An Evolutionary Institutionalist Explanation of the Philippines’ Militaristic COVID-19 Approach

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Abstract
The Philippines undertook a “militaristic” approach to COVID-19. This has been attributed, directly or indirectly, to the strong political will of their current president, Rodrigo Duterte. Going against this narrative, this work presents an alternative framing of the issue. Drawing on concepts from institutionalist theory, this work argues that such a militaristic policy should be viewed as a continuation of the long-standing presence of militaristic ideas in civilian affairs. The dominance of such ideas has been normalized, not recently via Duterte but decades ago, owing to the failure to have a genuine liberal democracy after the fall of the Marcos regime. Overall, this work presents a historical grounding, using a new evolutionary framework, as to why institutions or policies — in this case the militaristic COVID-19 approach — come to fruition.

Keywords Civil-military relations · Democratization · Evolutionary institutionalism · Military sociology

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic is a phenomenon never before seen in the post-World War II landscape. It has caused the world multiple losses — actual lives and economic ones. From economically developed states like the USA to emerging economies like Brazil and India, nearly all countries suffered devastatingly. However, there are also exceptions as countries like New Zealand, Taiwan, and Vietnam handled the crisis relatively well early in the pandemic. These differences in outcomes are a result of divergent policies imposed. As such, the divergence in itself is a puzzle. It becomes necessary to ask, for instance, why countries did not imitate the approaches which worked better. More specifically, it is perplexing why certain countries took very specific, and sometimes questionable, policy decisions. This study seeks to solve such a question in a specific context: that of the Philippines.

The Philippines’ response to the pandemic has been labeled “militaristic” and populist (Lasco and Larson, 2020). It has caught the attention of several organizations, notably the United Nations. This militaristic approach has been seen as the cause of the Philippines’ initial failed containment of COVID-19. While the approach of the government now can be argued to be less militaristic, the initial approach deserves attention as, clearly, other approaches could have been taken.

This paper’s goal is twofold: first, I elaborate on a relatively new modified social evolutionary framework to understand the origins of institutions — in this case operationalized as the “militaristic” COVID-19 approach. Second, using the framework, I provide a preliminary answer to the following question: what explains the “militaristic” approach undertaken by the Philippines to combat COVID-19? This paper is not the first one to talk about the Philippines’ militaristic approach. Scholarly works have also talked about it, mainly from the perspective of securitization theory (Baysa-Barredo, 2020; Hapal, 2021; Schaffar, 2021). Opinion editorials have also problematized such an issue to have massive implications (Chandran, 2020). However, as I establish later, these perspectives have limited explanatory power.

“Evolutionary Institutionalism and Path Dependence” presents the theoretical framework for the study. “The ‘Militaristic’ Philippine Response to COVID-19” elaborates on how the Philippine response to COVID-19 can be considered militaristic. “Analysis: Military Intrusion in Civil Society and Government” presents the discussion on how the
Evolutionary institutionalist theory explains the militaristic approach undertaken. “Exploring Alternative Explanations” presents current alternative explanations and how they can be subsumed in the purported explanation. The final two sections discuss the conclusions and recommendations.

**Evolutionary Institutionalism and Path Dependence**

To provide a more grounded explanation on the question I aim to answer, I explain in this section several concepts, namely: critical junctures, institutions, and path dependence.

The elementary definition of path dependence is simple: past actions can influence the present and future (North, 1991; Sewell, 1996). However, in reality, path dependence is more complex in that there are some events called “critical junctures” that decisively influence future actions. Specifically, critical junctures have been conceptualized as events where there occurs an “adoption of a particular institutional arrangement from among two or more alternatives” (Mahoney, 2000, p. 513). Simply put, at certain periods in a society’s development, an idea, law, or policy—an institution (Tang, 2010)—becomes prioritized over others. For example, a war may be treated as a critical juncture in a country’s history. It is because it can have a (1) decisive impact on the country’s development and, at that certain period, (2) an alternative institutional choice, like diplomacy, could have been chosen.

It should be noted that it is in itself a question why certain institutions get chosen in critical junctures. One basic explanation is that they are functional. An institutional arrangement is chosen because they are beneficial (see Keohane, 2005) to the overall workings of a society or a system. However, in some cases, it is power that is conceptualized as the factor that stabilizes institutional arrangements (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney and Thelen, 2009; Tang, 2010). Power-centric explanations highlight competition among several actors regarding the desired institutional arrangement. Thus, an institution comes to fruition because an actor or group of actors (ex. capitalists, politicians, military, etc.) have asserted it.

