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

ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXI / 2020

Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

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

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989
Vol. XXXI / 2020

Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

Asia Maior. The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989.

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. XXXI, 2020

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.
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	abbonamenti@viella.it		www.viella.it	

Before being published in Asia Maior, all articles, whether commissioned or unsolicited, after being first evaluated by the Journal's editors, are then submitted to a double-blind peer review involving up to three anonymous referees. Coherently with the double-blind peer review process, Asia Maior does not make public the name of the reviewers. However, the reviewers' names – and, if need be, the whole correspondence between the journal's editors and the reviewer/s – can be disclosed to interested institutions, upon a formal request made directly to the Editor in Chief of the journal.

Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Nicola Mocci (nicola.mocci@unifi.it) and Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk); book reviews should be sent to Oliviero Frattolillo (oliviero.frattolillo@uniroma3.it) and Francesca Congiu (fcongiu@unica.it).

viella
libreria editrice
via delle Alpi, 32
I-00198 ROMA
tel. 06 84 17 758
fax 06 85 35 39 60
www.viella.it

Contents

The Philippines 2020: The gamble of the populist leadership

Yvan Ysmael T. Yonaha and *Esther Mary L. Calvo*

Ateneo de Manila University and
Chinese University of Hong Kong
yvanyonaha@link.cuhk.edu.hk

Lund University
esther.calvo@svet.lu.se

The year 2020 was an eventful one for the Philippines. Still recovering from the aftermath of the Taal volcano eruption, the country soon faced a public health crisis. Contrary to Duterte's belief that the new coronavirus (COVID-19) would just die a natural death, the pandemic turned out to be one of the greatest challenges the Philippine government has ever had to face. As the country's cases increased rapidly, the government, handicapped by the long-standing institutional problems in the country's educational and healthcare sectors, scrambled to implement a national lockdown to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus. After struggling to contain the pandemic, it then opened the economy prematurely. At the same time, the country witnessed a power struggle for the Speakership of the House of Representatives as well as massive corruption in the state health insurance agency, PhilHealth. But what caught the public off-guard was Duterte's UN address upholding the Permanent Court Arbitration's ruling on the West Philippine Sea; more importantly, the unexpected passage of the repressive Anti-Terror Law that originally was not considered an urgent legislation. Despite public outrage over the mismanagement of the crisis and the passage of the Anti-Terror Law, Duterte's approval and trust ratings remained unscathed.

Keywords – Philippines, COVID-19 pandemic, Duterte, populism, illiberalism

1. *Introduction*

In the year under review (2020), defying expectations, Duterte's «Teflon status» proved to be immune even from the ruinous effect of his administration's abysmal performance in managing the new coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and Philippine economy.[1] Much to the disbelief of political analysts, Duterte remained a well-loved president. In a survey released by Pulse Asia in October 2020, 91% of the sampled Filipinos reported their appreciation for Duterte's efforts and expressed their continued trust in him.[2] Many questioned the unrealistic results of the survey, pointing out the con-

1. Camille Elemia, 'EXPLAINER: Duterte's High Ratings despite Poor COVID-19 Response', *Rappler*, 2 October 2020.

2. Jodesz Gavilan, 'Pulse Asia: 8 in 10 Filipinos Approve of Duterte Gov't's Coronavirus Response', *Rappler*, 8 October 2020.

ISSN 2385-2526

venient timing of its implementation, when most parts of the country were already under the less restrictive General Community Quarantine (GCQ). But Duterte had been enjoying consistently high popularity ratings even before the pandemic struck the Philippines. What explains the persistence of Duterte's popularity?

While his enduring popularity may be attributed to his populist charm, it may also be due to the social programmes implemented by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the *Bayanihan to Heal as One Act*, a legislation that grants the president special powers for a limited time, the government distributed financial aid to 18 million families over two months.[3] This provided immediate relief from the financial shocks caused by the pandemic. In addition, Duterte's formation of the national task force against COVID-19 and usual candour in regular televised briefings, gave an impression of the President's decisiveness and the appearance that his administration was on top of things. Despite the self-congratulatory statements by presidential spokesperson Harry Roque, the alarming number of COVID-19 cases, the soaring unemployment rate and the sharp decline in economic growth, tell another story.

Internationally, Duterte's image as a mercurial, populist leader was further consolidated by his attempts at the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States and his dismissal of the International Criminal Court (ICC) report on his war on drugs. However, his sudden endorsement of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling against China's claims to the West Philippine Sea in his very first address at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) was generally perceived as being out of character for a president known for his deference to Beijing.

In this essay, we describe how the Philippines muddled through a series of natural calamities during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The article discusses how the pandemic, exacerbated by incompetent governance, petty political rivalries and natural disasters, strained the country's feeble public healthcare and education systems and economy.

2. *An overwhelmed healthcare system*

The COVID-19 pandemic made the Philippine government's incompetence and complacency in the face of medical disasters only too obvious. In contrast with Hong Kong and Taiwan, the government was slow to implement a travel ban on mainland China. Despite the possibility of the virus originating in the East Asian country and the confirmed international spread of the virus, Duterte refused to ban Chinese nationals from entering the

3. Melissa Luz Lopez, 'TIMELINE: The COVID-19 Response Money Trail', *CNN Philippines*, 8 April 2020.

Philippines, even rebuking the public for being xenophobic.[4] Duterte has many times publicly professed his admiration for China's Xi Jinping, unlike his predecessor Aquino. Department of Health (DOH) Secretary Francisco Duque III also insisted on the unnecessary travel ban, for fear of offending China.[5] But a day later, when the Philippines recorded its first case of COVID-19, Duque backtracked and recommended travel restrictions from mainland China.[6] Duterte, who was initially reluctant, announced on 31 January 2020 a travel ban on Chinese nationals travelling from Hubei province and other areas of China affected by the virus.

