

The Populist Brand is Crisis: Durable Duterteismo amidst Mismanaged COVID-19 Response

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As with the rest of Southeast Asia and the world, the coronavirus outbreak took the entire Philippines by surprise in early 2020. But the response by the Philippine government was quite distinct compared to those of its neighbours. It placed the entire country in a highly-securitized lockdown—one of the longest and strictest in the world. The series of harsh lockdowns has also been coupled with an order from the president for security officers to use lethal force against violators—“shoot them dead!”, as Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte commanded in April 2020.¹ Yet, close to the end of the year it had become clear that the harsh measures taken by the government had failed to keep the outbreak from turning into a full-blown economic, health, political and social crisis. Along with close to 475,000 confirmed cases and more than 9,200 casualties of the coronavirus recorded by year’s end,² hunger and poverty among Filipino families and the loss of jobs and economic opportunities reached historical highs. A record 7.6 million Filipino households experienced involuntary hunger,³ a strikingly high 7.2 million Filipinos were jobless⁴ and the economy contracted at an unprecedented rate of 9.5 per cent,⁵ making it the worst in Southeast Asia. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a most complex and challenging crisis all over the world, but even more so for the national administration in the Philippines.

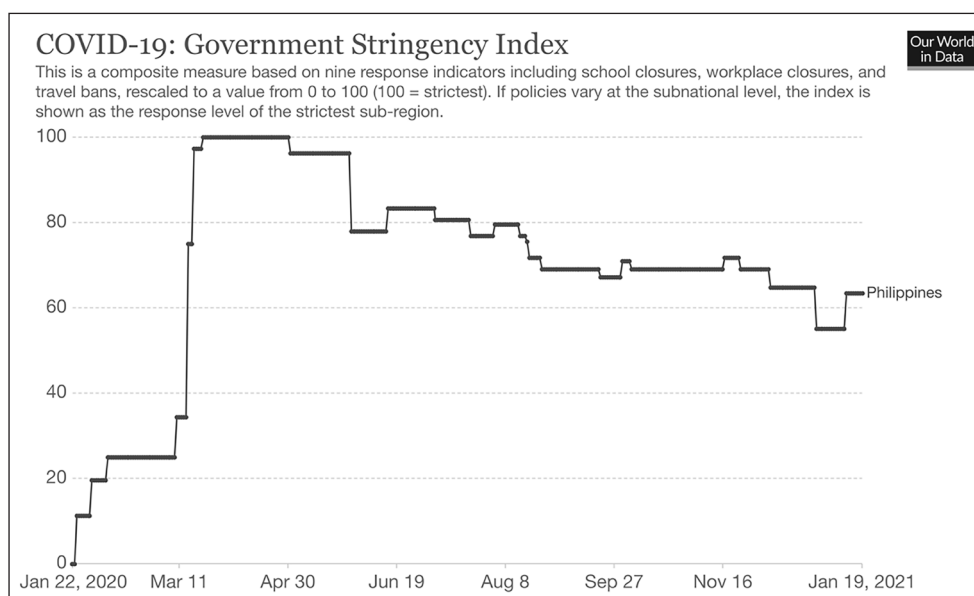
But rather than being a curse for the populist Duterte, the pandemic turned out to be a gift. Despite leading one of the worst-managed responses in the region to the outbreak, the crisis gave Duterte an opportunity to renew the

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public mandate for his illiberal agenda. The series of spectacular failures by his administration in curbing the spread of the virus did not dent his popularity. At the height of the pandemic, a 50 per cent spike in the number of casualties from the administration's brutal war on drugs was recorded,⁶ and Duterte's assaults on democracy and human rights worsened. By September 2020, public trust and support for Duterte's performance was at a record-high 91 per cent.⁷ This is his highest rating so far, and this remarkably high score sets him apart from all the past presidents in the post-authoritarian years. Duterte is now the most powerful and popular Philippine president since the country's return to democracy in 1986. How and why Duterte managed to stay popular despite mismanagement of the COVID-19 response is a subject of debate among observers of Philippine politics.

Many observers, like sociologist Randy David, claim that the climate of fear under the Duterte administration may have compelled survey respondents to give positive assessments of the president's COVID-19 response.⁸ David argues that "one

FIGURE 1
National and Local Lockdowns in the Philippines Are Considered to Be among the World's Strictest



Note: This index simply records the number and strictness of government policies, and should not be interpreted as 'scoring' the appropriateness or effectiveness of a country's response.