To be able to explain why the Philippines chose a militaristic COVID-19 response— an institution in itself—I borrow from a new framework called evolutionary institutionalism. Tang’s (2010) evolutionary institutionalist framework posits a five-phase mechanism that starts from identifying the ideas’ sources up to the actual institutionalization process. The mechanism can be seen below:

- The process of institutional change consists of five distinct phases: (1) generation of ideas for specific institutional arrangements; (2) political mobilization; (3) the struggle for power to design and dictate specific institutional arrangements (i.e., to set specific rules); (4) the setting of the rules; and (5) legitimization, stabilization, and reproduction. (Tang, 2011, p. 34)

To simplify the above, what Tang (2010) highlights is that the process of adopting an institutional arrangement, like the militaristic approach I am claiming, is a long process involving negotiations among different actors struggling to assert their ideas. These negotiations may be diplomatic or involve violence. At certain periods, the institution is retained because it is functional, while sometimes, it is maintained due to the backing of powerful actors. The advantage of this framework is that it views the process in a nuanced way. There seems to be a tendency for path-dependent explanations to be tautological (Tang, 2010). That is, a certain outcome is explained by path dependence but that cause of the path dependence is left unexplored. The evolutionary framework laid above solves it by presenting a dynamic process, where path dependence of institutions is seen as outcomes of struggles.

This study’s main goal is less about presenting new empirical evidence than showing that the mechanism chosen best explains the current institutional arrangement. At its core, I present a reframing of the understanding of how a certain institutional arrangement—the militaristic COVID-19 response—came to fruition. Nonetheless, I still draw on empirical claims in the literature which have analyzed the workings of Philippine military and democracy. This study treats the militaristic COVID-19 approach as an institution. It is argued that it arose from path dependence triggered mainly by two critical junctures: the start of the Marcos dictatorship and the failure of the EDSA People Power Revolution to transform the Philippines into a liberal democracy. It can be seen that this work is not the first one to claim that the Philippines undertook a militaristic or militarized response to COVID-19. However, the published works seemed to have had a limited understanding, and I explore such in the third to the last section. My proposed explanation provides a multifaceted explanation in a sense that it covers both the explanation for the institutional arrangement and also why there has not been resistance. The latter, of course, is relevant as it can be recalled that ideas need public acceptance for them to become an institutional arrangement. The next part presents why the Philippines’ approach can be considered militaristic. There, I draw on recent policies and pronouncements made by top officials leading the response.

The “Militaristic” Philippine Response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has indirectly illustrated the significance of long-term investment in healthcare and research. It has been argued that trust in specialists would revitalize as the failed
policies initiated by those non-specialists finally unfold (Bieber, 2020). As such, this does not seem to be the case in the Philippines. In rhetoric, the current administration has been arguing that they are following scientific evidence. However, as stated, several people have contested this, deeming the administrations’ policies as unscientific due to their militaristic nature (Esmaquel, 2020). To answer the question in this article, it becomes necessary to elaborate on the characteristics of the claimed militaristic approach. Several factors can be pointed out to justify the said classification. What I examine are the people in charge of the pandemic response, the different policies implemented, and also the rhetoric of officials. On the first issue, the primary manifestation can be seen with the agency heading the pandemic response. The chair of the National Task Force against COVID-19 is Delfin Lorenzana, the current secretary of the Philippines’ Department of National Defense. The chief implementor of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases of the Philippines, the agency mainly in charge of policymaking related to the COVID-19 pandemic, is Carlito Galvez, a retired general and former peace process officer. The direction of the policies, whether official or unofficial, has also been very questionable. For one, the lockdown started with the government deploying massive military and police forces in different parts of the country, a move that has been called “martial law” like by observers (Robles, 2020). There have also been several cases where protestors have been detained for seemingly questionable violations, with the Philippines’ Commission of Human Rights receiving hundreds of cases concerning arbitrary detentions and the like (see CNN, 2020). These include drivers of public utility vehicles who were asking for food and students in the Philippines’ national university who were rallying against a controversial anti-terrorism law that was passed (see ABS-CBN News, 2020; Mayol and Semilla, 2020). Symbolically, the government and mainly the president, Rodrigo Duterte, have also portrayed the COVID-19 crisis as a problem that needs strong forces to be solved. A speech of Duterte delivered in March, for instance, has been labeled as a “spectacle” due to the presence of uniformed men behind him (Lasco and Larson, 2020). Another controversial speech involved Duterte threatening to proclaim martial law even though it will most probably be deemed unconstitutional as there is no ongoing rebellion or war.

