

# Do Filipinos Really Hate Duterte's Leadership? Uncovering Duterte Controversies in the Philippines

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## Abstract

This article investigates whether Filipinos genuinely have negative feelings about President Duterte's leadership. It examines public opinions through surveys, media discussions, and actions in socio-political groups. Using a descriptive research approach, this article aims to understand diverse perspectives on Duterte's leadership in the Philippines. It delves into why some people support him and others criticize him, considering factors like economic policies, leadership style, and responses to significant events during his presidency. This article seeks to uncover the various reasons that influence people's opinions in a changing political and social landscape in the Philippines. It recognizes that different factors shape Filipinos' beliefs about their leader. Finally, it offers insightful perspectives into the complex sentiments surrounding Duterte's leadership, providing a clearer understanding of what Filipinos truly think about their president.

## Key Words

Human rights, leadership style, radical, Rodrigo Duterte, war on drugs

## Introduction

Rodrigo Duterte, born on March 28, 1945, was the President of the Philippines from 2016 to 2022 (Ray 2020). Before becoming president, he was the Mayor of Davao City for over 20 years, known for being tough on crime (Todd 2019). Duterte's leadership, starting in 2016, brought both praise and criticism, especially for his policies on crime and drugs (Lopega 2019; Regilme 2021). He made significant changes, like improving infrastructure, making economic reforms, and changing the country's

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foreign policies (Tabbada and Pacho 2021; Balotol 2018). However, his way of dealing with drug issues raised concerns about human rights.

Duterte's presidency focused on a "war on drugs" campaign, attracting global attention and causing debates about its effectiveness and impact on human rights (Lamchek and Sanchez 2020; Pernia 2019; Ochoa and Ong 2022). His time as president reflects a complicated era in Philippine history, where people are still figuring out the results of his decisions and what it means for the country (Baclig 2021). Whether people liked his strong actions or disagreed with his controversial policies, Rodrigo Duterte's time as president is a topic of intense discussion, showing the complex challenges of modern Philippine politics (Thompson 2016; Maboloc 2020; Imbong and Torres 2022).

The leadership of President Duterte has been a subject of considerable discussion and debate in the Philippines (Teehankee 2016; Viray 2019; Tenorio, Meyer and Nurmandi 2020). This study addresses the pivotal question: Are Filipinos genuinely harboring negative sentiments toward President Duterte's leadership? In a landscape where public opinions are shaped by diverse factors, including surveys, media narratives, and socio-political actions, this study employs a descriptive approach to unravel the multifaceted perspectives on Duterte's leadership. By delving into the reasons behind both support and criticism, encompassing considerations such as economic policies, leadership style, and responses to significant events during his presidency, the study seeks to illuminate the complex fabric of opinions within the Filipino populace. Recognizing the dynamic nature of political and social contexts, the study acknowledges the varied factors influencing Filipinos' beliefs about their leader. Ultimately, the objective of this study is to offer valuable insights into the intricate sentiments surrounding Duterte's leadership, contributing to a clearer understanding of the nuanced perspectives held by the Filipino people regarding their president.

### **Diehard Duterte Supporters**

Diehard Duterte Supporters (DDS) is a term used by extreme political followers who strongly support the 16th president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte (Aranda 2021). They consider Duterte a strong leader and proudly identify themselves as the most unwavering among his supporters. The term became popular during the 2016 presidential elections and is often associated with individuals, including netizens, who engage in online

trolling and disruptive behaviour to defend Duterte (Sinpeng, Gueorguiev and Arugay 2020).

The acronym DDS is directly taken from the Davao Death Squad, a vigilante group that operated in Davao City during Duterte's time as mayor (Francis 2022). DDS members are recognized for their unswerving loyalty to Duterte and, later, to his successor, Bongbong Marcos, rather than adherence to a specific political or economic ideology. Observers often describe DDS as a right-wing populist or far-right phenomenon that supports the existing political order. The DDS has shown enthusiasm for constitutional reforms and the transition to a federal form of government. Some members may also align with left-leaning causes, but overall, the DDS is seen as maintaining the status quo rather than advocating for systemic transformation (You 2018; Kenes 2021; Teehankee and Kasuya 2020).

