Vitug | The Philippines under Duterte

The Philippines under Duterte
How Journalism, the Judicial System, and Politics have Changed

An Interview with Marites Vitug

After her January 18 book talk at Georgetown University, Marites Vitug sat down with the *Journal* to share her views on Philippine political affairs, justice, security, and foreign policy. As one of the Philippines’ most accomplished journalists, Vitug also explained how the field of journalism and freedom of press has evolved under the Duterte administration. Other major conversation topics include the War on Drugs, the Moro conflict, and political prospects for the Philippines.

Journalism

*Journal*: You are the Editor-in-Chief of Newsbreak Magazine and the Editor-at-Large of *Rappler*, both of which are cutting edge investigative news organizations in the Philippines which are recognized worldwide. As a co-founder and decorated journalist, what are your missions at these news institutions and how are those missions connected with the Journalism for Nation Building Foundation that you lead?

Vitug: I think, first of all, we want to shine a light on the darkest corners of government. That is our obsession. We want to unearth secrets. Why? Because we want these institutions and public officials to be held accountable. It is a duty, I think, of journalists. It is not just to inform. When I started journalism as a reporter more than three decades ago, my publisher kept telling us that you know you do this to inform, inform, inform, inform. But through the years, I thought it should be beyond informing, it should be to hold institutions accountable, to scrutinize the government as well as maybe institutions in the private sector, so that there will be unfettered exchange of ideas and there will be reduced corruption. We have a difficult duty and mission. I hope I do not sound like we want to save the world but part of it is maybe just making a difference in our community. Maybe if we are just a community newspaper or a national publication, then hopefully the government will listen if we expose corruption or maybe we write about inequality in society. We call it public interest journalism. That is what we are trying to do.
Journal: Throughout your career, you have won multiple awards for your journalism and published many books on social and legal issues in the Philippines. How has the field of journalism changed since you first started out? Could you discuss more in-depth about the status of press freedom under President Duterte's administration?

Vitug: I think the mission remains the same. Our goals remain the same. But the form has really changed. When I started as reporter, there was no internet. We would all write our stories which appeared the next day and there were no cellular phones. No internet data. I said, “Wow, there is just really a lot of legwork.” Of course, our deadlines meant we had to be up the next day, so I had to adjust. When the internet came and Newsbreak also had to start our own website, I was like a zombie. Every minute was a deadline. Then I thought, “Oh no, I cannot do this.” I was fascinated by the way the young reporters would carry a smartphone and then they would video something and then interview, upload, and tweet. I asked, “How do they do this?” That has changed — the speed and the form. Still, the goals are the same. I asked a young reporter about this, because during my time, since we did not have all of this, we had time to spend with our sources. We could linger. We could ask more questions. This young journalist said, “Yeah, we sort of miss that,” but after they have to file, if they have time, they stay longer with their sources. I think that is what needs to happen. They need to adjust because they are always in a hurry. So, it is just the form. The rules are the same.

Under Marcos, press censorship was very defined. There was state censorship during the martial law years. It was very clear. You did not write articles critical about the president, the first family, and the military because the military was implementing martial law. But since Business Day was an independent newspaper, the market was the business community, and we wrote political stories. Marcos did not give a lot of attention to us because he said we were a “mosquito press” due to our small scope. He gave attention to the mass newspapers because they had a larger influence, but he did not know that Business Day was influencing elites, the middle-class, embassies, and governments which shaped policy toward the Philippines. That was the lay of the land.

Fast forward to Duterte and press censorship is more nuanced. There is no state censorship. He publicly threatens news organizations and individual journalists, and his men go after critical news organizations by charging them with libel or tax evasion. In the case of Rappler, he wanted us to stop operating by withdrawing our certificate, which is a type of license, by questioning our ownership. In the Philippines, foreign entities cannot own the media. It should be 100 percent Filipino owned, but Rappler has shares bought by a foreign group. However, this is not ownership, it is just shares. They do not participate in management. The government really rammed this case and Rappler almost lost its certificate, but we won the case on appeal. So, the environment is very nuanced now.

