

Tracing the Political Divide: An Analysis of Antagonisms between Contesting Publics amidst a Challenged Democracy

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The ascent of former President Rodrigo Duterte in the national political scene has not only revealed illiberal undertones in Philippine democracy but has also shifted the attention to the exacerbated divisions in society from where antagonisms characterized along moral lines are divulged. Envisioned to continue, the changes instigated by the populist turn in the country which hastened the maturity of illiberalism warrant a revisitation and interrogation of the traditional way of "doing politics" in relation to the aggravated antagonistic relations between groups found to be in continuous contestation in society. Aimed with the purpose of understanding the emergence and reinforcement of antagonisms between the contesting Populist Public and the Liberal Reformist Public whose roots go back to the EDSA Revolution vs. Unfinished Revolution divide, the study examines their prevailing ethos on their political aims, priority issues, visions for change, language, media, and living space along with an identification of relevant factors engendering resentments in between. Utilizing a qualitative methodology and descriptive phenomenological approach through focus group discussions in the gathering of data, the findings of this study determined that moral antagonisms between the groups are engendered by a struggle of opposing narratives, a crisis of dignity, an allegiance-tolerance dichotomy, a persistent adherence to political actors, and a populism-civic exclusivism conflict. With Filipino religiosity and hegemonic discourses from politicians characterizing the "moral" nature of the said antagonisms, its implications on the "politics that should be" entails a Philippine democracy that is more challenged and contested as before.

Keywords: Antagonisms, Moral Divisions, Populist Public, Liberal Reformism, Philippine Democracy

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A repercussion of the global shift in politics, a sudden political earthquake that disrupted and shifted the almost static trajectory of the Philippine political landscape has bared a disbelieving truth left in almost oblivion — democracy is challenged. As unconventional presidents assume office and illiberalism attains maturity as aggravated by a populist ascendancy, the liberal democratic regime's ills and systemic paralysis have questioned the durability of democratic foundations in the country as well as a rethinking of the realities on the ground. Deep-seated polarization in civil society due to differences among contesting groups seeking to be the correct "we" at the expense of the wrong "they" has entailed antagonisms as a defining characteristic of a democracy challenged within a nation divided. With the presence of a problem seen mostly from "above", a disconnection between the people and the regime in existence requires a perceptive shift of focus from "below" — an approach rarely utilized among local literatures.

Scholarly interests have accumulated over socio-political conditions and their implications to democracy, but political antagonisms as a core subject among literature so far remain as a secondary concern or a concept just implied and/or tapped in political science scholarship. In the Philippine setting, for instance, Nathan Gilbert Quimpo's "Contested Democracy" theory in 2004 can be recognized as the earliest literature that shed light on the prospects of resentments due to divisions in Philippine society, but the concept of antagonisms between opposing publics remains implicitly expressed in his work.¹ The same situation persists decades later. Amidst the scarcity, Wataru Kusaka was a lone addition who tapped on antagonisms significantly as a subject of his work.²

Be that as it may, specific points in the history of struggles in the Philippines depict antagonisms as a common occurrence despite the scarcity of literature examining it. The EDSA Tres, a popular uprising of the poor to contest the assumption of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, is indicative of antagonisms present in society where the masses perceived the elite and middle class-supported Arroyo administration as an "enemy" that will perpetuate inequalities and thrust them out in the peripheries.³ This manifestation was soon followed by the entrance of Rodrigo Duterte in the national political scene, a populist President who became a polarizing figure that deepened the divide and resentments of opposing groups. This perpetuated years after, highlighting the stratification of civil society where a public that supported the sudden populist turn in politics

¹ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos" (PhD diss., The Australian National University, 2004), 12, 15. The elite democracy aims for a formal or deficient type of democracy whereas the "democracy from below" seeks a more open and egalitarian type of democracy.

² Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines* (Singapore: NUS Press in association with Kyoto University Press, 2017), xvii. Moral politics is responsible for the we/they relations in Philippine society as the "other" is treated blatantly as an "enemy."

³ Julio Teehankee, "Was Duterte's Rise Inevitable?" in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, ed. Nicole Curato, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 37-56.

emerged on one hand, and another public that aimed for the continuation of the values and aspirations of EDSA against dictatorship surfaced on the other. At present, the former appears apparent among the Marcos-Duterte supporters while the latter is reminiscent of the Robredo-Pangilinan supporters in the concluded 2022 elections.

Indeed, much previous literature are just a "prelude to the divided present."⁴ Seeing that the Philippine political landscape has changed yet struggles along divisions are still prevalent and antagonisms remain to be marginalized among research, this study will focus on an analysis of the emergence and reinforcement of antagonisms between contesting groups in civil society through an examination of existing realities from below amidst a democracy challenged by a populist and illiberal transcendence presently. In particular, this will seek to understand the prevailing ethos of two contesting publics who, as opposed to the class-based approach, will be perceived along ideological lines: the *liberal reformist public* seen to be tolerant to the promises of democratic change of the EDSA Revolution and aversive to authoritarian tendencies, and the *populist public* perceived to be supportive to a radical political shift and adoptive of the aspirations and sentiments enshrined in the "unfinished revolution." An examination of factors fostering antagonisms in between will also be sought in this research to gain an understanding of how antagonisms further reinforce. These will be analyzed in light of their possible implications towards contributing to democratic progress or erosion.

