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## Duterte's pandemic populism: Strongman leadership, weak state capacity, and the politics of deployment in the Philippines

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WIDER Working Paper 2022/63

## **Duterte's pandemic populism**

Strongman leadership, weak state capacity, and the politics of deployment in the Philippines

Julio C. Teehankee\*

June 2022

**Abstract:** The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic undermined the populist legacy of Philippine president Rodrigo R. Duterte. Despite implementing one of the longest and strictest lockdowns globally, the country has struggled with controlling the pandemic. While Duterte looks to have triumphed in his attack on human rights and press freedom, his government's record in combating the virus has been spotty at best. Yet Duterte's populism has proven to be resilient. He has remained extremely popular, with a September 2021 national survey reporting 81 per cent approval of his government's response to the pandemic and 91 per cent of respondents expressing trust in his leadership. The irony of Duterte's populist resilience amid his poor pandemic response serves to highlight his mastery of political deployment within a weak state. Two significant inputs are required to deploy state capacity into a range of outcomes: political coalitions (including leadership, classes, and parties) and a balance of social forces. The 'politics of deployment' depends on the quality of decision-making of state leadership and the political coalitions forged to support such decision-making. Decisions, in turn, depend on the balance of social forces—the resistance or support of various sectors in society. This paper will unpack Duterte's deployment of 'brute force governance' (which he earlier employed in his bloody 'war on drugs') in addressing the COVID-19 crisis in the Philippines.

**Key words:** COVID-19, pandemic, Philippines, populism, Rodrigo Duterte

**JEL classification:** B52, H10, H11, H12

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## 1 Introduction

Among the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Philippines is one of three countries that has struggled to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, its dismal performance coming despite the country implementing one of the strictest and longest lockdowns in the world. While populist president Rodrigo Duterte appeared victorious in his assault on human rights and media freedom, his government's record in fighting the virus has been spotty at best. Duterte's inadequate performance in handling the pandemic has been highlighted as the Philippines has consistently appeared last in Nikkei Asia's COVID-19 Recovery Index and Bloomberg's COVID Resilience Ranking. Each month, the Nikkei index ranks over 120 countries and regions on infection control, vaccination rollout, and social mobility. A higher vaccination rate and fewer social isolation measures help a country or region to rank higher (Li 2021). Bloomberg's is a monthly ranking of the best and worst countries to be in during the pandemic. The Philippines has scored poorly on all four of Bloomberg's metrics, and its vaccine coverage rate of 20 per cent is the lowest of the 53 countries ranked.

Yet Duterte's populism has proven to be resilient, with a record approval rating of 92 per cent at the height of the pandemic. For some observers, the continuing COVID-19 pandemic presents an ideal chance for 'strongmen' and autocrats to further solidify their authority and control, in the face of a massive worldwide humanitarian calamity (Lührmann et al. 2020). Indeed, there has appeared to be a trade-off between limiting individual liberties and the necessity for the government to impose these limits by command to stop the spread of the fatal virus. Hence, it is puzzling that the Philippines has struggled with the pandemic despite Duterte's strongman leadership, high state legitimacy, and popular trust. What has the role been of state capacity (or the lack of it) in the poor pandemic response? This paper will unpack Duterte's deployment of 'brute force governance' (which he earlier employed in his bloody 'war on drugs') in addressing the COVID-19 crisis in the Philippines. It seeks to delineate how factors such as political deployment and state capacity have shaped the government's pandemic response and account for Duterte's enduring popularity despite his mismanagement of the coronavirus crisis.

## 2 State capacity and the politics of deployment

The onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the integral role of state capacity in containing the spread of the virus. The literature initially focused on regime types (Alon et al. 2020; Berengaut 2020; Kleinfeld 2020). The swift and disciplined approach at first helped some authoritarian regimes to flatten the COVID-19 curve. Indeed, authoritarian regimes were quick to impose strict public health measures compared with democracies (Diamond 2020). But advocates of democratic governance argue that democracy offers a more effective way of addressing the pandemic by mobilizing social capital and public trust between citizens and government. However, countries with strong democratic institutions were slower in implementing measures to address the pandemic (Bunyavejchewin and Sirichuanjun 2021; Dobbs 2020).

Drawing on political science and health politics research, Greer et al. (2020, 2021) identify four broad hypotheses for research on COVID-19 political responses:

1. Social policy matters to crisis management as well as recovery—the pre-existing social policies of the country plus the importance of communication and trust in generating compliance.

2. Regimes matter—the regime type of a country, such as whether it is democratic or autocratic. Authoritarian regimes are bad at maintaining the internal and external flow of good information, while only some are good at forceful action (for example, China and Russia). Democratic regimes might have more difficulty taking forceful or appropriate action but benefit from better information flow and public trust (for example, Germany under Angela Merkel and New Zealand under Jacinda Ardern).
3. Formal political institutions matter—this refers to the vertical and horizontal institutions of governance: unitary or federal, presidential or parliamentary.
4. State capacity matters—whether state capacity is strong or weak significantly impacts the shaping of policy options and the implementation of a more effective response to the pandemic.

However, the performance outcomes of regimes and political institutions have varied in response to the pandemic. Some democratic federal countries have succeeded, while others have failed. Some authoritarian unitary governments have been able to flatten the curve, but not all. Rather than regime type dictating a country's ability to respond effectively, characteristics such as legitimacy, capacity, and trust have been more likely to determine a country's success rate in combating this worldwide pandemic (Dobbs 2020; Hartley and Jarvis 2020). For Fukuyama (2020, 26), 'It is not a matter of regime type. Some democracies have performed well, but others have not, and the same is true for autocracies.' Hanson (2015) was among the first to ask whether it is more important to have democracy or a capable state in achieving development outcomes. Recently, the literature has shifted its focus onto the critical role of state capacity in government pandemic response. The absence of state capacity is frequently cited as a barrier to development. Initially referring to the ability to produce income, state capacity encompasses various skills relevant to the development process, including protecting private property rights, enforcing contracts, supporting and augmenting markets through regulation, and providing public goods (Serikbayeva et al. 2020).

Gisselquist and Vaccaro (2021) identify three core dimensions of the state: authority, capacity, and legitimacy. Authority refers to the ability of the state to provide order and security within its territorial boundaries. Ideally, state authority should be associated with improved pandemic outcomes, since states with greater power should be more successful at implementing COVID-related limitations such as quarantine and stay-at-home regulations than states with less jurisdiction. Capacity is the state's ability to provide basic public services. To a lesser extent, capacity and authority are inextricably linked to what is occasionally referred to as state effectiveness. Effective states provide a range of beneficial socioeconomic outcomes, including economic development, improved supply of public goods, and improved public health outcomes.

