

Headline: Climate change of heart

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PRESIDENT DUTERTE is no climate change denier. In fact, in his very first Cabinet meeting, he declared: "Climate change is here. We were warned several years ago." He proceeded to underscore the vulnerability of our country to the effects of climate change by referencing Supertyphoon "Yolanda," echoing what he had voiced out during the campaign period.

This ready acknowledgment of the reality of global warming, coupled with his proenvironment stances (albeit equivocal), has caused green groups to warm up to the idea of the Duterte presidency. That his environment secretary, Gina Lopez, has started to crack down on wayward mining firms was seen as another promising sign that, insofar as environmental issues are concerned, "change is coming."

His latest pronouncement about not honoring the Paris Agreement—and even calling it "stupid" and "absurd"—has thus made headlines, and elicited reactions from environmentalists and policymakers alike. "I am pissed and angry about Duterte's stand," declared climate activist Renee Karunungan on her Facebook page, before proceeding to offer counterarguments against the oft-repeated statements in support of the President's position.

On the other hand, Rodne Galicha, the director of The Climate Reality Project Philippines, expressed the desire to sit down with the President, being the ex-officio head of the Climate Change Commission, so that he would "understand the context of the processes of the climate talks."

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The President's position shouldn't have come as a surprise. As early as March, he had been expressing his resentment over developed countries—the ones historically responsible for climate change—not doing their fair share of emission reductions, while passing on the burden to others.

In May, he reiterated his position at a time when he was still holding press conferences in Davao City: "They (the developed countries) were... booming and they were really flooding the contaminants sa air. Now that they are rich, we are still rural. We have hand-me-down machinery and they tell us to cut our emissions and limit productivity."

Insofar as his positions are concerned, he is actually in good company, both here and abroad. Asad Rehman of the Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice described the Paris Agreement as "a great escape for the big polluters, and a poisoned chalice for the poor." Rehman added: "We've got some warm words about temperature levels, but no concrete action. Rich countries aren't pledging to do any more about their inadequate emissions reduction targets which are going to lead us to 3.7 degrees warming of the planet. None of the developed countries are doing their fair share to reduce their emissions and move away from dirty energy."

For his part, environmental policy expert Antonio La Viña framed the President's statement in the context of longstanding Philippine positions. Writes La Viña on his Facebook page: "The President simply reiterated a pillar of climate justice." He proceeded to recount that other Philippine presidents, from FVR to P-Noy, have actually raised the same issue of commensurability.

The legitimacy of demanding climate justice notwithstanding, there are strong reasons why we should abide with the Paris Agreement— while pushing for stronger commitments in the future.

First and foremost, the Paris Agreement is precisely to protect the most vulnerable nations in the world, like the Philippines, from the effects of global warming—we are ranked 13 among 186 countries in the Climate Change Vulnerability Index for 2016—and it does have provisions to help us. As La Viña stresses, while the Philippines has committed to an ambitious 70-percent reduction of carbon emissions by 2030, this is contingent on receiving financial and technological support.

It is true that our own commitments to the Paris Agreement will steer us toward renewable energy, and away from coal, but isn't that a good thing in itself? Independent of the clear and present threat of global warming, coal is "dirty energy," and while it might have short-term appeals, its long-term effects to human health and the environment are catastrophic. Experts emphasize that the reduction goals should not get in the way of industrialization if we take the path of sustainable development.

Secondly, if we turn our back on the Paris Agreement, we will embolden countries, particularly big carbon emitters like China and the United States (28 percent and 16 percent of the world total, respectively), to renege on their own commitments—to the detriment of the whole world, particularly of our own country. The Paris Agreement is already fragile to begin with—Donald Trump is threatening to "cancel" it should he (God forbid) be elected US president—and our own withdrawal will deal it a further blow. The alternative stand— of using the Paris Agreement as a starting point to demand stronger action in the next round of the five-year renewal of commitments— makes more diplomatic sense.

Finally, the attitude of disregarding international agreements—and in such a colorful manner—can have consequences in our international standing beyond the realm of climate action. To start with: How can we expect China to respect the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the South China Sea if we ourselves cannot abide with an agreement we signed and even campaigned for?

To his credit, Mr. Duterte has shown a willingness to change his mind on certain issues. Here's hoping for a climate change of heart.

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