The presence of demarcation lines in civil society that engendered polarization has often been regarded as a symptom of malaise. Democracy may have long been installed in the land, but the Philippines still succumbs to an unfortunate and unwanted quandary relative to the current state of the political landscape. However, by tracing the political divide seen from below, antagonisms between contesting publics may just be a key in understanding whether a nation in division is indeed a nation in peril or otherwise.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As resentments from existing divisions manifest immensely in the opposing blocs that emerged in the 2022 elections, a complex polarization among the people placed Philippine democracy at the pedestal where its operation became a subject of debate as dysfunctional ills revealed themselves concomitantly all the while populism encounters normalization in political affairs and illiberalism sets the platform for its maturity.

In this rationale, the purpose of this study is to analyze the emergence and reinforcement of antagonisms among contesting groups in Philippine civil society through an examination of the existing realities from below amidst a challenged democracy. Specifically, this research seeks to (1) understand the prevailing ethos of the contesting publics in terms of their (a) *political aims*, (b)

⁴ Kusaka, "Moral Politics," xi.

priority issues, (c) visions for change, (d) language, (e) media, and (f) living space; (2) determine the relevant factors that engender antagonisms between contesting publics, and (3) analyze the implications of the reinforcement of antagonisms to the current state of Philippine democracy.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study is centered on political antagonisms fostered by contention and resentments from the Philippine civil society which is largely perceived as fragmented and/or divided along moral lines at present. Examining the existing realities of which they are influenced, engaged, and immersed, this research endeavor will look at the dominating ethos on political aims, priority issues, visions for change, language, media, and living space alongside the relevant factors and overall dynamics characterizing and influencing two identified "contesting publics": *liberal reformist public* and *populist public* in the emergence and reinforcement of antagonisms between them. In the discipline of Political Science, this study will be encompassed by political theory and political thought in the context of the Philippine situation.

Moreover, the data will be procured from informants who belong to the Marcos-Duterte Supporters Group namely the BBM Tigers, and Bagong Bansang Masagana for the Populist Public and to the Robredo People's Council and Angat Buhay Supporters Group for the Liberal Reformist Public, respectively. As they were selected in accordance with the characteristics of the Populist Public and Liberal Reformist Public elucidated by Curato, Arguelles, and Thompson in their separate studies, the groups were likewise determined based on specific parameters specified in this study.⁵ The phenomenon being studied in this research will likewise be analyzed in a timeline beginning from the Duterte administration until the recent Marcos Jr. administration, respectively.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several thinkers have situated the subject of their research to the realities that encompass Philippine democracy, including the occurrence of antagonisms in society which may be a catalyst of either two possibilities: an erosion of the employed democratic framework or an invigoration of the democratic foundations through a deepening of its elements.

In his 2004 book entitled *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos*, Nathan Gilbert Quimpo provided an explanatory framework in understanding what he

⁵ Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope," 91-109.

Cleve Kevin Robert Villanueva Arguelles, "Grounding Populism: Perspectives from the Populist Publics," (M.A. thesis, Central European University, 2017). 1-83.

Mark R. Thompson, "Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines," in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35, 3, (2017): 39-68.

coined as a "Contested Democracy" in the Philippines. The overarching dominance of the elitist stance in Philippine politics has been challenged by voices from below, advocating a different democracy that is inclusive and exhaustive as opposed to the limited and defective one that exists. Aided by the elucidations pioneered by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Evelyn Huber, Quimpo expresses:

Informed by the "bridging" concepts of democracy of Laclau and Mouffe and of Huber et al., I view the contest more as a struggle between those who want to let a new (or newly-restored) democracy remain a formal and truncated liberal democracy and those who want to extend and deepen democracy and transform formal liberal democracy into a more participatory and egalitarian one.⁶

In this sense, Philippine democracy is contested both in "meaning and substance" as it embodies a convergence of two opposing perspectives — an elite democracy and a democracy from below.⁷ Contestations emerge because of the paradoxical views distinctively employed by the two kinds of democracy and the incessant clash that both have encountered as they assert their position in Philippine democracy.

Echoing Quimpo in his thesis, Wataru Kusaka, in his 2017 book entitled *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, likewise provided a theory for contemporary Philippine democracy perceived through the lens of the struggles in civil society relative to moral politics. Although Kusaka advanced a framework citing the amalgamation of the civic sphere and mass sphere where people may communicate with one another while legitimately tolerating each other as "enemies", he nevertheless believes that democracy is deeply enamored with a "serious predicament" resulting from neoliberalism's aggravation of existing cleavages in society alongside a "moralization of politics" that sustains a we/they dichotomy and good vs. evil divide.⁸ This provides cause for antagonisms to arise as a consequence of the two spheres' distinct perspectives on concerned areas and on the existing elite-dominated politics in the Philippines which signals questions on democracy's progress or decay.

Additionally, Nicole Curato, in her 2016 article entitled "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power", explored the underlying logic that propels former President Rodrigo Duterte's massive public support in the early years of his presidency. Interpreting her interviews with Duterte supporters in a disaster-stricken province, Curato explained that the former President's popularity is due to the various factors underpinning the

⁶ Quimpo, "Contested Democracy," 15.