Additionally, a well-functioning state apparatus is believed to be critical in minimizing the harmful consequences of external shocks such as natural disasters. It is assumed that states with 'high capacity' will be more prepared to respond to crises than states with 'low capacity', such as through having proper pandemic response plans and preventative infrastructure in place. Legitimacy is the ability to acquire consent to govern from the population of a country. State legitimacy appears to affect pandemic outcomes mainly through the state's ability to enforce rules and deliver services (i.e., via state authority and capacity). States with a high degree of legitimacy may rely more on the population's voluntary compliance with the regulations. Individuals living in legitimate states are also more likely to have a higher level of social trust, allowing voluntary compliance with rules and support for government actions.

Mao (2021) underscores the importance of state capacity for crisis management. State capacity is critical for developing an effective crisis management system because it helps the government to manage crises by coordinating many entities, analysing data, and providing public services. Mao

conceptualizes state capacity for crisis management in four dimensions: information capacity, decision-making and implementation capacity, coercive capacity, and mobilization and co-operation capacity. He also acknowledges that political institutions shape the state's capacity. As a result, both consolidated democracies and authoritarian regimes can have strong state capacity. Stable democracies can increase state capacity through institutionalized administration and bottom-up control of civil society. Through strong top-down control, consolidated authoritarian states can bolster state capacity.

Nevertheless, countries with varying political institutions have different degrees of state capacity. State capacity has a critical role in shaping the strength of the lines of accountability that connect rulers to service providers. When state capacity is high, rulers can more effectively supply increased levels of public services. When states lack capacity, funds may not reach service providers and policy-makers may lack the tools to hold service providers accountable for their performance (Hanson 2015).

Comparing authoritarian China with democratic South Korea, for example, offers two effective pandemic responses within various political institutions and state capacities. China has followed a policy of mandatory lockdown that is highly reliant on authoritarian governance. However, in the early stages of the pandemic, a lack of state information capability hampered the rapid response. In comparison, as a democratic country, South Korea has maintained a robust information capability that enables timely crisis responses. In light of the government's limited coercive capacity, this capability has supported society's openness and opposes COVID-19 through state-society synergy. Voluntary social co-operation, such as public compliance with anti-crisis measures, affects effectiveness (Mao 2021).

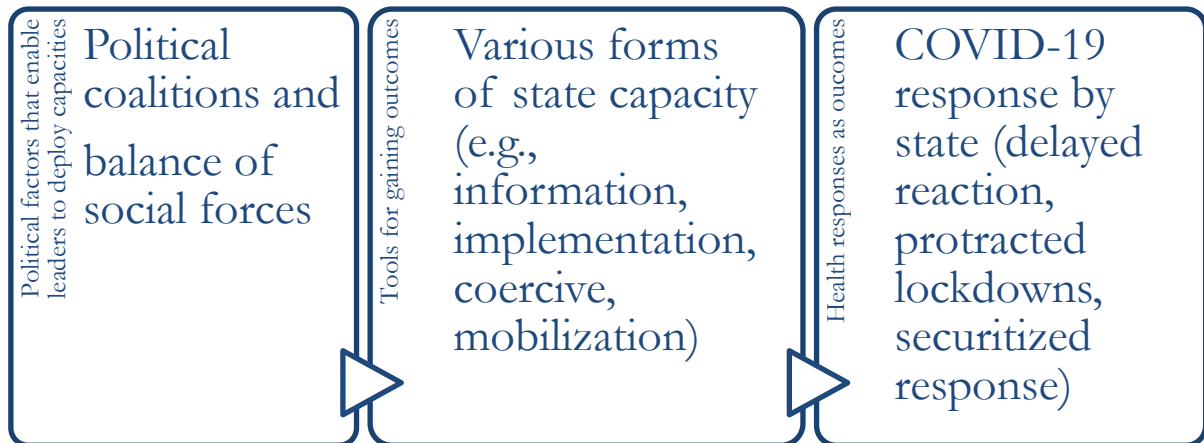
Underpinning the functionality of state capacity, particularly during a crisis, is public trust and political legitimacy. As countries worldwide have fought to limit the COVID-19 pandemic, analysts have frequently observed that those with greater regime legitimacy, state capacity, and political trust have been more likely to contain the virus's spread. Fukuyama (2020) highlights the factors responsible for successful pandemic responses: state capacity, social trust, and leadership. A competent state apparatus is defined by a government that citizens trust and listen to and successful leaders who have performed admirably, mitigating the harm they have sustained. Countries with dysfunctional state apparatus, polarized communities, or ineffective leadership, on the other hand, have performed poorly in pandemic response, leaving their populations and economies exposed and vulnerable. However, Dobbs (2020) discovered that countries with higher legitimacy and trust have also had a rise in COVID-19 cases, though the correlation is only moderate.

Some puzzles have emerged in the role of legitimacy and trust in facilitating the state's capacity for crisis response. Hong Kong may have been expected to falter in reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic as sociopolitical tensions erupted into significant street protests against the government's perceived facilitation of Chinese Communist Party control over the city in the year preceding the outbreak. And yet, it initially succeeded in containing the first wave of the virus. For Hartley and Jarvis (2020), the Hong Kong experience called into question the applicability of academic theories of response capacity that are primarily concerned with the state. This society riven by legitimation crisis and low trust in government still managed to successfully respond to the crisis through 'community capacity'. This concept relates to collective action, whether coordinated or not, to tackle a public policy issue. It encompasses and expands on the concept of 'civil society', which generally relates to non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations (Hartley and Jarvis 2020).

State capacity can also be defined by politics, or the mechanisms by which leaders with authority over bureaucracies are selected and sanctioned, beginning at the village level. Politics influences the incentives of state workers and their beliefs and expectations, and thus the performance of government agencies (Khemani 2019). According to Centeno et al. (2017), two significant inputs are required to deploy state capacity into a range of outcomes: political coalitions (including leadership, classes, and parties) and a balance of social forces. The ‘politics of deployment’ depends on the quality of decision-making of the state leadership and the political coalitions forged to support such decision-making. Decisions, in turn, depend on the balance of social forces—the resistance or support of various sectors in society. A state’s performance cannot be divorced from the expectations imposed on it, the opposition it may face in achieving its objectives, and the degree of support or co-operation it enjoys. We must account for societal resistance posed by either a sizeable segment of the population (for example, a refusal to observe the law) or a sizeable and influential minority (objecting to some health measure). State capacity will depend on the means available to mobilize support, quell resistance, or fulfil requests in certain instances. While states’ coercive capacity to enforce decisions is frequently emphasized, equal weight should be given to the political instruments available to garner and demonstrate support (Centeno et al. 2017).

