



Attempt at Dissecting Duterte's Presidency Using the Political Ideas of Plato, Hobbes, Locke, and Machiavelli

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Western philosophers have made significant contributions to the establishment of government around the world. Philosophers like Plato, Locke, Hobbes, and Machiavelli dramatically influenced the government system not just in foreign countries but also in the Philippines. Hence, this paper explored the political notions of four Western philosophers and positioned them in Duterte's six years of presidency. In pursuit of this study, I employed a systematic literature review. A systematic review process is used to collect articles, and then a qualitative approach is used to assess them. I came up with four major themes in this study particularly (1) Duterte is a dictator, not a philosopher-king, (2) violators of natural rights, (3) the sea monster of Davao, and lastly (4) love, fear, cruelty, and Duterte. Thus, I concurred that all of the philosophical ideas of the four Western philosophers did not fit or even violated during Duterte's six years of presidency in the Philippines.

Keywords: *Political Ideas; western philosophers; duterte; presidency; Philippines.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Western philosophers have made significant contributions to the establishment of government not only in the West but also in Southeast Asia. In fact, Plato's contribution to government lies in his concept of an ideal state, rooted in virtue and the common good [1]. Meanwhile, Hobbes and Locke, both emphasized the need for government to protect life and property but clashed in their views on the power of the ruler and the necessity of checks and balances [2]. In addition, Locke's theory of government, in particular, offered the foundation for the construction of limited government and social revolution [3]. Lastly, Machiavelli's influence on government is evident in his emphasis on the practical aspects of governance, including the use of power, treachery, and the need for a strong leader [4].

In the Philippine context, the model of the government is a democratic system that is enshrined in the 1987 Constitution, which emerged after the turbulent period of martial law under the Marcos Sr. regime [5]. As the matter of fact, democracy was first used by the Athenians over 2,500 years ago [6]. Meanwhile, the Philippine's political landscape today is characterized by a multi-party system, periodic elections, and a separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government [7]. However, challenges such as political dynasties, corruption, and weak institutions continue to undermine the full realization of democratic ideals, leading to concerns about the quality of governance and the protection of civil liberties [8].

Since assuming office in 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte's administration has pursued a grand agenda encompassing various policies, including economic development, national security grounded on his advocacy of the "war on drugs", and social welfare [9]. However, Duterte's occupancy has also been marked by various controversies, particularly regarding his human rights record since he was the mayor of Davao, extrajudicial killings, and authoritarian leanings, which have drawn criticism from both within the country and international observers [10]. Some described Duterte's rise to the presidency as the turning point into the "death of liberal reformism" [11].

Several studies were conducted comparative to Duterte's presidency and using the political ideas

of different philosophers. Pavo et al. [12], conducted a study on Rodrigo Duterte's Leadership through the Lens of Plato's Philosophy King. Also, Gaspar [13] studied Duterte's presidency and asked the question if President Duterte was a philosopher king. Meanwhile, Kine [14] explored Philippine President Rodrigo's war on drugs. Likewise, Claudio [15] studied defending Liberalism in the Global South using the political idea of John Locke and notes from Duterte's administration. In addition, Pavo et al. [16] pursued a study about the Hobbesian aspects of Duterte's style of government. Moreover, Nuque [17] explored an analysis of President Duterte's Strategy of Rule through notions from Machiavelli's *The Prince*. With these available studies, there is still a dearth of literature especially using the political ideas of Plato, Hobbes, Locke, and Machiavelli with the same paradigm. This is the gap that this paper would like to fill in. In the context of this paper, I hope to draw a conclusion on what is the application of Plato, Locke, Hobbes, and Machiavelli's political ideas in Duterte's six years of presidency.

