

## The Philippines in 2020

### *COVID-19 Pandemic Threatens Duterte's Populist Legacy*

#### ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic initially threatened the populist legacy of Philippine President Rodrigo R. Duterte. Despite implementing one of the longest and strictest lockdowns globally, the country is still struggling to control the virus. While Duterte appears victorious in his assault on human rights and media freedom, his government's record in fighting the virus is spotty at best. Yet, Duterte's populism proved resilient. He remains extremely popular, with a September national survey reporting 81% approval of his government's response to the pandemic and 91% of respondents expressing trust in his leadership.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, Duterte, pandemic, Philippines, populism

#### INTRODUCTION

The eruption of the long-dormant Taal Volcano and the outbreak of African swine fever in Mindanao in the first two months of 2020 were portents of things to come for the administration of populist Rodrigo R. Duterte. With the overwhelming victory of most of his national and local candidates in the 2019 midterm elections, the strongman president greeted the year with a renewed mandate to cement his administration's legacy.<sup>1</sup> Duterte ascended to the presidency on a "the people versus the corrupt elite" narrative in 2016. Drawing on the politics of anger and resentment, amplified through social

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1. Under the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the president is only allowed a single six-year term.

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media, he managed to sustain his popularity despite his consistent bad behavior, bloody war on drugs, and assault on media freedom. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, threatens his populist legacy.

### OUTBREAK OF COVID-19

Like other populist leaders abroad, Duterte initially downplayed the threat of the novel coronavirus that first broke out in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. It was only in March 2020 that his government belatedly ordered a hard lockdown, labeled Enhanced Community Quarantine, in Metro Manila and Luzon to prevent a nationwide spread of the disease. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has become an unfamiliar “enemy” for Duterte and his populist counterparts worldwide. It is difficult to sustain a people-versus-the-elite narrative in the face of a viral and existential threat. One cannot merely discipline the virus. And the people are afraid, hungry, and dying.

Duterte mobilized an Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases composed of health practitioners, technocrats, and business representatives, headed by controversial health secretary Francisco Duque III, who had been publicly criticized for incompetence and alleged anomalous transactions.<sup>2</sup> Duque has been blamed for the slow and ineffective government response to the spread of the pandemic, as well as the billion-peso anomalies in the corruption-laden Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth), where he sits as chairman. Recently, he has also been accused of failing to submit important documents to finalize the procurement of COVID-19 vaccine from the US-based Pfizer/BioNTech. Duterte also relied heavily on another body, composed of former military generals, the National Task Force COVID-19, which he tasked with implementing the National Action Plan to manage the spread of the virulent disease in the country. On the prodding of his military advisers, Duterte implemented one of the longest and most stringent lockdowns in the world, patterned after the military’s decades-long tactics for border control in its fight against armed insurgent groups (Dizon 2020; Olanday and Rigby 2020).

2. Francisco Duque III is a medical doctor who has accumulated 21 years in government service and has ridden through waves of controversy.

Congress immediately granted the president additional powers to strengthen the government's response to the coronavirus disease with the Bayanihan [National Unity] to Heal as One Act, a law that was deliberated and approved in a day. To some observers, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect opportunity for strongmen and autocrats to further consolidate power and control amid a great global humanitarian crisis. There is perhaps a trade-off between individual freedoms and the need for government restrictions to protect the public health. However, there are also fears that liberty, once taken away, especially by the state, might be difficult to restore.

### DUTERTE'S WAR ON MANY FRONTS

In July, in his penultimate State of the Nation Address, Duterte vowed to “fight this pandemic with the same fervor as our campaign against illegal drugs, criminality, insurgency, and corruption in high places and entrenched parochial interests.” This declaration came after his government and political allies in Congress expended much of their energy passing a draconian Anti-Terrorism Law and ending the franchise of the country's largest broadcast network, ABS-CBN. Also during this time, CEO Maria Ressa and researcher Rey Santos of the news site Rappler were convicted of cyber libel. Instead of providing a concrete plan to address the rise and spread of the virus, the president used the opportunity to attack his political enemies and reiterate his declaration of a war on many fronts. While Duterte appears victorious in his assault on human rights and media freedom, his government's record in this war on many fronts has been spotty at best over the past four years.