This paper will utilize process-tracing to account for Duterte’s political deployment during the coronavirus outbreak. Process-tracing is ‘an analytic tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence—often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena’ (Collier 2011: 824). It will systematically examine trajectories of change and causation in light of Duterte’s populist resilience despite his poor pandemic response. Specifically, the paper will probe into a sequence of three critical elements in the Philippine response to the coronavirus pandemic (see Figure 1). These elements are: political factors that enable leaders to deploy state capacity; state capacity as a tool for gaining outcomes; and health responses as outcomes.

Figure 1: Political deployment and state capacity in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: author’s illustration based on Mao (2021) and Centeno et al. (2017).

### 3 Populist mobilization in the midst of a pandemic

There is a tendency to focus on structural explanations for the success or failure of state response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even when capable states exist, we must consider whether political agents aim to deploy the organizational capacity of the state. A well-functioning state bureaucracy is essentially a tool. It can only fulfil its potential if deployed in the proper direction and partially

insulated from interference, and if it has mechanisms to deal with competing pressures. It is critical to distinguish between public failures caused by state capacity (organizational or institutional structures) and those driven primarily by leadership quality, preferences, or tactics. It is critical to evaluate the leaders who spearhead a project and the political coalitions formed to support those efforts when analysing political agency (Centeno et al. 2017).

### **3.1 Duterte's political coalition**

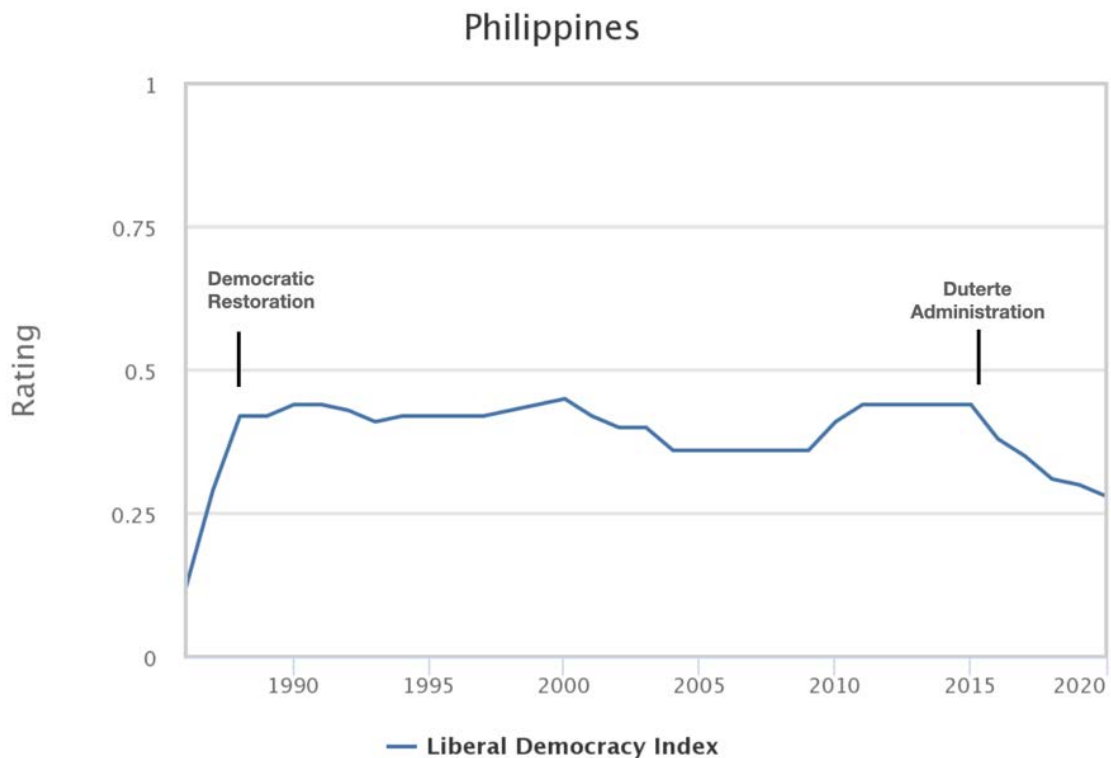
The liberal political order's inability to enact critical social and political reforms and increase state capacity (most notably in criminal justice systems and disaster management) fostered a 'politics of anger' that Duterte exploited during the 2016 election (Teehankee and Thompson 2016). This outpouring of anger was sparked by widespread voter discontent and rising demand for a strong leader capable of restoring law and order. The outpouring of rage manifested itself as a movement centred on an anti-establishment and unorthodox mayor from the South who promised the arrival of genuine change ('*tunay na pagbabago*'). (Teehankee 2017).

Despite the lack of reliable party support and political machinery, the former mayor of Davao City in Mindanao rode a wave of angry votes to capture the single-term presidency in 2016. Starting as an almost party-less candidate, his allies swelled to hundreds of national and local politicians upon his assumption of the presidency. However, unlike previous Philippine presidents, he did not personally endeavour to consolidate his political support under his political party, the PDP-Laban. Duterte has succeeded in bypassing patronage-based political party formation in favour of populist mobilization —a 'sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people' (Jansen 2011: 82).

Duterte's populist mobilization triggered the rise of illiberal democracy that promoted intense polarization and spawned brute-force governance in the country. Illiberal democracy 'upholds participation rights while violating personal liberties' (Thompson 2019: 41). The country restored its democracy in 1986 after 14 years of authoritarian rule under Ferdinand Marcos. Its steep decline into illiberal democracy (See Figure 2) was first manifested in Duterte's bloody 'war on drugs' and later replicated in his militarized COVID-19 response. When institutions are unable to generate favourable governance outcomes, particularly when issues have been 'securitized', resulting in expectations of quick solutions, and when a lack of accountability allows for widespread human rights violations, brute-force governance results (Thompson 2020).



Figure 2: Philippines Liberal Democracy Index, 1986–2020



Source: author's illustration based on Coppedge et al. (2021).

### 3.2 The populist public

As with other populist politicians abroad, Duterte originally minimized the threat posed by the novel coronavirus. Duterte and his populist peers globally have discovered an unfamiliar ‘enemy’ in the COVID-19 pandemic problem. It is tough to maintain a narrative of the people versus the elite in the face of a viral and existential threat. A virus cannot just be disciplined. And the population is fearful, hungry, and dying (Teehankee 2021). However, for his die-hard supporters, Duterte embodies their ‘tatay’ or daddy—a severe father figure who has the Filipino people’s best interests at heart (Aquino 2019). They are a segment of the ‘populist public’ who are disgruntled, angry, and distrustful of liberal reformism’s ‘hypocrisy’, as represented by the previous presidential administration, which was believed to be governed by ‘elites’ and ‘oligarchs’. As one enthusiastic Duterte admirer puts it, ‘[we] support Duterte because [we] are Duterte’ (Arguelles 2019: 431).