This paper explored the political ideas of four Western philosophers and positioned them in Duterte's 6 years of presidency in the Philippines. This paper will help the students flip the pages of their philosophy and political science books and understand how thinkers from the West offer the current issues in the 21st century, particularly in the Philippine government. This paper answered the following questions. What are the political ideas held by Plato, Locke, Hobbes, and Machiavelli? What was the situation of the Philippine government under the presidency of Duterte? What are the practical applications of Plato, Locke, Hobbes, and Machiavelli's ideas on the Duterte administration?

2. METHODOLOGY

In pursuit of this paper, I employed a systematic review of the literature. A systematic review can be explained as a research method and process for identifying and critically appraising relevant research, as well as for collecting and analyzing data [18]. Also, a systematic review aims to identify all empirical evidence that fits the pre-specified inclusion criteria to answer a particular research question or hypothesis [19].

In this paper, I employed secondary data and examined their distinct results to address the

research questions posed in this paper. In gathering the data, I intentionally and purposely selected the articles or related studies that will be included in this paper. Alongside, I collected pertinent articles from online sources, notably Google Scholar. In analyzing the data, I employed a deep and thorough reading to extract key pieces of information and categorize them through themes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Plato (428-348): “For Plato, the philosopher king should be the one who has been fully educated and has come to understand the difference between the visible and the intelligible world, between opinion and knowledge, and between appearance and reality to become effective in leading the state” [20]. In addition, Philosopher King has two criteria. First, he must exhibit great intelligence and undergo rigorous academic training. Second, he is a moral person who always considers the common good of all and can overpower his spirit and appetite [21]. Having mentioned all of these, I would like to assess if Duterte is qualified as a Philosopher king.

Duterte was a former Mayor of Davao and a lawyer as well [12]. In the first criterion of a philosopher king, Duterte admitted to the public that he was an average student during his high school years. He spent seven years in high school in Digos Davao Del Sur (GMA News, 2016). He even advised the students to settle for a 75 grade (GMA News Online, 2018). I think Duterte did not reach the first qualification of being a philosopher king. Moreover, there is another quality that the philosopher-king must embrace. Philosopher King should be moral in considering the common good. Morally because it is in their nature to love truth and learn so much that they are free from the greed and lust that tempts others to abuse power and intellectually because they alone can gain full knowledge of reality [13]. No doubt that Duterte deeply failed in this criterion. He abused his power to the extent that there were many people died because of his war on drugs [22]. I am hung on the question that if Duterte is not qualified as a philosopher king, who is he?

Duterte is a dictator, not a philosopher-king:

“The concept of Plato about his idea of a philosopher king is not perfect. In fact, many scholars strongly opposed the idea of philosopher-king. Firstly, Karl Popper blamed the

idea of the philosopher king for justifying the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. He added that philosopher-king led directly to Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin” [23]. “Also, Matassa argues that Plato’s argument for a group of knowledgeable persons who can carry out happiness and justice in the Republic is ideal and unrealistic leaving our rights and opinions in the hands of a benevolent dictator [24]. Moreover, Wolff considers a major flaw in Plato’s argument in that he argues that an enlightened despot, without the need to consult people, would govern in their interests” [25]. “Hence, Plato’s argument becomes increasingly inapplicable. But if we follow the arguments of Popper, Matassa, and Woolf- Duterte’s presidency was a dictatorial government” [13].

This claim validated by Nery [26] concurs that President Duterte has dictatorial tendencies. She asked if the “Philippines is back under one-man rule.” She replied, “Not yet — but we’re getting there, fast. Also, Fuesl [27] writes that “worst, Duterte has been bending the law and its spirit into his very own small-minded world. In addition, Temario Rivera, former chair of the University of the Philippines’ Department of Political Science, said that Duterte has shown “an inclination to becoming a despot” and has shown a “more pronounced dictatorial tendency over his two years in office [13]. In addition, Labastin [28] refers to President Duterte’s dictatorial tendencies as symptoms of being a narcissistic leader. If we follow Eddy and VanDerLinden [29] study, it proposes a description of a leader in terms of traits. Let me assess if these are also the traits of Duterte. “Being seen as very superior,” i.e. they need to insult others to affirm their greatness. “Expanding their power,” meaning they always need to pick up a fight to show they are really powerful, and “Being admired by all,” especially by high-status people or by those they have insulted or injured. “In fact, citizens were displeased with the President’s performance as an authoritarian leader when he consistently manifested a disregard for the rule of law and human rights resulting in tens of thousands of supposed drug addicts killed” [30].