Duterte considers ABS-CBN's closure a significant achievement in his administration's fight against the so-called “oligarchs.” Since gaining power, he has complained that during the election campaign he was wronged by the station and its owners, the Lopez family, and vowed to reject its franchise renewal (Esguerra 2020).<sup>3</sup> The late dictator Ferdinand Marcos also used the dismantling of the Lopez empire and “oligarchy” as his justification for placing the country under martial law in 1972. He similarly shut down ABS-CBN and then handed its equipment and property to one of his cronies.

3. The power of the Lopez family, one of the oldest and wealthiest in the Philippines, has waned since the Marcos era. Its wealth has been overtaken by a new set of billionaires listed in the Fortune 500.

One president's oligarch is another's crony; this has always been the system in the Philippines.

In the speech, Duterte also lashed out against the country's two leading telecommunication companies, which are controlled by the Ayala family and billionaire Manuel V. Pangilinan, respectively (Venzon 2020). Faulty telecommunication and Internet services are hot-button issues across all socio-economic classes in the Philippines. As Duterte's critics point out, his own set of cronies look just like an emerging oligarchy. An example is the Davao-based businessman and Duterte campaign contributor Dennis Uy.<sup>4</sup> His China-backed Dito Telecommunity is making a big push to break the telecom duopoly of Ayala's Globe Telecom and Pangilinan's Smart Communication.

Duterte also vowed to continue his bloody war on drugs. Despite causing thousands of deaths, the failing campaign has only seized 1% of the country's total illegal drug supply (*Economist* 2020). His much-vaunted war on corruption continues to be nothing more than mere rhetoric, as the country's corruption levels continue to rise in recent rankings by international agencies. He has fired and then rehired several officials linked to corruption. Allegations of massive fraud in the state-run Philippine Health Insurance Corporation, amounting to 15 billion pesos (US\$ 300 million), were aired in a Senate hearing (Romero and Nonato 2020).

## SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL ALLIANCES

The strongman remains soft on China. In his public appearances, Duterte never fails to mention his special relationship with President Xi Jinping. He has pinned the nation's COVID-19 recovery on the development of a Chinese vaccine. He has pleaded for the country to be put on China's priority list for distribution. His keeping close ties with Beijing, when the international community is demanding accountability for China's role in the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, is not without its Filipino critics. The Duterte government opted to softpedal the Philippines' landmark 2016 victory (in the Permanent Court of Arbitration) against China's territorial claims in the

4. Uy is a Chinese-Filipino entrepreneur and a close associate of Rodrigo Duterte from Davao City who managed to expand his business interests from petroleum to a vast empire that extends to shipping, casinos, and telecommunications. Critics accuse him of being Duterte's crony, who has leveraged his close ties with the president to enlarge his business over these four years (Sayson 2020).

South China Sea—in return for bilateral economic concessions. In his State of the Nation address, Duterte admitted shamelessly to the nation that the Philippines has no option but to concede to China’s geopolitical power. This defeatist statement drew harsh reactions from other government officials and the public.

In contrast, Duterte has been more combative toward the country’s traditional ally, the United States. Since his ascension to the presidency, his government had pursued an “independent foreign policy” that sought to lessen its relationship with the US and forge closer ties with China and Russia. In February 2020, Duterte formalized the termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which provided a legal basis for the presence of US troops in Philippine territory for joint military exercises. In June, however, he suddenly ordered the suspension of the termination order “in light of the political and other developments in the region” (Tomacruz 2020). Later, Duterte granted an absolute pardon to Lance Corporal Joseph Scott Pemberton, a US Marine convicted of murdering Filipino transgender woman Jennifer Laude in 2014. The VFA provided the legal basis for Pemberton’s detention in a military camp instead of one of the country’s overcrowded and high-risk prisons. The suspension of the VFA termination and Pemberton’s absolute pardon came on the heels of China’s continued aggression and encroachment in Philippine maritime territory despite Duterte’s policy of appeasement.