In the following month, Duterte was still convinced that «Everything is well in the country. There is nothing to be extra scared of that corona-virus thing […] It will just die a natural death».[7] This response, according to the anthropologist Gideon Lasco, is typical of medical populists who simplify the pandemic by «downplaying the severity of the outbreak, promising quick fixes, or making simplistic arguments».[8] But Duterte soon changed his tone after the DOH confirmed a dramatic increase in the country's cases. On 8 March 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a state of public health emergency throughout the Philippines.[9] This was quickly followed by Metro Manila, and later on, the entire island of Luzon being put into an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) that lasted from March to the end of May. Shortly after, a curfew was imposed, the police and military were deployed to man checkpoints, and quarantine passes from *barangays*, the lowest tier of local government, were required for essential travel. Even when confronted with a public health issue, Duterte opted for a militaristic solution, which, according to political scientist Carmel Abao, is «what Duterte knows best».[10]

The virus also exposed, if not confirmed, the neglected state of the healthcare system of the country. Longstanding problems of inadequate medical resources and a shortage of healthcare professionals resurfaced. The Philippines struggled to conduct mass testing despite the World Health Organization (WHO) Director General stressing its importance in battling

4. Vince Ferreras, 'Duterte: Stop Being Xenophobic towards Chinese Nationals', C*NN Philippines*, 3 February 2020.

5. Janine Peralta, 'Duterte Not Keen on Banning Travel to China amid Coronavirus Scare', *CNN Philippines*, 29 January 2020.

6. Michelle Abad, 'TIMELINE: The Novel Coronavirus Pandemic', *Rappler,* 3 February 2020.

7. Ronron Calunsod, 'Duterte Allays Fears over 2019-NCoV Outbreak', *ABS-CBN News*, 3 February 2020.

8. Gideon Lasco, 'Medical Populism and the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Global Public Health*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2020, p. 1418.

9. Dessy Bautista & Melissa Luz Lopez, 'TIMELINE: How the Philippines Is Handling COVID-19', *CNN Philippines*, 21 April 2020.

10. Pia Ranada, 'In 2018, Duterte Turns to Military for (Almost) Everything', *Rappler,* 12 December 2018.

the virus. Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire, the spokesperson of DOH, even told the public that mass testing was not cost-effective because of the country's lack of test kits and testing capacity.[11] During the height of the first wave of the pandemic, it was only the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) that had the laboratory testing capacity for detecting COVID-19. The government, embarrassingly, had to rely on the private sector to increase the testing capacity of the country.[12] But more agonizing was the number of medical professionals dying because of the severe scarcity of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and face masks. Those who remained on duty were overworked and had to use improvised PPE to attend to COVID-19 patients. To add insult to injury, the DOH issued a call for volunteer doctors and health workers offering only PHP (Philippine peso) 500 (the equivalent of € 10) as hazard pay. This caused outrage from both health associations and workers who viewed the PHP 500 hazard pay as an insult to their profession.

The state health insurer, Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth), was also not immune from corruption allegations and activities. The corruption-infested agency was once again put under the spotlight by the resignation of its Anti-Fraud Legal Officer Thorsson Keith and some of its officials. A series of Senate probes discovered the illegal release of interim reimbursement funds (IRM), a form of cash advance for hospitals to continue serving patients in times of disaster, to favoured healthcare institutes and the bloating of the agency's information technology (IT) budget for 2020.[13] This resulted in the resignation of PhilHealth President Ricardo Morales, just one year after being appointed by Duterte to the agency, and the suspension of eight incriminated executives.[14] To «clean-up» the corruption mess in PhilHealth, Duterte tapped his trusted fraternity brother and former National Bureau Director (NBI) Dante Gierran.[15] But Gierran, who is a certified public accountant and lawyer by profession, admitted that he knew nothing of the workings of the agency but vowed to end corruption in PhilHealth before Duterte's term ends.[16] Not wasting any time, Gierran's first order of business was to issue a memorandum instructing executives who earned PHP 109,593 per month (€ 1800) or with a Salary Grade of 26

11. Mara Cepeda, 'DOH: Testing of Those without Symptoms «not Cost-Effective» for Now', *Rappler*, 20 May 2020.

12. Sofia Tomacruz, 'Government to Rely on Private Sector to Boost Coronavirus Testing Capacity', *Rappler*, 18 May 2020.

13. JC Gotinga & Mara Cepeda, 'CHEAT SHEET: Alleged PhilHealth Anomalies Uncovered in Congress Probes', *Rappler*, 30 August 2020.

14. Nikka G. Valenzuela, 'Ombudsman Suspends 8 PhilHealth Officials', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 29 October 2020.

15. Ruth-Abbey Gita-Carlos, 'Gierran Is «Best Choice» to Make PhilHealth Corrupt-Free: Palace', *Philippine News Agency*, 1 September 2020.

