

Title : The Philippines in Deterioration? ‘Imagined Strategy’ as Prospects for the Philippines Democracy and Accountability in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Philippines in Deterioration? ‘Imagined Strategy’ as Prospects for the Philippines Democracy and Accountability in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

As one of the largest democracies in the world, the Philippines' democracy and accountability have undergone many dynamics, from the era of President Ferdinand Marcos to the current President Rodrigo Duterte. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the contours of democracy and accountability in the Philippines. Therefore, it is interesting to examine the real prospects for democracy and accountability in the Philippines amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, the authors examine policies that reflect the practice of democracy in the Philippines genealogically through comparative analysis on the domestic policy dynamics and comparing some democracies to authoritarian countries. The authors also focus on Duterte's policies before and during the pandemic which was judged by the image of the Philippines before it experienced democratization, namely authoritarian, militaristic, and populist polity. These then become indications of what direction the Philippines' democracy and accountability prospects are in the contemporary era in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. From there, the authors then find that there are elements of strategic culture and historical precursors of the Philippines that influence government policies in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *Philippines, Democracy, Accountability, COVID-19 Pandemic, Duterte.*

Introduction

The emergence of a pandemic is not something new for the international community. The outbreak of SARS, H1N1, Mers, and Ebola in the last two decades, already being the examples of how the pandemic happened before. Later on, COVID-19 or Coronavirus Disease 2019 has been designated by World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic after its spread progressively to various countries since its first identification in Wuhan, China (WHO 2021). The phenomenon has undoubtedly influenced and changed many things, including the value of democracy and the accountability of some countries in the pandemic era. The COVID-19 pandemic situation has deepened the democratic crisis in most countries in the world. Kurlantzick (2021a) stated that global democracy has been at its lowest point since

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2006, based on a related survey. Furthermore, in a related context, the COVID-19 pandemic situation has become a great opportunity and reason for governments to expand or centralize their executive powers. This feature also can be found in the Philippines as one of the largest democracies in the world.

The dynamic development of democracy in the Philippines has faced its challenges from the very beginning. The Philippines had to deal with a democratic crisis in the second term of Ferdinand Marcos' leadership. The authoritarian form of leadership involving military forces triggered resistance from the community to undermine Marcos' power (May and Selochan 2004). After the fall of Marcos, the Aquino government-held high hopes in restoring democracy in the Philippines, until this era democracy gradually began to be restored. However, during the leadership of Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines is facing another democratic crisis. Unlike Marcos, Duterte, who is known to be a populist, is able to gain broad domestic public support and has to find himself in trouble in responding to the COVID-19 situation in the Philippines. Therefore, the authors then try to examine the prospects for democracy and accountability in the Philippines in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is interesting to analyze as Alon et al. (2020) and Kurlantzick (2021a; 2021b) argue that there is a deterioration of globalization in the context of democracy and accountability in countries that have been known as democracies. To answer the research question above, the authors begin by problematizing the Philippine policies under Rodrigo Duterte's administration right before and during pandemics which are judged by the international community as a form of authoritarian, populist, and undermining democracy polity. Afterward, the authors try to observe Duterte's policies in the pandemic situation through the perspective of constructivism and regional norms using a proposition proposed by Anderson (1983) and Acharya (2012) as the critical basis to this research.

The Crisis of Democracy and Accountability of Philippines Under Duterte

In the modern era, integration faces a major challenge to the presence of populism with charismatic figures who generate threats by means of authoritarian leadership. The phenomenon of populism is conceptualized as an ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, namely pure society versus corrupt elites (Mudde 2004 in Pernia 2019). This classification is expressed through a process based on the evolving social context. However, populism is seen as part of a political strategy that relies on personalistic leaders who run their government both directly and indirectly with the support of their broad and disorganized followers (Weyland 2001 in Pernia 2019). A wave of populism in the Philippines emerged after the victory of President Rodrigo Duterte on May 9, 2016. This victory was considered inseparable from the attributes of leadership that he had received while serving as a Mayor of Davao. Duterte succeeded in transforming a city known for its crime with his campaign of peace and order (Mabaloc 2018).