⁷ Quimpo 2004, p. 15.

⁸ Kusaka, "Moral Politics," xvii.

'politics of anxiety' and 'politics of hope'; the former being a manifestation of the latent fears and danger that challenge the people, while the latter hinges on a collective aspiration to be recognized as a legitimate democratic agency.⁹ As this has been the case, the employment of a penal populist style by Duterte acquired agreement from his supporters yet objection by those who express a grave concern on the matter, therefore constructing an antagonism between opposing groups.

In an integration of these analyses, below is a framework applied in this research:

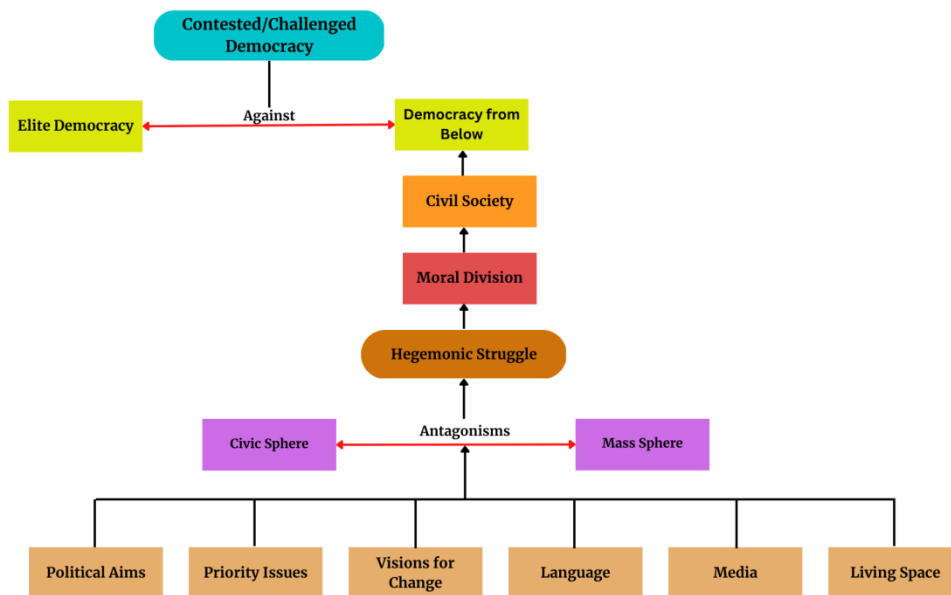


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

As depicted in Figure 1, the integration of three theories has been sought in the formation of a theoretical framework. Included in this are Quimpo's Contested Democracy theory, Kusaka's Moral Politics theory, and Curato's Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope theory. The contested/challenged nature of democracy is rooted from the antagonisms between two spheres: the civic sphere and the mass sphere.¹⁰ The emergence of antagonisms in between are associated with several bases such as the group's political aims, priority issues, visions for change, language, media, and living space.

⁹ Nicole Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power," in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 92-93.

¹⁰ Kusaka, "Moral Politics," 35-38. The civic sphere is a public space comprised of an English-dominated discursive forum and media alongside exclusive, guarded, and technologically advanced communities while the mass sphere is public space where communication and media is aligned to the vernacular language of the masses alongside poor settlements where the people find means to establish intimate relationships with each other.

In terms of the political aims of the group, Quimpo expressed the varying discernment on the type of democracy which the groups regard as ideal to them.¹¹ Consequently, Curato implied the difference between ideas pertaining to the political style of the leader and the redemption of the failing republic, citing divergence on the people's perspectives on the said matter.¹² In addition to the previously stated, Kusaka ascertained that apart from their socioeconomic conditions, a paradox of desire for reform arises between the two, as the former functions on an objective to eradicate mass poverty and political illiteracy for progress in democratization and modernization while the latter operates on a goal of realizing fairness in politics where equal generosity is bestowed irrespective of status.¹³ Priority issues likewise become a point of contention due to the opposing views on which societal issues need immediate approach and resolution.¹⁴ The same holds true for the contesting groups' visions for change as they express deviating narratives on the kind of socio-political transformation they aim to realize.¹⁵ Recognizing the contrasting spaces for which they thrive, the groups tend to antagonize one another because of the linguistic divide wherein the civic sphere utilizes sophisticated English while the mass sphere use their vernacular languages; the media which caters to an intellectual and globalized audience on one hand, and a popularized and localized audience on the other; and the living space where a contrast occurs between privately modernized communities and publicly developing mass settlements.¹⁶

From these, counter-discourses arising in the demarcation coalesce into a hegemonic struggle against a perceived "evil". In this event, the said struggle mirrors a *moral division* as a product of civic exclusivism and populism which invites discontent if the "other" dominates in influence.¹⁷ With unequal power relations inevitably surfacing still, civil society becomes a window to view antagonisms and disagreements, constituting the main sentiments and narratives that form the 'democracy from below' which also antagonizes the existing elite democracy as the main enemy that causes polarization. The friction between the democracy sustained by the vested

¹¹ Quimpo, "Contested Democracy," 15, 47-50. A Contested Democracy framework is the most suitable for the Philippines as it offers an alternative view on democracy in contrast to the usual one-sided and top-down interpretation. The integration of the 'democracy from below' recognizes the masses' struggle for recognition by means of asserting their independence and empowerment.

