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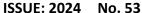
## Digital Autocratisation and Electoral Disinformation in the Philippines

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Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., with Vice President Sara Duterte, posing for pictures after taking his oath as the next President, at the National Museum of Fine Arts on 30 June 2022 in Manila, Philippines. (Photo by Ezra Acayan / GETTY IMAGES ASIAPAC / Getty Images via AFP).

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The Duterte administration (2016-2022) propagated securitised narratives (such as the war on drugs and the threat of communist insurgency) to justify draconian policies, including extrajudicial killings and arrests of government critics. These narratives were reinforced through online disinformation campaigns mostly spewed by organised 'troll' farms.
- This trend towards "digital autocratisation" continued in the 2022 elections. The presidential campaign of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., capitalised on a tide of misplaced nostalgia for the authoritarian rule of his father.
- Electoral disinformation in that Philippine elections contained two sources of digital autocratisation: Duterte's assaults on the liberal democratic opposition through securitised narratives, and Marcos Jr.'s nostalgic narratives that glorified the country's autocratic past.
- Pervasive disinformation in the Philippines complemented the autocratic policies of Duterte, benefited the Marcos Jr. campaign, and continues to negatively affect the fragile state of Philippine democracy.
- Policy interventions to counter electoral disinformation are necessary for the 2025 midterm elections especially to address attacks on democratic norms and institutions.
   Also needed are reforms that can anticipate and address future manifestations of disinformation in the Philippines.



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#### INTRODUCTION

The Philippines under the Duterte administration (2016-2022), witnessed two political trends: an erosion of democratic institutions and norms through deliberate autocratic acts of the government and the rise of electoral disinformation.<sup>1</sup> Autocratisation is defined as the decline of democratic traits or "any move away from [full] democracy.<sup>2</sup> Duterte's anti-drug and anti-crime campaign resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings and cases of human rights violations. His strongman approach attacked democracy on different fronts: there were assaults on press freedom, pervasive tagging of government critics and opposition figures as communist sympathisers, and extensive use of the military to implement draconian policies.<sup>3</sup> These securitised narratives were amplified in the digital sphere and used to justify Duterte's policies.

It is not coincidental that the popularity of Duterte's strongman politics helped in securing victory in the 2022 presidential elections for Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr.. Social media likewise played a critical role through what we call digital autocratisation – a process in which democratic norms and institutions are undermined through the extensive use of digital technologies such as social media. During the 2022 elections, social media platforms became saturated with the voice of supporters of Marcos Jr.. They were capitalizing on nostalgia based on memories of the late dictator and on the myth of the Philippine 'golden age' during the rule of Marcos Sr., and the 'strong' sense of discipline that Filipinos were supposed to have had during the martial law period. These narratives complemented extant securitised narratives such as the need to cleanse the country of drug addicts. The latter were the hallmark of Duterte's rhetoric and came to form the basis for his national policies.

This paper argues that digital autocratisation was manifested in the disinformation witnessed in the 2022 presidential elections. Duterte's securitised narratives were undermining Philippine democracy's commitment to human rights, while Marcos Jr.'s campaign through nostalgia was repudiating the imperative of democratic accountability for past atrocities. Without concrete policy interventions countering disinformation, digital autocratisation is likely to persist in the 2025 midterm elections. Measures such as new legislation, collaborative partnerships, innovative fact-checking, and anticipating the evolution of disinformation with artificial intelligence and changes in the political influencer industry, require the intervention of governments, independent media, the digital industry, civil society, and external actors.

### SECURITISED NARRATIVES AND DIGITAL AUTOCRATISATION UNDER DUTERTE

Filipinos' vulnerability to disinformation is facilitated by their heavy consumption of social media and their reliance since the 2016 elections on these platforms when making voting choices. Duterte's campaign made use of both grassroots and online support and mobilised the first cyber-armies or 'troll farms'. The extensive use of social media in the 2016 elections led Facebook executive Katie Harbath to label the Philippines the "patient zero" of global disinformation.