Source: Hale, Webster, Petherick, Phillips, and Kira (2020). Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker – Last updated 30 January, 01:00 (London time).

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need not go to the country's remotest barangays to find people who readily give 'safe' answers [rather] than say something that could expose them to unwanted drugs raids or being denied 'ayuda' [aid]".⁹ The strict lockdowns made citizens even more dependent on access to government aid and services; hence, the strong need to be in the good graces of government officials. Political scientist Ronald Holmes, president of the polling firm Pulse Asia, which is responsible for the September 2020 survey, also does not dismiss the possibility that fear—though difficult to measure—is affecting the polling process.¹⁰ He argues though that there are no indications in their past surveys, such as nonverbal cues or high refusal rates, that respondents are more fearful or apprehensive than usual.¹¹ It remains an open question how and why Duterte's popularity endured even at the height of the pandemic.

Some insights can be found in the extant literature on presidential approval that can potentially, although still inadequately, explain the "durability" of Duterteism. Prior research argues that economic performance and high-profile rally-around-the-flag events like wars are generally the prime determinants of presidential approval.¹² On the one hand, rising inflation and unemployment are related to a decline in government popularity,¹³ although researchers emphasize that perceptions of the state of the economy—rather than objective economic indicators—often affect popular support for an incumbent president.¹⁴ Surveys taken during the height of the pandemic, however, reveal a very grim perception among Filipinos of the state of the economy and even of their quality of life. Four out of five Filipinos believe their quality of life declined over the past year,¹⁵ a majority lost their jobs or had their incomes reduced¹⁶ and many felt that the actions of the government to help those who lost their jobs during the pandemic were inadequate.¹⁷

On the other hand, in wartime and other similar crises, presidents also benefit from a rally-around-the-flag effect: they enjoy short-lived spikes in public approval because of the assumed need for national unity and support of government leadership among citizens.¹⁸ Key to this phenomenon is the effective use of crisis rhetoric, which is often characterized by discourses of national unity amidst adversity.¹⁹ The addresses Duterte made during the pandemic, however, have generally been confusing and extremely divisive. Many political analysts note that his public appearances have failed to ease fears since government plans to address the outbreak are rarely discussed. Instead, these appearances have focused on his personal ramblings.²⁰ A number of his regular televised appearances have also often been dedicated to maligning critics and the opposition.²¹ In one of his late night COVID-19 addresses, Duterte referred to the Philippines as "the fucking country". He compared the coronavirus pandemic to the Inquisition, stating that "if

you have a birthmark, you are a witch and you are burned at [the] stake”.²² This is hardly a stellar example of the crisis rhetoric referred to in previous studies as being associated with the rally-around-the-flag phenomenon.

This chapter offers an alternative explanation for the durability of Duterteism amidst the disastrous management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the lens of comparative populism, this chapter draws attention to the populist nature of Duterte to explain the basis and dynamics of his enduring favour. Populist leaders emerge from, manufacture and thrive in crises. Crises create social conditions of widespread anxiety and insecurity that are particularly conducive for populist support. Such leaders mobilize support by capitalizing on anxieties, securitizing crises and polarizing societies. In short, the populist brand is crisis. Unpacking Duterte’s populist nature is key to understanding how he used a slow-moving disaster like the COVID-19 pandemic to his advantage. While 2019 in the Philippines saw the successful political consolidation of the Duterte regime,²³ 2020 proved how durable Duterteism has become. His hold on the Philippines, whether the elites or the masses, has withstood domestic and international crises.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first outlines how the series of spectacular failed responses by the Duterte administration to the coronavirus outbreak resulted in a mismanaged pandemic. The next section retraces the short-lived albeit significant pushbacks against Duterteism that occurred at the beginning of the crisis. The final section discusses the populist bases and dynamics of Duterte’s enduring popularity amidst the mishandled crisis.

