

Populist and Authoritarian Leadership of Prayuth-Chan-ocha and Rodrigo Duterte

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Abstract

Academics and the media have raised concerns over the recent rise of populism and authoritarianism globally. Southeast Asia is no exception to this trend. This paper examines the populist and authoritarian leadership styles of Prayuth Chan-ocha of Thailand and Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines using a comparative method and literature review. The study reveals that the populist and authoritarian styles of the two leaders have a number of similarities and also important differences. It also finds a different pattern of populism and authoritarianism between the two leaders. While Prayuth can be considered an authoritarian aspiring to be a populist, Duterte is more a populist who has become an authoritarian. The paper further examines the global phenomena distinguishing the case of Prayuth from other populist leaders following an authoritarian pattern.

Keywords: Populism, authoritarianism, Southeast Asia, Philippines, Thailand

Introduction

Academics and the media raise concerns over the recent rise of populism and authoritarianism on the global scale. The tendency can be seen in the US, Latin America, Europe, and Asia, and in both poor and prosperous countries (Wolf, 2019). It also becomes a shared phenomenon among the global superpowers – US, Russia, China and India – expanding the illiberal theme into international politics (Ogden, 2019). Norris (2016) explains that the trend is caused by growing inequality, social exclusion, and social change. Southeast Asia also follows this trend. Populism and authoritarianism is not a new here, but it has been resurged particularly in Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand. Kurlantzick (2018) see this resurgence being driven by inequality, crime, and dysfunctional governments. However, it is undermining democratic institutions and weakening security of this region. This paper examines populist and authoritarian leaderships of Prayuth and Duterte in order to explore patterns, similarities and differences between them. It begins with reviewing the theoretical framework of authoritarian populism, followed by the study results and discussion.

Theoretical Framework

The term ‘authoritarian populism’ went back to the writings of Stuart Hall in 1980s. He explained authoritarian populism as a particular kind of conservative politics that characterized by the construction of a contradiction between the common people and the elites, which is then used to justify the imposition of repressive measures by the state. According to Hall, such a contradiction was constructed in part by portraying specific groups as an ominous enemy within – that is, as a threat to and an enemy of the interests of the putative people. This enemy – typically political dissidents and minority groups – is in turn made the target of repression and punitive discipline, all in the name of a supposed common national interest (Nilsen, 2018). As Morelock (2018) sees authoritarianism as seeking social homogeneity through coercion, while populism is seen as the true and rightful ‘people’ displaying hostility towards the elites. Taken together, he refers to authoritarian populism as mobilizing the people against the elites in order to have the power to dominate others who they do not consider the true people. He further generalized that authoritarian populism refers to social movements fuelled by prejudice and led by charismatic leaders that seek to increase governmental force to combat differences in society. In addition, it is common for authoritarian populist governments to condense and centralize authority, so that more power rests in the hands of fewer people.

Brysk (2020) argues that the 21st century has witnessed a global rise of authoritarianism that seeks to mobilize a populist base by portraying bearers of globalization and modernity as a danger to the nation, with the ultimate goal of undermining fragile democratic institutions that could check the rising power of the reactionary elite. In previous eras, authoritarianism located the threat to the

nation in ethnic and religious difference, modernizing gender regimes, migration, and independent intellectual critique of national myths and leaders' claims. These targeted groups were cast by charismatic patriarchal leadership as a threat to national security and values. However, the 21st century authoritarianism adds new layers to preexisting patterns of hierarchy, repression, and boundaries by mobilizing a new coalition of semi-peripheral countries and sectors that have lost trust in the liberal model and the liberal international order. In Brysk's view, populist authoritarianism is a reaction to economic change in which the losers of global liberalism use the mechanisms of electoral democracy to undermine or exclude the citizenship of perceived competitors and empower charismatic leaders who promise redistribution and the restoration of national greatness.