The DDS is known for using aggressive and harsh language, similar to Duterte (Breuil and Rozema 2009). They often respond strongly to any criticism of Duterte, accusing others of bias, shilling, or being associated with groups like the CPP or NPA (Ragragio 2022; Marasigan 2022) They engage in online bullying and harassment, targeting activists, political alliances, Vice President Leni Robredo, and even fellow Duterte supporters suspected of disloyalty. The DDS commonly uses slurs like "dilawan" and "pulauan" to silence or manipulate those they harass (Clarito 2021; Corcuera 2020).

### **Protests Against Duterte**

Protests against Duterte increased on November 18, 2016, because Duterte supported the burial of the late President Ferdinand Marcos (Hincks 2016). These protests were mainly organized by progressive groups and other opponents who are concerned about issues like the war on drugs, martial law in Mindanao, employment problems such as temporary work contracts and rising prices caused by the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion Law (Mogato and Ng 2017; Calupitan 2021). The protests were also influenced by the government's actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the passing of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, and the closure and denial of franchises to ABS-CBN.

Duterte started the fight against illegal drugs when he became president, vowing to eliminate thousands involved in the drug trade. Over 6,000, mostly small-scale drug users and suspects, were killed in police

anti-drug operations. These deaths raised concerns from human rights groups, Western governments, and U.N. experts (Johnson and Fernquest 2018). Protests against the drug war, like one by Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (Kadamay), began in August 2016 (IBON International 2020). Despite criticism, Duterte's popularity remained high.

### **Duterte's Leadership**

President Rodrigo Duterte's leadership style has been defined by his aggressive and autocratic approach (Tenorio, Meyer and Nurmandi 2022). Known for his blunt and confrontational manner, Duterte has not shied away from using harsh language and making controversial statements (Montiel, Uyheng, and de Leon 2022). His "war on drugs" campaign aimed to quickly eradicate the drug problem in the Philippines through strict policies and law enforcement operations. While this approach did lead to many arrests, it was also criticized for human rights violations and overcrowded jails (Lamchek and Sanchez 2020; Pernia 2019; Ochoa and Ong 2022).

Duterte exhibits a firm, top-down leadership approach, expecting government agencies and personnel to follow his directives without question. His communication style is direct, dropping "truth bombs" on institutions and individuals alike. This resonated with many Filipinos who wanted immediate change and results (Teehankee and Thompson 2016). However, Duterte has also faced backlash for sexist and tasteless remarks. His handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was a major test of leadership. While quarantines helped initially, more was needed over time. Ramped-up vaccination efforts and Filipinos following safety protocols have helped the country recover. Thus, Duterte's presidency has demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of his uncompromising, assertive leadership manner (Thompson 2022).

Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines has pursued a radical and controversial leadership style since taking office in 2016. Duterte rose to power by portraying himself as an anti-establishment candidate who would take drastic measures to address issues like crime, drugs, and corruption in the Philippines. His radical approach has generated both intense support and criticism locally and internationally. This part will explain the key factors underlying Duterte's radical political agenda and disruptive leadership approach.

### *War on Drugs*

Rodrigo Duterte launched a “war on drugs” upon taking office in 2016. The campaign has been widely criticized for its brutality and extrajudicial killings. The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) has admitted to killing over 6,000 people in the war on drugs, while human rights groups estimate that the actual number is much higher. Many of these killings have been carried out by police and vigilantes without due process (Johnson and Fernquest 2018). Duterte defended the war on drugs, arguing that it is necessary to protect the Philippines from the scourge of illegal drugs. He also claimed that the killings were justified because the victims were all criminals (Reyes 2016). However, human rights groups have argued that the war on drugs is a violation of international law and that Duterte is guilty of crimes against humanity.

