



Viewpoint

Urban populist ecologies and Duterte's politics of discipline in Manila's Dolomite Beach

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In this piece, I aim to extend the spaces and tensions of populist ecologies by examining their contemporary urban forms. In the Philippines, urban populist ecologies articulate a politics of discipline that mines discontent among urban residents and fuels antagonistic rhetoric against the undisciplined “others” who are often blamed for the city's problems. Using the controversy over an artificial white sand beach in Manila, I explore how environmental conflicts, visions of urban futures and authoritarian nostalgia coalesce around strongman populist performances that reimagine the urban environment by appealing to people's aspirations for resolving urban disorder.

Nearly six months into the pandemic lockdown in 2020, a short stretch of Manila Bay's gray, garbage-strewn shoreline got a white sand makeover. Crushed dolomite sourced from the hills of the central island of Cebu was dumped over a shallow corner at the northernmost end of Manila's Baywalk. Dubbed as the Dolomite Beach, the multi-million beach nourishment project was part of a broader government effort to rehabilitate Manila Bay, a historic harbor that has become a frontier for urban development and reclamation in a dense city that is expanding where it can. The worsening state of the bay, polluted and unsightly after decades of serving as sink for waste and sewage, has long symbolized Manila's chronic environmental problems that the project seeks to fix. Controversy around the artificial beach soon erupted. Environmentalists, scientists, fisherfolk groups, heritage conservationists and critics decried the white sand project as a waste of scarce resources and as a threat to the marine environment. President Rodrigo Duterte and his officials and supporters defended its place in the city, arguing that a clean, white sand beach – even if unnatural – would offer a better alternative to the dirty and trash-littered landscape of Manila Bay, a persistent reminder of past administrations' failures to address its sorry ecological state.

Menga (2021) has argued that populist ecologies emerge at the intersection of populist politics and environmental issues, characterized by an emphasis on territorial sovereignty, hostility towards imagined others, and a redefinition of both ‘the people’ and ‘the enemy’. Ecological politics become the conduit for populist imaginaries that

often take the form of anti-environmentalism, on the one hand, and rural romanticism, on the other. In the Philippines, the fuss over the artificial beach provides a lens to the urban-centered populist ecology of Duterte's politics of *discipline*. In this sense, the beach articulates the deep-seated anxieties of a segment of the urban population about urban disorder. This segment aspires for a strongman leader who would deliver a desired urban future through political will and infrastructural interventions.

Duterte's populist performances rely on cultivating this image of delivering change and fixing perceived chronic social and environmental problems through decisive action. His campaign promises revolved around breaking the status quo by securitizing threats to social order that previous leaders have routinely failed to solve. Since his election to the presidency in 2016, he has singled out a wide variety of sources of the country's ills, including oligarchs, opposition politicians, communists, and drug users. Despite his popularity that cuts across class, Duterte's strongman rhetoric has attracted the staunchest support from an upper- and middle-class base that has grown ambivalent toward democracy and that has cultivated nostalgia for a disciplinary leader. Duterte's image as a former mayor with a track record of cleaning up a city ridden with crime and terrorism has resonated with urban voters, drawing on their deep-seated anxieties about urban disorder and a longing for an iron fist that will enforce rules and get things done. Duterte's oppositional rhetoric has pitted law-abiding citizens against the enemies of order – drug addicts, criminals and the *pasaway*, or the stubborn rule-breaker – who deserve to be punished for their transgressions and violations (Garrido, 2019; Hapal, 2021).

Duterte's stance on environmental issues has been incoherent, conflicting and ambivalent throughout his presidency. For example, he revoked a controversial anti-mining crackdown due to opposition from the mining sector and from within the government; and despite voicing disapproval, he also permitted environmentally destructive reclamation projects in Manila Bay. However, he has been steadfast in his desire to clean up “cesspools” and disorderly eyesores – often through militaristic means – and to return them to supposedly pristine conditions. His

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interventions in Manila Bay and other places such as Boracay and Laguna Lake display a visual, affective and aesthetic brand of green authoritarian/populist rhetoric (Saguin 2019; Theriault, 2019). Duterte's statement in a recent public address that "Dolomite is beautiful to the eyes, period" (Sarao, 2021) fittingly captures this aesthetic preoccupation.

When the Dolomite Beach first opened to the public on September 20, 2020, huge crowds trooped to Manila's Baywalk to catch a glimpse of its much-talked-about transformation. People took selfies, admiring the manicured landscape that drew a few comparisons to Boracay's famed white sand beaches. A flock of egrets and a school of tilapia were photographed at the edge of the beach; their presence was interpreted as a sign of the project's instantaneously beneficial effect on the bay's ecological conditions. For Duterte's supporters, the beach was immediate proof that the promised change had come. This sentiment was perhaps best reflected in a video of a group of senior citizens who forced their way into the beach carrying a banner with a caption that read "Manila Bay's Resurgence Under the Duterte Administration". When the beach was formally opened to the public on a weekend 13 months later, it attracted thousands of lockdown-weary residents from across a city where open recreational spaces have historically been lacking.