Spectacular Failures, Mismanaged Pandemic

Populist leaders are known to be incompetent crisis managers. The long list of blunders the Duterte government committed—especially during the early phase of the coronavirus outbreak—is proof of this. Duterte’s typical governance toolkit of “shock and awe” was a far cry from the highly complex and demanding pandemic response requiring simultaneous economic, health and social interventions. A review of the actions and inactions of the Duterte administration pertaining to the COVID-19 situation from January to December 2020 reveals three major policy areas that can be considered the “mother of all errors”. These mistakes, outlined below, reveal how his administration’s series of spectacular failed responses resulted in a mismanaged pandemic.

First, the government’s belated recognition of the seriousness of the threat of the coronavirus outbreak forced the country to be reactive in its response. While other countries took the early initiative to impose travel bans and other public health measures, Duterte in early February 2020 was complaining about the

TABLE 1
Key COVID-19 Events and Philippine Government Responses, January–June 2020

28 January 2020	Department of Health (DOH) convenes the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) ¹
30 January 2020	The first confirmed COVID-19 case in the Philippines is a 38-year-old Chinese woman from Wuhan, China
31 January 2020	President Duterte issues temporary travel ban on all non-Filipino travellers from Hubei, China
1 February 2020	First COVID-19-related death in the Philippines and first recorded COVID-19-related death outside mainland China
7 March 2020	The first confirmed case of local transmission of COVID-19 is a 62-year-old Filipino who frequented a Muslim prayer hall in San Juan City
8 March 2020	President Duterte issues Proclamation No. 922 declaring a state of public health emergency throughout the country ²
12 March 2020	President Duterte declares Code Red Sub-Level 2 and imposes community quarantine in the National Capital Region (NCR) for thirty days ³
16 March 2020	President Duterte issues Proclamation No. 929 declaring a state of calamity throughout the Philippines for six months and placing the entire Luzon island under enhanced community quarantine from 17 March 2020 to 12 April 2020 ⁴
22 March 2020	Malacañang asks Congress for additional emergency powers
23–24 March 2020	On 23 March 2020, the House of Representatives and Senate convened separately for a special session and passed Republic Act No. 11469, or “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act”, declaring a state of national emergency and granting the president additional powers. ⁵ President Duterte signed it into law on 24 March 2020.
7 April 2020	President Duterte extends ECQ of entire Luzon island until 30 April 2020
30 April 2020	President Duterte issues Executive Order No. 112 placing high-risk geographic areas—including Metro Manila, Cebu Province and Davao City—in ECQ and the rest of the Philippines in general community quarantine (GCQ) from 1 to 15 May 2020 ⁶
12 May 2020	President Duterte places Metro Manila, Laguna Province and Cebu City under modified ECQ (MECQ); other areas in the Philippines were declared to be under either GCQ or free from quarantine status from 15 to 31 May 2020
26 May 2020	President Duterte places Metro Manila, Davao City and other high-risk areas under GCQ status beginning 1 June 2020
25 June 2020	Expiration of Bayanihan to Heal as One Act and its grant of additional emergency powers to President Duterte

Sources: (1) Department of Health, “Recommendations for the Management of Novel Coronavirus Situation”, 28 January 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/01jan/20200128-IATF-RESOLUTION-NO-1-RRD.pdf>; (2) Office of the President, Proclamation No. 922, 8 March 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/03mar/20200308-PROC-922-RRD.pdf>; (3) Office of the Presidential Spokesperson, “On Code Red Sublevel 2”, 12 March 2020, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/OPS-content/on-code-red-sublevel-2/>; (4) Office of the President, Proclamation No. 929, 16 March 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/03mar/20200316-PROC-929-RRD.pdf>; (5) Republic Act No. 11469, 24 March 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/03mar/20200324-RA-11469-RRD.pdf>; (6) Executive Order No. 112, 30 April 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/04apr/2020030-EO-112-RRD.pdf>.