¹² Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope," 95, 101.

¹³ Kusaka, "Moral Politics," 38-42.

¹⁴ Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope," 98.

¹⁵ Kusaka, "Moral Politics," 34-49.

¹⁶ Kusaka, "Moral Politics," 50-75. The colonial roots of the country alongside the Martial Law years account for the linguistic and media divide experienced by the civic sphere and mass sphere. The division in living spaces is attributed to the rapid urbanization and economic migration of the masses in the cities as well as the exclusive development of communities by the private sector against the increasing squatter settlements among unused lands.

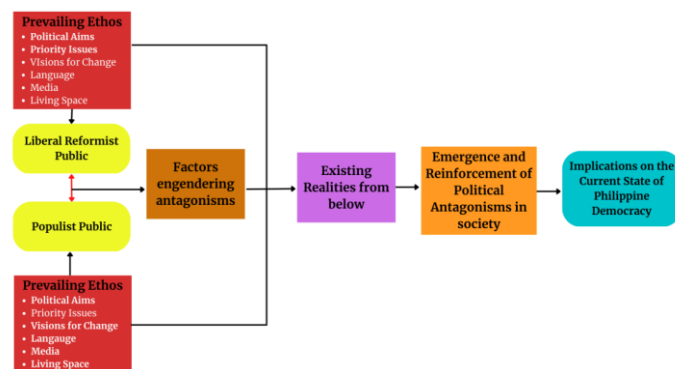
¹⁷ Kusaka, "Moral Politics," 48. Civic exclusivism occurs when antagonisms arise between educated, skilled, moral citizens and corrupt politicians and uneducated, "immoral" masses. Populism happens when contestations are evident between the oppressed, righteous "poor people" and the "rich" who oppress the poor.

interests of the elites and the democracy manifested by the struggles from civil society elicited a fragmentation that accounts for the contested/challenged nature of democracy.¹⁸

The integrated theoretical framework referenced from the studies of Quimpo (2004), Kusaka (2017), and Curato (2016) on the status and changes of Philippine democracy entails an illustration of the means and ways from where political antagonisms emerging from the clash of perspectives, intentions, and conditions between contesting spheres or groups harbor an implication on democracy. With the perceived problem of the dominating elitist stance in politics that the groups from below seek to address and change, civil society provides a viable reflection of how contestations and resentment from below may produce a sense of thesis-antithesis synthesis from the people which may prove integral on how democracy will progress or decline in the next years. And since this research aims to analyze present political antagonisms in the context of existing realities from below, the said theoretical framework is relevant in this pursuit.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, the variables earlier determined will be analyzed comprehensively to demonstrate the interrelation of concepts and the implications of the elements relative to the topic at hand. A process from where the said variables will undergo in this study is likewise provided in this part of the paper.



¹⁸ Quimpo, "Contested Democracy," 15, 47-50.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

As shown in the diagram above, two groups or "publics" will be the subject of observation and analysis in this research: *liberal reformist public* and *populist public*. Nicole Curato, who coined the term 'populist publics', refer to the said group as that which arose alongside the populist insurgency in the country, attributed to the rise of Rodrigo Duterte to the presidency where a challenge to the liberal democratic regime has ensued.¹⁹ This is composed of groups who carry the agenda of the "unfinished revolution" and engendered contestations to traditional institutions employed. Their experience of marginalization in the previous administrations encouraged them to seek recognition of their democratic agency exhibited by their struggle to restore their dignity.²⁰ Perceived to be embodying contrasting ideas, visions, and perceptions, the populist public collides with the liberal reformist public, generally identified in this research as individuals in society who supported or tolerated the regime that was installed after EDSA and advocated for reforms crafted to counter the regime's problems. Groups that form part of this share the same agenda as that of the prevailing regime enforced prior to the entrance of Duterte into national politics. They seek to realize the aspirations and promises of EDSA through the restoration of democracy in its formal form relative to the ideals and principles by which it was installed. As these two subjects are seen to be representative of the present division in civil society from where antagonisms are born between the long-standing liberalism and populism in mainstream politics, two concepts will be considered — the group ethos and the factors that reinforce political antagonisms.

To exhaustively elucidate the characteristics present in the subjects being studied, the prevailing ethos serves as a crucial variable in this study. In antagonistic politics, the ethos present among groups distinguished by contestations in between is important, and to an extent, even necessary²¹. In this research, the prevailing ethos will be further examined through an interpretation of each group's ideas and sentiments on (a) *political aims*, (b) *priority issues*, (c) *visions for change*, (d) *language*, (e) *media*, and (f) *living space*. This will provide an in-depth understanding of the internal dynamics occurring within the contesting groups being analyzed. Moreover, the relevant factors that engendered resentments and contestations between the liberal reformist public and populist public will likewise be scrutinized. An observation and analysis of themes relative to the existing conditions and other indicators will be sought in this pursuit alongside the integration of findings from previous scholarly works.

