

Contemporary politics in the Philippines shows how emotions can inform human rights advocacy

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On 30 June 2022, Rodrigo Duterte concluded his six-year term as the President of the Philippines. During his presidency, Duterte was perhaps best known for his vocal scrutiny of human rights, and strict defence of the killings committed as part of his administration's strategy to combat criminality. Many of his controversial statements on human rights captured media headlines across the globe. There is, for example, an infamous [speech](#) during a pre-election rally in 2016 where he urged the public to 'forget the laws on human rights,' promising instead that if he makes it to the presidential palace he would kill criminals. There is also another [speech](#) where, in relation to his administration's war on drugs, he said he does not 'care about human rights', and again [another](#), where he said he would be 'happy' to go jail for the killing of human rights activists. These '[anti-human rights discourses](#)' were not mere words. They shaped the contours of the country under his leadership, during which thousands of suspected [drug dealers and users](#) were killed in police and vigilante encounters, and scores of [human rights defenders](#) endured various forms of harassment.

While Duterte's anti-rights discourse was met with resistance by civil society organisations in the Philippines—especially by organisations advocating for human rights—it was also met with overwhelming acceptance by many Filipinos, who supported Duterte as their leader. Polls show that Duterte consistently [sustained high approval ratings](#) throughout his six-year term, and left his post as '[the most](#)

[popular president](#) who has ever served under the 1987 Constitution. The support he amassed [‘cut across classes, generations, gender and geography.’](#)

In the wake of his departure, many questions remain: How did Duterte’s anti-rights discourses gain such widespread acceptance? What lessons can human rights organisations take from this history? Part of answering these questions, I suggest, necessitates a deeper consideration of the emotional appeal of Duterte’s discourses, and how an understanding of it can inform the work of human rights organisations.

What do emotions have to do it?

Emotion is not often a concept associated with human rights. This may be explained, in part, by the [dominance of legalistic approaches](#) in human rights theory and practice. In such approaches, human rights are seen primarily as law, and commonly involve claims addressed to States. These legal approaches are useful in many contexts, but generally adopt a ‘rationalist’ view of human rights, which disregards emotion for its potential to hamper ‘objective’ analyses. In the legal realm, human rights are commonly imagined as entitlements or obligations—neither of which, as scholar Kathryn [Abrams](#) puts it, ‘brings emotion to mind’—and as belonging to individuals who are seen as ‘rationalist subject[s]...hardly a creature brimming with affect.’ Another reason that explains the disconnect between emotions and human rights is that emotions have traditionally been assumed to belong in the [‘private’ or ‘personal’ sphere](#), which human rights, with its State-centric focus, generally overlooks. Yet, emotions figure centrally in the human rights issues civil society face, as poignantly exemplified during the Duterte administration.

Many [scholars](#) who have written about Duterte, have defined him as a populist, with an uncanny ability to enliven or mobilise people’s emotions. While endless definitions can describe populism—a strategy or ideology, for example—one that highlights its emotional or affective nature, comes from scholars Benjamin Moffit and Simon Tormey. They define populism as [‘a political style’](#) composed of a series of

performances that aim to influence political relations between a ‘populist leader’, the ‘people’ they claim to represent, and vice versa. To speak of populism as composed of ‘performances’, is to speak of it as affective; for performances—whether plays, concerts, or in this case politics—function to evoke emotional reactions from an audience. Populist leaders enact stories, symbols, and tropes to forge a connection with the public.

Duterte does this strategically through, for example, his enactment of fear. Duterte was a known [storyteller](#), who wove together narratives about the drugs crisis, with the objective of creating a climate of fear. While this was partly directed towards [criminals](#), who Duterte said he wanted ‘[to scare](#)’ into following the law, fear was also directed towards the public. Duterte often [heightened](#) existing fears about drug problems among the public—many of whom already believed in a ‘[perceived seriousness of the national drugs/crime problem](#)’ —and use this fear to justify his anti-rights agenda.

One emblematic example of this tactic is evident in a section of his speech during a [meeting](#) in 2020 where he spoke about ‘the evil of drugs,’ his anger about it, and why he does not ‘give a shit’ about human rights. Here, Duterte tells a story about an unnamed family, in which the father gets addicted to drugs, and as a result, starts beating up his wife and children. His drug use forces his wife to work to provide for the family, which leads her to be trafficked abroad or relocated to the Middle East for work, where she may be treated as a ‘slave’, subject to rape and forced to get abortions. The man’s drug use also leads him to engage in vices like drunkenness and robbery. His children, left in his care, turn to drugs themselves. If this is what can happen in one family, Duterte argues, ‘multiply it with the ...thousands in our midst’ and we can see why drugs are a problem for society. This, he said, ‘is why I don’t care about human rights’ and part of why he orders authorities to kill suspected drug users.

Here, Duterte narrates one of his classic stories about the drug problem. In it, he frames drug users as causing personal and, by extension, national suffering, and

from here advances the claim that violating the rights of these actors is a public good. The story is, in many ways, incoherent. It simplifies and distorts the drug problem and scapegoats drug users. Duterte is also inconsistent in his usage of rights, claiming, on the one hand, that he does not care about rights, yet speaking at length about why drug users do not deserve them. But Duterte does not aim to be coherent. As a populist, his objective is to make his performance resonate.