Duterte's success cannot be separated from his ability to attract the majority of Filipinos who come from the middle class (Thompson 2016). Duterte has succeeded in consolidating the middle class' dissatisfaction with the incompetent corrupt elites, drug criminals, critics as well as the opposition group of media and the Catholic church (Sianipar and Maya 2020). Duterte used this social context as the main narrative in his campaign promise to support resistance between 'us' and 'them' in an attempt to bring about significant change. After six

months of his victory, Duterte carried out the eradication of drug crime through the war on drugs campaign by claiming resistance to three to four million drug criminals (Sianipar and Maya 2020). The campaign that had involved the use of militarization immediately sparked a response from various human rights activists who considered this act as tantamount to genocide. In March 2019, it was predicted that 27,000 people died, including unlawful killings and 248 victims from lawyers, journalists, human rights volunteers, and labor unions (Sianipar and Maya 2020). This campaign was considered flawed because of its existence which only targeted the poor. Meanwhile, drug criminals from China managed to escape the law (West in Mabaloc 2020).

In addition, Duterte threatened press freedom by shutting down the online news media, Rappler, which criticized the war on drugs campaign in January 2018. The accusations were based on charges of embezzlement of funds against Rappler founder, Maria Ressa (Sianipar and Maya 2020). In proving his legitimacy, Duterte sought to fight tax evaders and corrupt elites. Duterte sought to oppose the oligarchic practices by paying the Mighty Corporation a tax burden of 30 billion pesos which has succeeded in building public confidence in him (Mabaloc 2020). However, at the same time, this effort was also used by Duterte to get rid of his opposition. Imprisonment Senator, Leila de Lima, who was actively investigating the war on the drugs murder case, was also accused of being a drug-related motive. Another accusation was made against Trillanes as an active critic criticizing the existence of corruption crimes against the Duterte family (Sianipar and Maya 2020). Among these actions, the dismissal of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Maria Lourdes Sereno who was appointed in the previous period has become clear evidence of the decline of democracy and accountability in the Philippines (Mabaloc 2020). During his tenure, Sereno was seen as a bulwark against Duterte's biggest abuse of power, demonstrating the incompetence of the law against the president.

The various criticisms given during the Duterte leadership period did not reduce the domestic public's interest in Duterte. The domestic public response has been positive from their support for the police and Duterte's authoritarian leadership in bringing political order to the Philippines (Johnson 2016). The public's fear of themselves and their families who can be involved with drug crimes is considered to be a public driver for the war on drugs. Duterte gave a firm statement in dealing with human rights defenders accused of trying to protect drug criminals, as well as being suspected of being potential accomplices to drug crimes (Sianipar and Maya 2020). The war against the oligarchy in reality was not fully realized. This was proven by Duterte's inconsistency in diverting economic benefits to other parties without completely eroding oligarchic control (Mendoza and Jaminola 2020). Meanwhile, the detention and dismissal of the political opposition have shown Duterte's efforts to narrow the presence of his opponent. In addition, the availability of economic stability with the growth of 6 percent and 7.4 percent in 2016 and 2017 is another main strength for Duterte in maintaining his legitimacy (Sianipar and Maya 2020).

The Philippines' Democracy and Accountability Crisis in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic had made a significant impact on people's lives around the world. When reviewed further, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a very high number of deaths and case numbers in some of the largest democracies countries in the world such as the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Brazil, to the United States (Kurlantzick 2021a). This shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has increasingly exposed the system's

dysfunction in these democracies to overcome the crisis, especially in the Philippines. The Philippine government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a reflection of the continuation of President Rodrigo Duterte's leadership style, which is known as a populist figure, as explained in previous explanations (Curato 2016; Juego 2017; Thompson 2020 in Hapal 2021). Furthermore, it will be interesting to find out how Duterte emphasized his populist stance on dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines as one of the largest democracies and whether this will have an impact on deepening the crisis of democracy and accountability in the Philippines.