¹⁹ Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope," 92-97.

²⁰ Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope," 93. Nicole Curato, in her study, referenced the ethnographic literature of Frederic Schaeffer in the less privileged communities where a "class politics of dignity" arises due to their condemnation of politicians who tend to remember them only during election time.

²¹ W. E. Connolly, "Pluralism," as stated in David R. Howarth, "Ethos, Agonism, and Populism: William Connolly and the Case for Radical Democracy," in *Political Studies Association* 10 (2008): 175, DOI:10.1111/j.1467-856x.2007.00308.x

In this regard, the prevailing ethos and relevant factors as variables stated in this research will be analyzed to comprehend the relation of existing realities from below to the emergence and reinforcement of political antagonisms — the independent variable. Through an application of the theoretical framework previously presented, the said political antagonisms will be subjected to a comprehensive analysis to explain its implications on the current state of Philippine democracy — the dependent variable — on whether it guarantees a continuation of democracy as it is today, or a prospective decline and decay in the next years to come.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In the understanding of the prevailing narratives of the contesting publics vis a vis the factors that led to antagonisms between them, this study adopted a qualitative research design in the acquisition, organization, and analysis of raw data. A method of this character establishes a research focused on techniques, processes, and approaches that are nonstatistical nor numerical in the collection of pertinent data relative to a social phenomenon.²² In the method introduced by Cresswell, the said approach entails the treatment of assumptions in a constructivist viewpoint from where the data obtained through open-ended questions by means of a suitable research instrument will be interpreted to extract meanings relative to the context and phenomenon.²³ This is likewise based on the premise that reality is within the sphere of subjectivity given that it is built on the existing conditions and experiences of people. As this study is endowed with an aim to examine the "ethos" of the respondents on indicators of antagonisms along with an analysis of factors engendering resentments between them, the data gathered consisted of narratives and perspectives from the people — qualitative data which were interpreted critically and substantially. Relying on the content and depth of data, the methodological approach allows for flexibility in the process which is an integral characteristic of qualitative research. For these reasons and for the manner by which this study's central problem is intended to be answered, a qualitative method is suitable for this research.

With a consideration of the objectives of this research, a descriptive phenomenological design was utilized in the examination of the variables, analysis of gathered data, and investigation of the research problem in this study. Commonly applied in qualitative research among the social sciences, descriptive phenomenology is aimed at the examination of the conscious experience of a phenomenon and explores the realities embedded within it as it gains ground in a participant's

²² David E. McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science* (USA: Routledge, 2015), 255-227.

²³ John W. Cresswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, (London, United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014): 35-48.

sphere of awareness.²⁴ This research design also entails participants to be distanced while the researcher brackets his or her prejudices to prevent their intervention in the process per se.²⁵ Hence, a descriptive phenomenological research design deemed appropriate for this study given that this aims to examine two identified opposing groups, the Populist Public and the Liberal Reformist Public, whose beliefs, narratives, and lived experiences caused disparities and differences which engendered the phenomenon that is an antagonism between them. And since the suspension of the researcher's biases counts as integral in the resolution of the research problem and the realization of the purposes of this research, the said research design is suitable to meet the aims by which this study is pursued.

PARTICIPANTS

In a pursuit of an analysis of the divisions in society caused by antagonisms between two contesting publics, the participants for this study emanated from groups who resemble the Populist Public and the Liberal Reformist Public. For the former, the participants were specifically chosen from the Marcos-Duterte Supporters Group, particularly in the (1) BBM Tigers, and (2) Bagong Bansang Masagana. For the latter, the informants were distinctly chosen from the Robredo-Pangilinan Supporters Group, particularly in the (1) Robredo People's Council and (2) Angat Buhay Supporters Group. Carefully selected based on their (a) *national presence*, (b) *extent of mobilization*, (c) *huge membership base*, (d) *active status*, and (e) *organizing capacity*, they exhibit the characteristics of a Populist Public defined by the studies of Nicole Curato and Cleve Arguelles; and the Liberal Reformist Public explained by the study of Mark Thompson.²⁶

²⁴ Amedeo Giorgi, "Concerning variations in the application of the phenomenological method," in *The Phenomenological House: A Metaphoric Framework for Descriptive Phenomenological Design and Analysis*, ed. Katheryne T. Leigh-Osroosh, *The Qualitative Report*, no. 26, 6, (June 2021): 1817.

Mark D. Vagle, "Crafting phenomenological research," in *The Phenomenological House: A Metaphoric Framework for Descriptive Phenomenological Design and Analysis*, ed. Katheryne T. Leigh-Osroosh, *The Qualitative Report*, no. 26, 6, (June 2021): 1817.

²⁵ Katheryne T. Leigh-Osroosh, "The Phenomenological House: A Metaphoric Framework for Descriptive Phenomenological Design and Analysis," *The Qualitative Report*, no. 26, 6, (June 2021): 1818.

²⁶ Nicole Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power," in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 91-109.

Cleve Kevin Robert Villanueva Arguelles, "Grounding Populism: Perspectives from the Populist Publics," (M.A. thesis, Central European University, 2017). 1-83.

Mark R. Thompson, "Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines," in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35, 3, (2017): 39-68.