To do so, Duterte affectively frames human rights violations against drug users in the form of their killings, not as acts of merciless violence, but as a commonsense matter of self-defence against an alleged aggressor. The logic is that he is not attacking anyone; it is drug users who are poisoning society. This deflects wrongdoing from Duterte, justifies the violence he promotes, and makes his controversial statements about human rights seem more acceptable to those who already fear drug users. The story is also moving as it gives a detailed account of the suffering many Filipinos know intimately and have lived, either first-hand or within their networks: addiction, family separation, physical violence, and the abuse of overseas workers. Duterte may not speak to the complex politics that shape these issues, but he does speak well to how painfully they manifest in people's lives. This was something Duterte was commended for by his supporters: his ability to [speak about and represent people's misery](#) with fluency.

Additionally, the story benefits from Duterte's emotional performance. When Duterte speaks about social issues, he uses an enraged tone, swears out of frustration, and admits his anger about it. He acts as though the people's pain is also his pain. As part of this, he is [careful](#) not to distance himself from the public by using political jargon or dressing extravagantly. This was welcomed by his supporters, who saw Duterte's 'authenticity' as a sign of reliability. One [study](#) of Duterte supporters, for example, showed that many appreciated Duterte's perceived ability to bring 'authenticity to politics,' citing 'his style of speech, manner of walking, and even his clothing as material proofs of his supposedly authentic political act.' Another [study](#) showed Duterte supporters commending his 'reliable' character, describing him as 'a man who talks the language of the poor.'

What the above suggests is that the acceptance of Duterte's anti-rights discourses hinges largely on his ability to perform them in ways that have emotional resonance and appeal among voters. Emotions, in other words, are an important channel through which Duterte mediated his relationship with the public: he used affective discourses to promote an anti-rights agenda, and the public evaluated their support for Duterte based on how his performance of these discourses resonated with their experiences.

Characterising Duterte's relationship with people as emotional does not reduce it to '[superficiality](#)'— as somehow based on fleeting feelings as opposed to 'real' politics. Rather, it brings to light [the emotional nature of politics and political nature of emotions](#). Politics is emotional, in the sense that leaders such as Duterte depend upon forging affective relationships with the public to challenge human rights. Emotions are political, since what resonates emotionally depends largely on the context one exists in. Evidently, Duterte played on existing fears about drugs. This fear is not inherent: people are not born fearing drug users. Duterte's representation of them as fearsome thrives only because the image of drug users as people *to be feared* is already well-codified in '[cultural histories and memories](#).' In the Philippines, the idea has long been institutionalised that the recurring cases of violence committed by drug users, can be attributed singularly to the drug user, as opposed to, say, an array of socio-economic and political [factors](#) such as structural poverty, inadequate access to health services, violent policing practices, and poor public infrastructure that make those violent encounters possible in the first place. Similarly, nothing is innately appealing about Duterte's 'man of the people' character. It has appeal largely because there has been a growing perception among many in the Philippines that since the downfall of late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr.—who ruled the country from 1965 and, having been responsible for widespread human rights abuses, was overthrown through the People's Power Revolution in 1986—preceding politicians have [failed](#) to deliver on their promise to restore democracy and improve standards of living. To the dismay of many, political systems in the post-Marcos era remained dominated by a handful of elites, standing above

the Filipino people who endured hardships in the form of, as Duterte pointed out, physical violence, job insecurity, and so on. If the context were different, Duterte's discourse might not have drawn the emotional appeal it did.

What does this mean for human rights organisations?

Human rights organisations in the Philippines, though [diverse](#), are primarily composed of non-governmental organisations, alliances and networks that adopt the defence of human rights in their mandate. Under Duterte's term, these organisations relentlessly challenged his anti-rights approach to politics, facing various abuses along the way. In line with traditional human rights practice, much of their advocacy efforts tended to concentrate on criticising Duterte's anti-rights agenda and calling on State actors to address it. A substantial amount of work was, for example, focused on [demanding that the Duterte administration put an end to rights violations](#), and for inter-governmental bodies to condemn Duterte, impose [sanctions](#), and [launch examinations and investigations against him](#). This was often done with support from international and regional organisations as their allies. These strategies were useful for exposing Duterte's violence, his breach of international norms, and the necessity for the international community to act upon it. The resulting examinations and investigations by the [Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines](#), the [United Nations](#), and the [International Criminal Court](#) reflect the success of their efforts. Yet if, as outlined above, a central aspect to Duterte's power exists in the emotional appeal of his discourses among the *public*, it follows that advocacy work focused on the *State* addresses only part of the problem. It addresses Duterte's violations and breaches, but not the societal acceptance that existed for such actions.