In sum, these are the factors that make the Philippines’ initial response militaristic: first, the people assigned to be at the forefront of decision-making are mainly military men. Second, there have been several instances where fundamental freedoms, like the right to assembly, have been threatened. Finally, the whole administration has continuously been espousing, directly and indirectly, rhetoric that aims to treat the pandemic as a sort of war, thus “securitizing” it (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde, 1998) or treating it as a military emergency. To clarify, militaristic could be equated to militarization. Using militaristic is simply a personal preference of the author. Militarization, it has been argued, “draws attention to the simultaneously material and discursive nature of military dominance” (Lutz, 2007, p. 322). In the Philippines’ COVID-19 approach, there was literally heavy military presence on the ground and a lot of war-like metaphors on the speeches made by officials. Thus, one can see evident manifestations of the military’s authority both on the ground and also in the general discourse.

At the moment, the measures undertaken are less “militaristic.” While the heads of the task forces remain, it can be seen that some notable policy changes have happened. For one, there seems to be lesser deployment of military forces on the ground. Questionable policies like early curfews and other clearly unscientific ones like the imposition of motorcycle barriers are gone. Nonetheless, the puzzle remains unanswered. Why did the initial approach have to be militaristic? Hence, the next section presents pieces of evidence of military intrusion that paved the way for the ensuing power struggles and eventual institutionalization of a “militaristic approach.”

Analysis: Military Intrusion in Civil Society and Government

Scholars of civil-military relations have long been trying to solve the puzzle concerning balancing between civil society and the military (see Huntington, 1981). Hall (2004, p. 108) claims that “conventionally, it is assumed that civilian supremacy is best realized when the military is confined to a limited set of functions in line with its professional capacities.” In the Philippines, that does not seem to be the case. The intrusion of the military into affairs that are not covered by traditional military dates back to the time of late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Hernandez (1985, p. 908) establishes that during that time, “the military soon found itself not only keeping law and order, and maintaining internal security, but also managing military-related industries, public corporations and even diplomatic posts, and dispensing justice as well as political patronage.” This, in turn, converted them to an organization keen on being loyal to Marcos (Heiduk, 2011). The declaration of martial law covers phases one and two of the evolutionary institutionalist framework, as the policy literally puts the military at the forefront of civilian decision-making. It was during that time when a certain major idea — having military at the forefront of civilian affairs — was pushed by political actors. The act of mobilization was launched by Marcos himself and his allies. This also started the consolidation of power of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The Marcos dictatorship did not occur without pushback, however. Resistance in this period was mainly from the New People’s Army (NPA), a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist organization. In the early years of the dictatorship, the NPA could be said to be the most ideationally...
and materially powerful actors given that they were able to have, as their members, people coming from different ranks, from farmers to intellectuals. Thus, they had legitimacy from a lot of people, and they also had actual members. This presence and strengthening of the NPA mainly signifies phase three of the framework, where one can expect ideas purported by the Marcos dictatorship to be contested by countervailing forces — in this case the main challenge came from the NPA.

