is Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr, son and namesake of the late dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, who ruled the Philippines from 1965 to 1986.

Marcos Jr has vowed to carry on with Duterte's agenda and the legacy of strongman rule. Duterte himself may be stepping down, but Dutertismo — the populist-authoritarian brand of politics that carried him to victory — is likely to remain as powerful as ever, or even gain strength.

Settling for “Lesser Evils”?

Faced with this possibility, many on the Philippine left have been arguing for their own version of a strategy familiar from other countries where figures like Duterte have entered the stage. They insist that Filipinos should rally behind the opposition candidate who is deemed to be “most winnable” to prevent a new Marcos presidency and another six years of despotic rule. It is necessary, they maintain, to forge a united opposition alliance with other groups, because the Left is still too weak to take Marcos Jr down on its own.

The candidate they have in mind is the incumbent vice president, Leni Robredo, who is running as an independent yet remains the chair of the Liberal Party. Under the Philippine electoral system, there are two separate but simultaneous elections for the presidency and the vice presidency: Robredo stood in 2016 as the running mate of Mar Roxas, who placed second behind Duterte in the presidential vote. Robredo defeated Marcos Jr to take the vice presidency that year by a narrow margin.

In political terms, we could describe Robredo as a “progressive neoliberal” — someone who is opposed to authoritarianism but merely seeks to soften the neoliberal economic model rather than abolish it. However, the argument goes, she will at least provide the country’s progressives with some breathing space to rebuild their strength in the years ahead.

Many on the Philippine left offer some variation on this political pragmatism as election day approaches. The presidential election is based on a first-past-the-post voting system: with no second-round runoff, it is enough for the winning candidate to achieve a plurality of the vote. In elections since 1998, the victorious candidate has polled somewhere between 39 and 42 percent.

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This generates strong pressure to fall in behind a candidate seen as the lesser of several evils. Many on the Left insist, however, that this election is different because there is a clear alternative. They perceive Robredo as a dependable progressive ally, despite the fact that she is a neoliberal, rather than as merely the lesser of two evils.

Yet not everyone is convinced by this logic. The past few months have seen a different perspective emerge with the unprecedented campaign of the first openly socialist presidential and vice presidential candidates in the Philippines: Leody de Guzman, a former garment worker and labor leader, and the renowned scholar-activist Walden Bello. Running under the

banner of a democratic socialist coalition, they have unveiled a radical platform for economic, political, and social transformation of a kind that has never been seen before in a Philippine election.

The candidacies of Guzman and Bello are revolutionary in terms of their agenda but also because the campaign stages a presence. It claims and takes up space outside the constraints of the permissible and sets its own frames of reference, instead of capitulating to the terms of others. Moreover, it rejects a long tradition of defeatist politics on the Philippine left that has led its organizations to forge electoral alliances with the country's established political elite.

A Left on the Margins

In order to appreciate the significance of the Guzman-Bello campaign, it is worth reviewing the history of the Philippine left's engagement with electoral politics. The collaborationist strategies of the Left have generated a pattern of "friend-and-foe" engagement with Philippine elite democracy. This dates back to alliances with the anti-communist administrations of Ramon Magsaysay and the elder Marcos during the Cold War era.

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Since the popular ousting of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, this has become the Left's standard method for intervening in electoral politics and state affairs. Instead of resulting in socioeconomic transformation and mass political participation, the restoration of democracy

following the “People Power Revolution” that removed Marcos simply reinforced the neoliberal restructuring of the Philippine economy. It further entrenched oligarchic elite control of Philippine society.

The dire consequences of this postrevolutionary neoliberalization include the decimation of the country’s garment industry and other labor-intensive sectors that parts of the Left had worked so hard to organize in the 1980s and ’90s. This dislocated many left cadre and practically destroyed the movement’s bases across Philippine cities. In the same period, anti-labor legislation made it harder to organize workers, preventing the Left from recovering lost ground.

The workers’ movement was consequently all but decimated. The rate of unionization among workers declined dramatically, as did their levels of participation in protest rallies and other forms of direct political action. Meanwhile in the countryside, the state intensified its military offensives against communist guerrillas, capturing or killing many of the best and brightest cadre from what is perhaps the world’s longest ongoing communist insurgency.

These factors helped reduce the Philippine left to a pale shadow of its old and relatively more formidable self. It also became more fragmented as a result of the bloody purges and doctrinal debates that consumed its ranks after the fall of the dictatorship, hindering any chance of strategic reconciliation among its activists.

