

The Bloodstained Rise of Global Populism

A Political Movement's Violent Pursuit of "Enemies"

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In 2016, something extraordinary happened in the politics of diverse countries around the world. With surprising speed and simultaneity, a new generation of populist leaders emerged from the margins of nominally democratic nations to win power. In doing so, they gave voice, often in virulent fashion, to public concerns about the social costs of globalization.

Even in societies as disparate as the affluent United States and the impoverished Philippines, similarly violent strains of populist rhetoric carried two unlikely candidates from the political margins to the presidency. On opposite sides of the Pacific, these outsider campaigns were framed by lurid calls for violence and even murder.

As his insurgent crusade gained momentum, billionaire Donald Trump moved beyond his repeated promises to fight Islamic terror with torture and brutal bombing by also advocating the murder of women and children.

"The other thing with the terrorists is you have to take out their families, when you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families," he [told](#) Fox News. "They care about their lives, don't kid yourself. When they say they don't care about their lives, you have to take out their families."

At the same time, campaigning in the Philippines on a law-and-order program of his own, Rodrigo Duterte, then mayor of a remote provincial city, swore that he would kill drug dealers across the nation, sparing nothing in the way of violent imagery.

"If by chance that God will place me [in the presidency]," he [promised](#) in launching his campaign, "watch out because the 1,000 [people executed while he was a mayor] will become 100,000. You will see the fish in Manila Bay getting fat. That is where I will dump you."

The rise of these political soulmates and populist strongmen not only resonated deeply in their political cultures, but also reflected global trends that made their bloodstained rhetoric paradigmatic of our present moment. After a post-Cold War quarter-century of globalization, displaced workers around the world began mobilizing angrily to oppose an economic order that had made life so good for transnational corporations and social elites.

Between 1999 and 2011, for instance, Chinese imports had eliminated 2.4 million American jobs, [closing](#) furniture manufacturers in North Carolina, factories that produced glass in Ohio, and auto parts and steel companies across the Midwest. As a range of nations

worldwide reacted to such realities by imposing a combined 2,100 restrictions on imports to staunch similar job losses, world trade actually started to [slow down](#) without a major recession for the first time since 1945.

The Bloodstained History of Populism

Across Europe, hyper-nationalist right-wing parties like the French National Front, the Alternative for Germany, and the UK Independence Party [won over voters](#) by cultivating nativist, especially anti-Islamic, responses to globalization. Simultaneously, a generation of populist demagogues either held, gained, or threatened to take power in democracies around the world: Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Recep Erdogan in Turkey, Donald Trump in the U.S., Narendra Modi in India, Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, among others.

Indian essayist Pankaj Mishra recently [summed](#) up their successes this way:

“Demagogues are still emerging, in the West and outside it, as the promise of prosperity collides with massive disparities of wealth, power, education, and status.”

The Philippine economy offered typically grim news on this score. It [grew](#) by an impressive 6% annually in the six years before Duterte launched his presidential campaign, even as a staggering 26 million poor Filipinos [struggled](#) to survive on a dollar a day. In those years, just 40 elite Filipino families [grabbed](#) an estimated 76% of all the wealth this growth produced.

Scholar Michael Lee [suggests](#) that a populist leader succeeds by rhetorically defining his or her national community by both its supposedly “shared characteristics” and its inevitable common “enemy,” whether Mexican “rapists” or Muslim refugees, much as the Nazis created a powerful sense of national selfhood by excluding certain groups by “blood.” In addition, he argues, such movements share the desire for an “apocalyptic confrontation” through a final “mythic battle” as “the vehicle to revolutionary change.”

Although scholars like Lee emphasize the ways in which populist demagogues rely on violent rhetoric for their success, they tend to focus less on another crucial aspect of such populists globally: actual violence. These movements might still be in their (relatively) benign phase in the United States and Europe, but in less developed democracies around the world populist leaders haven’t hesitated to inscribe their newfound power on the battered bodies of their victims.