“Moreover, these are the other manifestations of being a dictator. The hallmarks of Duterte’s administration are defined by his abrasive and combative rhetoric in dealing with his critics. He has hounded his critics and found ways to put them in jail like Senator Leila de Lima or impeached Supreme Court Justice Sereno” [31]. “Moreover, the totalitarian streak is also

manifested in the manner the media has been treated by this administration. There are available statistics as to how many journalists have been harassed, with a few becoming EJK victims. At various junctures, Rappler, the Philippine Daily Inquirer, and ABS-CBN had faced difficulties in fully enjoying freedom of the press. Mayuga writes that at one time, these words were spoken: “Just because you’re a journalist, you’re not exempted from assassination if you’re a son of a bitch” In one cover story of Time, Trump, Putin, and Duterte were lumped together as “strongmen” who can so easily manipulate truth and have such abhorrence for a feisty media” [32].

“However, on a few occasions, President Duterte had no fears about referring to himself as a dictator. In fact, at a gathering of former Communist rebels, he was quoted saying that “if weren’t for his dictatorial style, his country would stagnate and never improve.” “If you say dictator, I am a dictator. If I don’t act dictator, which is my style now, nothing will happen to this country...I had to act like a dictator” [33]. Given all the available literature, I concurred that former president Rodrigo R. Duterte was not a philosopher-king but rather showed a tendency for a dictator. Hence, he did not meet the two criteria of becoming a philosopher king.

John Locke (1632-1704): According to Locke, “men can naturally know the moral law even in the state of nature. Locke added that the law teaches all mankind that, being all equal and independent, thus, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions”. “In addition, this natural moral law is not simply the egotistical law of self-preservation unlike Hobbes but the positive recognition of each individual’s value as a person by his or her status as a creature of God” [20]. I do not know if Duterte would agree with the idea of Locke about God. In fact, he mocked the creation story in the Christian Bible. He even questioned the story behind the Last Supper, wherein Jesus Christ had his last meal with his apostles. “Sino nag-publish niyang Bible na iyan? Even itong last supper. Who are the idiots there? [34]. I think Locke and Duterte have a conflict regarding this matter.

Meanwhile, Locke established his political idea by highlighting the natural rights of the citizens, namely, life liberty, and possession. In this section, let’s take a glimpse at Duterte’s presidency in the context of the natural rights of

Locke. Let me quote Duterte himself, “I’m telling the Filipino people, huwag ako. If I become president, it would be bloody because we’ll order the killing of all criminals, particularly the drug lords” – Rodrigo Duterte [11].

Violators of natural rights: Let me situate the natural rights of the citizens in Duterte’s presidency. John Locke highly emphasized life as one of the natural rights. Meanwhile, in Duterte’ presidency, his war on drugs committed more than 7,000 suspected drug users and drug dealers killed by police and unidentified gunmen since he took office in 2016 [22]. Also, the death toll doesn’t include the victims that Duterte calls “collateral damage” or children shot dead in anti-drug operations. Sadly, many of the victims were found in alleys or street corners wrapped in packing tape, their bodies bullet-ridden or bearing stab wounds, and other signs of torture [35]. However, Duterte justifies his anti-drug campaign as a life-or-death struggle. He is untroubled by the fact that the statistics he brandishes to back up this hyperbole are flawed, exaggerated, or fabricated [14]. Thus, moral law directs that nobody has the right to curtail human life, but Duterte did the opposite due to his war on drugs campaign.