Of course, social media has changed the environment because any journalist can receive threats just on Facebook, maybe on your phone. I asked the young journalists in the office, and it is common. One young woman in her mid-20s who reports on human rights violation and human rights policy said that she received rape threats and death threats.
I said, “Oh my god” because when there was no social media, there were death threats, but they would call you on a landline, or later they would text you for consecutive days. Social media is like bees swarming, you keep getting them. I asked the young reporters, “What do you do?” They say get off the grid. Then, as long as they are not stalked physically, they continue their jobs. It has changed, really.

Journal: Given the current administration’s hostility towards and persecution of the press, what are the implications for civil rights and civil society in the Philippines more broadly? Not just the press but maybe everybody?

Vitug: There is a climate of fear. People speak up, continue to write — to write poems, or write news reports. Artists continue to write poetry and sing songs against this autocratic president. But it is so difficult to mobilize people against him because he remains popular. He has been doing “swift justice.” He has undermined the judicial system, and there is low public confidence in the judiciary. Instead of reforming the judicial system or reforming the courts, which takes longer, how do you speed up the resolution of cases? Instead of doing all this, with his cabinet discussing this, he just has people killed, and has given direct orders which are public. He has changed the political climate. We have not had this fear of the president since martial law. All of the presidents after that, even if they were upset at the press, they would get angry and give a statement, but they never banned reporters. They never threatened them publicly. Again, President Aquino was very upset with some of the reporting against him or about him, but he never followed it up. He would just say something airing his frustration, but that is all. This is the first time since Marcos left.

Journal: Do you fear that the administration might resort to imprisonment or violence against journalists that speak out against President Duterte?

Vitug: He has sent a rival to prison, a fierce critic who was a senator. Somehow, I do not think he will do that to journalists because his resistance or anger against certain journalists is not that intense compared to his resistance and resentment against certain politicians who are very outspoken. He is now trying to go after another senator. I do not think he will do this to journalists. No single journalist would come up and say, “You are corrupt.” We only report this. It is not like a single journalist or two journalists are really going after him. I do not think he will resort to that. It is just that this is intimidation, and he knows that he is effective because of the toning down. The Inquirer was forced to sell to a crony of Duterte, but it was never pushed through. They are looking for a new buyer, but imagine intimidating an entire news organization that also has the largest news TV network.

Journal: Duterte’s 2016 presidential election campaign allegedly utilized fake news and troll armies in social media to spread false stories and attack political rivals. This is a problem we have been facing in the United States as well as many other countries. Do you think there is a solution to this problem without compromising the principle of a free, open internet?
Vitug: Yeah, gradual steps. For example, in the Philippines, universities are very active. They invite journalists and invite academics to speak on how to detect fake news. This has been going on now for more than a year. Now, after a year, a group of journalists have united under this cause. It is not the entire spectrum, but many of the journalists are now working together which has not happened in recent years. There is a group called the Democracy and Disinformation Consortium. It is very informal. They go to campuses and give seminars on how to detect fake news. In many newsrooms there are fact checking groups. It is so frustrating. It is like fighting fire. After they put out one fire, another hoax or misleading post comes up. I would never have this job, even if I was young. I would not. I will never do that. It is easier to report rather than killing all these misleading stories.

Philippine Drug War & Judicial System

Journal: Could you provide us an overview of the current state of President Duterte’s War on Drugs and its progress since 2016? How has this campaign disenfranchised Filipino citizens and contributed to the rising level of violence in the country?

Vitug: This is a centerpiece of Duterte’s administration, and we have a theory on why he continues to believe in the War on Drugs. Every country – Thailand, Colombia, and other Latin American countries – that experienced it has shown that killing drug suspects or dealers does not really work. But why does he keep doing it? In fact, the former president of Colombia wrote an op-ed in the New York Times, saying do not follow our example. He said, “You are an idiot.” Why, despite scientific evidence, does he continue to do it? My belief is that this is a means of control, to intimidate us, so he can rule more easily because we are scared. So, that is the thing: make us scared, and he can get away with other programs.