Marcos’ rule ended with the EDSA People Power Revolution. Several important facts need to be remembered. First, the NPA’s numbers started dwindling as the dictatorship ended alongside an internal organizational conflict which greatly affected their cohesion. Second, while the EDSA People Power Revolution restored the free press and elections, the powerful military officers have been unaffected for the most part. It should be recalled that Corazon Aquino is the one who replaced Marcos. However, this did not happen without the help of the coup launched by General Fidel Ramos (future successor of Aquino) and then Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile. The troubles, however, did not end with the Marcos regime. During the reign of Corazon Aquino, several coup attempts were launched. The closest call happened in 1989, where the USA even had to intervene to quash the coup of thousands of military forces. Thus, even during the C. Aquino regime, Marcos’ military men remained powerful as they continuously threatened the electorally democratic Corazon Aquino administration (McCoy, 2002). C. Aquino’s successor, former General Fidel Ramos, reinstated notorious military men in government positions (McCoy, 2002). Ramos also allowed military men to take part in functions like conservation of the environment and alleviation programs in times of crisis (Hall, 2004). The reign of C. Aquino still signifies the continuation of phase three, as clearly there are still struggles over a desired institutional arrangement. On the one hand, C. Aquino and her supporters had been promoting liberal democracy. On the other hand, the breakaway military groups had been wanting to establish a military regime. With the election of Ramos, the coups had stopped, and the Philippines remained a democracy, but it was far from being a true liberal democracy. From 1992 onwards, during the reign of Ramos, it can be seen that the conflicts have been reduced. While de jure, it can be claimed that safeguards, like the ones concerning budgeting, have been put in place (see Hall, 2017), it cannot be denied that the military are still de facto potent. They also still lack professionalism (Schulzke, 2010). One manifestation of their de facto power is that the AFP’s loyalty is greatly sought after by Philippine presidents. This is evidenced in the regime of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (Hutchcroft, 2008) and now seemingly with Rodrigo Duterte, as he appointed several military men. The evidence shows that the militarization of the civilian sphere in the Philippines goes back a long time. As De Castro (2012) states, the Philippines has experienced a cycle of “militarization, de-militarization, and remilitarization.”

What we see from the Duterte regime is merely another phase of the militarization process. From the outset, Duterte appointed different retired military men to top executive departments. While the appointment of a former military personnel in the Department of National Defense can be justifiable, a lot of observers have raised their brows as military men have also been appointed in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the Department of Social Welfare and Development, among others. Ramos’ reign up to Duterte can be argued to exhibit phases four and five of the framework. This is due to the fact that military power and a “general militaristic approach” have been legitimized and reproduced. In the time of Duterte, it should be noted that this COVID-19 response is not the first evidence of a militaristic approach. The controversial war on drugs can also be treated militaristic in a way because of the violent outcome it has led to, with thousands having been killed already. In fact, it has been argued that it is genocide-like (Simangan, 2018). Another recent policy which can be said to be of such nature is the establishment of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Insurgency. The organization supposedly “institutionalizes a whole-of-nation approach in obtaining exclusive and sustainable peace” (Kabagani, par. 2, 2022). Indeed, the program gives development funds to barangays — the smallest unit of government in the Philippines. However, a lot of progressive groups are against such an inclusion as they believe its framework is questionable. A group, called Action for Indigenous Women’s Rights, specifically claims that a supposed development-oriented program is not a task of the military (Rey, 2021). Again, in the program, one sees civilian tasks getting combined with the military. Despite these, Duterte still enjoys relatively high approval ratings. While it needs further empirical support, it can be implied what the approval of these militaristic approaches highlight is a successful ideational victory won by the AFP and everyone who subscribes to such a perspective.

To further integrate the analysis above, it can be said that there have been two major critical junctures from the start of Marcos’ rule up to the Duterte administration. The first one is the start of Marcos’ imposition of martial law, and the second is the EDSA People Power Revolution. Both critical junctures involved choosing between dictatorship and democracy — both conflicting institutional arrangements. The former was chosen in the first critical juncture, while the latter was picked in the second one. The consequence of the first critical juncture was the intrusion of the military, while the latter critical juncture’s consequence was the maintenance of military power in civilian affairs. On paper, a revolution overthrowing a dictatorial regime was expected to normalize civil-military affairs. However, that did not happen as it should be recalled that the attempt to establish a liberal democracy did not materialize (Yu, 2005). What happened instead is the maintenance of an asymmetric balance of power tilted towards the military.
when in reality it should have been towards civilians as stated in the constitution and given that the country is a democracy. It is the two critical junctures which enabled path dependence. From the pieces of evidence above, it is clear that the path dependence did not happen smoothly as power struggles have occurred. Thus, it has not been a simple case of the “past influencing the present” as some basic interpretations of path dependence would show. Two decisive events shaped the trajectory of Philippine democracy, broadly, and the militaristic COVID-19 response is an outcome of such.