For more than a decade, for instance, Russian President Vladimir Putin, a reasonable candidate for sparking this wave of populism, has demonstrated his famously [bare-chested](#) version of power politics by [ensuring](#) that opponents and critics meet grim ends under “mysterious” circumstances. These include the lethal spritz of polonium 210 that killed Russian secret police defector Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006; the shooting of journalist and Putin critic Anna Politkovskaya outside her Moscow apartment that same year; a dose of rare Himalayan plant poison for banker and Putin nemesis Alexander Perepilichny in London in 2012; a fusillade that felled opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in downtown Moscow in 2015; and four [fatal bullets](#) this March for refugee whistleblower Denis

Vorononkov on a Kiev sidewalk, which Ukraine has denounced as “an act of state terrorism.”

As an Islamist populist, Turkish president Recep Erdogan has projected his power through a [bloody repression](#) of, and a new war with, the country’s Kurdish minority. He portrays the Kurds as a cancer within the country’s body politic whose identity must be extinguished, much as his forebears rid themselves of the Armenians. In addition, since mid-2016, he’s overseen a [wholesale purge](#) of 50,000 officials, journalists, teachers, and military officers in the aftermath of a failed coup, and in a [brutal round](#) of torture and rape filled Turkish prisons to the brim.

In 2014, retired general Prabowo Subianto nearly won Indonesia’s presidency with a populist [campaign](#) of “strength and order.” In fact, Prabowo’s military career had long been steeped in such violence. In 1998, when the authoritarian regime of his father-in-law Suharto was at the brink of collapse, Prabowo, then commander of the Kopassus Rangers, staged the kidnapping-disappearance of a dozen student activists, the [savagely rape](#) of 168 Chinese women (acts meant to incite racial violence), and the [burning](#) of 43 shopping malls and 5,109 buildings in Jakarta, the country’s capital, that left more than 1,000 dead.

During his first months in power, newly elected Philippine President Duterte waged his highly publicized war on the drug trade in city slums by loosing the police and vigilantes nationwide in a campaign already marked, in its first six months, by at least [7,000 extrajudicial killings](#). The bodies of his victims were regularly dumped on Manila’s streets as warnings to others and as down payments on Duterte’s promises of a new, orderly country.

And he wasn’t the first populist in Asia to take such a path either. In 2003, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra launched his “red shirt” movement as a war on his country’s rampant methamphetamine abuse. In just three months under Thaksin’s rule, the police carried out 2,275 [extrajudicial killings](#) of suspected drug dealers and users, often [leaving](#) the bodies where they fell as a twisted tribute to his power.

Such examples of populist political carnage and the likelihood of more to come — including what Donald Trump’s presidency might have in store — raise certain questions: Just what dynamics lie behind the urge toward violence that seems to propel such movements? Why does the virulent campaign rhetoric of populist political movements so often morph into actual violence once a populist wins power? And why is that violence invariably aimed at enemies believed to threaten the imagined integrity of the national community?

In their compulsion to “protect” the nation from what are seen as pernicious alien influences, such populist movements are defined by their need for enemies. That need, in turn, infuses them with an almost uncontrollable compulsion for conflict that transcends actual threats or rational political programs.

To give this troubling trend its political due, it’s necessary to understand how, at a particular moment in history, global forces have produced a generation of populist leaders with such potential compulsions. And at the moment, there may be no better example to look to than the Philippines.

During its last half-century of bloodstained elections, two populists, Ferdinand Marcos and Rodrigo Duterte, won exceptional power by combining the high politics of diplomacy with the low politics of performative violence, scattering corpses scarred by their signature brutality as if they were so many political pamphlets. A quick look at this history offers us an

unsettling glimpse of America's possible political future.

Populism in the Philippines: the Marcos Era

Although now remembered mainly as a “kleptocrat” who plundered his country and enriched himself with shameless abandon (epitomized by the discovery that his wife possessed 3,000 pairs of shoes), Ferdinand Marcos was, in fact, a brilliant populist, thoroughly skilled in the symbolic uses of violence.

As his legal term as president came to an end in 1972, Marcos — who, like many populists, saw himself as chosen by destiny to save his people from perdition — used the military to declare martial law. He then [jailed 50,000](#) opponents, including the senators who had blocked his favored legislation and the gossip columnists who had mocked his wife's pretensions.

