



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXII / 2021

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## Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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ISBN 978-88-3313-827-5 (Paper) ISBN 978-88-3313-828-2 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXII, 2021

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia

*Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989* is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: [www.asiamaior.org](http://www.asiamaior.org).

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	<a href="mailto:abbonamenti@viella.it">abbonamenti@viella.it</a>		<a href="http://www.viella.it">www.viella.it</a>	

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## CONTENTS

- 9 *Nicola Mocci (22 September 1969 – 29 January 2022)*
- 11 MICHELUGUGLIELMO TORRI, *Asia Maior in 2021: Pandemic crisis; US-China confrontation; authoritarian involution*
- 39 SILVIA MENEGAZZI, *China 2021: Coping with the resilience dilemma of the Chinese model*
- 63 GIULIO PUGLIESE & COREY WALLACE, *Japan 2021: The Liberal Democratic Party emerges stronger despite domestic tumult*
- 95 MARCO MILANI, *Korean peninsula 2021: Managing the crisis and adapting to the new situation*
- 125 AURELIO INSISA, *Taiwan 2021: Heightened geo-economic relevance amid rising cross-strait tensions*
- 153 MIGUEL ENRICO G. AYSON & LARA GIANINA S. REYES, *The Philippines 2021: Populist legacy and looming uncertainties*
- 171 BOIKE REHBEIN, *Laos 2017-2021: Revival of the subsistence ethic*
- 191 CAROLINE BENNETT, *Cambodia 2018-2021: From democracy to autocracy*
- 221 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI, *Malaysia 2021: A widening political legitimacy crisis*
- 237 EDOARDO SIANI, *Thailand 2019-2021: Military, monarchy, protests*
- 259 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2021: Repression and resistance in a multi-cornered conflict*
- 277 SILVIA TIERI, *Bangladesh 2021: The year of the golden jubilee and the second wave of pandemic*
- 297 DIEGO MAIORANO, *India 2021: Politics amid the pandemic*
- 329 DIEGO ABENANTE, *Sri Lanka 2021: From pandemic emergency to political and economic crisis*
- 347 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2021: In pursuit of a pivotal role in post-pandemic South Asia*
- 375 FILIPPO BONI, *Afghanistan 2021: US withdrawal, the Taliban return and regional geopolitics*
- 393 LUCIANO ZACCARA, *Iran 2021: The year of transition*
- 417 CARLO FRAPPI, *Azerbaijan 2021: Towards a new beginning?*
- 445 *Reviews*
- 471 *Appendix*

## THE PHILIPPINES 2021: POPULIST LEGACY AND LOOMING UNCERTAINTIES

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*The Philippines started 2021 with a temporary relief as the arrival of limited COVID-19 vaccine supplies ushered in the government's launch of its national inoculation programme. However, the periodic surge of COVID-19 cases exposed the constant inadequacies of the Philippine pandemic response, straining once again the country's struggling healthcare system and obstructing the path to economic recovery. With the Filipinos still enduring the pandemic, the government became embroiled in various allegations of corruption and cronyism over the utilization of pandemic funds, which sparked public outcry. President Rodrigo Duterte responded by attacking constitutionally independent agencies that scrutinized the executive branch's alleged excesses, partiality, and incompetence. The national government's policies that further eroded the fragile Philippine democracy were also apparent in how the state agents were increasingly cracking down on the country's civic space, targeting left-leaning activists and the media. The year under review also captured the preparations and manoeuvring of the country's dominant political forces for the 2022 presidential election. Moreover, it saw fresh trajectories and dilemmas in Philippine foreign relations. China's maritime incursions tested Philippines-China relations despite the latter's generous pandemic aid. Conversely, China's increasing threat and the demand for COVID-19 vaccines prompted the Philippines to re-establish its ties with the United States. Finally, the International Criminal Court's decision to investigate Duterte's controversial drug war, albeit temporarily halted, might pave the way for a comprehensive international probe into the Philippines' deteriorating human rights situation. These key intertwining developments in the year under review would cement the legacy of Duterte's populist regime as he prepares to leave the presidency next year.*

KEYWORDS – Philippines, Duterte, COVID-19 pandemic, presidential election

### 1. Introduction

The year under review coincided with President Rodrigo Duterte's final full year in power. For an outgoing president, he still enjoyed relatively higher satisfaction ratings than his predecessors.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the legacy of his

1. 'Duterte's lower satisfaction rating in final year still highest since martial law – Roque', *CNN Philippines*, 5 October 2021.

populist regime remained in flux, given that many Filipinos continued to suffer the consequences of his administration's costly mistakes in pandemic response. These include the failure to keep up with the preventive measures of neighbouring countries and the «militaristic» approach to the ongoing health crisis.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the year 2021 provided an opportunity for the Duterte administration to change course and rebuild its reputation tarnished by its poor handling of the pandemic.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on domestic political events. We begin by assessing the Duterte administration's unsuccessful attempts to improve the country's pandemic situation, as indicated by COVID-19's unabated spread, recurrent surges in infections, and the health care system on the brink of collapse. We then inspect Duterte's relentless efforts to undermine the country's democratic processes amid the supposed anomalies confronting his administration during the pandemic. Lastly, we analyse the dynamics surrounding the pre-election posturing of major political forces set to compete for the country's top political post next year.