16. Bonz Magsambol, '«I Don't Know about Public Health» Admits Incoming PhilHealth Chief', *Rappler*, 1 September 2020.

and above to resign, which resulted in the resignation and early retirement of 43 PhilHealth officials in October 2020.[17]

3. *The COVID-19 pandemic plunges the economy into a nosedive*

The COVID-19 pandemic had already caused the economy to contract by 0.7% in the first quarter of 2020. But the Philippines saw its sharpest decline in GDP in the 2nd quarter with a staggering 16.5% decrease, driven by falls in manufacturing, construction, and transportation and storage.[18] While there has been an easing of the GDP decrease, which went down to 11.5% in the 3rd quarter, the government had expected that the economy would contract by 8.5% to 9.5% for 2020.[19] The Philippines is expected to perform worse than its Southeast Asian neighbours in relation to the economy.[20] Whether the economy will be able to recover in 2021, especially because of problems in the acquisition of vaccines for the population and the possible rise of COVID-19 cases because of the holidays, remains to be seen.

Consequently, the economic downturn was felt by the population in terms of unemployment and underemployment. Unemployment rose to 17.6% in April 2020 but tapered off to 10% and 8.7% in July and October 2020 respectively.[21] The same can be said for underemployment which rose as high as 18.9% in April 2020, decreasing to 17.3% and 14.4% in July and October.[22] The immensity of the impact of COVID-19 is made visible by comparing the October 2020 unemployment rate (8.7%) and underemployment rate (14.4%) to those prevailing in October 2019 (4.6% and 12.8% respectively).[23] COVID-19 also hit Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). According to a press release by the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE), up to 600,000 OFWs communicated with the department to request aid.[24]

17. Mayen Jaymalin, '43 PhilHealth Officials Resign', *Philippine Star*, 9 October 2020.

18. Ralf Rivas, 'Virus Pushes Philippines into Recession with worst GDP Plunge on Record', *Rappler*, 6 August 2020.

19. Ralf Rivas, 'Slow Recovery: Philippine Economy Slumps 11.5% in Q3 of 2020', *Rappler*, 10 November 2020; Ditas B. Lopez & Andero Calonzo, 'Philippines Lowers 2020 Growth Forecast, Sees Improvement Ahead, *Bloomberg*, 3 December 2020.

20. Beatrice M. Laforga, 'Philippines to be SE Asia's worst performer this year', *Business World Online*, 11 December 2020.

21. Philippine Statistics Authority, 'Employment Situation in October 2020', *Philippines Statistics Authority*, 3 December 2020.

22. *Ibid*.

23. *Ibid*.

24. Department of Labor and Employment, 'Displaced OFWs soar past 600k', 16 August 2016.

By December, the number of repatriated OFWs exceeded 300,000.[25] This represents considerable loss to the Philippine economy, given the billions of pesos contributed by these workers through their remittances. It is not surprising that a record number of 7.6 million families (or 30.7% of the total) suffered hunger in September 2020; a proportion that has since tapered off to 16% in November.[26] In November 2020, Filipino families who considered themselves poor represented 48% of the total, those who considered themselves borderline poor, 36%, and those who did not consider themselves poor, only 16%.[27] Compared to December 2019, the previous time the survey was taken, the number of poor declined from 54% but the borderline poor grew from 23% and those who considered themselves not poor shrank from 23%.[28] The Social Weather Stations (SWS) November 2020 survey also reports that 62% of adult Filipinos assessed that they are «worse off in the past 12 months».[29]

Much of the debate about keeping the community quarantined has been made in relation to the necessity of opening the economy and the need to ensure that the population remains healthy. The ECQ declared in March that the island of Luzon close down many establishments, prompting work-from-home arrangements for both public and private workers; public transportation was suspended, and people forbidden from leaving their homes except to buy basic necessities, which would naturally have an impact on economic performance.[30] During this period, billions of pesos in government support for marginalized groups were promised..[31] The implementation of the promised financial support was not without problems with some local government units failing to distribute aid expediently.[32] Moreover, in his usual crass tones, Duterte called on the Secretary of Finance to «steal» or «borrow» to finance support for poor families, even to consider selling off famous government properties such as the Cultural Centre of

25. Cristina, Eloisa Baclig, 'Over 300,000 OFWs repatriated since start of the COVID-19 Pandemic', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, December 2020.

26. 'Fourth Quarter 2020 Social Weather Survey: Hunger eases to 16.0% of families in November', *Social Weather Stations*, 16 December 2020.

27. 'Fourth Quarter 2020 Social Weather Survey: Only 16% of Filipino families say they are Not Poor; 48% feel Poor, 36% feel Borderline Poor', *Social Weather Stations*, 14 December 2020.

28. *Ibid*.

29. 'Fourth Quarter 2020 Social Weather Survey: 62% of adult Filipinos got worse off in the past 12 months', *Social Weather Stations*, 21 December 2020.

30. Xave Gregorio & CNN Philippines, 'Movement of people on Luzon restricted as island placed under «enhanced» community quarantine', *CNN Philippines*, 16 March 2020.

31. Melissa Luz Lopez, 'Gov't readies ₱600-B for COVID-19 response, but more than half funded with loans', *CNN Philippines*, 7 April 2020.