Failed Engagements

With the Left weak, fractured, and marginalized, many of its supporters argued against running candidates for the country’s highest offices during the 1990s and 2000s. Instead of autonomous campaigns to contest such positions, they argued that left candidates should stand for lower offices and form alliances with different factions or parties of the ruling class to increase the chance of being elected. Such arguments largely prevailed.

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Indeed, over the past few decades, a number of prominent left-wing figures — mostly from the social democratic blocs and “independent” progressive NGOs — have taken up positions in centrist and right-wing governments. Hoping to push for reforms, they filled key posts in the cabinet and in state agencies under the presidencies of Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. However, conservative pressures and grave corruption in government circles obstructed these efforts.

The Left’s entanglement with elite democracy reached a pinnacle in 2010. The mainstream National Democratic left, an alliance of parties, trade unions, and other groups associated with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), decided to enter into a “tactical partnership” with the billionaire real estate mogul, Manny Villar, for that year’s presidential election.

This put them in a difficult position, as they found themselves associated with Ferdinand Marcos Jr, who then was running for a position in the Senate under Villar’s slate. In effect, the National Democratic left was part of the same coalition, campaigning for a noted land-grabber to become president and contributing to the rehabilitation of the Marcos dynasty in national politics.

For their part, Philippine social democrats, organized around the Akbayan Citizens’ Action Party, found an ally in the liberal opposition under Noynoy Aquino. Aquino was a scion of one of the country’s most powerful landed families and the son of the former president, Cory Aquino, who succeeded the elder Marcos.

A left-liberal coalition flourished in the early years of the younger Aquino administration, whose “good governance” agenda created space for progressive legislation as well as for progressives in the bureaucracy. Nonetheless, institutional constraints and coalition politics produced a “demobilizing effect” on Akbayan’s reputation as a left-wing party. This compromised the party’s integrity, especially in light of its fidelity to the Aquino administration in the face of the many scandals that marred his term.

Tailing Aquino and Duterte

Instead of seizing the opportunity for radical renewal, Akbayan drifted further toward the Liberal Party establishment. It coconvened the coalition that launched the presidential bid of Aquino's anointed, uncharismatic successor, who also belonged to a landed family and who would follow the business-as-usual path of neoliberal continuity.

As the party's alliance with the liberal political elite developed into a partnership, its ability to offer a consistent critique of the status quo and put forward alternative progressive discourses further weakened. Akbayan merely cemented its role within the Liberal Party structure as its grassroots "left" wing.

Yet the most controversial example of left engagement with political elites came from the National Democratic left, which entered into a year-long tactical alliance with Rodrigo Duterte at the start of his term. Although the bloc initially struggled with Duterte's tyrannical reputation as the long-time mayor of Davao City, its leadership saw promise in attributes of Duterte that seemed to establish common ground with them: his nationalism, hostility toward US imperialism, and history of activism.

Indeed, like much of Duterte's wider support base, many National Democrats found his populism captivating. Despite hailing from a provincial ruling elite, he harnessed an antiestablishment rhetoric and declared his commitment to crushing the Philippine oligarchy. His tenacity in enforcing a vision of "change" and seeming hospitality toward the revolutionary movement encouraged the bloc to pursue a strategy of cooperation, just as the social democrats had done in the previous administration.

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Once he was elected, Duterte's well-known despotic tendencies quickly came to the fore. The new president's declaration of a "war on drugs" and encouragement of extrajudicial killings and other abuses, combined with his grant of a hero's burial for the dictator Marcos, imprisonment and persecution of political opponents, and declaration of martial law in Mindanao, all challenged the ambition of the National Democrats to serve as partners of his administration. Growing criticism from within its own ranks amid the failure of peace talks with the CPP's armed wing, the New People's Army, precipitated the departure of the National Democratic bloc from Duterte's "supermajority coalition."

A New Opportunity

The Philippine left's opposition to Duterte strengthened in the years that followed. This was evident in the proliferation of militant street protests and particularly in the brief consolidation of left-wing forces for the 2019 midterm elections that led to the formation of a joint ticket for the senate called Labor Win. The slate explicitly campaigned for working-class interests and included Leody de Guzman as well as leaders from the radical opposition among its candidates.

However, the Labor Win alliance failed to obtain any of the twelve seats in contention. Its best-placed candidate and a key figure of the National Democratic left, the human rights lawyer Neri Colmenares, received just under 10 percent of the vote, in an election where the whole country forms a single constituency. This demonstrated that the Philippine left had yet to learn how to use electoral space effectively while confronting elites who are determined to mobilize all the resources at their disposal to edge out progressive candidates.