“hysterical” response of the public regarding the reported initial COVID-19 death in the Philippines.²⁴ He dismissed the threat and told the public there is really nothing to be afraid of because “one or two cases in any country is not really that fearsome”.²⁵ Even as late as March 2020, Duterte was making fun of precautions against coronavirus transmission: “They are discouraging long meetings and large congregation. You believed this [coronavirus threat]. Fools!”²⁶

More importantly, despite widespread calls for a travel ban on China, Duterte’s government refused to impose one because of his reluctance to upset the Chinese government.²⁷ When the belated travel ban was finally implemented on 31 January 2020, it only covered the province of Hubei despite knowledge that the virus had already taken root in all regions of China and had appeared in at least twenty countries.²⁸ It was obvious to many people that this late travel ban was part of Duterte’s foreign policy pivot towards appeasing the Chinese government.²⁹

Second, once it had become too late to avoid the widespread transmission of the virus, Duterte’s government crammed in imposing a series of long total lockdowns without adequate support for vulnerable communities. The first lockdown announcement was made less than twenty-four hours before it began—it sent panic-buying households into crowded shops, stranded workers in cities because of the sudden shutdown of public transportation and left daily wage earners without enough money to feed their families for the duration.

The absence of effective government assistance programmes, especially for poor households, was most noticeable in the early days of the lockdown. After being regularly featured as “drug-war hotspots”, low-income communities became prominent in the news again for breaking quarantine to forage for food and find alternative sources of income—often cycling or walking from city to city.³⁰ Even by the end of the first lockdown in mid-May 2020, the Asian Development Bank’s COVID-19 Policy Database revealed that the total aid and stimulus funds disbursed by the government was, disappointingly, among the lowest in Southeast Asia.³¹ The lockdowns, combined with absence of foresight and careful planning, magnified the weaknesses of the country’s social protection system. Economist Emmanuel S. De Dios described the Duterte administration’s COVID-19 social response as disjointed and patchy: “patse-patse na, pitsi-pitsi pa” (not just patchy, but also skimpy).³²

Finally, Duterte’s militaristic approach to a public health crisis worsened an already deadly pandemic. With little surprise, he has treated the virus outbreak as a law-and-order problem, cracking down on supposedly “*pasaway*” or “undisciplined” citizens who have allegedly caused the rapid transmission of COVID-19. He has imposed curfews, ordered harsh penalties for being outside, and deployed hundreds of police and soldiers to implement lockdowns.

When Cebu City was declared the new epicentre of the outbreak in June 2020, Duterte sent a former military general and troops to enforce strict community quarantine rules. Tanks roamed the city, Special Action Force (SAF) troopers manned over ninety checkpoints, military helicopters dropped information pamphlets—it seemed a “city under siege”.³³ The primary role uniformed personnel played in enforcing Duterte’s lockdowns reflects the continuing pattern under his administration of relying on the military for civilian tasks. Instead of doctors and public health experts, the government’s Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) and other ad hoc bodies created to combat COVID-19 are dominated by current and former military officials. Given this, the “war-like” approach to the crisis is unsurprising. In fact, one of the members of one government task force attributed the idea of enforcing strict lockdowns to ex-military officials: “It was the former generals who suggested these. The military tightens borders to control the movement of the New People’s Army or the Abu Sayyaf. This time, however, the enemy is a disease.”³⁴

Duterte’s pandemic response, patterned after the military’s counterinsurgency programmes notorious for human rights violations, expectedly resulted in widescale abuses. In Metro Manila alone, more than thirty thousand citizens were arrested for violating lockdown regulations in a span of just one month.³⁵ They were thrown into either overcrowded jails or temporary detention facilities, putting them at even greater risk of catching COVID-19.³⁶ In some areas, local officials were even inspired to put quarantine violators in dog cages or have them dance and kiss each other in public.³⁷ Killings related to the drug war did not stop either, and even increased by over 50 per cent during the lockdown months.³⁸ While failing to arrest the public health crisis, the government’s response managed to produce a human rights crisis.

Can the Pandemic Disrupt Public Support for Duterteism?

The series of spectacular failures during the early days of the coronavirus crisis gave critics and observers the impression that Duterteism could finally be disrupted. By the end of 2019, what had become clear was that Duterteism was on a roll. Duterte had consolidated political power, further marginalized his opposition, and undone at a spectacular rate the small gains in human rights and democracy made in post-authoritarian Philippines. But by early 2020, journalists and pundits were writing that Duterte’s popularity, and even legacy, could suffer major damage as a result of the mismanaged pandemic.³⁹ And as I have previously written, the government’s response at the height of the pandemic is the single most important predictor of whether the pandemic can also turn into Duterte’s worst political

nightmare—the public can potentially put the lives, jobs, and opportunities lost against his administration.⁴⁰ That significant pushbacks against Dutertismo started to appear during the early months of the pandemic gave even more false hopes. These impressions, however, were proven wrong before the end of the year.