The war on drugs has had a devastating impact on the Philippines. Thousands of people have been killed, and many more have been arrested and detained. The campaign has also led to a climate of fear and intimidation, as people are afraid to speak out against the government or to report crimes (Reyes 2016). The war on drugs has also failed to achieve its stated goals. The prevalence of illegal drugs in the Philippines has remained unchanged, and the country’s crime rate has not decreased. Some experts argue that the war on drugs has made the Philippines a more dangerous place. The war on drugs in the Philippines is a tragedy. It has resulted in the deaths of thousands of people and has violated the basic human rights of many more. The campaign has also failed to achieve its stated goals. The Philippine government should end the war on drugs and focus on evidence-based approaches to reducing drug use and crime (Soriano, David, and Atun 2021)

### *Authoritarian Leadership Style*

Rodrigo Duterte was known for his authoritarian leadership style (Tenorio, Meyer, and Nurmandi 2022). He consolidated power and governed in a manner that has been widely criticized by human rights groups and the international community (Acayan 2016). However, Duterte remained popular among many Filipinos, who saw his authoritarian behaviour as challenging institutions that they believed had protected the interests of the elite rather than ordinary people. There are several reasons why Duterte’s authoritarian leadership style resonated with many Filipinos. First, many Filipinos were disillusioned with traditional politicians, whom they saw as corrupt and ineffective. Duterte’s brash style and outsider image appealed

to those who were looking for a change (Jiao and Lopez 2020). Second, Duterte's authoritarian leadership style was seen as a way to address the country's problems with crime and corruption. Duterte promised to take a tough stance on crime and to clean up the government. Many Filipinos were willing to give him the power he needed to do this, even if it meant sacrificing some of their democratic rights (Carlos 2019; Jennings 2017). Third, Duterte's authoritarian leadership style was seen as a way to protect the country from external threats. Duterte took a hawkish stance on foreign policy, particularly towards China. Many Filipinos saw him as a strong leader who would stand up for the country's interests (Hibbing 2021).

However, Duterte's authoritarian leadership style had many negative consequences. He jailed opponents, launched attacks on the media, and publicly insulted institutions like the Catholic Church that criticized his policies (Abellanosa 2018; McCargo 2016). He also oversaw a war on drugs that resulted in the deaths of thousands of people. Duterte's authoritarian leadership style was a reflection of the public sentiment at the time. Many Filipinos were willing to give up some of their democratic rights in exchange for a strong leader who promised to address the country's problems (Carlos 2019; Jennings 2017). However, Duterte's authoritarianism had many negative consequences, and it is important to be aware of these costs when considering the benefits of authoritarian leadership.

### *Relations with China*

Rodrigo Duterte's radical foreign policy, particularly his dramatic pivot towards China, is a reflection of his self-cultivated image as an anti-establishment populist leader who is willing to challenge the status quo, even at the risk of alienating traditional allies (De Castro 2023). Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, took a tough stance on China, challenging its claims in the South China Sea and strengthening ties with the United States. Duterte, on the other hand, has openly embraced China, despite its growing regional influence and its maritime disputes with the Philippines (De Castro 2022).

Duterte justified his shift towards China as necessary to access Chinese investment and development aid. He also argued that the United States has not been a reliable ally to the Philippines (De Castro 2022). However, critics of Duterte's China policy argue that he was too willing to appease China and that he abandoned the Philippines' traditional strategic interests. Duterte's foreign policy was consistent with his domestic policies, which

were also radical and disruptive. He launched a brutal war on drugs, jailed opponents, and cracked down on dissent. He also took a populist approach to economics, promising to redistribute wealth and create jobs (Guild 2022; Lopez 2021).

Duterte's supporters argued that his radicalism was necessary to address the deep-rooted problems facing the Philippines, such as crime, corruption, and poverty (Caliwan 2022; Guild 2022; Lopez 2021). They also argued that Duterte was a strong leader who was not afraid to stand up to powerful interests (Jiao and Lopez 2020).

However, critics of Duterte argued that his radicalism was dangerous and that it was undermining the Philippines' democracy and institutions. They also argued that Duterte's foreign policy was risking the country's security and sovereignty (Balboa 2020).

### *Attack on Media*

Rodrigo Duterte repeatedly attacked the media and journalists who criticized him. He called them "fake news" and "enemies of the state" (Peschke 2016; Yap 2018). He also threatened to shut down media outlets and to jail journalists. Duterte's attacks on the media were a serious threat to press freedom in the Philippines (Rappler Research Team 2018). The media plays an essential role in holding the government accountable and in informing the public about important issues. When the media is under attack, it becomes more difficult for people to know the truth about what is happening in their country (Obordo 2021; Rappler Research Team 2018).

