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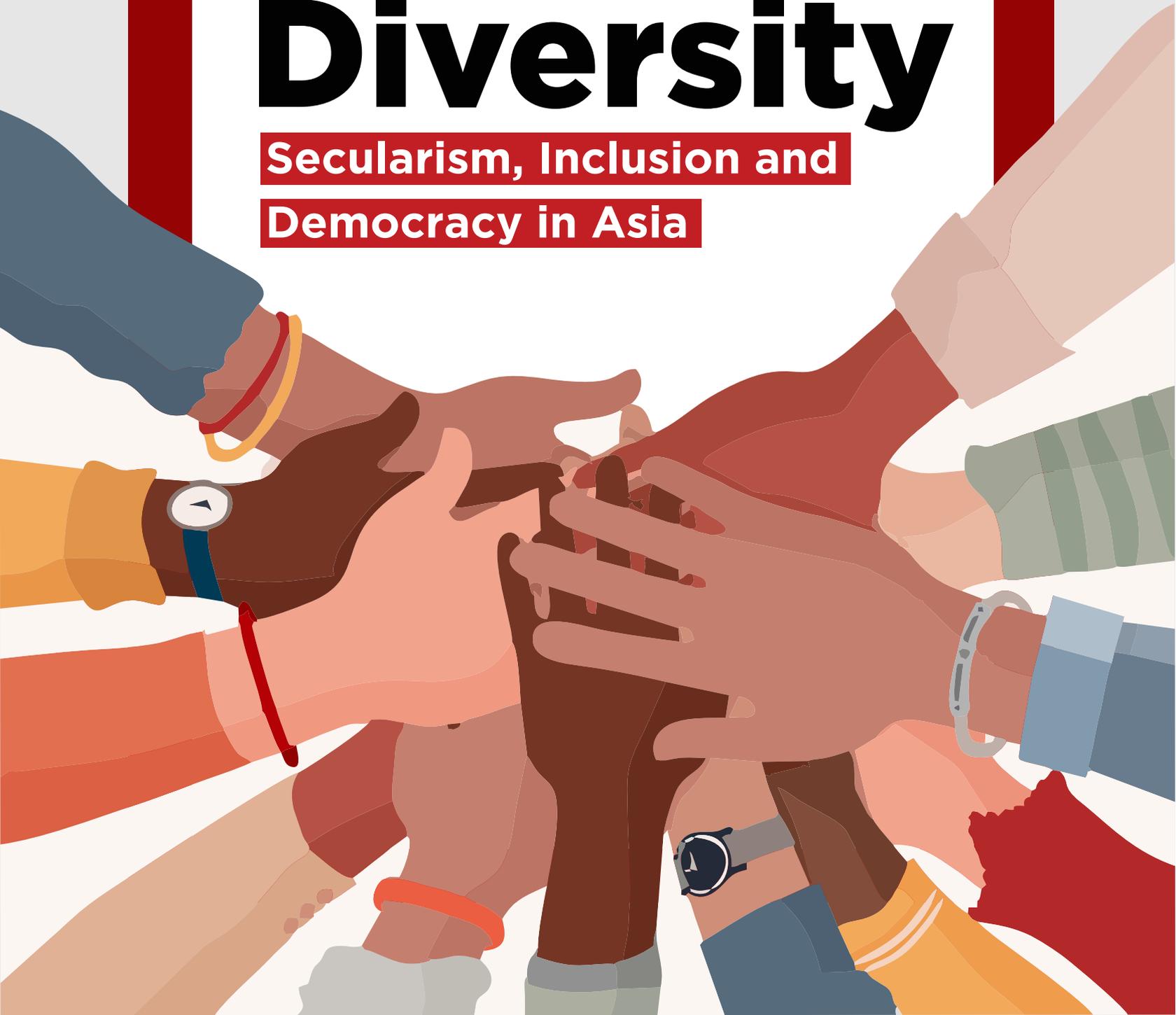
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Unity in Diversity

Secularism, Inclusion and
Democracy in Asia





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Network of Social Democracy in Asia
Unit 3-E, 112 Maginhawa Street, Barangay Teachers' Village East,
Quezon City, Philippines, 1101

Website: www.socdemasia.com Facebook: facebook.com/SocDemAsia
E-mail: secretariat@socdemasia.com

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By: Carlo Angelo Vargas

Filipino Identity, Patronage, and Citizenship

The Philippines has entered a new era in its political history with the election of Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. and Sara Duterte to the presidency and vice-presidency, respectively. The return of the Marcoses to power and the transformation of the Duterte family into a national-level political dynasty were two separate political projects that had been years in the making. Both families have used the tools of mythmaking to cultivate personal narratives that resonate with the visceral sentiments of Filipinos.

In many ways, the power and attraction of the new political order not only represents the repudiation of the old liberal democratic order but also the shaping of Filipino identity through the country's culture of patronage. What does Duterte's election in 2016 and the landslide victory of Bongbong Marcos say about how Filipinos see themselves and how it affects Philippine society? In answering this question, one is tempted to conclude that Filipino identity is rooted in the rejection of modernity and antipathy towards formal structures of democracy and human rights. However, we must also see that the country's tumultuous history of colonialism, elite democracy, patronage politics, and conservative rule has served to accustom Filipinos to see themselves as passive witnesses to the unfolding of the country's history, rather than as empowered citizens involved in the project of creating the modern Filipino nation-state.