The first pushback was among standout local government mayors—a symbolic assault against the president who claims to be “mayor of the Philippines”.⁴¹ From March to May 2020, the national government faced highly publicized standoffs with defiant local chief executives eager to lead their own pandemic responses, even in cases when they contradict orders from the president.⁴² There is Pasig City mayor Vico Sotto, who allowed the limited operation of tricycles for public transportation despite a Malacañang-issued nationwide ban.⁴³ He was summoned by the National Bureau of Investigation for his alleged violation of quarantine laws.⁴⁴ There is also Marikina City mayor Marcilino Teodoro, who opened a COVID-19 testing facility for his city despite lacking permits from the national government.⁴⁵

Another case is that of Ormoc City mayor Richard Gomez, who refused to facilitate the return of migrant and Metro Manila workers in the city.⁴⁶ The return of these workers is part of the pet project of Senator Bong Go, a close aide of Duterte’s,⁴⁷ which was eventually suspended after widespread criticism from other local officials in Eastern Visayas.⁴⁸ These open criticisms of national government policies have been rather rare among local officials in past years given the regular threats of prosecution and violence direct from the president. In response to these open pushbacks from local officials, Duterte made a public address ordering local governments to “stand down” or face charges.⁴⁹

The second pushback came, most surprisingly, from the Duterte-controlled Congress. Malacañang’s emergency powers bill, the *Bayanihan to Heal as One* law, was eventually watered down by the president’s allies in the legislature.⁵⁰ In a March 2020 special session, the president’s “supermajority coalition” in the House of Representatives adopted in toto the administration’s version of the bill granting the president wide-ranging powers to respond to the pandemic. This alerted big business groups such as the influential American Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines, the Makati Business Club and the Management Association of the Philippines, who, in a rare show of solidarity, jointly demanded respect for constitutional limits in the emergency powers granted to Duterte, especially on the realignment and reallocation of government funds as well as the take-over of private enterprises.⁵¹

Meanwhile, key allies of Duterte in the Senate, led by Senate president Vicente Sotto III, refused to support some of the most controversial provisions of

the bill and insisted on the granting of “special authority” rather than “emergency powers”.⁵² In the end, although only ten legislators decided to vote against the bill,⁵³ Congress was able to rein in Duterte’s emergency powers.⁵⁴ Given he has control of the numbers in both the upper and the lower houses, it would have been possible to have his original emergency powers bill simply adopted by Congress.

Last among these significant pushbacks was the flood of criticisms from unusually confrontational and vocal sectors about the government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Media personalities complained about the absence of a coherent national strategy, medical workers publicly aired their grievances against government shortcomings on fulfilling the needs of frontliners, and the government’s propaganda machine was overwhelmed by critical organic online campaigns such as #OustDuterteNow.⁵⁵ The business community also found its political voice in its joint condemnation of the absence of rule of law in the midst of the pandemic, singling out how public officials close to the president were violating quarantine violations.⁵⁶ The statement was made as the public learned that Police General Debold Sinas—then chief of the Metro Manila force and now the national chief—threw a large and festive birthday party despite harshly enforcing lockdown rules on others.⁵⁷

As usual, Duterte responded with contempt to this flood of criticisms. In August 2020, the piqued president challenged health workers to stage a revolution against him if they continued to go public about pandemic mismanagement: “There is no need for you and for the guys, 1,000 of you, telling us what to do publicly. You could have just wrote [*sic*] us a letter.... Next time, don’t say revolution. That’s more dangerous than COVID-19. If you mount a revolution, you will give me free ticket to stage a counter-revolution. How I wish you would do it!”⁵⁸ Duterte took the public criticisms badly and dedicated his late-night briefings, which were supposed to be updates about government actions against the virus outbreak, to maligning and threatening his critics.

The pushbacks, however significant, were short-lived. A few months into the crisis, Duterteism was on a roll again. In May 2020 the government shut down the country’s largest media network, ABS-CBN.⁵⁹ Duterte, as far back as 2016, had threatened the network that Congress would refuse to renew its licence after airing a campaign ad against him in the past election. The closure of ABS-CBN put almost eleven thousand jobs at risk and left many far-flung communities without access to timely news during the height of the pandemic. A few weeks after, journalist Maria Ressa was found guilty of cyber libel for an article published before the cyber libel law was even passed.⁶⁰ Ressa, and the news site she founded, *Rappler*, have been receiving constant threats from Duterte for their critical reports

on the government. She had been facing at least a dozen other charges in court, including a tax evasion case likely orchestrated by Duterte's allies.