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As someone who labeled a populist, Duterte surprisingly is considered to have an attitude that is concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic, but his crisis management has turned into a big disaster for the people of the Philippines. In the beginning, Duterte firmly rejected travel restrictions from and to China (Heydarian 2021). However, along with the increasing number of the COVID-19 pandemic cases, Duterte later realized and instead turned to implement an extreme strict lockdown in Metro Manila and the whole of Luzon Island since March 16, 2020 (Hapal 2021). Lockdown regulations stipulate that only one person has a permit to go out and buy necessities for his families, through a document known as a 'quarantine pass'. The police and military become the leading actor when it comes to implementing the lockdown, they handle critical aspects of the crisis itself. Hapal (2021) mentions the establishment of Inter-Agency Taskforce on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) which is a task force that does not contain a single epidemiologist to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from this situation, it can be seen that the Philippine government is more likely to adopt a militaristic and police-centric approach to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, as the actual 'war' takes place.

Aside from the militaristic and police-centric feature, Duterte's policies in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic are also known as 'draconian' that refers to the ruthless use of the law. This thing especially appears when the record number of COVID-19 cases is getting higher. Kolvani et al. (2020) explained Duterte "shoot to kill" instructions for police and military aimed at people who violate lockdown regulations as one of the examples. The feature of its response is similar to the 'war on drugs' approach that he initiated even before the COVID-19 pandemic starting to spread in the Philippines. Either the war on drugs or the COVID-19 pandemic, Duterte relies on brute force to eliminate what he considers an enemy (Hapal 2021). This certainly drew much criticism, one of them was the critics by Butch Olan (The Director of Amnesty Philippines) who stated that those 'draconian' types of law should not be

used in an emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Amnesty International 2020). It truly gives the impact of the lockdown on the poor. The implementation of the lockdown has stopped people from being able to fulfill their basic needs. Accordingly, we can see that Duterte does not pay attention to the class perspective.

During the lockdown, 75 percent of the Philippines' economic activity has stopped (Heydarian 2021). As a result, this condition leads the Philippines into the worst performance of its economy recorded since the 1980s. Experts even predict that the Philippines will experience the worst decline in economic growth in the world over the next five years (Heydarian 2021). However, despite the worsening crisis of the economy, Duterte has maintained an extreme lockdown that continues until the vaccines arrive from his strategic partners China and Russia (Heydarian 2021). However, even though the government has made efforts to assist the low-income families under the Social Amelioration Program, it doesn't help the community and reduced socio-economic inequality that much during the COVID-19 pandemic era. This situation is caused by the provision of too little emergency aid and its late delivery. This is exacerbated by Duterte's militaristic and police-centric focus. For example, in the case of the 21 residents arrested in Quezon City who were queuing to get an aid distribution, they were later charged with violating the lockdown regulations on April 1, 2020 (Hapal 2021). Furthermore, the increasing corruption index of the government has also exacerbated the situation.

The extreme implementation of the lockdown also means the closure of all offices, including the closure of the ABS-CBN office as the biggest broadcasting channel in the Philippines on May 5, 2020 (Sasakawa Peace Foundation 2020). Its closure is the first time since Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972. It certainly raised many suspicions for his critics, mostly about how accountable the Philippine government is, but Duterte seems to have managed it smoothly in an effective way. Maria Ressa, a prominent journalist, is suddenly being charged with cyber libel (Heydarian 2021). It is related to the Anti-Terror Law's enactment, whose draft was ratified by the House of Representatives within five days of the lockdown. Referred to the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (2020), the Act gives a small group of cabinet secretaries the power to declare someone a terrorist.. A person (could be a journalist) can be arrested without a warrant and imprisoned for up to 24 days.