Levitsky (2017) studied the success of populism in weakening democracies and pushing them into competitive authoritarianism in Latin America. He explains how populism has the potential to break down fragile democracies into competitive authoritarianism in three ways; first, populists are political outsiders who have little experience with representative democracy's institutions; second, successful populists obtain an electoral mandate to overturn the political establishment; and finally, newly elected populists generally confront hostile institutions of horizontal accountability. Rohac, Kennedy and Singh (2018) examined the political, economic, cultural, and racial factors driving authoritarian populism in the United States. They argue that in the US context, authoritarian populism is driven by the decline of trust in government and political institutions, economic hardship, and cultural and racial resentment.

In Southeast Asia, authoritarian and populist combination can be traced back to the eras of Prime Ministers Sarit Thanarat (1958 - 1963) and Thaksin Shinawatra (2001 - 2006) of Thailand and President Ferdinand Marcos (1965 - 1986) of the Philippines. Sarit established a military led authoritarian regime suppressing dissent and ruled the country with absolute power using a top – down approach (Kongkirati, 2017). In the meantime, numerous populist policies were initiated including transportation and household expense reduction, free medical treatment for poor families, and a financial aid fund for civil servants (Bangkokbiznews, 2014). Thaksin also turned into an authoritarian populist (Pasuk & Baker, 2011) cracking down on political dissents, waging a bloody war on drug, intensifying an insurgency in Thailand's south in line with expressing rhetorically against the elite as well as driving redistributive policies and effective anti - poverty program. In the Philippines, Marcos was a right - wing populist and authoritarian combining the performative violence in projecting his domestic strength with skilled diplomacy to demonstrate international influence. Like many authoritarian populists, Marcos saw himself chosen by destiny to save his people from perdition by declaring martial law, eliminating political opponents, and using performative violence. Meanwhile, Marcos used the issue of the massive U.S. military bases near Manila to win support for his authoritarian rule from the successive American administrations (McCoy, 2017).

Study Result

The Prayuth Leadership

Prayuth led an authoritarian regime with no democratic practice and ruled the country with absolute power (Pongsudhirak, 2014). In May 2014, he staged a military coup against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra and later assumed power as a head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). The NCPO issued an interim constitution in July, giving Prayuth an absolute power and granting him amnesty for staging the coup. A month later he was appointed as the Prime Minister by a military-dominated national legislature. In 2016, a constitutional referendum was held, leading to the promulgation of the 20th constitution of Thailand in 2017. After several postponements, Prayuth has sustained his power in the 2019 general election, held for the first time since he staged the military coup.

The authoritarian style of Prayuth is apparent at the election and the electoral process. After the coup, local and national elections in Thailand were prohibited, denying a basic right and political participation of the people. Prayuth issued orders no. 85/2014 and 86/2014 to halt the local elections temporarily and replace local council members, local executive officers, the Bangkok Metropolitan Council members and its executive officers by selection. At the national level, a general election was successively postponed from the electoral roadmap; in 2015, 2017 (middle of the year), 2017 (end of the year), 2018 (November), and 2019 (February). The 2019 general election eventually held in March; however, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) (2019) considers this election 'partly free, and not fair' with several concerns over circumstance, electoral process influenced to secure the outcome, the legal framework, the a role of civil society and media, and the transparency of the Election Commission of Thailand. Before the election, iLAW (2018), a non-profit organization, warned that the upcoming election would be 'of the NCPO, by the NCPO and for the NCPO' because it was Prayuth regime that wrote the election rules, interpreted and enforced the rule, and became a player running in the election.

Another obvious authoritarianism of Prayuth stems from Section 44 enacted in the 2014 interim constitution and later transferred to the 2017 constitution, giving the absolute power to the junta until the assumption of the elected government. iLAW (2018) notes that traits of Section 44 grants the arbitrary, sweeping and unchecked power, covering a wide range of agendas (e.g. justice intervening, reforming education, combating illegal fishing, pushing special economic zone, controlling media, dominating independent organizations, and controlling election), unpredictability, amending the previous orders of the NCPO, and having the legislative, executive or judicial effect. Authoritarianism of Prayuth regime is further manifested in its structure which militarizes - the 'Five Rivers' governing mechanism - consisting of the NCPO, the National Legislative Assembly (NLA), the National Reform Council (NRC), the Cabinet and the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) to rule the country.