The second section discusses the Philippine economic situation amid the ongoing health crisis. The country's economic managers were optimistic about the Philippine economy as the national GDP showed signs of recovery. However, analysts worried about the mounting national debt exceeding 60% debt-to-GDP ratio, which is considered too high in developing economies. Furthermore, the incurred loans did not yet mitigate the economic costs of the pandemic, as unemployment, hunger, and poverty rates remained at very high levels.

Finally, in the third section we examine the shifting terrain characterizing Philippine foreign relations. The country faced a foreign policy dilemma as China, the Duterte administration's favoured ally and generous COVID-19 vaccines donor, continued with its maritime incursions in the West Philippine Sea. Meanwhile, the Philippines was taking the initiative to warm up its ties with the United States amid the former's colossal vaccine demand – targeting 77 million fully vaccinated Filipinos to achieve herd immunity<sup>3</sup> – and China's increasing threat. One of Duterte's final concerns, which may extend beyond his term, was the International Criminal Court's (ICC) investigation into the rights violations and killings during his controversial drug war.

After reviewing the above listed events, we conclude the article by reflecting on Duterte's contested legacy, namely a question that Filipinos face as they prepare to elect a new president in 2022.

2. Michael Beltran, 'The Philippines' Pandemic Response: A Tragedy of Errors', *The Diplomat*, 12 May 2020.

3. 'PH misses COVID-19 vaccination target, to focus on protecting senior citizens', *CNN Philippines*, 31 December 2021.



## 2. Domestic politics

### 2.1. Marginal improvements in pandemic health management

At the beginning of the year, the Philippines experienced a brief reprieve in its pandemic fight following the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines and the start of the nationwide vaccination programme. The first tranche of CoronaVac vaccines arrived in mid-March with a total of 1 million out of 25 million procured doses from the Chinese biopharmaceutical company Sinovac.<sup>4</sup> Misunderstandings within the national government regarding the necessity of indemnity agreements delayed the arrival of other vaccines from Western manufacturers such as Pfizer-BioNTech.<sup>5</sup> Duterte then urgently signed into law the creation of a PHP 500 million (USD 10.2 million) indemnity fund to cover the expenses for potentially adverse vaccination side effects and to guarantee immunity for the manufacturers from lawsuits, thereby facilitating the delivery of vaccine doses.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the ongoing vaccination drive, the unabated spread of COVID-19 indicated only marginal improvements over 2020 in the Philippine pandemic response. On the one hand, through the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID or IATF), the national government ramped up efforts to achieve the vaccination target of 50 million Filipinos by the end of the year. In addition, the IATF explored measures to incentivise Filipinos to get vaccinated. On the other hand, the poorly designed and constantly changing quarantine protocols – combined with the delays in vaccine procurement – failed to prevent the surge in COVID-19 cases, bringing the country's condition back to where it started the previous year.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, active cases continued to rise, with the total number breaching the 1-million mark by the end of April.<sup>8</sup> The highly contagious Delta variant further aggravated the conditions in the following months. Daily infections ranged from 8,000 to 10,000 in August compared to the average 5,700 cases per day in July. The exponential surge in COVID-19 cases continued the following month as September logged the highest number of daily cases (26,303 infections). By December 30, 2021, the Philippines had a total of 2,841,260 COVID-19 confirmed cases while the

4. 'Philippines to receive first COVID-19 vaccines, start inoculations next week', *Reuters*, 25 February 2021.

5. 'Government didn't know about indemnity requirement for vaccines — Palace official', *The Philippine Star*, 22 February 2021.

6. 'Philippines' Duterte signs indemnity bill for COVID-19 vaccine rollout', *Reuters*, 26 February 2021.

7. 'Businesses criticize gov't for lockdown policy flip-flop', *Business World*, 9 September 2021.

8. 'How the Philippines reached 1 million COVID-19 cases', *Rappler*, 27 April 2021.

death toll in the country reached 51,373.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, some of its Southeast Asian neighbours reported lower figures such as those in Vietnam (1,651,673 cases; 31,007 deaths)<sup>10</sup> and Thailand (2,217,287 cases; 21,647 deaths)<sup>11</sup>. This happened despite the national government's decision to place Metro Manila under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) in the latter half of August.<sup>12</sup>

The country's already fragile healthcare system was on the verge of collapse as pandemic funds for health resources began to dwindle. Hospitals exceeded maximum capacity once again while being severely understaffed.<sup>13</sup> Medical institutions and health centres also reduced doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel to allow for quarantine time after exposures to COVID-19, resulting in longer working hours. Mass resignations became common in hospitals, with health workers, particularly nurses, searching for better working conditions overseas.<sup>14</sup>

Civil society groups and health workers staged political demonstrations and online campaigns to protest the double standards, lack of accountability, and incompetence of government officials tasked to spearhead the Philippine pandemic response. In January, Duterte outrightly rejected calls for a Senate inquiry into the Presidential Security Group (PSG), which allegedly received unregistered Sinopharm vaccines ahead of the country's beleaguered health workers.<sup>15</sup> To make matters worse, the health workers' appeal for increased hazard pay and special risk allowance, among other benefits, remained unheard. Calls for the resignation of Health Secretary Francisco Duque III also intensified in response to the national government's severe mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis and alleged misuse of its pandemic funds.<sup>16</sup> However, Duterte quickly absolved his embattled alter ego, demonstrating once again his penchant for protecting his favoured subordinates from public accountability.

9. 'Philippines logs 1,623 COVID-19 cases, highest since November 21', *Rappler*, 30 December 2021.

10. 'Viet Nam COVID-19 Situation Report #74', *World Health Organization*, 26 December 2021.