### THE ECONOMY TAKES A HIT

As in other parts of the world, the extended lockdown wreaked havoc on the Philippine economy. The COVID-19 pandemic and the government’s strict measures to contain it have resulted in the country’s highest unemployment rate and the sharpest decline in GDP in recent history. In the second quarter of 2020, GDP fell by 16.5%. The economic standstill also reduced income via remittances from overseas Filipino workers and business process outsourcing, two linchpins of the Philippine economy (Lim 2020).

The World Bank projected that the Philippine economy would contract by 6.9% in 2020, one of the sharpest declines in the Asia-Pacific. Economic recovery for the country will be slower than for its regional neighbors. Nonetheless, a gradual economic rebound is expected in 2021–2022, depending on the government’s ability to flatten the COVID-19 curve and open the economy successfully.

## POPULIST RESILIENCE

Despite implementing one of the longest and strictest lockdowns globally, the country is still struggling to control the virus. At the time of writing, at the close of 2020, the Philippines had reported 472,532 cumulative COVID-19 cases, far exceeding confirmed-case figures in China. While Duterte appears victorious in his assault on human rights and media freedom, his government's record in fighting the virus is mediocre.

Most pundits and analysts shared the conventional wisdom that the government's dismal performance would somehow impact the popularity of the president. Hence, it was a tremendous surprise for most observers of Philippine politics that in a national survey by Pulse Asia in September, Duterte's government gained an 81% approval rating for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, 91% of respondents said they approved of Duterte's performance as president. This is the highest approval rating garnered by a sitting president in the Philippines.

Critics of Duterte, particularly those in the political opposition, were incredulous. They raised doubts about the survey's methodology and the credibility of the firm that ran it.<sup>5</sup> But for his diehard supporters, Duterte is the embodiment of their *tatay* (daddy): a strict father of the nation with only the interest of the Filipino people at heart (Aquino 2019). They are a constituency of the "populist public" who are frustrated, angered, and skeptical of the "hypocrisy" of liberal reformism in the previous presidential administration, which is said to have been dominated by the "elites" and the "oligarchs." As one Duterte supporter put it, "[We] support Duterte because [we] are Duterte" (Arguelles 2019: 431).

## CONCLUSION

Duterte's continuing popularity, coupled with his electoral victories in 2016 and 2019, demonstrates that he has a solid base of legitimation for his brand of populism. With the next presidential election scheduled for 2022, it remains to be seen whether Filipino populism will consolidate and continue into the next presidential administration, either in the person of a Duterte-endorsed candidate, or in another populist figure.

5. Pulse Asia is one of the two oldest polling firms in the country. Managed by academics and professionals, it has credibly and correctly forecasted electoral outcomes and reported public opinion in the past three decades.

Moreover, it is still to be determined whether the pandemic and the emerging new normal will alter the rules of electoral engagement in a political system that has long been dominated by entrenched political dynasties, the distribution of patronage, and the cultivation of clientelistic ties.

In the first presidential survey by Pulse Asia for prospective candidates who could replace Duterte in 2022, the top three represented different hues of populist politics in the Philippines: Senator Grace Poe, daughter of the late popular movie actor and defeated presidential candidate Fernando Poe Jr.; Senator Manuel “Manny” Pacquiao, internationally renowned world boxing champion, with a powerful rags-to-riches story; and Senator Christopher “Bong” Go, Duterte’s former assistant and protégé. Sara Duterte, the president’s daughter and Davao City’s mayor, is also expected to run. Borrowing a page from her father’s playbook in 2016, the feisty mayor has so far denied any interest in aiming for the top post of the land. Meanwhile, the political opposition struggles to gain traction and resonate with the public, despite the efforts of its leader, Vice President Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo, to offer a more liberal and democratic alternative to Duterte’s populism.

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