32. Glee Jalea, '369 LGUs fail to meet cash aid distribution deadline', *CNN Philippines*, 11 May 2020.

the Philippines.[33] On 1 May 2020, the government eased earlier restrictions to allow for the continuation of economic activities, depending on the quarantine classifications imposed on various administrative divisions.[34] By August, however, the gradual reopening of the economy in certain areas, such as Metro Manila, was abruptly reversed for two weeks following calls from medical professionals for the government to more effectively contain the coronavirus. They pointed out that the increased number of cases in the country were already too many for the medical establishment to handle.[35] The new quarantine, however, could not be extended because the government claimed that its coffers were already exhausted.[36]

However, how the government handles the pandemic is a key determinant of whether the economy could be gradually opened without sacrificing the health of the population. Commentators have noted that the economy can only be safely opened if government has been successful in curbing infections. For example, Jan Carlo Punongbayan, an economic analyst, has noted the achievements of Vietnam in curbing virus transmission which allowed a cautious return to «normalcy»; while the sociologist and former Senate candidate, Walden Bello, criticized Duterte's penchant to threaten violence against the population rather than deal with the reasons for the spread of the contagion.[37]

4. *Creeping illiberalism under Duterte*

4.1. *ABS-CBN shutdown*

Duterte, emboldened by a rubberstamp Congress, seized the opportunity deriving from the pandemic to further pursue his authoritarian agenda of silencing his administration's critics. With the Philippine Daily Inquirer sold to notorious Duterte ally Ramon Ang, and Maria Ressa of Rappler convicted for cyber libel, Duterte now «turned his ire» on the largest broadcast

33. Xave Gregorio, 'Duterte worries over funding needs for COVID-19 cash aid program', *CNN Philippines*, 7 April 2020; CNN Philippines Staff, 'Duterte eyes selling govt. properties if funds vs. COVID-19 not enough', *CNN Philippines*, 9 April 2020.

34. CNN Philippines Staff, 'LIST: Businesses allowed to reopen by May 1', *CNN Philippines*, 28, April 2020.

35. CNN Philippines Staff, 'Metro Manila, 4 provinces to be placed under MECQ upon frontliners' call for tighter restrictions', *CNN Philippines*, 2 August 2020.

36. CNN Philippines Staff, 'Extended MECQ «highly unlikely'» with no new sources of cash aid funds – Roque', *CNN Philippines*, 11 August 2020.

37. JC Punongbayan, '[ANALYSIS] Had Duterte acted earlier, PH economy would be safe to open by now', *Rappler*, 17 July 2020; Walden Bello, '[OPINION] Why the Duterte regime will be COVID-19's main victim', *Rappler*, 25 July 2020

network, ABS-CBN.[38] He accused the ABS-CBN of «swindling» him by not airing his political ads for the 2016 presidential elections, and threatened the network many times with the non-renewal of its broadcast franchise. On 10 February 2020, Solicitor General Jose Calida, under the pretence of fulfilling his duty, filed a quo warranto against the network, asking the Supreme Court to invalidate its broadcasting licence.[39] A series of Congressional hearings on the alleged franchise and labour violations of the network ensued which culminated in the House of Representatives Committee on Legislative Franchise denying the renewal of the media giant's franchise. On 5 May 2020, ABS-CBN broadcast went officially off the air.

While the shutdown of ABS-CBN may seem to stem from Duterte's personal vendetta against large corporations, some analysts see it as an insidious machination by the President to pave the way for his cronies to take over the network.[40] Rumours of Udenna Corporation CEO Dennis Uy, another notorious Duterte supporter, buying ABS-CBN's former broadcast frequencies began circulating in July 2020. But the Davao-based business tycoon later denied these speculations, claiming no interest in broadcasting.[41]

4.2. *Passage of Anti-terror Law*

While the public was still recovering from the ABS-CBN controversy in May, the following month Duterte, surprisingly, certified the controversial Anti-Terror Bill as urgent. The new bill sparked public outrage due to its vague definition of «terrorism». It was also decried as a demonstration of the government's insensitivity to the more urgent and real threats posed by the economic recession and COVID-19. Despite this, Duterte's supermajority in Congress expedited the passage of the bill which soon became law in July. The effects of this repressive law were immediately felt through the arrests of activists, Amanda Echanis and Lady Ann Salem, over «illegal possession of firearms and explosives».[42]

38. Sol Iglesias & Lala Ordenes, 'The Philippines 2018-2019: Authoritarian Consolidation Under Duterte', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, p. 222.

39. Gaea Katreena Cabico, '«Calida's Just Doing His Job»: Palace Denies Hand in Quo Warranto Bid vs ABS-CBN', *Philippine Star*, 10 February 2020. A quo warranto is a writ or legal action requiring a person to show by what warrant an office or franchise is held, claimed, or exercised.

40. JC Punongbayan, '[ANALYSIS] Why Duterte's Attack on ABS-CBN Reeks of Double Standards, Desperation', *Rappler,* 13 February 2020.

41. ABS-CBN News, 'Dennis Uy's Udenna Says ABS-CBN Frequency Acquisition Rumors «Completely False», *ABS-CBN News*, 15 July 2020.

42. Russell Ku, 'After Her «Illegal» Arrest, Groups Call for Amanda Echanis' Immediate Release', *Rappler*, 3 December 2020; Rambo Talabong, 'PNP Arrests Editor of Red-Tagged Outlet in Mandaluyong Home', *Rappler*, 10 December 2020.