11. 'COVID-19 Situation, Thailand' *World Health Organization*, 29 December 2021.

12. 'PH breaks record for highest single-day tally of new COVID-19 cases with 26,303 more infections', *CNN Philippines*, 11 September 2021.

13. '«We've cried ourselves dry»: COVID overwhelms Manila hospitals', *Al Jazeera*, 19 April 2021.

14. 'Exodus of nurses alarms private hospitals', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 20 October 2021.

15. 'Duterte defends soldiers who got illegal COVID vaccine from China', *Al Jazeera*, 5 January 2021.

16. 'Philippines health workers protest as COVID strains hospitals', *Al Jazeera*, 1 September 2021.

## 2.2. *Corruption and cronyism amid the pandemic*

As the Filipinos continued to bear the brunt of the pandemic in 2021, allegations of government corruption and cronyism surfaced, prompting widespread resentment. These accusations revealed the supposed preferential treatment given by Duterte to his subordinates and allies despite their incompetence and excesses while dealing with the pandemic. More importantly, these complaints highlighted Duterte's relentless efforts to undermine democratic checks and balances and his abuse of authority to protect embattled men in his inner circle.

In August, a corruption controversy broke out after the Commission on Audit (COA) flagged various deficiencies in the Department of Health's (DOH) pandemic spending for 2020, amounting to PHP 67.3 billion (USD 1.4 billion).<sup>17</sup> These included procedural flaws and lack of documentation in several transactions by the DOH, indiscriminate waste of government resources for its inventory of expired or expiring medicines, and its unobligated allotment meant to strengthen the government's pandemic response.<sup>18</sup> Despite the DOH's assertion that its operating units had mostly resolved such deficiencies,<sup>19</sup> the publication of the COA report triggered Senate inquiries into the government's utilization of the pandemic response funds. The national government, through the Procurement Service-Department of Budget Management (PS-DBM), allegedly entered an overpriced procurement deal with Pharmally Pharmaceutical Corporation for pandemic-related supplies.<sup>20</sup> The senators questioned how the firm managed to bag nearly PHP 12 billion worth of contracts from the government despite its meagre paid-up capital of PHP 625,000 (USD 12,020).<sup>21</sup>

The partiality demonstrated by the PS-DBM in awarding PHP billions-worth contracts to Pharmally directed the senators' attention to the personalities behind the anomalous transactions and their alleged ties with the Duterte administration. Lloyd Christopher Lao, the former head of PS-DBM, previously worked under Senator Bong Go, Duterte's long-time aide. Pharmally executives also identified Michael Yang, Duterte's former economic adviser and Davao-based Chinese businessman, as the one who

17. 'Consolidated Annual Audit Report on the Department of Health for the Year Ended December 31, 2020', *Commission on Audit*, 11 August 2021.

18. *Ibid.*

19. 'DOH and other operating units committed to resolving COA findings; Php 67.3 billion COVID-19 funds mostly resolved', *Department of Health*, 16 August 2021.

20. 'Senators ask Pharmally execs why it sold products at higher price to the gov't', *Manila Bulletin*, 19 October 2021.

21. '«Defrauded?» Lacson asks how Pharmally bagged nearly P12B in gov't deals', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 13 September 2021.

funded their pandemic supplies purchase for the DOH.<sup>22</sup> Yang, however, refuted the claim and told the senators that his only role had been to introduce the firm to Chinese suppliers.<sup>23</sup>

Amid the corruption controversy, Duterte turned to his strongman playbook by subverting the oversight functions of the COA and the Senate. He directed the state audit agency, an independent constitutional commission, to stop flagging government transactions and publishing audit reports.<sup>24</sup> He also ordered the Solicitor General to have the COA audit the Philippine Red Cross (PRC), a private humanitarian institution. Senator Richard Gordon, current chair of the PRC, led the Senate inquiries on the government's transactions with Pharmally.<sup>25</sup> Duterte later shifted his attention to the Senate, accusing the senators of conducting a witch-hunt. He then issued an executive memorandum prohibiting Cabinet members from attending the ongoing Senate inquiries.<sup>26</sup> He also threatened to send the senators to jail if they cited Cabinet members in contempt for their absence.<sup>27</sup> To prevent a looming constitutional crisis, the senators formally filed a petition before the Supreme Court asking it to nullify Duterte's executive memorandum.<sup>28</sup>

With the Pharmally probe receiving nationwide attention, Duterte's close associate and top campaign donor, Davao-based businessman Dennis Uy, was also in the spotlight for securing large government contracts. Uy captured the headlines for his planned takeover of the Malampaya Deep Water Gas-to-Power Project, one of the country's vital energy sources, which yields billions of annual revenues.<sup>29</sup> Uy will own 90% of the Malampaya project once the deal is completed, with the remaining 10% controlled by the state-owned Philippine National Oil Company Exploration Corporation (PNOC-EC).

The Senate immediately conducted a probe into the Malampaya buy-out following the charges of cronyism against the government. Business groups also questioned the government's refusal to exercise its right-to-match option, thereby allowing the sale of the country's vital energy asset

22. 'Pharmally exec: Ex-Duterte adviser Yang financed firm's medical supply purchases', *Manila Bulletin*, 10 September 2021.

23. 'Ex-Duterte adviser Michael Yang lent money to pay for COVID-19 supplies, says Pharmally chief', *CNN Philippines*, 10 September 2021.

24. 'Duterte to COA: Stop flagging agencies, don't publish reports', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 17 August 2021.