The first months of his dictatorship actually lacked any official violence. Then, just before dawn on January 15, 1973, Constabulary officers read a presidential execution order and strapped Lim Seng, an overseas Chinese heroin manufacturer, to a post at a Manila military camp. As a battery of press photographers stood by, an eight-man firing squad raised their rifles. Replayed endlessly on television and in movie theaters, the dramatic footage of bullets [ripping open](#) the victim's chest was clearly meant to be a vivid display of the new dictator's power, as well as an appeal to his country's ingrained anti-Chinese racism. Lim Seng would be the only victim legally executed in the 14 years of the Marcos dictatorship. Extra-judicial killings were another matter, however.

✖ Marcos made clever use of the massive U.S. military bases near Manila to win continuing support for his authoritarian (and increasingly bloody) rule from three successive American administrations, even effectively neutralizing President Jimmy Carter's human rights policy. After a decade of dictatorship, however, the economy began to [collapse](#) from a too-heavy dose of “crony capitalism” and the political opposition started to challenge Marcos's self-image as destiny's chosen one.

To either sate or subdue an increasingly restive population, he soon resorted to escalating raw violence. His security squads conducted what were referred to as “salvagings,” more than 2,500 of them (or 77% of the [3,257 extrajudicial killings](#) during his 14-year dictatorship). Bodies scarred by torture were regularly abandoned in public plazas or at busy intersections so passers-by could read the transcript of terror in their stigmata. In the capital, Manila, with only 4,000 police for six million residents, the Marcos regime also deputized hundreds of “secret marshals” responsible for more than 30 shoot-on-sight fatalities during May 1985, the program's first month, alone.

Yet the impact of Marcos's version of populist violence proved mutable — effective at the start of martial law when people yearned for order and counterproductive at its close when Filipinos again longed for freedom. That shift in sentiment soon led to his downfall in the first of the dramatic “people power” revolutions that would challenge autocratic regimes from Beijing to Berlin.

Populism in the Philippines: Duterte's Violence

Rodrigo Duterte, the son of a provincial governor, initially pursued a career as the mayor of Davao City, a site of endemic violence that left a lasting imprint on his political persona.

In 1984, after the communist New People's Army made Davao its testing ground for urban guerilla warfare, the city's murders soared, doubling to 800, including the assassination of 150 policemen. To check the communists, who took over part of the city, the military [mobilized](#) criminals and ex-communists as death squad vigilantes in a lethal counterterror campaign. When I visited Davao in 1987 to investigate death squad killings, that remote southern city already had an unforgettable air of desolation and hopelessness.

It was in this context of rising national and local extrajudicial slaughter that the 33-year old Rodrigo Duterte launched his political career as the elected mayor of Davao City. That was in 1988, the first of seven terms that would keep him in office, on and off, for another 21 years until he won the country's presidency in 2016. His first campaign was hotly contested and he barely beat his rivals, taking only 26% of the vote.

Around 1996, he reportedly mobilized his own vigilante group, the [Davao Death Squad](#). It would be responsible for many of the city's 814 extrajudicial killings over the next decade, as victims were dumped on city streets with faces [wrapped bizarrely](#) in packing tape. Duterte himself may have [killed](#) one or more of the squad's victims. Apart from liquidating criminals, the Davao Death Squad also conveniently [eliminated](#) the mayor's political rivals.

Campaigning for president in 2016, Duterte would proudly point to the killings in Davao City and [promise](#) a drug war that would murder 100,000 Filipinos if necessary. In doing so, he was also drawing on historical resonances from the Marcos era that lent some political depth to his violent rhetoric. By specifically praising Marcos, promising to finally [bury](#) his body in the National Heroes Cemetery in Manila, and [supporting](#) Ferdinand Marcos Jr. for vice president, Duterte identified himself with a political lineage of populist strongmen epitomized by the old dictator at a time when desperate Filipinos were looking for new hope of a decent life.