“In the context of liberty, Duterte and pro-Duterte lawmakers have politically attacked his most vocal domestic critic, Senator Leila de Lima. A former justice secretary and chairwoman of the official CHR. Duterte’s senate loyalists overthrew de Lima from the chair of the Senate Committee on Justice and Human Rights in September 2016 in an apparent reprisal for de Lima’s move to convene Senate hearings into the drug war killings” [36]. The hearings prompted a stream of hateful, misogynist invective from Duterte and other pro-Duterte. In August, Duterte went so far as to tell a crowd of supporters that de Lima should “hang herself” [37]. “Duterte’s political crusade against de Lima climaxed in February with her arrest and detention on politically motivated charges of violating the country’s Dangerous Drugs Act. De Lima is in prison awaiting trial but is fearful that her safety is at risk while behind bars” [14]. Hence, I hope to believe that this incident was a concrete example of the violation of one’s liberty and a manifestation of the corrupt justice system that we have in the Philippines.

In the context of possession, I operationally used the word possession as the country’s property. Duterte’s presidency moves toward China. This

stance aims to earn goodwill with China so that the Philippines can avail itself of enormous aid and loans from China's Belt and Road Initiative [38]. Nevertheless, by appeasing an expansionist power, the Philippines became complicit to China's long-term strategy of maritime expansion to push the United States out of East Asia. Thus, the Duterte administration might end up losing its property or the country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea and the confidence and trust of its allies and security partners. This administration might also leave the public coffers empty and dry [39]. In addition, according to Wagner [40], the Philippines lost its natural resources in the West Philippine Sea because of China. For Locke, property is very crucial in one's life but Duterte's presidency permitted to loss country's property particularly the islands in the West Philippine Sea.

Given all the available pieces of literature, our country and its ethos of democracy should reside on the foundation of the constitution. Following this context, Duterte's presidency has violated the constitution which happens to be the safeguard of the people's fundamental rights.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679): Thomas Hobbes was best known for his political philosophy, especially as his well-known masterpiece, the Leviathan [41]. Hence, fear is the driving theme of his philosophy. Also, the Leviathan or the sea monster must be feared and obeyed. In addition, Hobbes argued that before civil society was created people were innately chaotic and selfish. Where life in this state was nasty, brutish, violent, and short [42]. To end this violent setting, Hobbes argued that mankind must forge a covenant with each other [20]. In this contract, people should give up their freedom and autonomy to absolute authority. Hence, this political entity has dictatorial tendencies. In this section, I gathered three Hobessian aspects of Duterte's presidency.

Sea-monster of davao: For nearly three decades before he became president, Duterte was a mayor of the large city of Davao. About his Davao reign in 2002, Zabriskie [43] dubbed him as "Dirty Harry, portraying Duterte as a motorcycle-riding, gun-toting mayor and comparing him to "The Punisher" for condoning the summary execution of alleged criminals. "Meanwhile, it was during his time as mayor that he crafted a tough-guy (siga) image [11]. Hence, the people of Davao allowed him to rule with an iron fist in exchange for social peace and personal security" [44]. "In fact, Duterte is tired of

being merely a local boss, overcoming his ennuity by becoming the Philippines' boss-in-chief" [11].

In the national elections, former Davao City Mayor and now the 16th President Rodrigo R. Duterte received the highest voter turnouts in the history of the country by winning 16M votes despite his protestations that he would be a dictator and build a revolutionary government [45]. It is interesting to interpret this statistical data that people prefer a strongman to rule them for the next six years. In fact, when he occupied the office, he manifested Hobbesian aspects such as extending the period of Martial Law in Mindanao and instigating his political resources to destabilize his political opponents. He decreed the "war on drugs" though is not part of martial law, but the context has a resemblance to the Hobbesian aspect since this portrays a kind of dictatorial manner [16].