Based on the response of the Philippines' government to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be understood that there are some dichotomies of us vs them. It is as stated by Duterte through his various statements, where someone who is not on his side is an enemy. Later on, the term '*Pasaway*' emerged that refers to someone with a stubborn attitude, whom Duterte says must be fought (Hapal 2021). Through the previous explanation, it can be seen that people who violate the lockdown regulations, critics, or even health professionals are people who are categorized by Duterte as a '*Pasaway*'. Those things certainly contradict the principles of democracy as a political system that allows differences of opinion, competition, and conflict between the various parties involved (Surbakti 2010). The primacy in the presence of individual freedom has decreased drastically, which also marks the decline in the value of the Philippines' democracy. The government's responses and implementation of the policies later also show that the accountability of the Philippine government is lacking when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Philippine government couldn't express convincing reasons to act and take responsibility for the decisions that have already been made. For example, when Duterte places more military personnel and ignores the role and voice of health professionals in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Globalization, Strategy, and Populism in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic: where is the Philippines?

After apprehending and identifying the prospects and contours of the Philippines' democracy and accountability—since the COVID-19 pandemic had not yet surged the country until this article is written—finally, it comes to an end of the most critical question, what is the position of the Philippines in the era of contemporary globalization regime when it has to deal with a pandemic situation? Is it viable for democracy? Or otherwise? Does Rodrigo Duterte's leadership which is oftentimes associated with the authoritarian, militaristic, and populist gain ground?

To answer that critical exponential question, we need to observe empirical phenomena in some countries as comparable samples towards this research. This initial step is very substantial to determine the state of the Philippines today. The most recent survey conducted by the Council of Foreign Affairs shows differential results through samples of five countries with the largest democracy track record, i.e. the United States, Brazil, Philippines, India, and Indonesia (Kurlantzick, 2021b). The Philippines itself continues to experience fairly stable democratization, especially since the 90s after the fall of the highly militaristic Ferdinand Marcos regime. Beforehand, this country was indeed laden with elements of populist military regime marked by military junta political leadership and the existence of national elites that were agglomerated dispersedly against lower class due to embedded Spanish colonialism rule which brought into conflict and partitioned classes (May and Selochan 2004). Then, reflecting on the previous discussions, is the emergence of Duterte a decline from democracy for the Philippines, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

As cited from Kurlantzick (2021a; 2021b), the five major democracies—like the United States, Brazil, Philippines, India, and Indonesia—are interesting to be examined the prospects for democracy and government accountability because the five countries show a declining trend in their response to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are illustrated through domestic and foreign policy analysis as evidenced by narratives of populist and restrictive policies against freedom of expressions as happened in the Philippines and Brazil, racial sentiment as in India and the US (especially during the Trump presidency), and anti-cosmopolitan plus nationalism sentiment as happened in Indonesia in the early outbreak of the pandemic which often turns a blind eye to scientific data and warnings from the international epistemic community. Then, can we classify the Philippines and other declining democracies as an unfavored path to handling the pandemic? These authors argue that the answer is supposed to be benevolent and can be observed in multiple arrays yet interestingly comparative analysis as we aforementioned proposed unveils the hidden impetus of Philippine behavior.

Though the Philippines seemed to be more populist, authoritarian, laden with nationalism sentiment under the Duterte administration, and rank the second place of most infected COVID-19 case in South East Asia, it can be problematized the skepticism of authoritarian, populist, and lack of accountability leadership as proposed by Bitros and Karayiannis (2013) saying that peace, societal security can be achieved if country practices democracy. If it is compared to the longstanding prominent undemocratic, authoritarian, and showing-trend of poor accountability countries, such as China and Vietnam, after all, they are outstanding in

performing immediate response to this health crisis. It can be seen through their successful containment—compared to the United States and many European countries which traditionally are considered as a liberal-democratic country—on the spread of the virus, at least before the immense outspread of the Delta variant which makes many countries hassle.

As pertained before, another anomaly occurred in countries that so far have very good democracy indexes, such as countries in Europe and North America, which gave a slower response to the handling of COVID-19 (Jun 2020). However, that does not mean this can be generalized that authoritarian states are better while democracies are the opposite. Russia and Iran, for example, as countries that are known to be inscrutable, have shown a slow response and a record of more severe COVID-19 cases than China. Whilst, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Germany as the representation of democracies show very much different from the US prescription. The three countries are even said to be successful in dealing with the pandemic which is characterized by responsive, accountable, and united governments in dealing with health crises (Kurlantzick 2021b).