5. *Petty rivalries and factions within Duterte's alliance*

The country came very close to a budgetary crisis reminiscent of the 2019 budget fiasco over the cash-based system, and the alleged unconstitutional insertions by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM).[43] In 2018, members of Congress had to sign a resolution to withdraw their support for House Bill 7032 that institutionalises a cash-based budgeting system in the 2019 national budget.[44] The proposed system, endorsed by Budget Secretary Benjamin Diokno, supposedly promotes fiscal discipline as it forces government agencies to «limit contractual obligations and disbursing payments to goods delivered and services rendered within the fiscal year».[45] The vacillation of the Congress, particularly the House of Representatives, over the cash-based budgeting system delayed the passage of the 2019 national budget, resulting in a re-enacted budget for the government.

The petty squabble between two of Duterte's allies for the position of Speaker of the House of Representatives risked the much-needed 2021 national budget. Representative Alan Peter Cayetano (Taguig-Pateros), who was Duterte's running mate in the 2016 general elections, refused to step down as Speaker of the House, reneging on his promise to Duterte that he would give way to Representative Lord Allan Velasco (Marinduque) after 15 months. To repair the growing division within his fragile coalition and to find a way out of the impasse, Duterte met both Cayetano and Velasco in person. Despite this, Cayetano, once again, reneged on his word. To prove that he still held sway over the lower house, Cayetano initiated a political démarche designed to obtain a form of «vote of confidence». He offered his resignation, knowing that it would be rejected by the members of the House.[46] In a desperate attempt to hold on to his position, Cayetano suspended the plenary debates on the 2021 national budget. Because the budget was once again in peril, Duterte called for a special session from 13 to 16 October 2020. On the day before its opening, Velasco's supporters gathered in Celebrity Sports Plaza, near the Batasang Pambansa Complex, to officially elect Velasco as Speaker of the House. Defeated, Cayetano offered his «irrevocable resignation» through Facebook Live; on the same day Velasco was ratified as speaker.

43. Xave Gregorio, 'From Alan to Allan: A Recap of the House Speakership Squabble', *Philippine Star*, 13 October 2020; Camille Elemia, 'Congress Adjourns, Fails to Pass 2019 Budget on Time', *Rappler*, 12 December 2018.

44. Mara Cepeda, 2018. 'Lawmakers cross party-lines to oppose cash-based budget in 2019', *Rappler,* 9 August 2018.

45. Aika Rey, 'What is cash-based budgeting?', *Rappler*, 13 August 2018.

46. Segundo Eclar Romero, 'Using «Democracy» to Defy Duterte', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2 October 2020.

6. *Struggles in education in a pandemic*

The novel coronavirus has forced the education system to move away from face-to-face classes towards «online and blended learning», with the government promising that no face-to-face classes will be held until vaccines are available.[47] Online and blended learning include the use of online platforms but also radio, television and printed materials delivered to students' homes in recognition of the Philippines' limited internet infrastructure.[48] The Department of Education (DepEd), for example, has launched DepEd Commons, «which can be accessed free of data charges», while the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), which regulates tertiary level institutions, is launching a similar platform, called PHL Connect.[49]

However, the plan was immediately challenged., DepEd, for one, had to move the opening of classes from the initial 24 August to 5 October because of «logistical limitations» brought about by the imposition of stricter lockdowns in Metro Manila and adjacent provinces.[50] On 12 August, barely two weeks before the original resumption of classes, DepEd Undersecretary Nepomuceno Malaluan stated that 61% of school division offices (excluding the Bangsamoro) had not even finished printing half of the modules required.[51] Public schools in other areas were allowed to continue with their preparations while private schools were allowed to proceed with their classes if they had already begun.[52]

However, not everyone agreed with the move of DepEd to continue education despite the pandemic. In an opinion piece in CNN Philippines, college students Sape, Aquino, and Olivar argued for the merits of an academic freeze, calling on the educational establishment to simply suspend classes until the vaccine became available.[53] Only when the contagion has stopped spreading and a vaccine is available will classes resume.[54] Youth group Samahan ng Progresibong Kabataan (Organization of Progressive

47. CNN Philippines Staff, 'DepEd heeds Duterte's call: No face-to-face classes until COVID-19 vaccine is available', *CNN Philippines*, 8 June 2020.

48. Anna Rosario Malindog-Uy, '«Blended Learning» in Virus-Hit Philippines', *The ASEAN Post*, 7 June 2020.

49. AC Nicholls, 'Education in time of a pandemic: What students and teachers are in for this coming school year', *CNN Philippines*, 11 June 2020.

50. Eimor Santos, 'DepEd moves opening of classes to October 5', *CNN Philippines*, 14 August 2020.

51. CNN Philippines Staff, 'DepEd official: Close to 4 million learners did not enroll for next school year due to COVID-19 crisis', *CNN Philippines*, 12 August 2020.

52. Eimor Santos, 'DepEd moves opening of classes to October 5', *CNN Philippines*, 14 August 2020.

53. Ervine Jules Sape, Bianca Mae Aquino & Andrea Isahbel Olivar, 'OPINION: An «academic freeze» is the best option for Filipino students for now', *CNN Philippines*, 1 July 2020.