Besides, suppression of the media and dissent under the authoritarian leadership of Prayuth has been ongoing. The World Press Freedom Index for 2017 compiled by the international non-profit organization Reporters Without Borders showed that Thailand's ranking dropped to 142nd place out of a total of 180 countries, with a score of 44.69 points (Bangkok Post, 2017). The report even labeled Prayuth a 'press freedom predator' and described how the media have been kept under surveillance, summoned for questioning, and arbitrarily detained. For instance, Pravit Rojanaphruk, a veteran journalist at the online news website Khaosod English, was previously taken for 'attitude adjustment' and later in 2017 charged with sedition and violation of the Computer Crime Act for criticizing the Prayuth government. Likewise, political dissidents have been subjected to arbitrary detention, intimidation, and criminal prosecution. According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (2019), 929 individuals were summoned for attitude adjustment and 572 individuals were subjected to intimidation, harassment and surveillance during 2014 - 2019. For instance, Watana Muangsook, a senior member of the Pheu Thai party, which ruled the country until the military coup in 2014, was previously summoned by the authorities several times and charged with sedition and computer crimes in 2017 for criticizing political and economic problems under Prime Minister Prayut (Human Right Watch, 2017).

In term of populism, after staging the coup Prayuth has a tough stance against populist policies by enacting laws that adhered to fiscal discipline. Section 142 of the 2017 constitution stipulates that annual appropriations bills, proposed for parliamentary approval by a government, must show sources of revenue, estimated revenue and the expected outcome or output derived from the expenditure. The 2018 State Financial and Fiscal Discipline Act also prohibit cabinet members from financing their policies with state funds in ways that could be damaging to the economy. Furthermore, Prayuth condemned politicians for relying on populism to win election (Bunyamanee, 2018). However, by early 2016 the Prayuth government could no longer resist the appeal of populism and introduced its Pracha Rat scheme. The scheme was defended that it differentiates from Thaksin's populism (Prachaniyom) and claimed that it would solve the economic problems and created a model for sustainable development. The Pracha Rat scheme aimed at financially assisting low-income earners, the elderly and retired officers includes THB 500 cash handout, credit for public bus fares, and government housing loan. Undeniable, Prayuth adopts populist approach for political gain because his Pracha Rat scheme becomes a foundation of Palang Pracha Rath party, which eventually nominates Prayuth as Prime Minister in the 2019 national election.

The Duterte Leadership

Duterte was the mayor of Davao city, the southern island of Mindanao in the Philippines for almost 22 years since 1988 and succeeded in transforming the city into one of the safest area in

Southeast Asia (Panarina, 2017). During his presidential campaign, he promised to rule the country as he did in Davao city by restoring law and order, and making enemies of criminals and drug lords. He came to the presidency of Philippines as a populist in the late 2016 after the general election. Duterte's populist styles have been broadly examined through various dimensions. Heydarian (2017) highlights *inclusive populism* of Duterte, describing his strongest support coming from the upper and middle classes, his populist charisma, and the strongman style. Duterte is also perceived as a non - corrupt, decisive and single minded, anti - elite and radical change leader. Kenny (2009) provides explanations of why Duterte's populist appeal won over Filipino voters, including a lack of bureaucratic political party in the country, his extraordinary charisma, his success in using mass media and social media, and his focus on crime and punishment. Kenny (2009) further points to *penal populism* of Duterte in particular, referring to the imposition of the harsh punishment for criminals and drug dealers as he has waged a violent war on drug. Meanwhile, McCargo (2016) emphasizes on *mediated populist* style of Duterte, placing himself to win media attention, and ultimately voter support across the socio - economic spectrum. Duterte also has above narrative among other presidential candidates, creating his image as the tough political outsider who calls for radical change. For Juego (2017), Duterte has the elements of both *left - wing and right - wing populism*, but he shows more of a right wing than left wing populism demonstrating in his speech and governance style towards authoritarianism, his military mind, his preference to police action, his fascination with the martial law, and waging state violence. Mendoza (2018) examines Duterte's *redistributive populism* including his free irrigation policy for small farmers along with land distribution and tax reform. In terms of foreign policy, as Arugay (2018) argues, Duterte uses *performative populism* to reorient the established positions and biases in the country's foreign policy by showing contempt for the West, admiration toward Russia and China, as well as indifference toward international law and norms.