Nonetheless, the pandemic has created a perfect opportunity for populist leaders worldwide to consolidate power (Balfour 2020; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020; Meyer 2020; Serhan 2020; Urbinati 2020). Populist mobilizations begin, develop, and flourish during times of crisis. Crises foster widespread worry and uncertainty in society, which is especially favourable to populist support. Popular support is generated by capitalizing on public fears, securitizing the epidemic, and alienating the people. In the Philippines, the effective implementation of these initiatives has created an environment favourable to the public renewing its support for Dutertismo (Arguelles 2021).

While various populisms have emerged in different parts of the world in recent years, Lasco (2020) points to ‘medical populism’ as a significant variant that spreads with contagion. He defines medical populism as ‘a political style based on performances of public health crises that pit “the

people” against “the establishment”, and proposes that this type of populism is characterized by ‘simplifying the pandemic by downplaying its impacts or touting easy solutions or treatments, spectacularizing ... responses to crisis, forging divisions between the “people” and dangerous “others”, and making medical knowledge claims to support the above’ (Lasco 2020: 1417).

In the Philippines, most pundits and analysts shared the conventional wisdom that the government’s dismal performance in addressing the pandemic would somehow impact the president’s popularity. Hence, it was a tremendous surprise for most observers of Philippine politics that in a national survey by Pulse Asia in September 2020, Duterte’s government gained a 92 per cent approval rating for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic (See Table 1). Moreover, 84 per cent of respondents said that they approved of Duterte’s performance in controlling the spread of the virus. Another 84 per cent approved of his government providing assistance and livelihood to those affected by the pandemic (See Table 2).

Table 1: Approval/disapproval of President Duterte's action to prevent spread of COVID-19

<i>Base: Aware of any news on COVID-19, 100%</i>								
<i>How much do you approve or disapprove of what President Rodrigo R. Duterte has done or is doing to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the country? Do you... ?</i>	LOCATION					CLASS		
	RP	NCR	BAL			ABC	D	E
			LUZ	VIS	MIN			
<b>APPROVE</b>	92	87	91	92	98	78	93	95
Truly approve	62	58	54	67	79	52	64	62
Somewhat approve	30	29	37	25	19	26	30	32
<b>MAY APPROVE OR MAY DISAPPROVE</b>	5	7	6	6	2	16	4	4
<b>DISAPPROVE</b>	3	6	4	2	1	6	3	2
Somewhat disapprove	1	4	1	1	1	5	1	1
Truly disapprove	2	2	2	1	0	1	2	0

Source: reproduced with permission from Pulse Asia (2020).

Duterte’s high approval mark was evident across geographical locations and classes. His highest level of support came from his bailiwick, Mindanao, and from the lower-middle to lower classes. But he also rated highly in the other geographical constituencies and even the upper to middle classes. The following section will delineate how Duterte leveraged his popularity to mount a highly militarized, albeit mismanaged, pandemic response anchored on a weak state.

Table 2: Performance rating of Duterte administration on selected issues relating to COVID-19

Base: Total Interviews, 100%								
Controlling the spread of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19	LOCATION					CLASS		
	RP	BAL				ABC	D	E
		NCR	LUZ	VIS	MIN			
<b>APPROVE</b>	84	78	85	86	85	84	84	85
Truly Approve	33	25	24	36	53	25	33	36
Somewhat approve	51	53	61	50	31	59	50	49
<b>MAY APPROVE OR MAY DISAPPROVE</b>	10	13	10	13	8	8	11	9
<b>DISAPPROVE</b>	6	9	5	1	8	8	5	6
Somewhat disapprove	4	6	3	1	6	5	3	5
Truly Disapprove	2	4	2	0	0	3	2	1
<b>Providing assistance / subsidy to those who lost their livelihood and jobs because of the spread of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19</b>								
<b>APPROVE</b>	84	75	82	87	91	74	84	91
Truly Approve	32	20	21	40	53	23	31	40
Somewhat approve	53	55	62	46	38	51	53	51
<b>MAY APPROVE OR MAY DISAPPROVE</b>	9	13	10	9	4	17	9	6
<b>DISAPPROVE</b>	7	11	8	5	4	9	7	3
Somewhat disapprove	5	7	6	4	3	3	6	3
Truly Disapprove	2	4	2	1	1	6	2	1

Source: reproduced with permission from Pulse Asia (2020).

A number of possible factors have been posited as having contributed to Duterte’s continuing popularity amid the mismanagement of the pandemic crisis. Some analysts point out that the possible ‘fear factor’ of the Duterte administration may have prompted survey respondents to positively rate the president’s COVID-19 response. Citizens became even more reliant on government assistance and services during the stringent lockdowns: thus the intense desire to be on the good side of government authorities. Pollsters do not rule out the idea that fear influences the polling process, even though it is hard to estimate (Arguelles 2021). According to Social Weather Stations (SWS) fellow Geoffrey Ducanes, the ‘fear factor’ relates to how much of the survey response is motivated by the fear of expressing dissatisfaction, such that what is observed is not genuine satisfaction. Another factor can be ‘social desirability bias’, making survey respondents fudge their responses. A list experiment conducted by Yuko Kasuya (Keio University), Hirofumi Miwa (Gakushuin University), and Ronald Holmes (De La Salle University) found that Filipinos who believed that their neighbours supported Duterte were more susceptible to this social desirability bias. For Jose Ramon Albert, a senior research fellow at the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, the Social Amelioration Program (the government’s pandemic financial support) contributed to the high satisfaction ratings, since it covered 75 per cent of households across the country (Albert 2021).

Another potential factor is the ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effect. Presidents benefit from this during times of war and other such crises: they enjoy brief increases in popular approval due to the imagined necessity for national unity and citizen support for government leadership. The effective use of crisis rhetoric, which is frequently characterized by discourses of national unity in the face of hardship, is critical to this phenomenon. However, Duterte’s addresses during the pandemic have mainly been unclear and polarizing. Populist leaders thrive amid crises. Crises foster a climate of widespread uncertainty and insecurity that enables populist support. These leaders garner support by exploiting fears, securitizing crises, and polarizing societies. According to Arguelles (2021), Duterte’s populist brand is crisis.