54. *Ibid*.

Youth) asked the DepEd and CHED to implement an academic freeze until the implementation of COVID-19 mass testing.[55] However, such proposals were dismissed by the DepEd as «short-sighted».[56]

Nevertheless, the challenges in continuing to implement education programmes amidst the pandemic are not insignificant. Enrolment dropped from 27.7 million in 2019 to just 23 million in 2020.[57] A huge portion of those who did not enrol had previously studied in private educational institutions.[58] While this needs further validation, it suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant effects on the capacity of families to send their children to school. Also, those who chose to continue sending their children to school faced additional costs of maintaining an internet connection.[59] One student has even gone viral after literally needing to climb a mountain to get the necessary internet connection to send in her requirements.[60] This does not even consider parents who can neither read nor write and are expected to assist their children with the learning modules.[61]

Aside from families, the teaching workforce also bore the brunt in the pandemic preparation. Printed materials had to be delivered to each of the students' homes and teachers were also expected to develop materials that could be studied by students independently, without necessarily diluting the material.[62] The delivery of materials and even home visitations for struggling students, nonetheless, could mean exposure to the virus.[63]

Unfortunately, the materials used to educate Filipino youth are themselves replete with errors. Less than two weeks before the date originally set for the opening of classes, DepEd tested its capacity to broadcast lessons. Netizens were quick to point out a glaring error in one of the grammar lessons.[64] Moreover, a total of 41 errors were found in self-learning modules distributed by DepEd across the country.[65]

55. Katrina Hallare, 'DepEd, CHED asked to «initiate academic freeze» until virus mass testing is conducted', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2 July 2020.

56. CNN Philippines Staff, 'DepEd dismisses calls for «academic freeze» as «shortsighted» solution', *CNN Philippines*, 9 September 2020.

57. CNN Philippines Staff, 'DepEd official: Close to 4 million learners did not enroll for next school year due to COVID-19 crisis', *CNN Philippines*, 12 August 2020.

58. *Ibid*.

59. 'Education in time of a pandemic'

60. Bonz Magsambol, 'During pandemic, student climbs a mountain to send class requirement', *Rappler*, 29 April 2020.

61. Bonz Magsambol, 'No student left behind? During pandemic, education «only for those who can afford»', *Rappler*, 22 May 2020.

62. 'Education in time of a pandemic'

63. Bonz Magsambol, 'Is it safe? Teachers fear exposure to coronavirus in modular learning setup', *Rappler*, 18 August 2020.

64. Bonz Magsambol, 'After glaring, 'painful' grammar errors, DepEd vows to improve TV episodes for distance learning', *Rappler*, 13 August 2020.

65. AC Nicholls, '41 errors in self-learning modules monitored by DepEd', *Rappler*, 23 October 2020.

7. *Natural disasters exacerbated the pandemic*

The novel coronavirus, however, was not the sole disaster to strike the country in 2020. The Taal Volcano began releasing ash on 12 January.[66] By evening, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHIVOLCS) raised the alert level to four, indicating the strong possibility that the volcano would erupt.[67] The ash expelled was felt not only in Batangas, where the volcano is found, but in the surrounding provinces such as Laguna, Cavite, Rizal, and even in Metro Manila, the capital.[68] The ensuing mayhem saw more than 160,000 evacuees from local government units surrounding the volcano.[69] The neighbouring province of Cavite also declared a state of calamity to use the emergency funds for disasters for Batangas evacuees.[70]

Aside from volcanic eruptions, two strong typhoons also battered the Philippines in 2020: Rolly (Goni) and Ulysses (Vamco). Rolly adversely impacted more than 230,000 families, killed at least 20 people, and cost PHP 2.9 billion damage to agriculture.[71] Ulysses, on the other hand, killed 67 and ruined PHP 1.19 billion in agriculture and almost half a million pesos in infrastructure.[72] These typhoons followed one another just days apart: Rolly made landfall on 1 November and Ulysses ten days later, on 11 November.[73]

These catastrophes underscore the difficulties that the Philippines experienced while dealing with COVID-19. Alongside the task of curbing the virus was the need to rescue and rehabilitate those adversely affected. It adds a burden to the already stretched government apparatus reeling from economic loss and the negative effects of the pandemic.

These calamities also show Duterte's political style. Professors Nicole Curato and Jonathan Corpus Ong made the point, in a joint article published in 2018, that Duterte has distinguished himself from other candidates by signalling «authenticity» as opposed to the contrived appearances

66. 'TIMELINE: Taal Volcano's January 2020 eruption', *Rappler*, 16 January 2020.
67. *Ibid*.
68. *Ibid*.
69. Tina Ganzon-Ozaeta, 'Batangas gov't: More than 160,000 evacuees as Taal Volcano still rumbles', *Rappler*, 18 January 2020.
70. 'Cavite declares state of calamity due to Taal Volcano eruption', *Rappler*, 15 January 2020.
71. Anna Malindog-Uy, 'Super Typhoon Rolly: Where Is The President?', *The ASEAN Post*, 8 November 2020.
72. Daphne Galvez, 'Typhoon Ulysses death toll hits 67 – NDRRMC', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 15 November 2020.
73. Acor Arceo, 'Rolly intensifies into super typhoon, makes landfall in Catanduanes', *Rappler*, 1 November 2020; Acor Arceo, 'Typhoon Ulysses makes landfall twice in Quezon', *Rappler*, 11 November 2020.