Our argumentation then refers to a proposition that prescribes that democracy will always go hand in hand with institutional reformation that leads to the stability of a country (Bitros and Karayiannis 2013). This proposition is further explained by Alon et al. (2020) which argues that the prospect of democratization will bring an impact on societal security in which the indicators are lower criminality rate, higher life expectancy, and better living quality. Hence, if it is associated with the geopolitical narrative of the Philippines, such as demonizing drugs through the war on drugs policy (Hapal 2021), the government which is often blamed to be ignorant to human rights as shown through “shoot them dead” (Kolvani et al. 2020), and social labeling on *‘Pasaway’* (stubborn) to defy opposition, critics, and health experts who try to do check-and-balance against Duterte before and during the pandemic, then is the Philippines truly democratic and accountable?

Until now it cannot be justified that democracies are without flaws in handling the COVID-19 pandemic while authoritarian countries fail vice versa. What can be criticized from the Philippines under the Duterte regime is the existence of normative-constructive ideas, or what we often understand as ‘Imagined Communities’ by Benedict Anderson (1983) and its further derivative thesis ‘Imagined Communities and Socially Constructed Region: The Making of South East Asia Region’ by Amitav Acharya (2012). From these two monumental works, it can be analyzed that there are different historical and genealogical precursors to the formation of society, statecraft, and strategic culture between countries in Europe and North America to countries in Southeast Asia in the form of the last wave of nationalism so that it affects the behavior of a country in responding to an issue.

Spanish colonialism style in the Philippines and the decolonization process which involved the US militias who tried to take advantage of the geographical location of the Philippines as a US geopolitical imperative (May and Selochan 2004), allowing us to associate strategic culture trend of civil-military relationship as well as the state-corporatism in the case of the Philippines state-building therefore the outcome is the Philippines that comprised of national elites and partitioned society due to Spanish colonialism style plus the militaristic leadership, as the consequence of the decolonization process which the US played a significant role in constructing the Philippines geopolitically. Finally, it resulted in a normatively constructed polity on what we see in the Philippines today through their

manifested strategic culture as a strategy to deal with the war against the COVID-19 pandemic. Henceforth, we propose the idea of 'Imagined Strategy' as a critical concept to describe the changing character of the Philippines in facing the COVID-19 pandemic under the Duterte leadership.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has given scholars a new paradigm regarding what regime is most suitable to be applied in a health crisis. From countries that adhere to a liberal-democratic system to countries that are considered authoritarian and have inscrutable, all of them has already shown their behavior in perceiving health security threats. The Philippines as the focus of this paper has shown its policies that lead to an authoritarian and populist state in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. It can be analyzed through the geopolitical narrative used by the Duterte administration even before the pandemic hit the Philippines, which was later strengthened by the advantages of this pandemic situation to consolidate its interests which sometimes neglect the democratic process. From the perspective of contemporary globalization, the Philippines' attitude change which has been democratized since the 90s undoubtedly has shown a setback in the prospects for democratization and accountability. However, we cannot justify that democracy can be uniform in its practices and prescriptions for all contemporary global political situations and agencies. Referring to the existence of the regional norms, strategic culture, and normative ideas inherent in each agency, it is sometimes considered irrational by the other agencies in the current structure of international society. The Philippines, which is located in Southeast Asia, certainly has a different strategic culture from countries in Western Europe. Norms, such as forms of democracy and rights, differ between European societies that adhere to individualism and most Southeast Asian countries that uphold consensus and collectivism. In the current health crisis, it is clear that every agency wants to return to normal conditions immediately and to achieve this condition, all have the right to determine which strategy is suitable to be implemented by the values and normative ideas that support the achievement of mutual security and free from the shadows of COVID-19's threat. We call the critical path chosen by the Philippines as 'Imagined Strategy'.

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