There are officially 4,000 plus who were killed outside of legitimate police operations. In many cases, families of the victims are too scared to file cases. That is why there are lawyers and groups which are helping them. But so far, since Duterte came to office, there has only been one conviction, which was against two policemen who killed this young suspect who was never into drugs. You know why this happened? It is because CCTV cameras caught this boy, who was hanging out in the store, and they just got him because they needed to fill the given quota that required this many suspects killed. Given this first conviction, I am not too hopeful about other convictions because this just happens to be caught on CCTV, but others are not. It is very difficult. I think you know that a number of human rights groups in the Philippines have filed complaints against Duterte’s War on Drugs in the International Criminal Court (ICC). We are really watching that because if the ICC decides to investigate, it will really be helpful to the country by showing cases with evidence of extrajudicial killing.

Journal: Your book Shadow of Doubt: Probing the Supreme Court sheds light on cases of corruption and nepotism that stem from a complex web of relationships between the judges and other political actors in the country. Your work is widely considered to have
exposed the critical weaknesses of the judicial branch in the Philippines. Do you believe the Supreme Court can change to better uphold civil rights and check executive power?

**Vitug:** The Supreme Court leads the judicial branch in the Philippines. The appointment process is very political — it is the president who appoints justices. But the tendency in the Philippines, and I think maybe other countries, is for these appointees to be indebted to the president. In cases brought before the court, where the executive department is involved, they tend to vote for the administration in power.

Therefore, the first reform should be that the process of selecting judges be more insulated from politics. It is a long-term process and it is so difficult because in the Philippines everything is personal. Second, make it more open. The judiciary is the least scrutinized branch. Some improvements have been made by putting up information online, but how they arrive at the decisions remains inaccessible. It should be made more transparent. On the citizen side, unlike here in the United States where legal academics really weigh in by writing blogs that criticize or analyze court decisions, in the Philippines it is very difficult because most lawyers and legal academics are not full-time. They practice law so they do not want to offend the judges. Overall, there is a lot of reform to be done.

**Journal:** The Drug War has been widely condemned by the governments of the Philippines’ long-time allies and human rights organizations around the globe. How has foreign reporting or governmental condemnations affected public opinion in the Philippines about President Duterte’s policy? Has opinion changed over time?

**Vitug:** You know that is the thing. He remains popular with a 60 percent approval rating, as recorded by a credible public opinion survey. Respondents say they support the War on Drugs, but the suspects should be arrested alive. So, while they like that the government goes after drug suspects, retailers, syndicates, or users, they do not want them killed. Yet, the killing continues and he remains popular. There must be other issues because he is known to be charismatic — a small town mayor who goes to their village, who is seen to be decisive. He acts right away. He will fire you because you are corrupt and then a month later you are in another office. He is seen as a decisive leader who goes after bad people, so it is okay. But that is the thing — it warps the values of Filipinos. It is really a puzzle why he remains popular. I torture myself and listen to him live. He gives hour long speeches. He does not follow the text. He just tells jokes which are reported later. He can be funny. This is what the people want. We are missing good speeches. It is the same here in the United States with the tweets, except our president goes live.

**Moro Conflict**

**Journal:** Back in 2000, you published *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* with an in-depth investigation on the Moro conflict in Southern Philippines. Have things changed since then? How would you characterize the current state of the conflict now?

**Vitug:** Before we wrote the book, we supposedly only had one terrorist group, the Abu
Sayyaf. Now, because of the international environment they have several groups, and they move freely from Indonesia to Mindanao. Now, there is funding for these groups and they use social media to recruit unlike when we wrote the book when it was much simpler. We just had the Moro National Liberation Front, the split group, and it was clear what each wanted. Now, it is more complicated. Plus, the non-Muslim indigenous groups also wanted their voices to be heard. There is a sort of demand or request for us to update it. I do not think we have the time to do it, my colleague and I.

