

## **DU30's high appreciation rating is no rocket science**

Marlen V. Ronquillo

July 16, 2017

The murmurs from below – at the Baseco compound, at the hamlets of rural poverty, at those isolated townships with 70 percent plus poverty levels – usher in the beginning of discontent with a sitting president. Poor Filipinos are a patient lot. But once a leader is perceived as isolated, uncaring and unconcerned, the judgment instantly turns from critical to harsh.

The poor want their President not to cross that threshold of indifference and boorishness and they are unforgiving once a leader crosses that threshold.

The rich and the super rich, as they say, are different from you and me. They have a different appreciation of standards.

The rich and the super rich, from the rentiers to those owning and managing conglomerates, have a one-track mind on whether a president is good or bad. The verdict is always related to their interests, their income levels, their profit levels after tax. A president good to business is a good president and the rich and the super rich base their appreciation of a president based on that criteria alone.

The middle class? Does this sector exist? Does it even have a voice? What I see is a country where “the center cannot hold.” The de facto middle class, the OFWs, are mostly out of the country. From their diasporas, they would rather work harder to send home additional money and boxes than engage in their mandated civic duty. The leaders of civil society, who are theoretically the advocates of this sector's interests, are mostly phonies and poseurs. This is a harsh judgment but it is true.

Mr. Duterte, based on the polling being done with some consistency, has been enjoying decent to excellent appreciation ratings. So this question is inevitably asked. What are his secret sauces? What are his keys to the kingdom of towering appreciation levels? There is no secret sauce. The poor still adores Mr. Duterte, the rich and the super rich have nothing to complain about him, though they occasionally cringe after a torrent of his expletives. On the whole, the rich and the super rich are satisfied with Mr. Duterte's policies as president.

Mr. Trump, meanwhile, the president DU30 identifies with most, is unprecedented in the sense that his approvals numbers are tanking and only his constant stirring of his white base and his nationalist agitations keep his leadership afloat. So, where lies the difference?

The poor, this is the truth and the whole truth, feel that Mr. Duterte is talking to them directly. When he says “kill the drug people,” the poor have the impression that it is for their own protection, barely conscious of the fact that 99 percent of the victims of the anti-drug campaign are people from their own economic class.

The hard-line talk of Mr. Duterte on the Marawi siege resonate deeply with the poor, their guarantee that their President will not allow these godless killers to leap beyond Marawi and into their homes.

The deeper issues of Muslim Mindanao and why the Hapilons and the Mautes and their ilk have made recruitment so easy are also lost on most of the poor. Like the fact that poverty and lack of opportunity have been the driver of shabu-hooked young men and women from the slums.

Mr. Duterte’s decision to stay away from economic issues and policies and leave the decisions to his economic team is well-appreciated by the rich and the super rich. Leading the economic team of Mr. Duterte are pro-market and pro-business technocrats. From Mr. Dominguez to Mr. Pernia, every key official on DU30’s economic team could very well fit in the cabinet of Mr. GDP, GDP Aquino.

Even the iron-clad statements of DU30 against “endo” cannot gain traction because of the sheer and overwhelming influence of his pro-market economic team. The tax reform package written by his team could very well be a document written by the Heritage Foundation or the Cato Institute. The so-called Golden Age of Infrastructure is also a golden age for the conglomerates. Either the original PPP mode of pursuing the infra projects or the “hybrid” version that is being introduced will not change the fact that only the Top 1 percent are qualified to pursue the PPP projects.

With the poor feeling protected by Mr. Duterte’s “kill” policies and the super rich (who also control the giant media organizations) fully supportive of Mr. Duterte’s “let the rich do their thing” policy, there is no spawning ground for dissent. The middle class does not count as its de facto inhabitants are mostly OFWs in the many overseas diasporas.

Again, this is a country where the center does not hold and a vigorous dissent and discernment voice from the center simply cannot be articulated.

With the poor representing the warm bodies, the multitudes, and the rich holding the huge megaphones, there is no public sphere for rearing and propagating anti-Duterte sentiment. Right now, Mr. Duterte is riding high and the opposition is talking in pipsqueak.

Of course, there is always that dreaded tipping point, when that massive appreciation could turn into discontent. Right now, observers cannot see that even in the far horizon. Right now, DU30 is very popular and to quote Homer Simpson “that is the most important thing in the world.”