25. 'Duterte orders SolGen to instruct COA to audit Red Cross', *CNN Philippines*, 16 September 2021.

26. 'Duterte issues memo forbidding Cabinet execs from attending Pharmally probe', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 October 2021.

27. 'Duterte threatens to jail senators', *CNN Philippines*, 7 October 2021.

28. 'Senate asks SC to nullify Duterte memo barring Cabinet execs from Senate probe', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 11 November 2021.

29. 'The importance of Malampaya: A story of power', *The Philippine Star*, 9 November 2021.

to firms with no prior experience in gas exploration and production.<sup>30</sup> In December, the PNOC-EC informed the Senate that it had already withheld its consent on selling Shell's 45% share to Malampaya Energy but did not disclose the reasons behind its decision.<sup>31</sup>

Aside from Uy's massive deals in the energy sector, another firm tied to his business empire, F2 Logistics, bagged a PHP 535-million contract (USD 10.6 million) from the Commission on Elections (COMELEC). The contract covered the warehousing and deployment of automated election system (AES)-related equipment for the 2022 elections. Election watchdogs and politicians saw the move to secure F2 Logistics' services as one that might compromise the integrity of the upcoming polls. Despite their strong objections, COMELEC guaranteed that security measures are in place to avoid tampering with AES-related equipment while in transit.<sup>32</sup> The Commission also defended its decision to award the contract to an Uy-affiliated firm, citing compliance with the procurement law and the absence of conflict-of-interest within its bids and awards committee.<sup>33</sup>

Overall, these controversies jeopardised Duterte's anti-corruption legacy as he was nearing the end of his term. His penchant for defending and unilaterally absolving his accused subordinates marred his campaign pledge of the swift eradication of corruption. His circumvention of the country's formal accountability system also questioned his commitment to a «clean government».<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, his apparent silence on Uy's acquisition spree cast doubt on his promise to «destroy the oligarchs», whom he had accused of using their political influence to advance their business interests.<sup>35</sup> The rise of Duterte-aligned businessmen, most notably Uy, suggests that the President lets his favoured individuals dominate the country's political and economic landscapes.

### 2.3. Crackdown on dissent intensified

Apart from flouting the constitutional checks and balances and other oversight mechanisms, the Duterte administration's policies that further eroded the country's fragile democracy are also evident by state agents' escalating crackdown on civic space.

30. *Ibid.*

31. 'PNOC-EC withholds consent to Malampaya deal', *Business World*, 16 December 2021.

32. «No law violation»: Comelec officials defend deal with F2 Logistics', *Rappler*, 27 August 2021.

33. 'Comelec says no conflict of interest in awarding of contract to F2 logistics', *Manila Bulletin*, 2 November 2021.

34. 'Duterte vows clean government in his first SONA', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 25 July 2016.

35. 'Duterte to destroy «monster» oligarchs', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 4 August 2016.

The administration's frequent red-tagging of leftist activists has blurred the line between insurgency and activism, steering its anti-communist campaign towards a repressive and violent path. Months after Duterte accused the University of the Philippines (UP) of serving as a communist recruitment hub, the Department of National Defense (DND) unilaterally abrogated the 1989 UP-DND Accord in January. The bilateral agreement prevented security forces from entering UP campuses that served as bastions of academic freedom and student activism. While the termination of the agreement elicited public outcry, the DND cited the alleged «clandestine recruitment» by communist groups inside UP to justify its decision, echoing the President's earlier statement.<sup>36</sup>

In March, Duterte ordered the security forces to «finish off» the communist rebels, raising concerns of another wave of killings similar to his drug war.<sup>37</sup> Two days later, state forces carried out joint police-military operations in Calabarzon<sup>38</sup> to implement search warrants for illegal possession of firearms and explosives issued by the Manila regional trial court. Dubbed as «Bloody Sunday», the raids resulted in the death of 9 individuals and the arrest of 6 others, most of whom were from labour and urban poor organisations.<sup>39</sup> While the region's police chief defended the joint operations as part of the President's «whole-of-nation» approach<sup>40</sup> to countering communist insurgency, various human rights and progressive groups considered them a premeditated attack on non-combatant activists.<sup>41</sup> They also disputed the PNP's claim that the slain individuals fought back when served with search warrants.<sup>42</sup>

In light of these alarming extrajudicial killings, the Supreme Court issued a rule requiring law enforcers to have at least two recording de-

36. 'DND ends agreement with UP barring military, police from its campuses', *CNN Philippines*, 18 January 2021.

37. '«Kill them»: Duterte wants to «finish off» communist rebels', *Al Jazeera*, 6 March 2021.

38. Calabarzon is an acronym for the five provinces comprising the Southern Tagalog region or Region IV-A in the Philippines: Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon.

39. '«Bloodbath Day»: Deaths, arrests reported in police raids in Calabarzon', *The Philippine Star*, 7 March 2021.

40. By virtue of Executive Order No. 70, President Duterte institutionalized the Whole-of-Nation Approach that aims to address the "root cause insurgencies, internal disturbances and tensions, and other armed conflicts and threats by prioritizing and harmonizing the delivery of basic services and social development packages by the government, facilitating societal inclusivity, and ensuring active participation of all sectors of the society in the pursuit of the country's peace agenda."

41. 'Bloody Sunday: 9 dead, 6 arrested in Calabarzon crackdown on activists', *Rappler*, 7 March 2021.