Besides, Duterte's tendency towards authoritarian is examined as well. Apparently, his brutal war on drug, killing more than 12,000 drug suspects in 2017 (Human Rights Watch, 2018), has been characterized by widespread impunity, using arbitrary power and eroding the rule of law (Flatt, 2018). In addition, suppression of media and dissents under Duterte leadership is intensive, for instance, the prosecution against Maria Ressa, an editor and founder of the online news platform Rappler, and the crackdown against oppositions such as Senator Leila de Lima and Senator Antonio Trillanes. Another authoritarian style of Duterte can be observed by erosion of check and balance system or dismantling of liberal institutions. In 2018 Duterte urges lawmakers to fast – track impeach the Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno from her office after she clashed with the president over the war on drug. As Thompson (2016) notes, the judiciary should be in the forefront to curb the extra - judiciary killings of the Duterte regime. Therefore, diminishing the judicial constraints will likely to continue the brutal crackdown of

Duterte unabated. Finally, Duterte's use of martial law in the Mindanao region has adversely affected the quality of democracy in the Philippines and opens the door to increase human rights violations and military abuses according to a report of the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2017 (Gavilan, 2018). Martial law is declared and extended in Mindanao from 2017 to the present after the fierce attack from Islamic extremist group.

The researcher further examines authoritarian populist leaders around the world in this comparative study. In the US, President Donald Trump is a classic example of a populist striving to be authoritarian (Wolf, 2019). His election campaign stressed the populist appeal of right wing, anti-immigration and ethno-nationalism. Once in power, Trump began to disregard many democratic practices such as with the use of an executive order to ban travelers from six Muslim-majority countries, as well as attack the independent media through anti-media messages. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán became Prime Minister in 2010 using right wing, and anti-immigrant populist rhetoric to portray refugees and migrants as an existential threat to the culture and to European Christian values. The refugee and migrant crisis in Europe then became a tool to legitimize the authoritarianism of him and his Fidesz party (Onvara, 2019). Orbán passed numerous laws to undermine opponents, intervene in the courts, dismantle institutional checks and balances, and centralize power in his own hands, meanwhile clamping down on media freedom. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro came to power with the populist promise of restoring law and order by eliminating crime and corruption (Valiquette & Su, 2018). However, to sustain his power he has attacked journalists, threatened his political rivals with jail, opposed human rights and aligned himself closely with the military rule.

In Asia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India came to power in 2014 on a divisive populist platform of right wing, anti-eliteism and nationalism by promising to restore India to a more glorious past by polarizing the people along Hindu-Muslim lines. Meanwhile, activists, journalists, and political dissidents have been subjected to suppression, legal prosecution, intimidation, and arrest. In Southeast Asia, like Duterte, Joko Widodo or Jokowi fits the model of a populist turning into an authoritarian. Jokowi came to the presidency as a populist. He introduced a new form of populism offering change within the democratic framework, presenting himself as highly inclusivist, and refraining from anti-foreign rhetoric, focusing instead on public service improvement as well as health and education reform (Mietzner, 2015). However, Power (2018) argues that later Jokowi turned to authoritarian leadership by mainstreaming and legitimizing a conservative and anti-pluralistic brand of political Islam, manipulating key institutions based upon partisanship, repressing and disempowering of political opponents.