On taking office, President Duterte promptly started his promised anti-drug campaign and [dead bodies](#) became commonplace sights on city streets nationwide, sometimes accompanied by a crude cardboard sign reading "I am a pusher," or simply with their faces wrapped in the by-now trademark [packing tape](#) used by the Davao Death Squad. Although Human Rights Watch would [declare](#) his drug war a "calamity," a resounding 85% of Filipinos [surveyed](#) were "satisfied," apparently seeing each body sprawled on a city street as another testament to the president's promise of order.

At the same time, like Marcos, Duterte deployed a new style of diplomacy as part of his populist reach for unrestrained power. Amid rising tensions in the South China Sea between Beijing and Washington, he improved his country's bargaining position by distancing himself from the Philippines' classic alliance with the United States. At the 2016 ASEAN conference, reacting to Barack Obama's criticism of his drug war, he [said bluntly](#) of the American president, "Your mother's a whore."

A month later during a state visit to Beijing, Duterte publicly [proclaimed](#) "separation from the United States." By setting aside his country's recent slam-dunk [win](#) over China at the Court of Arbitration in the Hague in a legal dispute over rival claims in the South China Sea, Duterte [came home](#) with \$24 billion in Chinese trade deals and a sense that he was helping establish a new world order.

In January, after his police tortured and [killed](#) a South Korean businessman on the pretext of a drug bust, he was forced to call a sudden halt to the nationwide killing spree. Like his role

model Marcos, however, Duterte's populism seems to contain an insatiable appetite for violence and so it was not long before bodies were once again being dumped on the streets of Manila, pushing the [death toll](#) past 8,000.

Success and the Strongman

The histories of these Filipino strongmen, past and present, reveal two overlooked aspects of the ill-defined phenomenon of global populism: the role of what might be termed performative violence in projecting domestic strength and a complementary need for diplomatic success to show international influence. How skillfully these critical poles of power are balanced may offer one gauge for speculating about the fate of populist strongmen in disparate parts of the globe.

In Russia's case, Putin's projection of strength through the murder of selected domestic opponents has been matched by [unchecked aggression](#) in Georgia and Ukraine — a successful balancing act that has made his country, with its rickety economy the [size of Italy's](#), seem like a great power again and is likely to extend his autocratic rule into the foreseeable future.

In Turkey, Erdogan's harsh repression of ethnic and political enemies has essentially [sunk his bid](#) for entry into the European Union, plunged him into an [unwinnable war](#) with Kurdish rebels, and complicated his alliance with the United States against Islamic fundamentalism — all potential barriers to his successful bid for unchecked power.

In Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto [failed](#) in his critical first step: building a domestic base large enough to sweep him into the presidency, in part because his call for order [resonated](#) so discordantly with a public still capable of remembering his earlier bid for power through eerie violence that roiled Jakarta with hundreds of rapes, fires, and deaths.

Without the popular support generated by his local spectacle of violence, President Duterte's [de facto abrogation](#) of his country's claims to the South China Sea's rich [fishing grounds](#) and oil reserves in his bid for Chinese support risks a popular backlash, a military coup, or both. For the time being, however, Duterte's deft juxtaposition of international maneuvering and local bloodletting has made him a successful Philippine [strongman](#) with, as yet, few apparent checks on his power.

While the essential weakness of the Philippine military limits Duterte's outlets for his populist violence to the police killings of poor street drug dealers, Donald Trump faces no such restraints. Should Congress and the courts check the virulence of his domestic attacks on Muslims, Mexicans, or other imagined enemies and should his presidency run into further setbacks like the recent repeal-Obamacare humiliation, he could readily resort to violent military adventures not only in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Libya, but even in Iran, not to speak of North Korea, in a bid to recover his populist aura of overweening power. In this way, unlike any other potential populist politician on the planet, he holds the fate of countless millions in his much-discussed hands.

If populism's need for what scholar Michael Lee calls an "apocalyptic confrontation" and a "mythic battle" proves accurate, it might, in the end, lead the Trump administration's "systemic revolutionaries" far beyond even their most extreme rhetoric into an endlessly escalating cycle of violence against foreign enemies, using whatever weapons are available, whether drones, special operations forces, fighter bombers, naval armadas, or even nuclear

weapons.

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