42. 'Activists reject «nanlaban» claim in Calabarzon killings', *SunStar*, 9 March 2021.

vices during the execution of warrants.<sup>43</sup> In December, the Department of Justice (DOJ) made its first major move since launching a probe on the «Bloody Sunday» raids, suing 17 policemen for murder over the death of one activist.<sup>44</sup> The Supreme Court in the same month also declared parts of the heavily contested Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 unconstitutional, including the vague provision that could make a protest, strike, or advocacy an act of terrorism.<sup>45</sup> While petitioners and critics applauded the decision, the High Court also affirmed most of the law's provisions, such as the contentious provision allowing the detention of suspects for up to 24 days without charges.<sup>46</sup>

The Duterte administration's crackdown on dissent further deteriorated press freedom in the Philippines, as evidenced by the mounting attacks against journalists and news outlets critical of the government's excesses. Beleaguered Rappler CEO Maria Ressa's efforts to safeguard freedom of expression emphasised this troubling trend that gained worldwide attention with her receipt of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>47</sup> Ressa has previously drawn Duterte's ire because of Rappler's critical coverage of his drug war. Over the previous years, Ressa and Rappler got charged with multiple offences, which critics viewed as politically motivated. In March, the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) red-tagged Rappler for allegedly being a «friend and ally» of the communists.<sup>48</sup>

Between May and June, the websites of two other red-tagged news outlets, Bulatlat and AlterMidya, were targeted by cyberattacks, according to Sweden-based Qurium Media Foundation.<sup>49</sup> AlterMidya also reported that the most recent attack against its website occurred after publishing an article about the ICC's investigation into the Duterte administration's drug war.<sup>50</sup> A probe by the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT) confirmed earlier reports that the cyberattacks originated from a computer network assigned to the Philippine Army.<sup>51</sup> Although it denied responsibility for the attacks, the Army received strong

43. 'SC now requires law enforcers to wear body cameras in implementation of warrants', *The Philippine Star*, 10 July 2021.

44. '17 cops in «Bloody Sunday» raids face murder complaint', *CNN Philippines*, 1 December 2021.

45. 'Supreme Court declares some provisions of Anti-Terror Law unconstitutional', *ABS-CBN News*, 9 December 2021.

46. *Ibid.*

47. 'The Nobel Peace Prize 2021', *The Nobel Prize*, 8 October 2021.

48. 'Badoy red-tags Rappler over fact-check articles', *Rappler*, 4 March 2021.

49. 'Attacks against media in the Philippines continue', *Qurium: The Media Foundation*, 22 June 2021.

50. 'Quick dive into recent cyberattack vs Altermidya, Bulatlat, Karapatan websites', *Interaksyon*, 24 June 2021.

51. 'DICT also traces cyberattack to the Army, 2 complaining news sites say', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 24 September 2021.

condemnation from the Freedom for Media Freedom for All (FMFA), a national coalition of the country's leading media organisations, for its «assaults on press freedom and free expression».<sup>52</sup> Such incidents are the main factor why the Philippines fell two places in the Reporter Without Border's 2021 World Press Freedom Index, now ranking 138<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries.<sup>53</sup> This negative trend contrasts starkly with the Palace's claim that press freedom is «alive and well in the Philippines», in response to Duterte's inclusion on the same media watchdog's 2021 «press freedom predators» list.<sup>54</sup>

While the Philippines boasts a robust press, it is still one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists.<sup>55</sup> The rampant media killings remain the biggest threat to press freedom, with 22 journalists murdered since Duterte took office in 2016.<sup>56</sup> Three of these victims were killed in 2021, namely Renante Cortes, Orlando Dinoy, and Jesus Malabanan. A Manila Standard correspondent, Malabanan also reportedly worked with Reuters on its Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the Duterte administration's drug war.<sup>57</sup> The Philippines also retained its spot as the 7<sup>th</sup> worst country for unsolved media killings, based on the Committee to Protect Journalists' 2021 Global Impunity Index.<sup>58</sup>

#### 2.4. Road to the 2022 presidential election

With the Philippines set for another leadership change next year, formal preparations for the upcoming elections began to take shape as early as the first quarter of 2021. Despite the various controversies the Duterte administration faced in its final year, the President's consistently high approval ratings raised expectations that he would take advantage of his political capital to ensure the victory of his chosen successor.<sup>59</sup> This prospect could be problematic for the opposition, which had been struggling to find a presidential candidate that could match Duterte's popularity. However, the factional dispute within the ruling PDP-Laban party prevented the administration

52. 'A call to the Philippine Army: Respect for press freedom in word and deed', *Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism*, 27 September 2021.

53. 'Philippines drop further in World Press Freedom Index', *The Philippine Star*, 22 April 2021.

54. 'Duterte not a press freedom predator, Palace says', *Manila Bulletin*, 6 July 2021.

55. Danilo A. Arao, 'Press freedom is no joke in the Philippines', *East Asia Forum*, 7 November 2021.

56. 'Filipino journalist who helped probe Duterte's drug war shot dead', *Al Jazeera*, 9 December 2021.

57. 'Slain Pampanga journo helped in Pulitzer-winning report on drug war', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 10 December 2021.

58. Jennifer Dunham, 'Killers of journalists still get away with murder', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 28 October 2021.

59. Pia Ranada, 'Duterte may cap term as most popular Philippine president. So what?', *Rappler*, 30 June 2021



from fielding a standard-bearer for the 2022 presidential election. These developments have created a unique set of dilemmas for major political players with a considerable stake in the upcoming polls.