Amidst assaults on media freedom and crackdowns on critics, the anti-terrorism bill was signed into law by Duterte in July 2020. The law contains dangerous provisions, including detention for up to twenty-four days and being placed under surveillance for up to three months, and both even without a judicial warrant.⁶¹ Critics fear the law will likely be used against anti-government activists, who have been persistently labelled by the president and the military as enemies of the state.

The Duterte administration has consistently red-tagged known government critics as communist rebels, including legislators who are members of the opposition Makabayan coalition in the House of Representatives. During the latter months of the pandemic, however, government officials have started to indiscriminately red-tag even popular celebrities such as television and movie actresses Liza Soberano and Angel Locsin and 2018 Miss Universe Catriona Gray.⁶² Also in this period, dozens of prominent human rights and peace activists from across the Philippines have been murdered by unidentified suspects—whose modus operandi is reminiscent of police operations in Duterte's drug war.⁶³ The political killings have grown more brazen, and they mark the shift to an even more intensified campaign to eliminate, harass and silence opposition.

Durable Dutertismo

If 2019 was the year Duterte consolidated political power, 2020 was the year he showed that his populist politics can endure a crisis. Against the backdrop of a mismanaged pandemic, he still has the support of Filipinos, and he has yet to encounter any effective domestic backlash against even his most illiberal agenda items, including the brutal war on drugs and the closure of ABS-CBN. What makes Dutertismo this durable?

I argue that key to answering this question is to look at the dynamics of his populist politics. Populist mobilizations emerge from, manufacture and thrive in times of crisis. In fact, Duterte is not unique. Populist leaders in other parts of the world, whether Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro or India's Narendra Modi, have remained popular despite their disastrous handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Crises create social conditions of widespread anxiety and insecurity that are particularly conducive for populist support. In the particular case of Duterte, he mobilized support by capitalizing on anxieties, securitizing the pandemic and polarizing the public. The successful use of these strategies provided the conditions conducive for the public to renew their support for Dutertismo.

First, the populist Duterte capitalized on the widespread anxiety that resulted from the failed attempts to curb the virus outbreak. The poor are desperate for jobs and food, while the middle class and wealthy are afraid of a breakdown in law and order. The national administration, despite all its faults, still managed to creatively respond to these anxieties and insecurities.

On the one hand, the government's emergency subsidy and social amelioration programme seemed to have reached its intended poor beneficiaries.⁶⁴ The package also includes an expansion of the "4Ps" conditional cash transfer programme that is so popular among low-income communities. According to an independent survey, 71 per cent of Filipino households reported they had received cash subsidies from the government—even more than once for some—since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.⁶⁵ There is no better proof of the government's compassion for the poor than cash aid.

On the other hand, presidential briefings devoted great attention to assuring the public that any social unrest that might be triggered by the crisis would be dealt with accordingly. As former presidential communications undersecretary Manolo Quezon III observed: "All of the President's late-night addresses speak to the primordial and most traditional expectation of any president: to maintain order. That's this President's understanding, and likely the majority expectation, too, of the public, particularly his constituency."⁶⁶ And while Duterte promises the middle class and the wealthy some security, he regularly called on them to take care of the social needs of the poor when the government faced challenges in rolling out its assistance programme.⁶⁷

Duterte is well-placed to capitalize on the public's class-differentiated anxieties and insecurities. He successfully did so in 2016, promising toughness on crime to appeal to the insecure middle class⁶⁸ and compassion for the vulnerable to win the support of the anxious poor.⁶⁹ The "slow-moving disasters" of inequality, disorder and misgovernance in the post-EDSA I period generated a public appetite for populist politics.⁷⁰ In many respects the pandemic is a case of another "slow-moving disaster", in an even more overwhelming form, that has once again made the social environment conducive for populist mobilization. Violence—both its use and the threat of its use—is the organizing logic behind Duterte's class-differentiated responses. The (potential) use of violence against the protesting poor demobilizes them, while at the same time mobilizing the order-fixated middle and upper classes.