Populist Public	Liberal Reformist Public
a. Aspires for visibility and voice in politics b. Supports an aggressive rhetoric with an underlying promise of justice c. Resents traditional institutions d. Enthralled to leaders who use the language of urgency e. Hopeless to the promises of EDSA	a. Aspires for the re-establishment of democracy b. Calls for the restoration of basic liberties and freedom c. Seeks for an end to the disjunction in the prevailing democratic system d. Desires for an efficient and good governance e. Aims for the realization of EDSA's promises

Table 1. Characteristics of a Populist Public and Liberal Reformist Public

From these populations, around five (5) to six (6) participants were determined from the groups in accordance with the ideal group size for focus group discussions.²⁷ The abovementioned specific groups which are perceived to be the most vigorous and active organized mobilizations in the recent months deem to be the most suitable participants reflective of the Populist Public and the Liberal Reformist Public.

DATA COLLECTION METHOD

In this study, focus group discussions were sought, entailing the acquisition of data obtained through insights shared in the spirit of group interaction.²⁸ This data collection method not only seeks to gather relevant information, but it likewise aims to fetch data based on implicit

²⁷ Sage Publications, "Participants in a Focus Group," accessed May 28, 2023, https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/24056_Chapter4.pdf

²⁸ Ariadne Vromen, "Debating Methods: Rediscovering Qualitative Approaches," in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 3rd ed. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 259-260.

ideas and information that the flow of discussion produces. In the case of this research, focus group discussions are appropriate because they produced data whose results, after thorough interpretation, provided an answer on how political antagonisms emerge and reinforce along with its implications to Philippine democracy — the study's main research problem. An understanding of the way by which the participants construct their narratives against the opposite group is likewise significant if obtained using this data collection method.

For this to be materialized, the researcher developed an FGD guide for the collection of data. The bracketing of biases and prejudices of the researcher was likewise sought in this pursuit. A list of participants from the groups determined was made afterwards from where informants whose knowledge, experience, and/or expertise are beneficial in answering this research's problem were rigorously selected. Informed consent was likewise sent to the chosen participants. The time, date, and platform to be used were decided by the researcher with respect to their availability. Following this, the researcher conducted the focus group discussion at the agreed time, date, and platform. The data gathered were organized for content and thematic analyses before writing the final analysis in accordance with the aims and purposes of this study.

Serving as the research instrument, the FGD guide consisted of self-made questions formulated by the researcher since no previous study whose topic interest is akin to this thesis has published an FGD guide for their methodology. Nevertheless, the interview questions were formulated based on the findings of previous studies relevant to this research. In specific terms, the first part of the FGD guide asked about their narratives and beliefs on the indicators of antagonisms, while the second part tackled their resentments against the opposite group's identity, sentiments, and narratives.

SUMMARY

In an examination of realities that exist from below following the aftermath of the upheaval that revealed divisions in society, an analysis of the identities, narratives, and perspectives of groups in direct and indirect contestation is sought. The prevailing ethos characterizing the group's adherence to their beliefs and perceptions divulge points of convergence and divergence relative to six indicators: (1) *political aims*, (2) *priority issues*, (3) *visions for change*, (4) *language*, (5) *media*, and (6) *living space*.

In terms of the aspirations for political improvement and development, the Populist Public views the present socio-political condition in the Philippines following the Duterte ascendancy as a betterment of politics and governance, recuperating gradually after years of stalled growth relative to the failures and shortcomings of the previous administrations. A relief from the frustrations and anxieties that troubled them in the years prior entailed them to express satisfaction in the overall change that transpired in Philippine politics, expressing an ardent desire for continuity through a realization of a government that is collaborative with the populace, instills

discipline and cooperation among the people, exhibits federalist ideals, and is managed by a leader with strongman characteristics to actualize in practice what they generally aspire for as a group — unity. This contrasts with the Liberal Reformist Public's political aims of fixing the damaged political system through a change of leaders and actualization of the real "power of the people" by seeking the establishment of a government ideal to them — democratically genuine, moral, and champion of good governance. For the group, the present condition is suggestive of a degeneration of politics and governance in its worst form which expresses a cause for dismay and dissatisfaction within their ranks.

Moreover, in the examination of their perspectives relative to issues which they prioritize, the Populist Public believes that capitalism, privatization, and rent-seeking behaviors in the government should be approached in order to hasten their eradication. Animosity against high poverty incidence is likewise explicitly expressed by the group, noting their exasperations on the government's inability to address the root cause of its emergence. Nevertheless, the Populist Public ascertains that the recent administrations have been responding to the said conundrums even amidst their inability to make judgements yet in the performance of the current administration as it is still in its early stages. Exhibiting similar sentiments, the Liberal Reformist Public, on the other hand, attributes the main issues to the incidence of a degrading Philippine economy exacerbated by inflation due to the surge of prices in the market which imperils the condition of the Filipinos, especially the poor and the marginalized. An aggravation of this misery is perceived in their disdain for justice that serves only the interests of the rich at the expense of the public welfare along with an education crisis that failed to instill values education among the populace. Upon raising these issues, the Liberal Reformist Public expressed discontent in the substandard responses generated by the current government. Notwithstanding their differences, both groups identify *Trapo* politics as a primary instigator of the issues they determined, seeing that poverty becomes a major concern when the interests of the elites and *trapos* gain dominance in the political sphere.