The Duterte administration effectively carried out disinformation strategies to achieve its political goals, in ways similar to that of other governments in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, the





ruling party *Barisan Nasional* was found to have hired private individuals and groups collectively known as 'cybertroopers' to spread disinformation during the 2018 elections.<sup>7</sup> The ruling military junta in Thailand treated 'fake news' as a national security issue that required the involvement of the military.<sup>8</sup> And in Indonesia, the Jokowi government weaponised its online defamation law to punish government critics.<sup>9</sup> While digital autocratisation can be state-sponsored, it can also be 'outsourced'. As with the use of 'cybertroopers' in Malaysia and 'buzzers' in Indonesia, the Philippines under Duterte shared the experience of utilising paid 'trolls' and online influencers to manufacture and spread online disinformation in favour of the incumbent regime.

Duterte's main campaign promise was to exact profound sociopolitical change with an emphasis in restoring law and order mainly through highly securitised public policies against perpetrators of illegal drugs and communist ideology in the country. His violent war on drugs resulted in a spate of extrajudicial killings estimated by human rights groups and investigative journalists at 1,000 fatalities per month, and in total at more than 30,000 individuals. Amidst public backlash over the lack of due process and the violent extrajudicial nature of these police operations, pro-Duterte social media pages attempted to justify the entire war on drugs policy by posting about heinous crimes allegedly committed by drug addicts. One instance involved Duterte's former campaign spokesman who posted a photo of a rape supposedly committed by a drug addict. This was reposted and circulated by various pro-Duterte pages which raised sentiments that drug addicts deserved to be killed. The post was eventually proven to be false; the photo had originated from another country and did not involve rape.

Second, Duterte targeted journalists, media personalities, and entire media outlets that were critical of his administration, effectively threatening the healthy functioning of press in the country. Prominent among these targets was Nobel Laureate and *Rappler* chief executive officer Maria Ressa who was attacked by online trolls following critical commentaries by her about the Duterte administration.<sup>13</sup> The impact of these online attacks and the reinforcement of narratives against 'biased' media outlets is reflected in the results of a Pulse Asia September 2022 nationwide survey in which television was ranked as the second biggest source of fake news about politics, and journalists were considered to be among the top spreaders of false information about the government.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, opposition figures and government critics also became the target of Duterte's crass criticism, and victims of online disinformation. Prominent among these was former vice president Maria Leonor "Leni" Robredo, the leader of the opposition who disagreed with Duterte on matters of policy, particularly on the war on drugs. Other government critics, including legislators coming from the progressive blocs of Congress and left-wing activists, were also not spared from the barrage of online attacks. A key Duterte narrative, both reflected in his speeches and in the posts on pro-Duterte social media pages, was to tag government critics as communist sympathisers or members of the communist movement.<sup>15</sup>

### MARCOS JR. AND AUTHORITARIAN NOSTALGIA IN THE 2022 PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS

Duterte embarked on an autocratisation campaign that had a significant digital component. This focused on perpetuation of "influence peddling, content 'seeding', and outright disinformation"





on social media. <sup>16</sup> Come the 2022 presidential election campaign period, it was already apparent that social media messaging was an important factor for an electoral victory, more so if it was boosted by 'cyber-armies'. A research report found that different candidates spent an overall amount of approximately 600 million to 1.5 billion Philippine pesos (approximately USD 10.9 million to 27 million) on political influencers during the 2022 campaign (Gaw et al., 2023). <sup>17</sup>

The power of social media was particularly clear to Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. whose two-decade rule constituted one of the darkest periods in Philippine history, encompassing massive corruption, human rights violations, economic decline, and the breakdown of democratic institutions. Three decades after the Marcos family went into exile after the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution, the son of the late dictator won the presidential election with more than 50 per cent of the votes. He ran in tandem with Sara Duterte, Rodrigo Duterte's daughter and successor as mayor of Davao City. Their tandem, called the "UniTeam", called for national unity to solve the country's problems, then exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from reaping the benefits of Duterte's legacy of distorting the [online] information landscape and emphasising the need for strongman rule to maintain law and order in a crime-stricken country, the Marcoses also put in a lot of work in their decades-long project to rehabilitate their family name. Marcos Jr.'s campaign narratives, anchored on authoritarian nostalgia, complemented Duterte's narratives and benefited from them. To demonstrate, Marcos Jr.'s narratives focused on the following: (1) the myth of the Philippine 'golden age' during the rule of dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr.; (2) the idea that Filipinos were more disciplined during the rule of Marcos Sr.; and (3) democratic disillusionment, wherein all post-EDSA presidents significantly failed to improve the lives of the Filipino people and that Marcos Sr. was the 'best president' the Philippines had ever had. Common among these narratives was the glorifying of strongman rule similar to the late dictator's. By tapping into the people's "misinformed nostalgia about an imagined golden era" the Marcoses planted the idea that it was strongman rule that ushered in a political and economic "golden age" in the country and enforced a strong sense of discipline among the people. 18