Duterte's popular appeal highlights the value of conducting human rights work that go beyond lobbying governments and diplomats, and focus more on fostering relationships with communities and individuals who sit at the margins of such realms

of power. These are the people who voted for Duterte, and who showed him support throughout six years as president, despite the scrutiny he faced. While communities who [enthusiastically](#) supported Duterte are commonly represented as [unthinking](#) people manipulated by Duterte, as shown in preceding sections and by other [scholars](#), many were critical agents, who invested in Duterte because they felt his investment in them.

It also speaks to the importance of not only criticising Duterte, but considering what his emotional appeal reveals about the contemporary political landscape. Studying this may provide important guidance for organisations, as they reflect upon developing advocacy strategies that resonate with this audience. For example, in one [study](#), during interviews conducted with human rights organisations, some advocates shared that while external factors made it difficult for them to draw public appeal, such as Duterte's attacks towards them, they may also have alienated people by promoting discourses that presented rights as self-evident truths, used 'jargon' tailored for those 'already politically engaged', and adopted a 'preachy tone.' In observing Duterte's appeal, we see that shifting away from these [technocratic](#) discourses, which are cold and distant in emotional orientation, may be key. As signalled above, many were moved by Duterte's 'authenticity' precisely because they rejected the ['inaccessibility of traditional politicians and institutions'](#), and demanded politics with ['popular appeal and emotional identification that cut through technocratic smokescreens'](#). Human rights advocacy that speaks to people in a language they can relate to is important for meeting this demand. While more research is needed to explore what human rights beyond technocracy may look like, [artists'](#) work in highlighting the affective dimensions of rights, point to promising directions. Beyond discourse, however, work also needs to be done to address the discontentment people express towards the exclusionary nature of political systems in the Philippines, which gave Duterte's 'man of the people' routine its appeal. The context signals the importance of placing these issues of systemic inequality as a priority in the work of human rights organisations.

Another reason advocates' claims may have dissuaded the public from the human

rights movement is the tendency for some to promote discourses that stoked '[anger and indignation](#).' This approach aligns with traditional strategies of 'naming and shaming' violators, which was [prevalent](#) during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos Sr, but was critiqued for concentrating heavily on the negative aspects of rights. In response, some, especially the younger generation of activists, have called for 'positive' or 'hope-based messaging.' This aligns with global trends, where [positive narratives](#) are gaining traction as a strategy against populism. Its aim is not to conceal the negative aspects of rights, but to highlight the hopeful future it can create.

Striking this balance, however, is as difficult as it is important. Romanticising human rights can also be alienating, especially if obscures the violations many still face, and the structural work needed to address them. Arguably, it might be useful to go beyond discussions about 'negative versus positive' emotions. Framing the discussion in binary terms makes it appear as though there is one answer to the issue. Yet while 'negative' emotions such as anger may be dissuading for some, as shown in the case of Duterte, anger can also foster solidarity for political action. Moreover, Duterte supporters were not drawn by anger alone, but a variety of emotions, including a [politics of anxiety and hope](#). There is thus no single set of emotions that resonates with people. Duterte's discourses were only emotionally 'appealing' in so far as they spoke to people's socially accepted fears and lived experiences.

Drawing on this, it could be valuable to focus less on finding the 'right' emotions, but on translating human rights into the language of emotions. This might mean recognising and representing rights violations not as mere breaches of international agreements, but as harms felt physically and emotionally; as phenomena, '[bound up with pain, distress and desperation](#).' This would necessitate challenging preconceived ideas of human rights subjects as devoid of emotion and recognising them as affective beings: as people, who, when faced with hardship—whether hunger, poverty, or insecurity—will first *feel* this hardship, before they think of the treaties and conventions. It can also mean measuring the realisation of rights not

only in terms of legal accountability, but the fulfilment of human needs and [alleviation of suffering](#). Putting food on the table, having access to education, expressing oneself openly, are human rights in practice. Translating human rights into the language of emotion, in other words, is about translating it into the language of the personal, everyday and lived. Doing so helps opens possibilities for more people to see how human rights may resonate with their lives and political visions.

Again, however, this focus on lived experience in discourse must be complemented with other actions that address the structural issues that give rise to those circumstances of suffering in the first place. The systemic issues mentioned above that give Duterte's anti-rights discourses against drug users its emotional appeal—structural poverty, lack of access to health services, among others—ought to be addressed not only in discourse, but in holistic practice. As enormous undertakings, addressing these issues through collective action alongside a variety of actors outside the traditional human rights advocacy groups, from academics to cultural workers, to medical practitioners and funding bodies, is essential.

It is said, after all, that the number of populists being elected to leadership are steadily growing, with many [incorporating](#) anti-rights discourses in their performances. And while emotions lie at the heart of any politics, its role in today's mediatised political landscape is becoming magnified. As politics become '[increasingly dependent on and shaped by mass media](#)'—an industry where emotion is an important currency—politicians are using innovative ways to draw emotional appeal. Signs of this are already evident with the [recent election](#) of President, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., son of Ferdinand Marcos Sr, whose victory was largely made possible by a systematic, decades-long media campaign to [re-narrate](#) his family's legacy of human rights abuses, into a yet another discourse of peace and order.

A protest on the 46th anniversary of Ferdinand Marcos' imposition of martial law.
[Credit: 350.org/Flickr](#)