

***The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte.* By Vicente L. Rafael. Quezon City, The Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2022. Softcover: 173pp.**

Since 2016, books about President Rodrigo Duterte, and his impact on Philippine politics and society, has become something of a cottage industry. Scholars reacted quickly to Duterte’s emergence on the national political scene as well as his mind-boggling appeal as a firebrand leader. However, this academic fascination could not, unfortunately, keep pace with the changing nature of Duterte’s chameleon-like personality. It seemed like scholars, including this reviewer, grasped at any and every theoretical straw to make sense of Duterte’s profound impact on post-democratization Philippine politics.

Thankfully, *The Sovereign Trickster* is not just another addition to the scholarly pile on the Duterte phenomenon. Vicente Rafael’s contribution is timely because it takes stock of the populist leader towards the end of his tenure. Moreover, his book successfully weaves historical analysis with contemporary multidisciplinary theories and the empirical richness derived from existing works about Duterte. The value of this compact but impressive volume is that it adds nuance to our understanding of this political maverick beyond the caricatures on offer.

From the book’s subtitle, one can surmise that the author probed into the performative and existential nature of Duterte’s politics. While this is not entirely novel given the extant works on Duterte’s populism, Rafael expertly weaves into his arguments the literature about life (biopolitics) and death (necropolitics)—the *sine qua non* of political power. Rafael avoids discussing Duterte’s politics as an ideology (sometimes called “Dutertismo”), mainly because the president never articulated a coherent and distinct set of political ideas. Instead, he interrogates how Duterte defied the political orthodoxies of Asia’s oldest democracy by focusing on how he efficaciously weaponized humour, obscenity, conviviality and coercion in order “to decide who must die so that others might live” (p. 3).

Readers may find Rafael’s approach to the subject matter atypical for a social science-oriented analysis. In lieu of a structured and chronological treatment normally expected of a treatise about politics, the book contains several thematic chapters that discuss Duterte’s authoritarian imaginary, his bloody war on drugs, his performative

rhetoric and his derision of the pillars of the country's liberal-democratic polity, such as human rights, democracy, the rule of law, an independent media and civil society. The first two chapters tackle Duterte as the representation of a benevolent dictatorship, a daydream of many Filipinos who desire decisive leadership, social cleansing and political order. This is where Rafael's competence as a historian shines, as he contextualizes Duterte's leadership by recounting the country's early years as a post-war republic. The following chapter looks into how Duterte effectively deployed vulgarity, misogyny and obscenity as instruments of political legitimacy despite the proclivity of many Filipinos for decency and modesty. There is also a chapter devoted to the privatization, marketization and decentralization of violence under Duterte through his notorious practice of extra-judicial killings. Rafael provides an excellent historical reminder that this has been a politically habituated exercise of state power for decades. Finally, Rafael also discusses the media coverage of Duterte's war on drugs and how the imagery and aesthetics of violence reinforced Duterte's conviction that a successful crusade against narcotics would be the panacea to the ills of the Philippine body politic.

By infusing concepts that were not utilized by previous scholars, *The Sovereign Trickster* expands one's epistemic repertoire in analysing politicians like Duterte, Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, Victor Orban and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, even though an academically precise category that could fit all these leaders remain elusive. However, Rafael could have done more to undertake systematic comparisons of other cases, but that would have been another scholarly project. Moreover, the author's goal was not to provide a definitive account of Duterte's political leadership, as that analytical narrative will be written in the future. To date, the former president remains politically active and shows no sign of fading into the background. Additionally, Duterte's magical formula for political success remains potent, as shown by the election of his own progeny, Sara, to the vice-presidency in the May 2022 elections.

In between the chapters, Rafael inserts short essays he calls "sketches" which are designed to connect and interrupt the other parts of the book. I agree with the author that they tend to distract the reader and displace one's thought processes in linking his ideas within the book. Rafael defends this style in order to instigate a deeper gaze into the future that could hopefully kindle more debates. Those with a more eclectic appreciation of the porous boundaries between academic and literary writing will find this format engaging.

Rafael's book is a rare but highly rewarding piece of scholarship, but his work is quite muted in examining how institutions and structures enabled Duterte's rise. There is still a lack of analysis on how a local mayor was able to capture the political imagination of the Filipino majority and maintain such a bedazzling level of popularity. Indeed, if Duterte is powerful enough to dictate who lives and who dies in the Philippines, then why was he unable to dictate the terms of his own political succession? This is where the restraining function of political institutions could pose as a possible explanation. Weak as they are, these political institutions prevented Duterte from extending his tenure as president and dictating the outcomes of the 2022 elections.

Perhaps, for Rafael, Duterte was not the politically savvy and domineering politician bent on ruling the country indefinitely. As such, the book is not about attributing Duterte as the most powerfully dangerous political force in the Philippines. By fostering the conditions conducive to authoritarianism, the strongman rhetoric and tactics of Duterte tricked us into believing he was an existential threat to Philippine democracy. Rafael cogently argues this in the concluding chapter and issues a dire warning: the Philippines might be in greater political trouble in the post-Duterte age.

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