Conclusion and Discussion

As argued above, empirical evidences of populist and authoritarian leaderships of Prayuth and Duterte are apparent. Both have a number of similarities, yet there are significant differences. In terms of authoritarian style, both Prayuth and Duterte have used harsh suppression of media, dissents and political oppositions by threatening, arresting, and prosecuting. In difference, authoritarian styles of Prayuth stresses on election and electoral process, militarizing the governing mechanism, and the use of Section 44, while Duterte has used his violent war on drug, dismantling of liberal institutions, erosion of check and balance, and the imposition of martial law in the Mindanao. For populist actions, Duterte has various styles of populism including inclusive populism, penal populism, mediated populism, left and right wings populism, redistributed populism and performative populism, but Prayuth, who initially has a tough stance against populist policies, focuses on the redistributive and welfare policies. After examining, this paper discovers a clear pattern of populist and authoritarian under the Prayuth and Duterte leadership. Prayuth is an authoritarian would be a populist because he starts from staging the coup and further legitimizes his power by the populist policies. Duterte, on the other hand, starts out as a populist and becomes an authoritarian by turning towards non - democratic practices and human right violation.

In the case of Duterte, his populist and authoritarian style is in accordance with the concepts of Hall (1980s), Morelock (2018) and Brysk (2020), who argue that populist authoritarian are led by charismatic leaders who mobilize the rightful people to justify their repressive measures, as well as increase and centralize their power. Duterte has identified criminals and drug lords as the enemy and portrayed them as a threat to the national peace and order. These criminals and drug lords are targeted with excessive punitive measures as can be seen in Duterte's violent war on drugs. This research explores how Duterte has used authoritarian actions to sustain his populist policy. An example of this is how he urged lawmakers to fast track the impeachment of the country's Chief Justice, diminishing judicial constraints so that he could continue his brutal crackdown unhindered by the judiciary. However, the case of Prayuth is different. His authoritarian actions have already been justified by militarization, legalization (Section 44) and the constitution. This research further explores how populist policy is important to the authoritarian leadership of Prayuth. In 2017, the Pracha Rat welfare program was launched and claimed to be an innovation to help low-income earners out of poverty by registering with the Ministry of Finance; and those qualifying would be issued a welfare card to reduce their cost of living. The author proposes that Prayuth implemented this populist policy for political gain, paving the way for him to transition to electoral democracy with the populist promise of distribution of wealth, as the Pracha Rat program would result in the foundation of the Palang Pracha Rath party, which would eventually nominated Prayuth for Prime Minister in the 2019 national election.

Furthermore, the case of Prayuth is distinctive when comparing to the global and regional phenomena. He is an authoritarian aspiring to be a populist, while the other leaders around the world are populists turning towards authoritarians. For example, the US President Donald Trump is a classic example of a populist striving to authoritarian (Wolf, 2019). His election campaign stresses on the populist appeal of right – wing and anti – migration. Once in power, Trump disregards many democratic practices and evades independent media. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary has utilizes the right – wing populist rhetoric, dismantles institutional checks and balances, centralizes power in his own hands, while clamping down on media freedom. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro comes to power with the populist promise of restoring law and order by eliminating crime and corruption (Valiquette & Su, 2018). But, to sustain his power he attacks journalists, threatens his political rivals, and aligns closely with the military rule. In Asia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India comes to power in 2014 on a divisive populist platform of right – wing, anti – elitism and nationalism, and resorts to suppression of social movements, activists and dissents. In Southeast Asia, like Duterte, Joko Widodo or Jokowi fits with the model of populist turning into an authoritarian. As Power (2018) argues, Jokowi came to the presidency as a populist, but he continues to mainstream and legitimize a conservative and anti-pluralistic brand of political Islam, manipulate key institutions upon partisan, and open repression and disempowerment of political opposition.

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