**Journal:** What do you think caused the Marawi Siege and was this a continuation of the larger Moro conflict?

**Vitug:** In this case, the military was going after just a single terrorist. This single leader of the terrorist group had support from the community. It is not so much that they believed in what he is doing, but personal ties are so strong in Muslim Mindanao that one is related to the other and they wanted to protect him. This also couples with, sometimes, very ineffective local government— they are unable to respond to basic issues of jobs and alleviation of poverty. It started with a hunt for this guy and then then it became big because they fought back against the military. It opened up a very complex situation. Personal ties, weak local government — that is why the rebuilding of Marawi is trying to address this problem of local government.

**Journal:** Is there a positive impact that globalization can have on this conflict and the region?

**Vitug:** Because they use social media to recruit, other groups can also use social media to discredit them, to build a real story. They fact check them, so it can also be used for good. I do not know if there are groups actively using social media to fight terrorists in Mindanao, in the Philippines. I am not aware of but it might be interesting to look at that.

**Journal:** Are you optimistic about the creation and maintenance of self-governing Bangsamoro?

**Vitug:** Monday is the plebiscite and it looks like the opposition has supported it. There is a lot of support from civil society and congressmen. I am not too sure about how the Christian population, who feared they will be dominated by the Muslims, feel. I have not been there recently, so I cannot say. Duterte has really pushed for this because he came from Mindanao. He wants this to be a part of his legacy even though there was groundwork already done way before. He may be able to influence local government leaders to make this plebiscite a successful one. I am more optimistic now because no one is challenging this in the Supreme Court.

**Philippine Politics & Foreign Policy**

**Journal:** Ever since the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, pockets of civil society, a “resistance” of sorts, has emerged in response to his policies and
administration. Has the Philippines experienced a similar response, and do you envision it translating at the ballot box?

**Vitug:** There are pockets of resistance from civil society. There are protests, speak-up sessions, social media, opposition, and Catholic church protests as well on the killings. There are also groups that protest his policies that seem to appease China. But it is very difficult now to unite or mobilize people because he is still very popular. I think the opposition and anti-Duterte forces are looking at more creative ways to express their disapproval of him. The difference here in the U.S. is that you have strong institutions — your courts can decide against Trump’s orders. This would not happen in the Philippines — maybe once, very rarely — because citizens are scared. Second, the media here has been quite united. I think most major news organizations are united together, supporting each other and really, the investigative reports tend to be very in-depth. The institutions are strong. That is why there is pushback against Trump because of the courts and media.

**Journal:** In the context of the upcoming May 2019 midterm elections, do you foresee any fundamental challenges to the current political system and President Duterte’s stronghold?

**Vitug:** I do not think there will be a major change after the midterm election. Out of 24 senator seats, only 12 will be up for grabs. They tend to side with who is in power but when they see that there is disappointment or defection then they will go against him. It is the same. It is business as usual. But for the military, it is a stable institution. After the election, they will just go on maintaining their control of Congress and the Executive Department. No, it is not going to happen.

**Journal:** Given how fake news and troll armies have complicated the electoral process in the United States and many other countries, is there suspicion of foreign influence in the election campaigns?

**Vitug:** We are watching that. That is why social media — Rappler in particular and maybe other news groups — are looking if there are concerted messaging efforts from Russia or China. It is very difficult to prove the funding. There are no paper trails. But at least on social media, Rappler can do analyses of messaging and where these accounts come from to see if they are fake or tied to Russia. Maybe on social media we will look at the potential of foreign influence.

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**Marites Danguilan Vitug** is one of the Philippines’ most accomplished journalists. She is also a bestselling author and has written eight books on Philippine current affairs. She is the former editor of Newsbreak Magazine and is currently editor-at-large of the news website Rappler. Her latest book, Rock Solid: How the Philippines Won its Maritime Dispute against China, was released in July 2018.