For Pernia (forthcoming), the unexpected spike in popular trust and confidence in political institutions under Duterte can be attributed to citizens' latent authoritarian values being activated. The 'populist' politics of Duterte have appealed to the public's need for strong leadership and a government that shows (or signals) legitimacy by decision responsiveness. It is possible that Duterte merely mirrors an innate political orientation among citizens that values order and hierarchy. According to political psychology research, a 'beneficial strategy' deals with life's complexity and disorder. This would explain Filipinos' continued admiration of and support for Duterte. Healthy authoritarians comprise a sizeable segment of the Filipino population who remained loyal to the government because it offered a semblance of decisive action (e.g., cash aids, rehabilitation programmes, and lockdowns) that could alleviate their anxieties and powerlessness during disasters and other related crises. Despite the country's substandard healthcare system—which is often indicative of poor institutional performance—the government could generate trust among the populace.

#### **4 The Philippines' weak state capacity**

The state is a formidable structure that towers above other formal and informal social formations because it seeks primacy via rules that govern citizens' conduct. State capabilities are the state's 'capacities to penetrate society, regulate social relationships, extract resources, and appropriate and use resources in determined ways' (Migdal 1988: 4–5). The Philippines is frequently said to be a weak state. The capacity of the Philippine state is insufficient to withstand challenges to its autonomy, particularly in the face of various elite interests. The country is South-East Asia's oldest democracy, yet democratic institutions consistently fail to demonstrate coherence in what is usually viewed as a resilient oligarchical state that maintains power over the state, economy, and society by continually adapting and shifting in response to changing political dynamics (Teehankee and Calimbahin 2020).

Moreover, state capacity is a multidimensional concept that relates to the ability of the state to achieve administrative, extractive, and coercive goals. Administrative capacity relates to the ability to formulate and implement policies. Coercive capacity demonstrates how the state exerts control over society and suppresses dissent using coercive force. The ability of a state to extract income from its citizens to cement its authority is referred to as its extractive capacity (Hanson 2018). State capacity is critical to developing an efficient crisis management system because it helps the government deal with crises by coordinating many organizations, analysing information, and providing public services (Christensen et al. 2016). Mao (2021) adapts these dimensions into a state-capacity-driven crisis management framework that includes information capacity, decision-making and implementation capacity, coercive capacity, and mobilization and co-operation capacity (see [Figure 1, page 318](#)<sup>1</sup>). The following sections will assess these capacities in the Philippines' response to the pandemic.

##### **4.1 Information capacity**

Information collection, processing, and sharing are integral to crisis response and management. Co-ordination and collaboration at the intergovernmental level facilitate effective information collecting and sharing, prompt decision-making, and the execution of crisis response measures. Inadequate information capacity may result in the government responding slowly to crises (Mao 2021). For example, one of the contributing elements to the initial success of Vietnam in

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<sup>1</sup> Figure available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/figure/10.1177/0192512121994026>.

containing the virus was its strong and effective information capacity. Timely notification by government and the media of any pandemic developments, together with the Vietnamese scientific community's latest understanding of the new virus, combined to provide reliable sources of information. The government also ran an effective social media information campaign (Hartley et al. 2021).

COVID-19 data in the Philippines are critically deficient. Currently, the country's Department of Health (DOH) collects COVID-19-related data through disease reporting units, local government units, and health facilities. However, when an information system fails, the data-collecting process is halted. The DOH does not collect official statistics on COVID-19 excess fatalities. The Philippines has limited capability for surveying public health threats and low capacity for community reporting. COVID-19 statistics that are incomplete or delayed undermine the government's response to the public health situation (Del Castillo 2021).

On top of the state's information infrastructure is the chief executive, who acts as the government's chief communicator. World leaders' communication styles are being compared, from New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern's Facebook press conferences to Singaporean prime minister Lee Hsien Loong's crisp statements, to US president Donald Trump's ranting (Ranada 2020). Even before the pandemic, Trump and Duterte used confusing strategy combinations in their crisis communication. Despite their inconsistent implementation and conflicting methods, poll findings indicate that they withstood damage to their image (Ismail et al. 2019).

Duterte's unorthodox and unfiltered communication style was designed for reality television and social media. When he was mayor of Davao City in Mindanao, he hosted a local television show called 'Gikan sa Masa, Para sa Masa' ('From the Masses to the Masses') for years, where he called out and cursed incompetent local and national bureaucrats, suspected criminals, and other erring government officials. Thus, Duterte, like Donald Trump in the US, exemplifies 'performative populism'—a kind of populism in the era of television and digital media that draws on a 'repertoire of performance' and establishes a link between the leader as a performer and the follower as the audience (Moffitt 2016).

Even in the face of a crisis that needs clarity, analytical rigour, and consistency, Duterte has continued to deliver lengthy, rambling speeches filled with digressions, rants against opponents, and personal thoughts that drowned out clear commands and crucial messaging. Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, brutal messaging has trumped science-based communication. Duterte has used swear words more often than he has used the terms 'testing', 'test kits', or 'tracing' (Ranada 2020). He has reacted angrily to public criticism, devoting his late-night briefings, which were intended to provide updates on the government's response to the virus's spread, to maligning and threatening his critics (Arguelles 2021). As the nation waited every week for updates regarding the state of the COVID-19 response, they expected the same discipline that was exacted from them with the demanding requirements of community quarantine. Unfortunately, these periodic televised reports by the president and his task force members have only highlighted how unorganized and unco-ordinated COVID-19 response efforts have been.

## **4.2 Decision-making and implementation capacity**

The capacity of a government to make decisions and implement policies is critical to enhancing disaster preparation and institutional quality in responding to crises. Strong decision-making and implementation capacity require effective intergovernmental co-ordination to overcome institutional frictions between different levels of government (Mao 2021). Who decides and how decisions are made impact the implementation of crisis response.

Duterte constituted an Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) comprising health professionals, technocrats, and business leaders, led by controversial health secretary Francisco Duque III, who has been publicly chastised for incompetence and alleged irregular transactions. Duque has been blamed for the slow and ineffective government response to the spread of the pandemic, as well as billion-peso anomalies in the corruption-laden Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth), where he sits as chair.

Despite running on an electoral platform of shifting the Philippine form of government to federalism, Duterte has eschewed decentralization in his pandemic response and adopted a highly centralized ‘whole-of-government’ strategy with a top-down approach to policy-making decisions. This set-up left local government units as mere implementers, following the orders of the national government (Navarro et al. 2020; Espia et al. 2021). For Hutchcroft and Gera (forthcoming), the Philippine state in the midst of the pandemic has not provided the type of ‘central steering’ required of the national government to address COVID-19. Drawing on the work of Kjellberg (1995), this strategy attempts to guarantee that although the basic goals of public action remain the purview of the national government, the means to achieve them are defined more explicitly by local governments. Instead, populist president Rodrigo Duterte’s action has relied on ‘strong-arming’ local politicians. This has concealed the government’s weak steering and provided the illusion that a ‘strongman’ is in control of the situation. Nonetheless, this approach has been ineffective in terms of the central steering required for pandemic response. At the outset, the pandemic necessitated strong and effective co-ordination by the national government, mainly through the IATF-EID. However, the critical central agencies led by the DOH have consistently failed to deliver. Thus, a number of local governments have picked up the slack to compensate for the slow and faulty response of the national government. However, not all local governments have the capacity and resources to address the onslaught of the pandemic.