In March, the launching of the ISambayan coalition was the opposition's arduous attempt to unite its fragmented forces around a single presidential candidate that would give them a fighting chance against whomever Duterte endorses as his successor. The coalition aimed to become a party of «democratic forces» that would oppose those «identified with authoritarianism, dictatorship, extrajudicial killings, plunder and violation of human rights».<sup>60</sup> As such, they were seeking to elect a successor who would steer the country's return to pre-Duterte liberal politics.

However, the opposition's plan to field a single candidate was thwarted by the Philippines' weak political party system and personality-based politics, in which presidential aspirants hardly submit to a rigorous party screening and nomination process. Instead, the country's plurality system, combined with a multiparty setup, creates an incentive for early survey frontrunners to join the presidential race rather than concede to a candidate with a competitive advantage. The opposition's dilemma was exacerbated further by the poor performance in pre-election surveys of its de facto leader, Vice President Leni Robredo, compared to other presidential aspirants with whom she held unity talks.

As expected, those whom Robredo actively wooed for a potential coalition also announced their candidacies for president. Senator Panfilo Lacson ran under Partido Reporma, Manila Mayor Isko Moreno under Aksyon Demokratiko, and Senator Manny Pacquiao under Probinsya Muna Development Initiative (PROMDI). This outcome proved to be the worst-case scenario for the opposition, as they failed to avert another crowded presidential race that would likely split the votes against Duterte's presidential bet. Their adoption of «shared candidates»<sup>61</sup> on their senatorial slates made the situation even more complicated.<sup>62</sup> This odd consequence of electoral alliance formation was also caused by the prevalence of personality politics, overshadowing the possibility of organizing an election ticket along party lines or common platforms.

Conversely, the ruling party became embroiled in an intra-party feud and could not capitalize on the opposition's predicament. Prior to the candidacy filing period, the election spotlight focused on the presidential daughter, Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte-Carpio, who consistently topped the pre-election surveys. This development raised expectations

60. 'Retired justice to lead opposition coalition in elections next year', *Business World*, 17 March 2021.

61. Shared candidates, in the context of Philippine elections, refer to senatorial bets who are included in the Senate ticket of two or more presidential candidates.

62. Bea Cupin, 'Shared candidates: Parties out, personalities in', *Rappler*, 30 October 2021.

that she would become PDP-Laban's candidate. The Duterte-aligned faction in the ruling party, led by Energy Secretary Alfonso Cusi, had been actively promoting the tandem of Duterte-Carpio and her father for next year's presidential and vice-presidential race. For the Cusi faction, forming such an alliance would ensure the continuity of the Duterte administration's policies and programmes. However, Senator Manny Pacquiao, the party's acting president, opposed the Cusi-faction's manoeuvres as he was also planning to launch his presidential bid under PDP-Laban. The months of infighting proved politically costly, leaving the ruling party without a standard-bearer. Duterte-Carpio instead joined Lakas-CMD, the party of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, while Pacquiao ran under PROMDI, a regional party.

After deciding to not join the ruling party, Duterte-Carpio became the running mate of presidential frontrunner and standard-bearer of the Partido Federal ng Pilipinas (PFP), former Senator Ferdinand «Bongbong» Marcos Jr. Their tandem, dubbed as «BBM-Sara UniTeam», was backed by a coalition of four major parties, namely PFP, Lakas-CMD, Hugpong ng Pagbabago (HNP), and Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino (PMP).<sup>63</sup> This partnership created a formidable alliance for the upcoming polls. On one hand, the Marcos family's efforts to return to the Palace would benefit from Duterte-Carpio's popularity and solid political base, especially in Mindanao. On the other hand, Duterte-Carpio's decision to run for vice president averted a potential split of the administration's supporters caused by her competition with Marcos. It may also enable the Duterte family to maintain influence on national politics once its patriarch steps down in 2022.

While the «BBM-Sara UniTeam» is projected to dominate other contenders, a greater leadership challenge awaits if they secure victory. Marcos is running on a platform that seeks to offer a «unifying leadership», stressing the importance of unity in accomplishing reform and recovery from the pandemic. However, the legacy of his father's 20-year dictatorship remained arguably one of the most divisive political issues in the country's history. Critics and victims of the martial law regime continued to demand that the Marcos family be held accountable for the widespread human rights abuses and corruption during their regime. Their opposition to the Marcos family's potential return to the apex of power explains the filing of several disqualification cases against Marcos's candidacy. Since breaking into the country's national political scene, Marcos has repeatedly downplayed the atrocities committed during the martial law regime. At the same time, he and his supporters actively spun the Marcos administration's historical narrative to portray his father's legacy in a positive light. What might further upset Marcos's push for national

63. 'Four political parties forge UniTeam alliance pact for Bongbong-Sara tandem', *Manila Bulletin*, 25 November 2021.

unity is running with Duterte-Carpio, whose father is a similarly divisive political figure.

Finally, uncertainties also loomed over Duterte's political fate because the administration was without a standard-bearer. After the costly infighting within PDP-Laban, the public widely anticipated that Duterte would support his daughter's running-mate. However, he bared that his party was averse to allying with the «BBM-Sara UniTeam», citing Marcos as a «weak leader».<sup>64</sup> Thus, it remained unclear whom Duterte would endorse for the upcoming polls. His endorsement will significantly impact his political fate beyond 2022, considering that Duterte may face multiple charges for his controversial drug war, among others, including the one probed by the ICC. During the year under review, the only certainty was that Duterte and his party found themselves in a politically awkward position as the Philippines was preparing for another leadership change.