Despite these shortcomings, the Labor Win alliance did constitute a rare moment of left-wing electoral solidarity. While it was a momentous development, optimistic interpretations of the coalition as heralding new possibilities need to reckon with the deep fragmentation of the Philippine left. Those divisions obstruct further efforts to intervene on the political stage by offering a radical alternative.

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The socialist program of Guzman and Bello rests on a fresh vision of how the Left should engage in elections. It is a clear opportunity to inaugurate a new politics of radical democracy.

Unfortunately, the dominant currents of the country's left have rejected this opportunity by choosing to rally behind Leni Robredo, who does not understand the structural dynamics of the allure of strongman rule. This surrender underscores the Left's consistent failure to challenge a regressive politics that has revealed and reproduced the ruthlessness of the country's elite liberal-democratic order.

Left-wing support for Robredo has put progressives in a vulnerable position that leaves them incapable of adequately opposing her inclination to compromise with the different parts of a regressive establishment, whether it is big business or the military. Instead of criticizing her platform and offering an alternative, they have chosen to campaign for a candidate who is unable and unwilling to offer a radically different vision of Philippine society.

The “Good Governance” Trap

The clarion call of “good governance” sounded by Robredo's camp underlines this inability to advance meaningful alternatives. It portrays the allure of reactionary politics as a crisis of governance and in doing so reduces it to a question of leadership.

Such a simplistic view of authoritarian populism explains why Robredo's political project is one of reaffirmation — of trust in public institutions, of liberal values, and ultimately of the liberal social order. This is what her promise of change amounts to. Seeing it, one wonders how a reform-oriented elite democracy committed to preserving the structures that enrich and empower the few could possibly signify hope.

Nowhere is this paradox more palpable than in a platform anchored on employment that recognizes the need for a wage increase but does not actually call for one. This irony is a recurring theme of Robredo's politics: she promises equity without wealth redistribution, empowerment without citizen control, poverty alleviation without structural transformation. Her vision is a fantasy of poor people and billionaires coexisting harmoniously, simultaneously occupying the center, with the former inching closer from the margins while the latter remain in place.

As the radical geographer Erik Swyngedouw has argued, the idea of good governance reduces politics to a narrow field of technical and managerial competence. This cannot serve as the antidote to reactionary populism, nor can it resolve the miseries that have long plagued Philippine society. Instead, the fixation on governance perpetuates the misdiagnosis of structural and systemic problems like impoverishment as a matter of political will — an ambiguous concept that has been used to justify the need for strongman rule and to excuse the heavy hand of authoritarianism.

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Furthermore, the idea of good governance entrenches the liberal social order. Outside the framework of emancipatory justice, this principle is completely antithetical to social transformation. It devolves into a method for reproducing the liberal fantasy of a self-correcting system — a black box that depoliticizes change by rendering systemic transformations unnecessary.

Indeed, six years of Dutertismo have driven home the urgency of structural and systemic transformations in Philippine politics and society, and the pandemic has reinforced that message. Robredo herself speaks of building “a future of true and radical solidarity.”

Yet her agenda and ambition betray the urgent need and desire for transformation. Robredo's so-called politics of hope is inspired yet cowering, emboldened yet timid, hopeful yet dispirited. It is tethered to neoliberal rationalities, obsessed with governance, and ultimately committed to rejuvenating the status quo through palliative reforms that do not aim for fundamental change in social relations.

Beyond Liberal Restoration

If there is a way out of the Left's conundrum, it is through a new kind of politics that the socialist ticket of Leody de Guzman and Walden Bello offers. By running for the highest positions, Guzman and Bello are laying the groundwork for radicalized progressive interventions on national platforms. They are bringing a revolutionary perspective to public attention and building the political and organizational infrastructure that will be needed to make such initiatives sustainable.

There should be no illusions about the prospects of this unprecedented campaign. Guzman and Bello have a long way to go. With the limited machinery and resources available to them, their biggest problem is reaching out to the broader public and capturing their imagination. However, simply by running for office and attracting the attention of so many ordinary Filipinos, they are already laying claim to space that the Left has effectively vacated for several decades, during which time the likes of Duterte and Marcos have occupied and dominated that space instead.

Guzman and Bello are already doing what the Left has predominantly failed to do in the face of mounting popular disenchantment with liberal democracy and a crisis of representation. They are offering people a real and radical alternative, not only to the reactionary populism and authoritarian neoliberalism represented by Duterte and Marcos, but also to the progressive neoliberalism associated with figures like Robredo. By so doing, they are enhancing the Left's ability to draw more people to its side and achieve its twin goals of defeating Dutertismo and rejuvenating the movement.

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