### **4.3 Coercive capacity**

State–society relations shape coercive, mobilization, and co-operation capacities. Combating crises requires not only government action but also public compliance, social mobilization, and co-operation. For example, when a state exerts strong control over its society through coercive force, the government’s capacity to coerce public compliance with anti-crisis measures is enhanced (Mao 2021).

The Philippines, however, implemented one of the world’s most draconian lockdowns. Its flight capacity, which indicates how far air transport has recovered, is 74 per cent lower than in 2019, and its borders remain closed to travellers. Yet the Philippines has also underperformed in COVID containment. While cases per capita are less than a fifth of what vaccine leader Israel has seen, the Philippines has the second-worst positive test rate in Bloomberg’s ranking, at 27 per cent (Bloomberg News 2021).

Consistent with his leadership approach, President Duterte viewed the pandemic problem as a war against the virus—shutting down its transmission barriers by stopping the movement of people and mobilizing the police and military to keep citizens indoors. He has also relied heavily on another body, composed of former military generals, the National Task Force COVID-19 (NTF), which he tasked with implementing the National Action Plan to manage the spread of virulent disease in the country. On the prodding of his military advisers, Duterte implemented a lockdown patterned after the military’s decades-long tactics for border control in its fight against armed insurgent groups (Dizon 2020; Olanday and Rigby 2020).

Duterte's government has focused its efforts on slowing down the spread of the virus by curbing the movement of people through martial-law-like mechanisms. This approach, however, has not been combined with mass testing and aggressive contact tracing. While governments of countries with the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 ramped up their testing strategies and capacities, the Philippine government continued to ignore the advice of health experts to include mass testing in its prevention and control measures. According to health experts, Vietnam effectively prevented and limited the spread of the virus because it made urgent decisions to restrict entry into the nation, enforce quarantine protocols, and strengthen its testing and contract tracing capacities. By 19 March 2020, Vietnam had conducted 14,950 tests (Vu et al. 2020) compared with the 1,200 tests conducted by the Philippines (DOH 2020).

#### **4.4 Mobilizational and co-operative capacity**

When a state and its society are connected, the government is more likely to have high capacity for social mobilization and co-operation, enabling the private sector and citizens to participate more effectively in crisis response (Mao 2021). The Philippines has a rich history of community capacity through its vibrant civil society, non-governmental, and not-for-profit organizations (Teehankee and Calimbahin 2020). However, the populist Duterte has exploited the enormous anxiety caused by the viral pandemic. He has securitized the pandemic by militarizing crisis response, empowering security agencies to administer it, and using war rhetoric. For Duterte, the pandemic response is a 'war against COVID-19' or 'war against an invisible enemy'. After the COVID-19 crisis was securitized, the people saw Duterte as the ideal crisis manager. He has portrayed himself as a ruthless, tough, and uncompromising commander-in-chief, always ready for war. 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 (Arguelles 2021).

Hence, Duterte's pandemic response has been akin to a war cabinet. He has deployed an ad hoc coalition of bureaucrats, the military, the police, allied parties, petty village and suburb heads, and online die-hard supporters. More importantly, he has relied on populist mobilization or the rallying of mass supporters towards contentious political action with minimum institutional intermediation (Teehankee and Kasuya 2020). Populists thrive on direct communication with their supporters, relying mainly on the media and public demonstrations (Kenny 2017). Arguelles (2019) argues that the populist publics are not irrational, dumb, or gullible voters but are part of a growing constituency who are frustrated, angered, and sceptical of the 'hypocrisy' of liberal reformism. Cas Mudde (2015) points out that 'populism is an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism'.

In 2016, Duterte won the presidency on a narrative of 'the people vs the corrupt elite'. Drawing on the politics of anger and resentment amplified through social media, he managed to sustain his popularity despite his consistent bad behaviour, bloody war on drugs, and assault on media freedom. Since Duterte's government implemented a long and strict lockdown and seems to enjoy high levels of legitimacy (as high approval ratings suggest), it could seem puzzling that the Philippines has been struggling to control the pandemic (Teehankee 2021). The irony of Duterte's populist resilience amid his poor pandemic response serves to highlight his mastery of political deployment within a weak state.

## 5 The pitfalls of Duterte's pandemic response

The COVID-19 pandemic caught the global community off guard. While health experts and risk assessors have always considered a pandemic scenario, world leaders did not expect it to happen so soon, on their watch. In an instant, national leaders faced an ambiguous and uncertain situation that could impact their population's health and survival and economic and political stability. The Philippines was unprepared for the magnitude and severity of the impact of the COVID-19 virus.

While Duterte exploited the crisis to his advantage, his government committed a series of severe missteps in the early phase of the outbreak that exacerbated the impact of the virus. These significant policy errors in the first year of the pandemic included: (1) the government's delayed acknowledgement of the severity of the coronavirus pandemic, causing the country to be reactive in its action; (2) once it was too late to avert widespread virus transmission, Duterte's government piled in, imposing a series of protracted total lockdowns without providing appropriate support for vulnerable localities; and (3) Duterte's securitized response to a public health emergency, which aggravated an already lethal virus. Unsurprisingly, Duterte has viewed the virus epidemic as a law-and-order issue, cracking down on allegedly 'pasaway' or 'undisciplined' residents who are said to be responsible for COVID-19's quick spread (Arguelles 2021).

### 5.1 Delayed reaction

With other leaders announcing travel restrictions and closely monitoring their airports as an urgent response to the virus's global spread, the Duterte administration adopted a 'wait and see' approach and even downplayed the virus. Since his assumption of the presidency, Duterte has closely pivoted the country's foreign policy towards China. He has frequently mentioned his close friendship with President Xi Jinping in his public speeches. He has anchored the nation's COVID-19 recovery on the development of the Chinese vaccine, urging China to prioritize supplies to the Philippines at a time when the world was demanding accountability for China's involvement in the COVID-19 outbreak.

As early as 9 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) had already announced the outbreak of coronavirus-related pneumonia in Wuhan, China. Even with the unprecedented move of China to put Wuhan under strict lockdown on 23 January, it was only on 28 January that President Duterte ordered a temporary ban on the entry of Chinese nationals from China's Hubei province. Two days after his announcement of the travel ban, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed by the DOH. The first documented case arrived in the Philippines on 21 January 2020, from Wuhan, China, via Hong Kong.