### 3. *An uphill climb to economic recovery*

The Philippine economy in 2021 improved but going back to the pre-pandemic GDP growth rates remained an uphill climb. The country's GDP in the second quarter grew by 11.8%, the highest quarterly recorded economic growth since 1989.<sup>65</sup> Two potential reasons could explain this improved economic performance. One is the «low base effect» as the GDP contracted by 16.9% in the same quarter of the previous year.<sup>66</sup> The other possible cause of growth was the marginal improvements in the Duterte administration's pandemic response.<sup>67</sup> The National Economic Development Authority projected that the country's economy could return to pre-pandemic levels by early 2022.<sup>68</sup>

Government tax collection had been severely affected by the continued quarantine restrictions. President Duterte then chose to access domestic and foreign financing to facilitate pandemic response and boost the economy. The Philippines was able to incur debt at a relatively low-interest rate resulting in a new record high debt of PHP 11.92 trillion (USD 233.79

64. 'Duterte says daughter Sara's running-mate Marcos is «spoiled, weak leader»', *ABS-CBN News*, 19 November 2021.

65. 'GDP grows 11.8% in Q2 2021, but economists say recovery not yet here', *Rappler*, 10 August 2021.

66. Solita Collas-Monsod, '11.8 percent GDP growth—what it means', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 14 August 2021.

67. 'Philippine economy still far from pre-pandemic levels —PSA data', *GMA News*, 10 August 2021.

68. 'NEDA: Economy could return to pre-pandemic level by 2022', *CNN Philippines*, 9 November 2021.

billion) by the end of September.<sup>69</sup> A cause for concern was how the national debt-to-GDP ratio exceeded the 60% threshold – namely what is considered manageable for emerging economies – as early as the end of June.<sup>70</sup> The Department of Finance maintained that these levels were still within control and that the government needed resources to increase the country's health care capacity and procure vaccines for the population.<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, beyond GDP growth, unemployment, hunger, and poverty remain a cause for concern. The Philippines recorded the highest unemployment rate for 2021 in September, equivalent to 4.25 million unemployed Filipinos due to quarantine restrictions in the previous quarters.<sup>72</sup> The daunting effects of the pandemic also translated into 17 to 19 million Filipinos being under the poverty line.<sup>73</sup> According to the Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey, 2.5 million families went hungry at least once in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the year.<sup>74</sup> These compounding effects of unemployment, hunger, and poverty prompted citizen participation towards establishing local food banks nationwide, dubbed as «community pantries». Many saw this phenomenon as a grassroots response to the slow and inefficient government aid distribution amid harsh lockdowns.<sup>75</sup>

#### 4. *Strains and concessions in foreign relations*

##### 4.1. *Tensions and dilemma with China*

The Duterte administration's pivot to China signified closer foreign relations between Manila and Beijing. This relationship was continuously tested in 2021 after another incident of Chinese incursions in the West Philippine Sea. In March, the Philippines spotted more than two hundred Chinese vessels stationed near the Julian Felipe Reef in the disputed territories. These vessels constituted a threat to maritime security and the environment, as

69. 'PH outstanding debt stock balloons to fresh record ₱11.9T in September', *CNN Philippines*, 29 October 2021.

70. 'PH debt grows to new high of P11.92 trillion in September', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 29 October 2021.

71. 'PH debt still manageable: DOF chief', *Philippine News Agency*, 26 August 2021.

72. 'Unemployment Rate in September 2021 is Estimated at 8.9 Percent', *Philippine Statistics Authority*, 4 November 2021

73. '17 million Pinoys likely to remain poor as government misses 2022 poverty goal', *Business Mirror*, 10 September 2021.

74. 'SWS: 2.5 million Filipino families experienced hunger once in past 3 months', *CNN Philippines*, 7 December 2021.

75. 'Community pantry: «Not charity, but mutual aid»', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 18 April 2021.

they illegally took an estimated 240,000 kilograms of fish from Philippine waters.<sup>76</sup> In response, China denied the presence of its maritime militia, claiming that the vessels which the Philippines spotted were owned by fishermen taking refuge from bad weather. However, the Chinese government eventually issued a unilateral fishing ban across the disputed territories, and water cannoned two Philippine boats en route to Ayungin Shoal, thereby preventing food supplies from being delivered to the Philippine military stationed in the area.<sup>77</sup>

The Philippines further faced a dilemma in balancing its relations with China because of the latter's critical assistance in pandemic response and post-pandemic economic recovery efforts. China served as the Philippines' primary supplier of COVID-19 vaccines, and China's Belt and Road Initiative is integrated into President Duterte's «Build, Build, Build» infrastructure programme.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. adopted a tough stance on the issue by filing close to two hundred diplomatic protests on the presence of Chinese vessels in the disputed territories.<sup>79</sup> Duterte, conversely, did not appear to share such an assertive posture against China's maritime activities. Despite raising the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration Ruling in the 2020 UN General Assembly, he later likened this landmark decision to a piece of paper that can easily be thrown away.<sup>80</sup> His stand caused domestic condemnation for his failure to advance the Filipino's interest in the West Philippine Sea.

#### 4.2. Reinforcing ties with the US

In light of its fragile relations with China, the Philippines has begun re-establishing ties with the United States. The country's need for the US to counterbalance China after the escalation of tensions in the West Philippine Sea and its high demand for COVID-19 vaccines and medical supplies facilitated the policy turn. Duterte's decision to reverse his earlier order to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) illustrated this new direction for the US-Philippine relations, which had become problematic when

76. 'TIMELINE: China's vessels swarming Julian Felipe Reef, West PH Sea', *Rappler*, 30 April 2021.