Also, based on World Values Survey [46], it is not surprising Duterte's strongman image resonated so strongly with many Filipinos when it is considered that nearly two-thirds of Filipino respondents answered in waves 4 and 6 of the World Values Survey that they favored "strong leaders" and that nearly half said they preferred military to civilian rule. Another Hobbesian aspect of Duterte is that he managed to "perform a crisis", striking a chord with a "frustrated public" with his promise to crack down on drugs [47].

In addition, the Hobbesian aspect has manifested in his order on the anti-war-on-drug personalities. An order speaks of the execution of these persons, as he delivered in his speeches, "I will kill all those who are opposed to my war on drugs. Although there wasn't any sort of visible coercion to the drug users considering the "killing" of people against it, depicts the dictatorial indication. Even on the ill-disciplined policemen, "if you handle it wrong, I will send you to jail. If you fight back, then you will die [16]. To threaten or inflict fear on the people in the state of killing them is the easiest route for the people to go back to their chaotic state of being [48]. Moreover, Hobbes argues that the Leviathan can, stifle the economy, propose questionable taxes, and imprison people for the sake of his pleasure.

Given all these data, I concurred that Duterte had the Hobbesian characteristics. Duterte inflicted fear on the Filipino people during his presidency for the sake of his advocacy for the war on drugs. In addition, Duterte did not only impose fear

among drug users and pushers but also those people who are strictly opposed to his advocacy.

Niccolò machiavelli (1469–1527): Niccolò Machiavelli is greatly known for his writings called “The Prince.” Written around 1513 and published by 1532 [49]. Moreover, the Prince entails the notions Machiavelli holds concerning the ruler and his ways of leading the government [20]. In this section, I would like to present the similarities between the Prince of Machiavelli and Duterte’s presidency.

Love, fear, cruelty and duterte: The Duterteserye. Way back in 2016, there were rumors that Duterte would run for the presidency. Duterte denied these rumors, explaining that he was too old, tired, and poor to run for president [50]. But after so many refusals that he would run for the presidency, the maybe-maybe-not dance kept Duterte in the limelight, scoring precious airtime in primetime news and headlines in broadsheets. Finally, in November, Duterte filed for a substitution of candidacy [51]. I think this is one of the political strategies of Duterte to gather sympathy and love from the people. Meanwhile, Devanadera and Alieto [52] added that Duterte gave his promise, ‘I will go to prison with you’, which was mentioned in the speeches several times. Duterte also promises his undying love and service to the Filipino people with a better country by fighting against drugs.

In addition, during Duterte’s campaign, he often ended with patriotic songs and the image of Duterte kissing the Philippine flag [51]. Also, In a forum where he first indicated his interest to run for president, he said, “If only to save this Republic, I can run for President.” He presented his imagined city as the murder capital of the country he transformed into one of the most competitive in city indices, named one of the Top 20 Most Liveable Cities in Asia. Likewise, Duterte employed a populist promise of “a caring, humble, and accessible form of governance” [10]. In fact, at the beginning of his presidency, he had an image of a humble start as he pleased the masses, but the longer he was seated in such power, he began to exercise cruelty on his subjects [17]. In addition, Duterte’s charisma can be best described as *cariño brutal*—a volatile mix of will to power, a commanding personality, and gangster charm that fulfills his followers’ deep-seated yearning for a father figure who will finally end what they see as the “national chaos” [53].

In the past years under the regime of Duterte, one of the harshest possible punishments was allowed to make people fear his power. It is through EJK that most people belonging to the lower classes were punished by death despite having no legal process or proper disclosure of someone's identity about illegal drug activities [17]. In fact, the elite and the middle class who most feared for their security supported Duterte's campaign [11]. Meanwhile, the Philippines experiences an almost authoritarian government as Duterte holds more power over the Filipino citizens. The COVID-19 and related injustices among the Philippine National Police and the lower class citizens, Filipinos became more at safety risk with the fear of going against the government. In exposing the kind of leadership that Duterte administers in the Philippine Government, Machiavelli provided the ground claiming that a leader is better feared than loved [17].