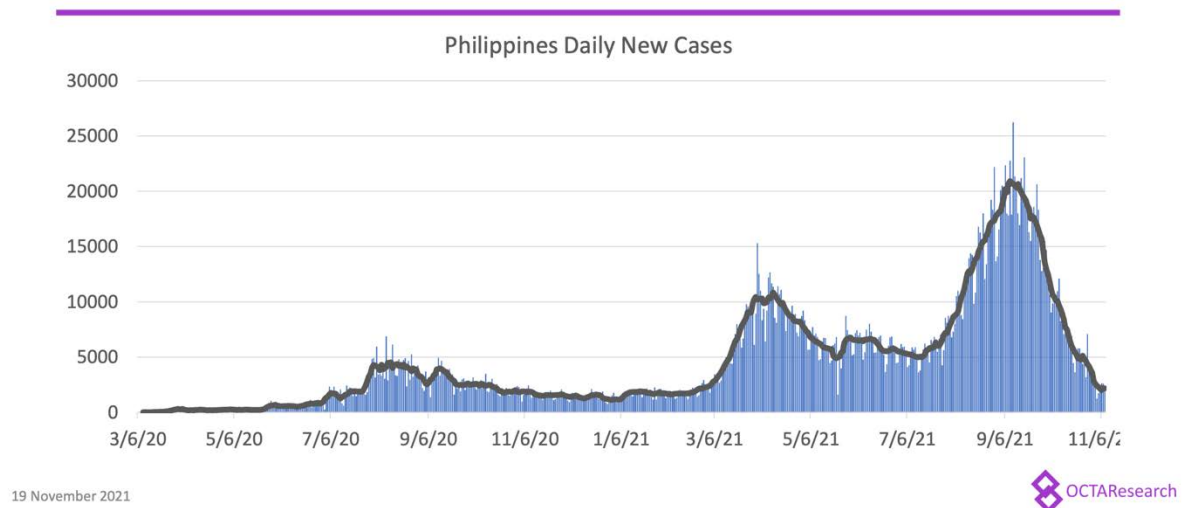
With the virus already in the country and its local transmission inevitable, the Duterte administration needed to work quickly (De Jesus and Dayrit 2021). Early intervention is critical in dealing with an infectious virus like COVID-19, in order to remain ahead of the disease. However, President Duterte continued to downplay the disease even after the country had reported its first COVID-19 fatality on 2 February 2020, involving a 44-year-old Chinese man who was the first victim's companion. His death on 1 February was the first to be reported outside of China (Romero and Baculinao 2020). In a press briefing the following day, the president said, 'let's start with narratives by saying that everything is well in the country, that there is nothing really to be extra scared of the coronavirus thing' (Baclig 2021).

The Philippines has experienced four COVID-19 surges (see Figure 4). The initial wave was moderate, peaking at 316 on a seven-day rolling average in early April 2020. Cases began to progressively climb in early June 2020, building up to the second wave, which peaked at roughly



4,300 daily cases in late August. The third wave peaked at 11,000 daily instances on average in mid-April 2021. The fourth wave, fuelled by the Delta variation, was the most devastating since the epidemic began. By 8 August 2021, the daily average had risen to nearly 19,000 instances (Cristino 2021). By September, the Philippines has breached two million cases, with a total death toll of 33,533 (Magsambol 2021).

Figure 4: Surges of COVID-19 in the Philippines



Source: reproduced with permission from Guido (2021).

## 5.2 Protracted lockdowns

With the total number of cases in the Philippines rising to 24 and a confirmed case of local transmission, President Duterte signed Proclamation 922 on 8 March 2020, declaring a state of public health emergency in the country. This declaration was soon followed by the imposition of a ‘community quarantine’ in Metro Manila on 12 March. Domestic land, air, and sea travel to and from Manila were suspended from 15 March to 14 April 2020.

In an attempt to make up for the time lost through the late imposition of travel restrictions from China and other countries with notable cases of COVID-19, the Duterte administration announced, on 15 March 2020, the lockdown of Metro Manila, giving its citizens minimal time to prepare provisions for what was at the time projected to be a month-long quarantine. After two days, the lockdown was extended to Luzon, and soon after, the rest of the country was put under community quarantine and subjected to interzonal travel restrictions. The country has been recognized globally as having had the longest general lockdown (general community quarantine) and strictest lockdown, with at least four hard lockdown cycles (enhanced community quarantine). President Duterte mobilized the police and the military to enforce a curfew and keep citizens indoors.

For weeks, police officers, petty bureaucrats, and village authorities cracked down on violators of the heightened community quarantine enforced by the ‘Bayanihan to Heal as One Act’—the law that granted Duterte special powers to handle the COVID-19 outbreak. Around 130,000 quarantine violators were apprehended (ABS-CBN News 2020b). According to some human rights groups, quarantine violators were also subjected to verbal abuse and physical punishments (Castaneda 2020). In a developing nation like the Philippines, where a significant proportion of the urban population lives in confined slum neighbourhoods and survives on daily wage labour, social distancing and work-from-home arrangements are luxuries reserved for the country’s middle and upper classes. Slow and sometimes missed delivery of crucial government food support and

subsidies to the poor and vulnerable sectors led to hunger and desperation that have further threatened social order in the metropolis (Gutierrez 2020). Nonetheless, the well-heeled have not been entirely spared, as the police barging into exclusive villages and condominiums in search of quarantine violators has also been reported (ABS-CBN News 2020a; De Leon 2020).

More than a dozen subpoenas were issued by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) to social media users who expressed their displeasure with the government's handling of COVID-19 (Patag 2020). The subpoenas reference Article 154 of the Revised Penal Code, which makes it illegal to publish 'any false news which may endanger public order or cause damage to the interest or credit of the State'. The Bayanihan Law, which took effect on 26 March, punishes those 'creating, perpetuating, or spreading false information regarding the [COVID-19] crisis on social media and other platforms, such information having no valid or beneficial effect on the population, and [being] geared to promote chaos, panic, anarchy, fear, or confusion', according to Section 6(6) (Buan 2020). The definition of fake news, on the other hand, is hazy, and decisions are left to the whims of law enforcement. Even Duterte's prominent political supporters, the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), were not exempt from this harsh rule. For suspected cyber-libel for her social media remarks against Duterte, a Filipina caregiver in Taichung, Taiwan, was threatened with deportation by her own Philippine labour attaché (Ramos 2020).