77. 'PH outraged after Chinese vessels blocked PH supply boats', *Philippines News Agency*, 18 November 2021.

78. 'China's Belt and Road Runs Aground in the Philippines', *Geopolitical Monitor*, 23 September 2021.

79. 'Diplomatic protests still effective vs China – experts', *The Philippine Star*, 7 December 2021.

80. 'Duterte on PH court win over China: «That's just paper; I'll throw that in the wastebasket»', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 06 May 2021.

he became president in 2016.<sup>81</sup> With the VFA still in place, the Philippines can acquire financial resources for military modernisation and pandemic support.<sup>82</sup> By December, the US had donated over 25 million vaccine doses to the country and PHP 1.9 billion (USD 39 million) in aid.<sup>83</sup> President Duterte expressed his gratitude to US President Joe Biden during the 9<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-US Summit and even considered paying a state visit to the US as a gesture of goodwill.<sup>84</sup>

### 4.3. ICC investigation into the «War on Drugs»

One of the significant foreign policy decisions enforced by the Duterte administration was the Philippines' withdrawal from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), effective in 2019. This action was in response to ICC's preliminary examination on allegations of extrajudicial killings and other human rights violations during the drug war, which found a «reasonable basis» for further investigation.<sup>85</sup> Despite the country's withdrawal, the ICC in September 2021 authorized an official probe into the crimes against humanity brought about by the «war on drugs» from 2011 to 2019, encompassing Duterte's years of service as the Philippine head of state as well as his tenure as vice mayor and mayor of Davao City. The ICC ruling also covers the years when the Philippines was still a signatory of the Rome Statute.

The Philippine government continued to bar the ICC from conducting the investigation by filing a deferral request. The Philippine Government assured the ICC that it would see through the cases filed against the Philippine National Police with «an ongoing review of 52 drug raids carried out between 2011 and 2016, and the DOJ's review of 6,000 admin-

81. The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) was signed by the Philippines and the United States in 1998 in support of their 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. The VFA symbolized political and military cooperation between the two states as it provided ease of access to US military personnel in the Philippines for the conduct of official business such as joint military exercises. It also outlined the procedures for safeguarding the rights and due process of Filipino and American troops in case of apprehension and prosecution in either state. Furthermore, Duterte redirected the Philippine foreign policy when he assumed the presidency, veering away from the United States and strengthening diplomatic ties with China and Russia instead. See John Schaus, 'What Is the Philippines-United States Visiting Forces Agreement, and Why Does It Matter?', *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 12 February 2020.

82. 'Duterte's back-down on US forces in Philippines', *The Interpreter*, 24 August 2021.

83. U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, 'U.S. Donates Additional 3.4 Million Pfizer Vaccines to the Philippines', 21 December 2021.

84. 'Duterte thanks Biden for Covid-19 vaccines in 9th Asean-US Summit', *Philippine News Agency*, 27 October 2021.

85. Georgi Engelbrecht, 'Philippines: The International Criminal Court Goes After Duterte's Drug War', *International Crisis Group*, 17 September 2021.

istrative cases pending an internal police investigation».<sup>86</sup> The ICC stated that they had suspended their investigation while reviewing the scope and effects of the deferral request.<sup>87</sup> Human rights groups and families of drug war victims urged the ICC to continue its investigation, claiming that the request for deferral was a «ruse» delaying accountability and punishment of erring officials who committed human rights violations and extrajudicial killings.<sup>88</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

This article has reviewed the major events that characterized the Philippines in 2021. We have explored the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the country's healthcare system and economy, which are mainly attributable to the lack of significant improvements in the Philippine pandemic response. We have discussed the allegations of corruption and cronyism leveled against the national government and highlighted Duterte's efforts to undermine the country's democratic processes to evade accountability. We have demonstrated that such efforts are also evident in how state agents have intensified their crackdown on activists and the media critical of the Administration's excesses. We have also explored the key developments and alliance formations ahead of the 2022 presidential election. Finally, we have addressed the new directions in Philippine foreign relations in the context of the Duterte administration's incoherent foreign policy.

The year 2021 was the final pitch for Duterte to burnish his legacy. Since he assumed the presidency in 2016, the overarching narrative of his populist regime centered on his determination to operate beyond the niceties of liberal democracy in favor of straightforward remedies to the country's pressing problems. Over the previous years, this narrative had created a seemingly deepening social divide between those sympathetic to his unconventional leadership style and those who condemned his authoritarian tendencies. Unfortunately for Duterte, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that resorting to strongman tactics was far from effective in addressing problems requiring science-based and pragmatic solutions. Given the costly missteps the Duterte administration committed within the first year of the pandemic, 2021 provided opportunities to make up for these shortcomings. However, this article has shown how the management of the pandemic, although better than in the previous year, remained far from satisfac-

86. 'ICC halts probe into Duterte's «war on drugs» after gov't request', *Al Jazeera*, 20 November 2021.

87. *Ibid.*

88. 'ICC urged to proceed with «drug war» probe to not further delay justice for victims', *The Philippine Star*, 15 December 2021.

tory, particularly in terms of still alarming levels of unemployment, poverty, and hunger. At the end of the year under review, the Philippines will be set for a leadership change with a significant question confronting the Filipino voters: do they want continuity or change?