Aside from this, acquired narratives in relation to their corresponding visions for real change indicate that the Populist Public ascertains the existence of change in government and society as a repercussion of the Duterte ascendancy. For them, this is witnessed in the eradication of security-related anxieties through penal justice which regains discipline in all aspects. A perception of a better administration is likewise expressed by the Populist Public, bearing the hope that life conditions will finally be traversing its improvement if the government will be the sole leader of a change that will replace *Trapos* with individuals who champion the masses' demands. However, the Liberal Reformist Public expressed utter denial of the presence of good change in the country, seeing that the only reality they perceive is a degradation of the situation. Believing that change is for the worst, their loss of hope can be overturned only by a realization of improved competence in the government that is manned, managed, and led by individuals of true integrity and responsibility conducive to democracy.

Furthermore, analyzing the ethos of the groups on language as a relevant indicator, both the Populist Public and the Liberal Reformist Public sought the utilization of the Filipino language in everyday discourse and dialogue, citing the ease in using a language that is natural and innate in them. However, the former expressed resentments against the blatant use of foreign language, particularly English, in political processes that require the people's understanding. In this case, both publics attest to the significance of sensitivity, stating that language ought to be used depending on the context and the demands of the situation. For the Populist Public, active and effective communication is an ingredient in the maintenance of group cohesion and solidarity while useful and symbolic communication is a matter of importance for the Liberal Reformist Public.

As communication and interaction remain relevant for both groups, their ethos in media and the provision of information exhibit distinctions. Albeit recognizing the hegemony of social media at the present time, the Populist Public expressed disdain for the mainstream or traditional media because of perceived biases relative to the provision of factual information, urging them to refer instead to social media sites and channels — Youtube and Social Media vlogs in particular. Departing from this tendency, the Liberal Reformist Public exhibits an inclination to counter-check information, relying instead on a variety of sources such as mainstream news programs and sites (i.e., ABS-CBN and Rappler), verified news pages in social media, and stories of experiences from first-hand witnesses. This indicates that the former perceives media as relevant in raising consciousness and imparting awareness while the latter views it as a catalyst for active participation and improvement of cognitive abilities.

Finally, in terms of the narratives on living spaces, the Populist Public expressed their hopelessness in their current living situation attributed to the lopsided services of their barangays and the perils they encounter as a result of departing their respective provinces in hopes of finding opportunities in Metro Manila. These aroused expectations of low life expectancy for them, citing the blurring possibility of human development in the Metro. Contrastingly, the Liberal Reformist Public correlates the comfort they feel in their present living spaces to the idea of living within the same vicinity as their relatives and in relishing the mutual toleration exchanged between them and their neighbors.

These distinctive ethos of the contesting publics on the aforementioned indicators collapse into a determination of relevant factors engendering antagonisms between them; one of which is the struggle between opposing narratives. Because of their tight grasp on "truths" shared and exchanged within their groups, a clash of their narratives in the socio-political spheres of society instigate resentments which put them in a battle against who shall be considered as "good" endowed with the "truth" and who shall be regarded as "evil" endowed with the perpetration of lies. Showing no indications of retreat nor surrender as both desires to attain ascendancy, a crisis of dignity emerges encompassing animosity against a nostalgia of inferiority, vulnerability, and negative connotations of being unable to think rationally. A revenge for their wounded dignities and a quest for ascertaining their legitimacy, a struggle between overturning the status quo and

maintaining its operation arises. This creates a situation where only one will be advantageous at the expense of the other's subjugation and marginalization. Indications of resistance from both the Populist Public and the Liberal Reformist Public is perceived to be due to the allegiance-tolerance dichotomy whereby loyalty to one's group in a demonstration of *paninindigan* counters the possibility of tolerance and openness to the "other". Witnessed within the internal dynamics of the groups is a condition that implicitly mandates a strict allegiance as a way to paint oneself as "good" by having one's *paninindigan* intact. However, openness to other perspectives from the opposing group unfortunately equates to betrayal and treachery, characterizing one to be "evil".

Be that as it may, the adherence of the said groups to political actors influences the manner by which they antagonize each other. Seeing that their supported leaders reflect their stances, ideologies, and demands by acting as challengers battling an "evil" that is the cause of the people's sufferings and anxieties, their adherence to political actors provides them the designation of being the "good" countering their counterpart that is the supporter and adherent of the said "evil". And with populism confronting civic exclusivism as a ramification of the shifts in the present Philippine political landscape, rejection and denial of the "other" becomes the course of action of groups who are keen in destroying and eradicating their "enemies" — a condition prompting the rejection of the democratic agency of the "other" in an assertion of absolute legitimacy.

These preconditions are breeding grounds for antagonisms engendered between groups in contestation at the present time. Needless to say, these antagonisms are found to exhibit a moral character coinciding with the moral divide between groups, encompassing notions of what is "good" and "evil" and what is "correct" and "wrong" based on the implications of Filipino religiosity on morality and the soft power alluded by the hegemonic discourses furthered by political actors in the mainstream who, in their power and influence, are able to foster an imagined condition where they resemble a moral hero supported by their adherents in a mutual fight against an immoral opponent.

