



*Special series: organising under authoritarian regimes*

## Covid19 and populist-authoritarianism in the Philippines: Contentions and contradictions

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The Philippines continues to battle Covid-19 infections despite pronouncements from the government that [everything is under control](#). Globally, the [Philippines ranks 20th](#) among the countries with the highest number of Covid-19 cases as of February 2022 and [21st among the highest number of Covid-19 deaths](#), as of February 2022. In the Southeast Asian region, among the 10 member-countries, the Philippines (3.68 million total cases and 54 930 Covid-19 deaths), is second to Indonesia (4.7 million total cases and 145 000 deaths) with the highest number of Covid infections and deaths as of February 2022, according to the Johns Hopkins database. To ease the pressure on the health care system, and reminiscent of the 2020 lockdowns, restrictions on transport, business operations, public services and movement of people across borders are once again being enforced through a variety or gradations of 'community quarantines'. The lockdowns meant job losses for millions of workers and starvation for informal or hourly-paid precarious workers in the Philippines. The pandemic has exposed the unequal impact of restrictions for the poor and the rich (Kundnani 2020). The harsh enforcements of quarantine restrictions also exposed how some states around the world are exploiting the need for lockdowns and quarantines 'to intensify patterns of violence that are already normalized in policing' (Kundnani 2020).<sup>1</sup>

### Covid response: A tragedy of errors

More than one year ago, on May 2020, the [Nikkei Asian Review](#) reported that the Philippines had the 'strictest lockdown in Asia, but ineffective vs. Covid-19'. At that time, the Duterte government had 'brought down public mobility by 85% in transit stations; by 79% of retail and recreation; and by 71% in workplaces'. However, the report further said that the harsh lockdowns have not been effective in stopping the contagion but instead were used to consolidate Duterte's authoritarian rule. The 'lockdowns' were heavily criticized for their harsh penalties and arrests of quarantine violators, such that there were more people apprehended for violating community quarantines than tested for coronavirus. In April 2020, more than [120 000](#) people were apprehended for violation of community quarantines by the police and the military, but only 70 000 were tested for coronavirus (Viajar 2020). The [United](#)

[Nations](#) on 29 April 2020, rebuked the Philippines for its 'highly militarized response' to lockdown violators. The strict enforcement and harsh penalties were encouraged by Duterte himself. In one of his late-night press statements, Duterte warned that [anyone caught violating the restrictions would be shot](#).

### Contentions and contradictions

After more than 200 days of lockdown, the year 2020 closed with an economic flatline and the worst contraction among all the countries in Southeast Asia. The Philippine economy contracted by [9.5% due to the pandemic restrictions](#) in 2020, the worst since World War II, and the [worst performer](#) compared to the ten other economies in Southeast Asia. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) also reported that close to 10 million Filipino workers lost their jobs by one year into the pandemic. However, in the midst of the pandemic, Duterte's trust ratings rose to 91 percent, according to a survey by Pulse Asia, a private polling firm that conducted the survey on [September 2020](#).

As the pandemic shows, Duterte's authoritarian leadership is expressed through, and thoroughly in collusion with, the military and the police which possess the legitimate use of state violence, to enforce the harsh Covid restrictions, repress dissent and critics, suspend civil and political rights. Duterte's authoritarian attributes are expressed through two aspects: (a) the narrowing of freedoms and democratic spaces such as civil, political and human rights, of communities and social movements; and (b) the demobilization of people's participation in determining the future of their communities. The narrowing of freedoms such as the freedom to dissent and to express political views under Duterte contributes to the death of pluralism as we know it. A recent survey of the Social Weather Station (SWS) released on March 2021 found out that ['65% of Filipinos perceive it is dangerous to publish anything critical to the administration'](#).

Duterte came into the 2016 presidential elections as a dark horse propelled by popular discontent over the ineffective liberal-democratic institutions. His supporters mainly come

<sup>1</sup> This article is an excerpt from a submitted web article, May 2021, for the Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung-Manila Office.

from the new middle-class, those that benefited from recent economic growth and from working abroad, seeking quick solutions to everyday issues such as crime and the horrendous traffic. Frustrated over the dominance of the 'politically-correct' or intellectual crowd and persistent socio-economic inequalities, Duterte swept the electoral stage with the slogan 'change is coming'. In his campaigns, he promised to single-handedly solve all problems (such as crime, corruption, drugs, and so on) in just a few months. More than 16 million Filipinos believed his rhetoric, entertained by his self-styled bravado and charismatic language. However, five years into his office, the persistent problems that Duterte promised to eradicate remained and even intensified.

### Gramscian perspective: authoritarian, fascist tendencies

To understand Duterte's populist yet authoritarian leadership, Antonio Gramsci's discussion of fascism and hegemony is instructive. Gramsci's use of hegemony refers to leadership or dominance, and the power of ideas, values, and beliefs in a particular historical moment over a particular political-economic context, 'political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class' (Bates 1975). This article situates Duterte's populist authoritarian leadership during a time of hegemonic crisis in Gramscian terms.

A hegemonic crisis happens when the ruling class fails to completely dominate or uses force to dominate (that is, war), until such time that a broad mass put forward demands and seized a particular political moment (Adamson 1980). In such a hegemonic crisis, the political field becomes open and 'a violent solution led by "charismatic men of destiny"' may provide the alternative. Without any strong challenge from other social forces, the moderates or the conservative elite, Gramsci likened the change towards fascism as 'Caesarism' which 'refers to a political intervention by some previously dormant or even previously unknown political force capable of asserting domination and thus of restoring a static equilibrium during a hegemonic crisis' (Adamson 1980: 628). In this political moment, according to Gramsci, the fascist takeover may emerge, through 'the sudden creation of a single heroic figure, or it may be the gradual and institutionalized outcome of a coalition government' (Adamson 1980: 628).

Duterte's brash brand of leadership contributes to the current polarization of the country's political and civil societies. Culturally, Duterte upended the long-held Filipino values and beliefs on solidarity, community and respect. Duterte has also thwarted liberal policies and norms on human rights and women's empowerment, that Filipinos have come to live with in the past 40 years. Family ties and friendships have become strained over Duterte's polarizing hateful stance against his critics, brutal and militarized policies such as the killings of drug addicts and communists, and unconstitutional restrictions on

human rights and other freedoms. Duterte's mode of governance and policy responses during the Covid-19 pandemic exposed his leadership as authoritarian with fascist tendencies. These were expressed through the narrowing of freedoms and democratic spaces for peoples' civil, political and human rights and the demobilization of peoples' participation in determining the future of their communities. Likewise, after more than one year into our pandemic lives, we have learned that the virus does not discriminate, regardless of wealth, power and material possessions. However, whilst everyone is in the same storm, not everyone is on the same boat. Some boats have more social protection than others.

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The GLC is supported by the ICDD at Kassel University and the Center for Global Workers' Rights at Penn State University.