

9-8-2016

The History Behind Philippine President Duterte's Obama Insult

Shelton Woods
Boise State University

The history behind Philippine President Duterte's Obama insult

September 8, 2016 6.17am EDT

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte speaks his mind. He does not back down.

Some believe he took his plain speaking too far this week before leaving the Philippines for a summit in Laos.

Reporters asked how Duterte intended to answer President Obama's concerns over the more than **1,300 drug suspects killed** over the past two months in Duterte's anti-drug campaign. Using a well-known Tagalog obscenity, the Philippine president called Obama a son of a bitch.

The U.S. responded by canceling a previously arranged official meeting between the two heads of state, although the two men did share an amiable exchange at the summit following Duterte's comment.

While many are amused by these theatrics, they raise an important question: Why would the Philippine president risk alienating an important and generous ally? This is particularly curious due to the Philippines' recent public spat with China over activities in the South China Sea – a fight the U.S. could help Duterte maneuver.

Born and raised in the Philippines, I have spent my career in the U.S. studying and writing about the Southeast Asian country. While President Duterte's comments may be a surprise to many, his words are not particularly shocking for Philippine watchers who understand the colonial history of this island nation.

Pope, president and ambassador

Within the past year, President Duterte has spoken ill of Pope Francis and labeled the U.S. ambassador Philip Goldberg a "gay son of a whore." Several weeks ago he threatened to take the Philippines out of the United Nations. In a seeming change of mood, he also praised the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea when it recently sided with the Philippines in its loud public claim against China's activities in the South China Sea.

Duterte may not be popular around the world, but he is a superstar at home, enjoying an unprecedented **91 percent** approval rate among Filipinos. It seems he has the pulse of his nation.

Author



Shelton Woods

Professor of East/Southeast Asian History,
Boise State University

Unfortunately, the global press has focused on Duterte cursing at Obama rather than what he said just before. He spoke rather eloquently about leading a sovereign nation and answering only to that nation's citizens. He noted that he was not a slave and had no master.

Duterte: 'I have no master except the Philippine people.'

President Duterte's ribald comments are rooted in Philippine history. In insulting the pope, he, in essence, struck at 350 years of Spanish colonial rule. As the famous Philippine writer León María Guerrero noted, "The history of Spain in the Philippines begins and ends with the friar."

After attacking Obama, Duterte claimed he meant nothing personal against the U.S. president or his mother. But the reality is that Obama, like the pope, represents a colonial master. The Philippines was an American colony from 1898 to 1946, and I'd argue that America was not as benevolent toward Filipinos as some history books claim.

Remembering history

While serving as America's first Philippine governor general between 1901-1904, William Howard Taft referred to the Filipinos as "our little brown brothers." While most people would be little compared to Taft, it was a patronizing nickname – one of the nicer ones American officials and civilians used when referring to Filipinos. Dean Worcester, arguably the most influential American in

the Philippines between 1900-1914, commented that "honesty among Filipinos is a theme for a humorist."

Still, compared with other 20th-century global colonial experiences, there was unprecedented courtesy between most Americans and Filipinos. That bond was sealed in blood during World War II as they fought and died side-by-side.

After gaining post-war independence without the wars that plagued the other Southeast Asian colonies like Indonesia and Vietnam, the Philippines allowed the U.S. to maintain major naval and air force bases on the island of Luzon. Money flowed into the Philippine economy as the U.S. paid a great deal to maintain these strategic stations. The economies of Olongapo City and Angeles also profited, though many of the businesses that emerged exploited women in the sex industry.

President Duterte is not a historian. But like most Filipinos, he is aware that the U.S. continued to support President Ferdinand Marcos even after he had lost the mandate of his citizens. Marcos' administration was rumored to be occupied by individuals interested in filling their bank accounts through nefarious means. It took the 1983 assassination of popular opposition leader Benigno Aquino to finally convince President Reagan that a time had come to step back from supporting Marcos.

While the current problems Filipinos face – abject poverty, unemployment and underemployment and challenges to the health care system – are largely home-grown, there are legacies of colonialism that contribute to a nation seeking its way out of graft and corruption. Apart from the People Power's ousting of President Marcos, two former presidents, Joseph Estrada (1998-2001) and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-2010), were arrested for corruption following their time in office.

Both colonial powers, the Spanish and the Americans, supported an economically and educated elite class that cemented a system where advancement was tied to relationships. The Philippines finally has a president who does not care what the world thinks. He, like many Filipinos, will no longer dance to an outsider's tune. According to Duterte and his advisors, the drug epidemic is destroying the Philippines and they are determined to rid their country of this plague on the land.



Mourners at the wake of Eric Quintinita Sison. Family members of Sison said he was attempting to surrender when he was gunned down by Philippine police during a recent drug bust. Erik De Castro/Reuters

So, can Duterte's comments against a pope, president, ambassador and the world's largest international organization just be attributed to a grouchy 71-year-old man and a country with a colonial hangover?

In my opinion, it is much more than that.

This is a man – and a country – tired of the judgments of the United Nations that China ignores and weary of promises that foreign nations have the best intentions in the Philippines.

It is a nation that last year wildly celebrated on the big screen the man it sees as real hero of the Philippine-American War which ended in 1902. The Filipinos' hero was not a colonial collaborator, but General Antonio Luna – a man who fought and died against the Americans.