of other candidates.[74] Responding to questions about his physical well-being and if he intended to visit Taal volcano evacuees, the President said «I'll eat that ashfall, even Taal, I'll pee on it, goddamn it».[75] Even more revealing are his reactions against those critical of his behaviour in relation to the two typhoons. On social media, the hashtag #NasaanAngPangulo (#WhereIsThePresident) trended. Duterte, however, lashed out against critics who questioned his absence during Typhoon Rolly.[76] Concerning Ulysses, he attacked Vice President Leni Robredo, whom he blamed for the criticism against government action in coping with it.[77]

8. *Independent or incoherent? Fumbling on the world stage*

8.1. *Duterte's inconsistent foreign policy*

Contrary to his campaign promise of defending the country's claims over the disputed islands in the West Philippine Sea, Duterte, in his fifth State of the Nation Address (SONA), once again expressed his subservience to China. Calling himself «inutile», he claimed that there was nothing to be done about the dispute because «China has the arms».[78] The President reiterated that reclaiming the islands could lead to a war with China, one that he could not afford because, in his words, «[the Philippines] does not have the arms».[79] But in the succeeding month, Duterte backtracked on his statement in his first-ever address to the United Nations General Assembly. In his four years as president, Duterte, for the first time, upheld the 2016 arbitral ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 which stated unequivocally that the Philippines have sole «exclusive rights to resources within 370.40 km of its coast».[80] While this reversal of attitude to the ruling by Duterte was welcomed even by his critics such as former foreign secretary

74. Nicole Curato & Jonathan Corpus Ong, 'Who Laughs at a Rape Joke? Illiberal Responsiveness in Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines', in Tanja Dreher & Anshuman Mondal (eds.), *Ethical Responsiveness and the Politics of Difference*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 120.

75. Janella Paris, 'Fit enough to visit affected areas? Duterte says he'll «eat ashfall, pee on Taal Volcano»', *Rappler*, 14 January 2020.

76. Jamaine Punzalan, 'Duterte tells #NasaanAngPangulo critics: «What's your problem?»', *ABS-CBN News*, 2 November 2020.

77. Darryl John Esguerra, '«Do not compete with me»: Duterte slams Robredo over typhoon response issues', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*. 18 November 2020.

78. Jamaine Punzalan, 'Duterte says he is «inutile, cannot do anything» against China sea aggression', ABS-CBN News, 27 July 2020.

79. Sofia Tomacruz, 'Duterte repeats threat of war with China, refuses to assert West PH Sea rights', *Rappler*, 27 July 2020.

80. Sebastian Strangio, 'In UN Speech, Duterte Stiffens Philippines' Stance on the South China Sea', *The Diplomat*, 23 September 2020.

Albert del Rosario, human rights groups were not convinced by his posturing and condemned the President's taking advantage of his UNGA address to defend his war on drugs.[81]

This was not the first time Duterte had rebuked the UN and the International Criminal Court for criticizing his war on drugs. In 2016, he attacked the multilateral institution, calling it «useless» for failing to combat terrorism and end the wars in Iraq and Syria.[82] He even threatened pulling the Philippines out of the UN since, in his words, «it has done nothing except to criticize».[83] In 2018, he threatened Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda with arrest if her court decided to conduct its activities in the Philippines.[84] However, this did not deter the ICC Prosecutor in releasing a preliminary report that found sufficient evidence of crimes against humanity under Duterte's administration in December 2020. Duterte, with brazen confidence, dismissed the report claiming that the ICC has no jurisdiction over the Philippines. The country ceased to be a signatory to the Rome Treaty in 2019 after the court conducted a preliminary examination of Duterte's crackdown on drugs in 2018.[85]

8.2. *The Visiting Forces Agreement as a bargaining chip*

The year 2020 also saw the continued strain in Philippine foreign relations brought about by Duterte's war on drugs and attempts by the international community to hold the administration accountable because of its human rights violations. This strained relationship is particularly visible with its former colonizer, the United States.

On 23 January 2020, the President announced that he is moving to cancel the Visiting Forces Agreement which governs military activities between the United States and the Philippines relating to entry of military personnel and equipment into the country.[86] This forms part of the security infrastructure maintained by the United States and the Philippines such as the Mutual Defense Treaty and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement suggesting the wide-scale implications of the abrogation, not only to rela-

81. 'Duterte invokes court ruling against China in UN address', *Aljazeera*, 23 September 2020.

82. BBC News, 'Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte threatens to leave UN', *BBC News*, 21 August 2016.

83. *Ibid*.

84. Reuters Staff, '«I will arrest you»: Duterte warns ICC lawyer to steer clear of Philippines, *Reuters*, 13 April 2018.

85. 'Philippines officially out of the International Criminal Court', *Aljazeera*, 17 March 2019.