Many have commented that the Marcos-Duterte coalition benefitted from and cultivated a nostalgia for strongman rule. They were also able to create a machinery of disinformation that was decisive for their victory. Equally important is the forging of the broadest unity of political dynasties and traditional political interests from the national down to the local level. This scale of consolidation is important not just during but in between elections. Political clans at the local level are able to promise and deliver votes to national politicians (themselves members of local political clans) in exchange for access to public funds for their constituents. Voters themselves have an understanding that votes are exchanged for material benefit, but they also hope that a strong relationship between them and their patrons can open opportunities for healthcare, education, and other public services.

Filipinos, like many Asian societies, rely on their family and social networks for support. While reforms in the past, such as the push for universal healthcare and free tuition in state universities, have enlarged existing social safety nets, most Filipinos are still largely dependent on their connections to get ahead in life. It is an unspoken rule that family members who are able to finish their college education and enter a profession will set aside a part of their income to give back to their parents or siblings even after they already



Image: www.wellnessphilippines.com

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have a family of their own. Filipinos who choose to work overseas send remittances back home to improve the socio-economic status of their families. These overseas Filipinos are able to lift their relatives out of poverty and enter the middle class through these remittances. Even the Philippine economy is itself heavily reliant on these remittances which keeps the economy afloat and has contributed to a growing consumer economy. These ties do not end when one enters adulthood but only alters the expectations that is expected by one's family members. Marriage and building your own family are seen as expanding those family and social networks. In many ways, such social networks are a net positive given that the government is an unreliable provider of basic social services. When Filipinos face any emergency, they, more often than not, rely on their family and social networks. It is no surprise that even former President Duterte used these strong family networks to maintain his popularity with Filipinos.

These strong social networks can, therefore, further cement unequal relations between the powerful and the powerless. It can be used to justify passivity and rationalize the elite's continued domination of the country's politics and economy. Political elites in the country utilize these strong bonds as a way to foster public support and acceptance of their rule. Rather than purely transactional, these relations are much more rooted on trust. These interlinking and informal social relations can be characterized as patron-client relationships. The patron's political office is seen as an instrument for dispensing their duties and to use the resources that come with political office to provide to their constituents, specifically the constituents who are their clients and voters. Clients see their act of voting as part of their duties and a demonstration of their strong bond with their patron. Such a relationship is almost always to the benefit of the politician and to the detriment of his constituents. These types of social relations have served to limit the Filipinos' capacity to participate in governance despite economic growth and rising incomes in the last few decades.



Image: www.benarnews.org

“Social democrats and progressives must engage in the project of social transformation and help Filipinos to see themselves as citizens rather than as recipients of patronage.

Patron-client relations have also prevented Filipinos from further developing the idea of citizenship. Citizenship as an identity is built on respecting the innate rights of individuals. For democratic states, this means such relations are built on universal human rights and the duty of the state to look after the welfare of its citizens. As progressives and social democrats, this means pursuing social transformation by empowering citizens to see themselves as possessing civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that states must respect and safeguard. Under this arrangement, patron-client relationships should not exist. Does this mean strengthening citizenship means sacrificing the strong social bonds and relations that underpin clientelism? This should not be the case, and it is important that we offer a transformative and new way of harmonizing existing social relations with individual rights, even as we create a more egalitarian society.

As mentioned earlier, the rising income and economic growth that the country has experienced has existed despite the continued marginalization of most Filipinos from the political life of the country. Despite guaranteeing the right to vote for all Filipinos 18 years old and above, political participation is still less than ideal. Elections are still seen as being the way how political democracy is exercised. But without a significant avenue for people's participation in governance, this can lead to political pessimism. Rising incomes and financial security of a growing middle class without accompanying political empowerment can lead to voters embracing populist movements and candidates.

It is important for social democrats and progressives to engage in the project of social transformation and help empower Filipinos to see themselves as citizens rather than as recipients of patronage. This necessitates accepting that strong familial relations and social networks must be used to advance progressive politics. Rather than undermining these social relations, we have to strengthen them. The economic and social changes in the country brought about by capital-led economic growth have created conditions that encourage precariousness and social anxiety. These social networks have ensured that individuals and communities that have been displaced by these changes have a network to fall back on. Progressives must use these relations, not to undermine and disempower, but to forward a progressive vision of society and citizenship.

Our existing concepts of family, kinship and personal relationships, insofar as they are utilized to further patronage politics, must be reimagined to transcend our immediate communities to encompass the Filipino nation as a family. Instead of seeing the nation or a future social democratic state as an impersonal and cold institution, we have to imagine it as how we see our own social networks. This also means Filipinos, instead of seeing themselves as either clients or patrons in hierarchical arrangements, should instead see themselves as part of a broader Filipino “family” of equals that is inclusive of everyone.

In times of great crisis, these family and social networks have the potential of radical transformation and progressive politics. Instead of allowing populist, reactionary and conservative forces to determine the arrangement how such social relations and by extension determine Filipino identity, progressives must see these networks as spaces of contestation. ■

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