Duterte's supporters argue that he was justified in criticizing the media because many media outlets had been critical of him. They also argued that Duterte was simply trying to protect himself from false and defamatory reporting (Peschke 2016; Yap 2018). However, Duterte's attacks on the media went far beyond legitimate criticism. He threatened and harassed journalists, and he created a climate of fear and intimidation for the media (Freedom for Media 2019). Duterte's attacks on the media also harmed the Philippine economy. Several media outlets were forced to shut down or reduce their operations due to Duterte's threats. This has led to job losses and a decline in the quality of journalism in the Philippines (Conde 2019; Rosario 2021).

The international community condemned Duterte's attacks on the media. Human rights groups called on Duterte to stop harassing journalists

and to respect press freedom. The United States also expressed concern about Duterte's attacks on the media (Civicus 2020). Thus, Duterte's attacks on the media were a serious threat to press freedom and the Philippine economy. The international community should continue to condemn Duterte's attacks on the media and support the Philippine media (Griffiths 2018; Rappler Research Team 2018).

### **Filipinos Really Hate Duterte's Leadership?**

Duterte was widely criticized for his authoritarian leadership style, his war on drugs, and his attacks on the media. However, he enjoyed high levels of public support throughout his presidency. Pulse Asia, a credible polling firm in the Philippines, conducted a survey in September 2020 that found that President Rodrigo Duterte had a 91% approval rating (Staff 2020). This was astonishing despite the fact that the Philippines was experiencing a series of scandals, including corruption allegations, ineptitude in handling the COVID-19 crisis, and failure to adequately prepare for the resumption of classes in public schools.

There are several reasons why Duterte remained popular despite strong criticism of him. First, he was seen as a strong leader who was not afraid to take on powerful interests. He promised to address the country's problems with crime, corruption, and poverty, and he was perceived as delivering on his promises (Carlos 2019; Jennings 2017). Second, Duterte appealed to many Filipinos with his populist message. He spoke to the people's concerns about inequality and social injustice. He also projected an image of himself as a man of the people, despite his wealthy background (Tenorio, Meyer and Nurmandi 2022). Third, Duterte's critics were often seen as being out of touch with the concerns of ordinary Filipinos. They were accused of being elitist and of protecting the interests of the privileged. Duterte was able to capitalize on this public sentiment by portraying himself as an outsider who was fighting for the common man (Maboloc 2020). Finally, Duterte's high trust rating was also because he was a master of communication. He was able to connect with people on an emotional level. He was also a skilled storyteller, and he used his speeches to create a narrative of himself as a hero who was fighting for the Filipino people (Lasco 2016).

It is important to note that Duterte's high trust rating was not universal. Many Filipinos, particularly those who were critical of his policies, did not trust him. However, Duterte was able to maintain a strong base of support



throughout his presidency. This suggests that there is a significant number of Filipinos who are willing to support authoritarian leaders who promise to address their concerns.

## **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that the Filipinos' sentiments toward President Duterte's leadership presents a complex narrative shaped by various factors. Employing a descriptive research approach, it delved into public opinions through available surveys, media discussions, and socio-political group actions. The multifaceted perspectives on Duterte's leadership, encompassing support and criticism, were scrutinized considering economic policies, leadership style, and responses to significant events during his presidency. The findings show a divided populace with diverse beliefs, acknowledging the dynamic nature of political and social contexts influencing Filipinos' opinions. The study emphasizes the intricate sentiments characterizing the Filipino people's relationship with their president. Duterte's tenure, marked by the "war on drugs," authoritarian leadership, and foreign policy shifts, prompted both praise and criticism. Diehard Duterte Supporters (DDS) passionately defended him, while protests against his policies increased, reflecting concerns about human rights and government actions.

This study reveals a nuanced view of Duterte's leadership, recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of his assertive style. Despite controversies, Duterte maintained high approval ratings, attributed to his perceived strength, populist messaging, and effective communication. Duterte's ability to connect with a significant portion of the population suggests a willingness among Filipinos to support leaders who promise to address their concerns, even in the face of authoritarian measures. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the understanding of intricate tapestry of sentiments surrounding Duterte's leadership, shedding light on the diverse perspectives that define the Filipino public's stance on their president.

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