On and off lockdowns have also harmed the economy. Lockdown can help a country enhance its healthcare and test-trace-treat systems—the basic elements of better disease control. However, failing to enhance these mechanisms wastes the time that lockdown gives. Despite having had the world's longest lockdowns, the country failed to flatten its COVID-19 curve (Mendoza 2021). Moreover, the 'low downs' of the protracted lockdowns, such as displacement, inefficiencies, and uneven distribution of resources from the presidential palace, continued to hamper the country's recovery efforts (Hall forthcoming-b).

### **5.3 Securitized response**

Strong-arming became the default mode of Duterte's highly securitized pandemic response, drawing heavily from his bloody 'war on drugs' (Hutchcroft and Gera forthcoming). This securitized approach blamed the so-called undisciplined others or 'pasaway' for justifying the imposition of a 'disciplinary quarantine' to protect the virtuous from those elements set to derail the war against COVID-19 (Kusaka 2020; Hapal 2021). The reliance of Duterte on 'strong-arming' is akin to what Michael Mann (1984: 188–90) termed 'despotic power' or 'power by the state over civil society'. This highlights the lack of 'infrastructural power', which Mann (1984: 189–90) characterized as the capacity of the state to 'centrally coordinate the activities of civil society through its own infrastructure'.

Duterte's use of the military to help police to enforce national mandates in the cities blurred the line between these two state security agents, and local governments did not object because they thought of the police and military as resources that could be used to implement their own policies. The use of uniformed personnel to address a public health emergency and the administration's aggressive enforcement strategy were viewed as having little effect on the rising tide of positive cases and inviting repressive action against the opposition under the guise of pandemic countermeasures. It widened the military's functional mandate and perceived institutional reach, even as President Duterte appointed ex-generals to various cabinet positions to co-ordinate government initiatives in testing, contact tracing, and vaccination. Military personnel were present on the ground and in decision-making positions at the highest levels (Hall forthcoming-a).

While a significant amount of political communication during the early stages of the COVID-19 epidemic did securitize the pandemic and attacked the opposition, the degree to which securitizing

players did so varied, thereby creating layers of legitimizing actors for securitization and repression. This also enabled Duterte to be depicted as a strong leader throughout the epidemic, thus explaining some of his continuing popularity.

Duterte exploited the pandemic to attack his enemies and declare war on many fronts. His administration and his allies in Congress spent a great deal of time and effort enacting severe anti-terrorism legislation and terminating the franchise of the country's leading television network, ABS-CBN. Maria Ressa, the CEO of the Rappler news website, was also convicted of cyber libel during this period (Teehankee 2020b).

In the early days of the pandemic, Duterte threatened to declare martial law on the Philippines' largest island, Luzon, to punish those who disobeyed the quarantine law. In a televised address, he told the military and police to 'shoot them dead'. 'Dead. Instead of causing chaos, I'll just bury you'. (Gregorio 2020). 'I am warning everybody and putting notice [to the] armed forces and the police, I might declare martial law', he later reiterated after two soldiers were reportedly killed by armed New People's Army (NPA) guerillas in Aurora province (CNN Philippines 2020). A police officer shot and killed a discharged army veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for supposed quarantine violations a few weeks after Duterte issued his order (Mangosing 2020).

However, the immediate implementation of lockdown measures was not supported by social and economic safety nets, leaving those who did not have the financial capacity to stockpile to leave their homes and look for food. These so-called 'pasaway' or undisciplined residents became the target of the president, singling them out as the cause of the rapid transmission of the virus. Thousands of people have been arrested for violating curfew and other health protocols (such as not wearing masks). Duterte even publicly threatened to order a tougher crackdown, ordering the military and police to 'shoot to kill' the 'pasaway' (violators) (Agojo 2021; Hapal 2021).

## **6 Conclusion**

The Philippines was among the last countries in the ASEAN region to roll out its vaccination programme. It only started its vaccination programme on 1 March 2021, with the arrival of the 600,000 doses of Sinovac. With the limited arrival of vaccines and limited capacity of laboratories and healthcare facilities, the primary strategy of the Duterte administration in addressing the pandemic continued to be community quarantine. The surge in COVID-19 cases in April and September 2021 further overwhelmed the already strained healthcare system.

To make matters worse, allegations of massive corruption have also tainted Duterte's pandemic response. The Commission on Audit has issued a report identifying 'deficiencies' in the DOH's usage of 67.3 billion pesos (PHP; US\$1.3 billion) in the fight against COVID-19, including PHP 41 billion (US\$800 million) transferred to the Procurement Service in the Department of Budget and Management (Buan 2021). According to the commission, the fund transfer was not documented, resulting in a delay in distributing critical medical supplies for the pandemic response. The commission's report prompted the Senate to dig deeper. It then uncovered evidence of financial misuse, particularly over supplies from Pharmally Pharmaceutical, a business formed just months before securing billions of pesos in supply contracts (Dela Peña 2021). The Pharmally scandal has become the most prominent allegation of corruption against the Duterte administration (Teehankee 2022).

Rodrigo Duterte rose to power by riding the wave of popular anger and frustration towards the ruling elite's failure to institute socioeconomic and political reforms. The COVID-19 pandemic

has threatened his populist legacy as a strongman president. His government has consistently fumbled in its handling of the pandemic despite implementing one of the most heavy-handed lockdowns in the world. Just like his fellow populists around the world, Duterte has found it challenging to sustain an ‘us versus them’ narrative against an existential threat like the virus. His unorthodox and disruptive populist leadership has amplified the country’s weak state capacity in crisis management, particularly information gathering and dissemination and decision-making and implementation. He has relied wholly on the state’s coercive capacity to mount an ‘all-out war’ against the COVID-19 pandemic to the point of transgressing institutional checks and balances and violating fundamental human rights.

As a political institution, the Philippine presidency has accrued enough constitutional power to have a formal semblance of a ‘strong presidency’. As a result, strong Philippine presidents appear to reign over a state with weak capacity, malleable to presidential whims and vulnerable to social pressure. The Philippine presidency is a classic case of what Latin American political scientist Guillermo O’Donnell (1994) called a ‘delegative democracy’, with little accountability, limited capacity and professionalism within the administrative and security apparatuses, and a lack of autonomy in the face of powerful domestic and foreign political actors. Nonetheless, even an apparently ‘strong’ presidency can become susceptible to societal challenges (Teehanke 2020a).

Despite his missteps in addressing the pandemic, Duterte remains popular, especially with his die-hard supporters—the populist public. He could have used this vast social capital to mobilize a unified nation with healing leadership to address the crisis. Rather than presenting a clear strategy to fight the virus’s rise and spread, the president used the moment to attack his political adversaries and renew his declaration of war on several fronts. In the end, he turned out to be a weak president against the COVID-19 virus.

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