In the prevalence of antagonisms amidst complexities and cleavages aggravated by the populist and illiberal challenge in the prevailing order, implications on the challenged Philippine democracy are sought. A radical 'power of the people' has an increased likelihood in society where radicalization is probable due to the interweb of various perspectives, narratives, and demands from the populace. Albeit the people are given greater liberty for their self-determination, a radical 'power of the people' may likewise threaten democratic stability when conflict arises within such differences, affecting democratic politics. Pluralism in society likewise tolerates these differences because of the rejection of a hegemony, proving favorable to the reinforcement of antagonisms where attaining solidarity is far from being reached. With contestations and differences from 'below', elite democracy will remain in prevalence. In these conditions, the reinforcement of antagonisms suggests a portrayal of Philippine democracy that will become more challenged as it is contested in the years to come.

CONCLUSION

For a country adopting the ideals of democracy, a robust and pluralistic society emerges as a consequence of entailing significance on individual liberties which allows people the free exercise of their self-determination. As the general populace entrusts the government with a democratic power in the pursuit of the public interest, the ruling establishment is bestowed with the responsibility of oversight on the diversity of interests and perspectives exchanged within the discursive spaces of society. However, as governance within such a democracy was left in its own operation, the failure to revisit the systems within the political domain has permitted toleration to transform into an outright rejection of anything that constitutes an "other" — a condition that produced an imaginary divide between an "us" and "them". Driven by the changing socio-political realities that were visible when former President Rodrigo Duterte emerged as a political challenger bearing the brand of populism that hastens the maturity of illiberal tendencies in the Philippines, exacerbated divisions along moral lines in society were divulged.

Examining the grounded realities from "below", existing distinctions on political aims, priority issues, visions for change, language, media, and living space among the Populist Public and the Liberal Reformist Public prove that differences still exist in Philippine civil society amidst previous studies' expositions on the absence of polarization in the country when Duterte allegedly united the rest of the population back in 2016. After his incumbency, the same condition is still visible as antagonisms remain engendered between contesting groups asserting their ascendancy at the expense of the other's subjugation. The struggle between opposing narratives, crisis of dignity, allegiance-tolerance dichotomy, adherence to political figures, and populism vs. civic exclusivism have all intensified resentments in between as they constantly provide spaces for antagonisms to thrive.

Therefore, in the interplay of these factors and indicators, the existing realities from below exhibits a permanence of differences which, when aggravated and radicalized, leads to the emergence and reinforcement of antagonisms between contesting publics in Philippine society. Depicting a hegemonic moral struggle, a contested civil society based on a "moral division of the nation" comprises the democracy being championed by the people from "below" against an exploitative yet prevailing nemesis — elite democracy. This hegemonic confrontation of the separate and distinct conceptions by the people on how "democracy should be" thus perpetuates a condition where actual Philippine democracy is challenged with prospects of either progress and continuation or destabilization and decay.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the espousal of concepts parallel with political polarization, representation, and democratization, the findings of this study provide contributions to the corpus of scholarship relative to contemporary political theory and political thought in the context of the Philippines.

Lacking studies that examine phenomena which deviates from the usual top-down approach, this research analyzes realities through a grounded perspective on socio-political dynamics existing between and among people in society. Nevertheless, the limitations set in the scope of this study determine areas for improvement and further analysis along with practical applications for key individuals.

To corroborate the findings of this study, a further comprehensive examination of the relational dynamics between Filipino religiosity and morality formation among Filipinos will prove essential in understanding the moral nature of divisions and antagonisms which arise between groups in present-day society. This will help in comprehending the relative influence of religion in the people's pursuit of mobilization and group formation, as well as in the emergence of antagonisms generated against their counterparts who likewise seek democratic legitimacy.

Perhaps a means to substantiate what has been discovered and elucidated in this research, an examination of the implications of hegemonic discourses and activities produced by political actors will be integral in the analysis of perception generation in society, providing a deeper understanding of the reinforcement of antagonisms perpetrated by those "above" to the people "below".

In addition, a larger view of society will be crucial in attaining a wide overview of the dynamics of antagonisms. As new groups bearing other ideologies have surfaced apart from the long-standing Populism-Liberal Reformism cycle in the Philippines, integrating a Democratic Socialist Public is suggested in this research, seeing that the group is attaining greater visibility and voice in Philippine politics recently.

Moreover, this study calls for aspiring politicians and leaders to reexamine and reassess their strategies and campaign agenda during the conduct of elections. Given that the findings dictate that numerous demands and aspirations of the Filipinos are yet to be actualized in practice, a comprehensive look and study of the perspectives, narratives, and reactions emanating from the people when politics is concerned is suggested. By doing so, it will help them in knowing the demands and interests of the electorate who will deliver them the votes that they need.

Finally, the grounded examination of Filipinos sought in the study warrants people's organizations and advocacy groups to integrate a similar grounded approach in the construction of agendas and other relevant materials to ensure that their causes are being furthered in a manner that is reflective of the people they vow to represent.

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