The presidential spokesperson claimed that the positive public response showed that the white sand beach was a right decision. But this statement came amid mounting criticism that the project focused merely on aesthetic appearances rather than providing a long-term solution to the bay's problems (Hallare 2020). The Environment Secretary asserted that the beach nourishment project, part of a bigger rehabilitation program started in 2019 upon the order of the President, was an attempt to save the bay from its polluted state and to restore it to its former tropical glory prior to urban decay. The presence of a white beach, the Duterte Administration argues, will deter people from throwing garbage recklessly, and will benefit the mental health of urban residents who will now be able to better enjoy the fresh air and admire the world-famous Manila Bay sunset (Aguilar 2020). The emphasis on the aesthetics of the white sand beach reflects a tropical romanticism of an environment that did not exist previously in the city. This same romanticism has justified the significant work required to maintain such a cosmetic landscape in a typhoon-prone coast. While advocating for the white sand beach, the Environment Department has countered other interventions suggested by marine scientists to improve bay ecology, such as the planting of mangroves, which it has dismissed as being less pleasing to the eyes (Hallare 2020).

Two articulations of a strongman politics of discipline intersect at the Dolomite Beach controversy: the desire to discipline the behavior of agents of urban disorder and the need to discipline the urban environment through infrastructure and other visible interventions. The first articulation - imposing discipline and social order - has appeared in other forms, most notably the brutal war on drugs that has killed several thousand people in the city during Duterte's term. Particular groups of people - the urban poor and slum dwellers - have been coded as enemies of order and obstacles to progress. They have been blamed for many urban problems such as crime, poverty, traffic congestion, flooding, environmental degradation, pollution of waterways and the city's state of arrested development.

Disciplining the disorderly and cleaning a dirty city has been a recurring trope in the history of urban management in Manila. The emphasis on health and sanitation during the American colonial period in the early 20th century designated certain urban bodies and spaces as dirty and prioritized efficient control of sanitary flows. Anti-slum sentiments magnified amid post-war urban growth that continues to this day, justifying systematic evictions of the urban poor, who have been seen as the primary threat to order, and therefore deserving of discipline or denial of their place in the city. In contrast, "pockets of discipline" - privatized enclaves such as gated subdivisions, master-planned estates and similarly exclusive spaces where rules are enforced - are viewed by the contemporary urban middle class as a model for aspirational urban

futures (Garrido 2019). The Dolomite Beach enacts a populist ecological expression of such a space - a break from the disorder of the city and an opportunity to implement a form of discipline that will lead to better urban life. It presents a radical reversal of trajectories of blight and decay, and, even if only on a surface level, affords an aesthetic and aspirational reimagination of the urban environment. Its allure as a recreational space for urban residents is similarly bolstered by the lack of public open spaces in the city, a spatial legacy of a historically privatized urban planning and profit-oriented urban development.

The second articulation consolidates around disciplining the urban environment through visible interventions that remind people of strongman power to get things done. For Duterte, building both showy and pragmatic infrastructure projects has been a key political strategy because people see and remember infrastructure. Ferdinand Marcos, the country's dictator in the 1970s, initiated a spree of high-modernist, mega-infrastructure projects in Manila, including civic buildings, transport networks, flood control structures and reclamation projects. These projects accumulated massive public debt and entailed the eviction of the urban poor to the peripheries. However, the lasting imprint of these projects on the urban landscape has served as a form of propaganda, sustaining the political legacy even of the formerly exiled Marcoses, who credit themselves with bringing urban progress through a supposed golden age of infrastructure.

Such infrastructural authoritarian nostalgia has been used by Duterte in his centerpiece "Build, Build, Build" program, which aims to revive the golden age of infrastructure in the country. Continuing previous neoliberal modes of urban development, the program has prioritized legacy-building projects that can be finished and showcased before the end of Duterte's term. The Dolomite Beach fits squarely within such infrastructural goals as a high-impact, visible project that can be completed within a few months, and as an expression of strong political will—and, by implication, a reversal of past administration's ineffectiveness. The affective power of transforming the urban environment through infrastructure draws from a deep well of frustrations with an incomplete city, where projects end up broken down, unfinished, or unrealized.

Duterte's reference to the visual beauty of the artificial white sand beach, and his simultaneous emphasis on the singular capacity of his administration to fix Manila Bay's chronic environmental problems, demonstrate urban populist ecologies rooted in a politics of discipline. As an infrastructural intervention in the urban environment, the artificial white sand beach represents a radical break from the pollution and trash that have symbolized a city marred by corruption and ineffective governance. It is an attempt to provide a clean slate where visions of urban futures—in which discipline will bear fruits to be enjoyed by the people - will be realized.

Whether the artificial beach will help solve Manila Bay's problems is irrelevant to such populist ecological narratives. A short-term and visible intervention that embodies a drive to bring discipline, order and progress to a city imagined to be in disarray has more popular appeal than invisible and long-term schemes that address the root causes of environmental degradation. The enduring power of such an appeal draws from the antagonistic construction of 'the people' versus an imagined other, and from the shared aspirational promise of progress and plenitude upon the defeat of the enemy. It is important to distinguish the particularity of the populism within the rhetoric and performances around the Dolomite Beach, even as this populism is folded into a broader set of authoritarian and illiberal practices in the Philippines.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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