Second, securitizing the pandemic also contributed to renewed public support for Duterte. Aside from a militarized approach to crisis response and the dominance of security agencies in implementing it, the use of war language in

crisis communication has also been central to the securitization of the pandemic. Duterte has consistently framed his government's pandemic response as a "war against COVID-19" or a "war against an invisible enemy". An analysis of his public addresses made between February and May 2020 shows clearly that the language of war dominates in his communication style.⁷¹ Among Duterte's frequently used words were "dead", "military", "law", "force" and "soldiers".⁷² Other populist leaders have similarly resorted to the use of war rhetoric in their COVID-19 addresses. India's Modi compared the "battle of the coronavirus" to the "battle of *Mahabharata*",⁷³ while former US president Donald Trump calls himself a "wartime president" for combatting coronavirus.⁷⁴

Once a securitized framing of the COVID-19 crisis had been mainstreamed, it was easier for the public to see the populist Duterte as the ideal crisis manager. He has consistently presented and idealized himself as a brutal, strong and uncompromising commander-in-chief always ready for war.⁷⁵ The administration has used the same strategy, and it has worked very well for them, in the war on drugs. Duterte has successfully marginalized public health discourses on the drug war and has instead securitized the issue to his advantage. As the flagship and most popular policy of Dutertismo, the highly violent anti-drug campaign is the foundation of Duterte's populist mobilization. Citizens who support the campaign are also more likely to be attracted to the charismatic appeal of his populist leadership.⁷⁶ Securitizing the pandemic sets the stage for public support for populist politics.

And lastly, while the coronavirus crisis could have served as an opportunity for Duterte to champion national unity and rally the country to a common cause, he instead doubled down on the use of polarizing rhetoric. The pandemic has provided new excuses for attacking his old enemies: the media, opposition groups, human rights advocates and other favourite punching bags. The use of war language is especially useful for this purpose. It allows Duterte to identify a permanent enemy (the coronavirus) while also labelling those who challenge the government's strategy (lockdowns) as occasional enemies (undisciplined citizens violating quarantine protocols, media reporting on mishandling of the pandemic, hospital workers calling for more government support). Like Brazil's Bolsonaro, he would regularly antagonize government critics and have the public pick a side.⁷⁷

He has also used his regular late-night addresses on the COVID-19 situation, popularly called the "Late Late Show with Duterte", to put accountability and blame on the supposed *pasaway* (undisciplined) individuals who refuse to cooperate with government measures. For instance, Duterte argued: "Oh these Bisaya, even those from Davao, the Bisaya from there, they are really hard-headed. You can't make them follow the rules."⁷⁸ Other government officials also echo this line in

their public briefings. This is what presidential spokesperson Harry Roque would regularly say in his press briefings: “There are so many undisciplined citizens in our country. And because of that, we are once again number one in the ASEAN in the number of COVID-19 cases. Stop being undisciplined, stay at home.”⁷⁹ The polarizing narrative being sold to the public is that ordinary, hard-headed Filipinos who refuse to follow basic rules are forcing the government to keep the harsh and coercive lockdown in place. If the narrative is to be believed, there is no other choice for the government but a top-down, militarized approach that can bring order to a nation of undisciplined citizens. So to end the crisis, there is no other choice for good citizens but to support the disciplining of these bad citizens. This parallels the message that pro-government online trolls drumbeat on social media: “sumunod ka na lang para matapos na” (just obey the orders so all of this would end).

Conclusion

When democracies hit a midlife crisis, a pandemic on the scale of the 2020 coronavirus outbreak can serve as a positive or negative interruption. The populist Duterte seized the moment to further weaken Philippine democracy. Capitalizing on the populist brand of crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic in Duterte’s Philippines resulted in the hardening of the current illiberal order. Duterteism was given renewed legitimacy and public support—it is, despite crises and controversies, here to stay. This means that—with more than a year before the next presidential election in 2022 and a potential run by the president’s daughter, Davao City mayor Sara Duterte—the country is worryingly set for more waves of killings, misgovernance and assaults on rights, while many Filipinos will be left on their own to recover from the debilitating effects of the pandemic.

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Notes

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