86. Xave Gregorio, 'Duterte threatens to terminate VFA if US does not reverse cancellation of Dela Rosa's visa', *CNN Philippines*, 23 January 2020; Xave Gregorio, 'Explainer: The Visiting Forces Agreement', *CNN Philippines*, 28 January 2020.

tions between the two countries but also to Philippine security.[87] No other than the Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary, Teodoro Locsin Jr., has credited American forces for aiding Philippine forces in the battle for the City of Marawi that was attacked by Islamic extremists in 2017;[88] that is in addition to up to Php «10 billion in aid».[89]

The significance of the deal to national security implies that decisions to abrogate the treaty cannot be taken lightly. Yet, the decision to scrap it is widely seen as a retaliation by the administration for the US' cancellation of Ronald «Bato» dela Rosa's visa - an overreaction. Bato dela Rosa is now senator but was formerly the chief of the Philippine National Police that implemented the bloody war on drugs that saw thousands dead. The President himself confirmed this when he said:

> Now they won't let Bato (dela Rosa) go to America. I am warning you... if you don't do the correction there. One, I will terminate the bases, Visiting Forces Agreement. I will end that son of a bitch.[90]

Aside from the visa cancellation, the presidential palace also cited interference from the United States as a reason for the move to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement. In 2019, members of the United States senate called for the release of Sen. Leila de Lima and placed sanctions on Philippine officials involved in her arrest.[91]

Despite a senate resolution passed to express the need to rethink the decision to scrap the agreement, Duterte formally abrogates the treaty through the Department of Foreign Affairs notice of termination sent to the US Embassy on February 2020.[92] The treaty will be finally considered terminated after 180 days.[93] However, the Philippines will take this back in June in consideration of «political and other developments in the region».[94] This was not the first time that Duterte threatened and failed to cancel the visiting forces agreement, having done so in 2016 after the cancellation of

87. Eimor Santos 'Philippines formally ends Visiting Forces Agreement with US', *CNN Philippines*, 11 February 2020.

88. Jim Gomez, 'Philippine Official Defends US Pact After Duterte Threat', *The Diplomat*, 6 February, 2020.

89. Eimor Santos, 'Locsin: PH could lose up to P10 billion in aid if VFA ends', *CNN Philippines*, 6 February 2020.

90. Julie Aurelio, 'No Bato visa, no VFA - Duterte', *Inquirer.net*, 24 January 2020.

91. 'Philippine formally ends Visiting Forces Agreement with US'

92. JC Gotinga, 'Senate urges Duterte to reconsider plan to scrap VFA', *Rappler.com*, 10 February 2020; Eimor Santos, 'Philippine formally ends Visiting Forces Agreement with US', *CNN Philippines*, 11 February 2020.

93. 'Philippine formally ends Visiting Forces Agreement with US'

94. Sofia Tomacruz, 'TIMELINE: Duterte's threats to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement', *Rappler.com*, 11 February 2020.

an aid program to the Philippines.[95] By December, Duterte is back with his threats, this time basing the renewal of the agreement on the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines to the country.[96]

9. *Conclusion*

In this essay, we have reviewed events and processes in the Philippines that characterized the year 2020. We have discussed how the health system was overwhelmed because of incomplete or late directives from the national government on how to curb the transmission of the virus. We have also argued that the implemented community quarantines, though necessary, devastated the economy, exposed many Filipinos to hunger and generated lower expectations of improvement for the economy. We have shown how the government made use of the contagion to enact draconian laws aimed at silencing media critics. We have also looked at problems in maintaining social services such as education in a pandemic. Finally, we have discussed other natural disasters that exacerbated COVID-19's impact as well as Duterte's inconsistent and incoherent foreign policy.

The coronavirus pandemic has bolstered the necessity of a responsive and competent government in the event of a crisis. Duterte's macho populism cannot cope properly with the task of managing the impact of COVID-19 on the country[97]. The result has been a tanked economy, a collapsing health system, and failure in the provision of social services. In 2020, the cost of populist blustering was almost half a million confirmed COVID-19 cases, which resulted in 9,405 deaths.[98] Competent and responsive leaders may prove to be key in ushering institutional reforms necessary to make government apparatus more capable of dealing with emerging new challenges especially in a disaster-stricken country such as the Philippines.

The year 2020 also exposed the durability of political interest. While the pandemic was raging, Duterte continued to consolidate his pow-

95. Pia Ranada, 'Duterte wants VFA scrapped, but will «wait' for Trump», *Rappler.com*, 17 December 2016.

96. Lian Buan, 'Duterte dangles VFA for US-made vaccine: «No vaccine, get out»', *Rappler.com*, 26 December 2020.

97. Scholar Richard Heydarian was quoted describing Duterte's populism as «machismo populism» in Ana Santos, 'The Price of 'Machismo Populism' in the Philippines', *The Atlantic*, 7 June 2018; Also see Maria Tanyag, 'Duterte, hypermasculinity and the key to populism', Lens by Monash University, 7 March 2018. For another detailed discussion on Duterte's populism, see Wataru Kusaka, 'Bandit Grabbed the State: Duterte's Moral Politics', *Philippine Sociological Review*, Vol. 65, 2017; Also see Nicole Curato, 'Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 47, 2017

98. Department of Health, 'COVID-19 Tracker', Department of Health, 10 January 2021.

er, as our discussion on politics has shown. The squabble for speakership suggests preparations for the coming 2022 elections. Finally, the inconsistent foreign policy for 2020 continues to damage Philippine reputation on the world stage. To be a reliable partner internationally, the Philippines needs to project a sense of coherence in its foreign policy. This cannot be done under conditions where foreign policy decisions seem to be based on personal interest, if not vendetta.