Exploring Alternative Explanations

As mentioned, several works, both academic and journalistic, have already discussed the Philippines’, and for that matter other countries’, militaristic COVID-19 approach. I argue that these studies have taken, implicitly or explicitly, perspectives which have limited explanatory power. The first approach implicit in a lot of journalistic works can perhaps be called the “single-decision maker” explanation. This is because these works imply that the militaristic policy was imposed only by Duterte as if he was not influenced by constraints. The second one takes the securitization approach (Baysa-Barredo, 2020; Hapal, 2021; Schaffar, 2021). In its most basic form, securitization theory argues that framing ideas or issues, even those which are not militaristic in nature, into a military-like emergency situation of some sort enables it to be treated as such. In the case of the Philippines, for instance, Hapal (2021, p. 225) argues that “the securitization of COVID-19 was produced by framing the pandemic response as war against a so-called ‘unseen enemy’.” These approaches have limited explanatory power compared to the one used here which takes an evolutionary lens. In fact, both can be subsumed. For one, the evolutionary explanation treats Duterte and his whole administration as a significant political actor. However, Duterte’s actions are not treated as ones made in a vacuum but are influenced by wider configurations, in this case, the previous institutional arrangements. Second, the securitization approach is limited as it only considers the power of ideas. As highlighted above, the said approach assumes that ideas assume primacy over the actual historical-institutional conditions that influence policies. Evolutionary institutionalism considers both the ideas and material reality.

Aside from the above, the previous studies cannot answer the more fundamental question of why other officials and the general public did not seem to contest such a militaristic approach. It should be noted, first, that some indirect resistance has been observed in the form of volunteer work, mainly with the presence of community pantries. However, if we are talking about actual resistance in the form of boycotts or protests, they have been limited to those organized by progressive groups, unlike in the USA and other countries where massive movements occurred. An early survey from one of the countries’ leading polling firms, Pulse Asia, shows that Duterte had an approval of an overwhelming majority (92%) of Filipinos (Rappler, 2020). I would argue that the acceptance of people with the militaristic approach can be explained only by an evolutionary analysis. Specifically, it can be argued that resistance was nearly absent due to the widespread acceptance of militaristic ways of dealing with non-military affairs. Admittedly, the preceding claim cannot be said with assurance, but it would be good for future papers to explore such a question.

Conclusions

This work has both introduced a relatively new and powerful theory — evolutionary institutionalism — and applied it to the case of the Philippines’ militaristic COVID-19 approach. In summary, I argued that the COVID-19 approach undertaken by the Philippines should not be seen as a policy instituted by Duterte only. Specifically, it is best to see such an institution as a result of the military’s long-standing intrusion in civilian affairs, which has its roots in previous struggles among different actors. The struggle, from my discussion, started way back during the Marcos regime, where the main actors involved in the struggle were the AFP and Ferdinand Marcos, on the one hand, and proponents of democracy — from the late President Corazon Aquino to the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) of the Philippines, among others, on the other hand. The struggles, I have argued, resulted in the victory of the parties directly or indirectly promoting militaristic ideas. Because of this, it is to be expected that even non-military affairs would have a sort of militaristic touch in the policies accompanying them — path dependence is to be expected. The militaristic COVID-19 approach is a manifestation of such path dependence. Further, what can preliminarily explain the maintenance of such path dependence is that the elites have been continuously unaffected, if not benefiting from it (Mahoney, 2000). Perhaps the latter can be most exemplified by the fact that the past four presidents of the Philippines have come from either elite political dynasties or elite-landowning families. They form the “modern principalia” (Simbulan, 2005). Thus, future policies which are non-militaristic in nature are expected to still have a militaristic orientation unless some powerful actor(s) succeeds in promoting genuine reform, either in the form of liberal democracy, socialism, or other economic-political system which promotes genuine civilian control over civilian affairs.

Recommendations

As stated, this paper’s goal is more to present a new framework for understanding the creation of institutions — in this
case the militaristic COVID-19 approach. Thus, the empirical evidence to support the evolutionary institutionalist lens needs to be substantiated. This paper, for the most part, employed a preliminary “process-tracing” of some sort where one “identifies the causal mechanisms that connect causes and effect” Falleti (2016, p. 2). However, the evidence is drawn mainly from previous studies. Moreover, as I have made clear earlier, my main goal is more about presenting a reframing of the issue using the evolutionary institutionalist framework. A deeper historical analysis, to be made by future researchers, is admittedly needed to solidify the claims of the framework.

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