The badly used structure of cruelty has been seen throughout the 4-year reign of the Duterte administration, even under the harsh circumstances of the COVID-19 Pandemic, a controversial statement of cruelty is still exercised by the President in his statement: “You choose, vaccine or I will have you jailed” [17]. These words are coming from the ruler who is supposed to be governing the State with concern for the masses, yet they threaten the people to follow his commands. On the other hand, from Machiavelli’s perspective, it is only right for a ruler to impose fear, especially if it concerns the safety of the community which in this instance is herd immunity against COVID-19 [54].

In addition, cruelty can be beneficial, but it can also be detrimental in garnering the trust of the people it serves. There is a certain extent to which a consequence of punishment either makes the people afraid and submissive or the other way which is for them to be defensive and hostile [55]. Yet as we have seen in Duterte’s account, his strategic rule of cruelty is very ineffective in gaining the favor of his subjects. He maneuvers through a system of cruelty that constantly fails to recognize how far cruelty must be exerted through his impositions. He often goes overboard to threatening the people whom he must be serving given that it is a democratic country, while also lacking the concept of positive qualities Machiavelli proposed for the ruler to have [17].

Cruelty is Duterte's best way of exercising power. Another example is regarding the law his administration was promoting called the Anti-Terror Act of 2020. Despite the law violating 15 of 22 items of the Bill of Rights according to an article detailing how it restricts fundamental human rights such as freedom of speech, the presumption of innocence, academic freedom, and other essential rights in voicing out the criticality of its citizens within the government ("Anti-terror law violates 15 of 22 items in Bill of Rights, issue TRO now" n.d.). This cruel act of taking away the voice of the people is one of the primary pieces of evidence of the very failure of Duterte's governance. People feared him through this Act as it enabled the authorities to jail any person alleged to be conspiring against the government. Cruelty is never justified the instant it oppresses the people [17].

I would like to concur that Machiavelli and Duterte have their similarities in governing. Duterte showed his cruelty and harshest power and inflicted fear on his subjects. However, based on the literature, being the modern prince is not effective in Duterte's administration. Hence, the cruel act to people is the very failure of Duterte's governance.

4. CONCLUSION

Philosopher kings should be both morally and intellectually suited. However, a critical examination reveals that former president Rodrigo R. Duterte was not a philosopher-king and showed a manifestation of a dictator. Hence, he falls short of this standard of being morally and intellectually suited. It is very clear that he abused his power and geared towards being a dictator. According to Locke, all mankind is responsible for respecting the life, health, liberty, and possessions of others. However, Duterte's presidency committed thousands of killings. In addition, the imprisonment of De Lima was a concrete example of the violation of one's liberty and a manifestation of the corrupt justice system that we have in the Philippines. Also, for Locke, property is very crucial in one's life, but Duterte permitted us to lose our property particularly the islands in the West Philippines.

Thomas Hobbes was best known for his Leviathan and fear is the driving theme of his philosophy. This sea monster is not to be covenanted but to be feared and obeyed. Based on the various studies, Duterte had the Hobbesian characteristics. Duterte inflicted fear

on the Filipino people during his administration for the sake of his advocacy for the war on drugs. Duterte holds the staff of power and imposes fear among drug users, pushers, and those people who are strictly opposed to his advocacy. Machiavelli and Duterte have similarities in governing. Duterte showed love, fear, and cruelty. Duterte's presidency inflicted fear on his subjects as Machiavelli perceived to be done by the leader. However, based on the literature, being the modern prince and use of cruelty is not effective in Duterte's administration. Hence, the cruel act to people is the very failure of Duterte's presidency.

Meanwhile, this paper recognizes various limitations. This study employed a systematic review of the literature. Also, this was limited to the six years of Duterte as president of the Philippines. This paper is only limited to the political ideas of Plato, Locke, Hobbes, and Machiavelli. Given these sets of parameters, further studies are encouraged employing similar or other methodologies, and different Western or Asian philosophers to validate the generated themes of this paper.

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Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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