Social media played a crucial role in disseminating the Marcoses' chosen nostalgic narratives. After Marcos Jr. narrowly lost in the 2016 vice-presidential elections, he started to establish his social media presence by posting regular content on Facebook and YouTube. In 2019, *Rappler* published a comprehensive report on the Marcoses' "networked propaganda" involving a web of Facebook and YouTube pages engaged in denying Marcos Sr.'s atrocities and spreading exaggerated and false narratives on his accomplishments. Social media became saturated with contents about the Marcoses before and during the campaign period for the 2022 elections. Apart from Facebook and YouTube, the Marcoses also became the most popular political family on TikTok, a video-sharing social media platform that skyrocketed in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>19</sup>

These online narratives contained falsehoods and disinformation about a "golden age", the strong sense of discipline in society during martial law, and the failures of post-Marcos Sr. presidents to uplift the country. The way that Duterte and his fervent crowd of online supporters have made social media highly susceptible to manipulation made it easy for Marcos Jr. and his



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supporters to spread these narratives online. Because Duterte resembles Marcos Sr. in terms of his strongman approach, the presidential successor was expected to also have the same qualities. This sentiment is reflected in the results of a 2021 *BOSES Pilipinas* survey which showed that Filipinos value "strong leadership" as the most important character trait when choosing the next leader.<sup>20</sup>

Independent fact-checkers such as *VERA Files* (2022) reported that the opposition candidate Robredo was the biggest target of election-related disinformation while Marcos Jr. benefited the most from such disinformation in 2021 and in early 2022. Social media platforms became rife with online bickering between Marcos' supporters and anti-Marcos groups and individuals, particularly Robredo supporters. *Rappler's* analysis of election-related data on different social media platforms indeed showed that Marcos Jr. and Robredo dominated online discourse (Macaraeg and Hapal, 2022), much to the benefit of Marcos Jr.<sup>21</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

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The 2022 Philippine elections showed how strongman leaders and other autocratising entrepreneurs weaponised digital technology, especially social media, for their political interests. Autocratisation reinforced by online disinformation, termed "digital autocratisation", started with Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 and continued until the election of Bongbong Marcos Jr. in 2022. Digital autocratisation under Duterte perpetuated securitised narratives on social media that were reinforced by disinformation and were used to justify his autocratic policies including the war on drugs, attacks on press freedom, and repression of critics. The massive social media efforts of Marcos Jr. and his supporters to spread narratives anchored on authoritarian nostalgia proved to be successful.

Pervasive disinformation amplified and justified the autocratic policies of Rodrigo Duterte which in turn benefited the Marcos Jr. campaign. This continues to negatively affect the fragile state of Philippine democracy at the moment. Efforts to stem the spread of electoral disinformation through fact-checking faced tremendous challenges, given their limited reach and impact. Moreover, such initiatives were in the mainstream political discourse only at the tail end of the electoral cycle. By then, the virtual sphere in the Philippines was already flooded with disinformation narratives that proved too formidable to repudiate.<sup>22</sup>

Policy interventions to counter electoral disinformation are necessary given the upcoming 2025 midterm elections. That the Marcos Jr. administration has recognised that disinformation is a grave sociopolitical problem is a crucial first step in mitigating the continuous impact of digital autocratisation. <sup>23</sup> Efforts to counter electoral disinformation requires innovative and anticipatory approaches, given the rapid evolution of digital technologies and the increasing use of artificial intelligence. Fact-checking must evolve to catch up with the digital evolution but also needs to be heavily supported by the government, civil society, media, and the digital industry. Other efforts such as new legislation buttressed by institutional mechanisms, resources, and external partnerships will be critical as the Philippines starts a new electoral cycle next year.

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