Policing a Pandemic: Understanding the State and Political Instrumentalization of the Coercive Apparatus in Duterte’s Philippines

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ABSTRACT

As the world was mired in distress, some leaders saw opportunities to exploit the pandemic and further consolidate their grip on power. It is, thus, the objective of this article to discuss how, when, and why the state’s coercive apparatus has been instrumentalized by its leader amid a crisis. It will also explain how such apparatus has shaped both the aura of invincibility of the state and social order within the polity. The deployment of the Philippine National Police by President Rodrigo Duterte will be analyzed and discussed. The main argument of the article is that while the police has been given extensive powers to amplify the state’s power and assist in administrating a crisis-stricken society, they have also been instrumentalized to bolster an illiberal regime. In particular, the police were bestowed positions of authority within the state’s pandemic response apparatus, provided a broader leeway to wield violence through a contentious anti-terrorism law, and mobilized to unfairly enforce government-imposed measures. Thus, amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Duterte’s Philippines, civil liberties were violated, cultures of violence and impunity worsened, and the executive powers were consolidated.

Keywords: State, society, coercive apparatus, police, pandemic, Philippines

Introduction: Opportunities amid Crisis

To say that the emergence of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) inundated the world with fear and ambiguity is an understatement. Its consequences have forced the people to constantly take extraordinary safety precautions; the global economy has been reeling from a sharp recession, and a post-pandemic society may necessitate a significant adjustment toward a “new” normal.
However, as the world is mired in distress, some state leaders saw opportunities. The global health crisis provided unprecedented chances for leaders to assume extensive responsibilities within their polities. A few of them nonetheless opted to exploit this critical juncture to consolidate their stranglehold on power. These include, but are not limited to, Xi Jinping’s imposition of a security law in Hong Kong that intends to curtail basic freedoms within the city; the provision of emergency powers to the government of Hungary that enabled Viktor Orban to rule by decree; and Donald Trump’s efforts at blocking of funds for the United States Postal Service in an attempt to restrict mail-in voting and benefit his reelection bid. The pandemic is also being exploited by authorities in the Philippines, one of the worst-hit countries in Southeast Asia. Its government, headed by President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, has strategically operationalized militaristic and police-centered approaches in managing the crisis-ridden society.

It is, thus, the objective of this article to discuss how, when, and why the state’s coercive apparatus has been instrumentalized by its leader amid a crisis. It will also seek to explain how such apparatus shaped both the aura of invincibility of the state and social order within the polity. The deployment of Philippine National Police (PNP), the civilian national police force of the Philippines, by Duterte will be the article’s main point of reference. Undertaking such study is of vital importance for three reasons. First, as argued Migdal (2001, p. 115), state sovereignty or “the actual imposition of supreme state authority over its claimed territory” has time and again been taken too lightly. Given the dire circumstances brought forth by the pandemic, it is, therefore, imperative for us to provide due attention on how power is being imposed by a state leader over his/her area of responsibility. Second, the police are at the forefront of accomplishing the Weberian state’s fundamental purpose of asserting authority over a distinct territory (Bayley, 1971; Crabtree, 2018; Flom, 2018). They are the agents who enforce laws at the most basic echelons of the society and are, therefore, aptly described as the “personification of the state’s coercive power” (Crabtree, 2018, p. 3). Lastly, this article intends to contribute to the literature on state sovereignty, particularly on the politics of state and society, executive authority, and police misadministration in developing countries. The main argument of this article is that while PNP has been given more extensive powers by Duterte to amplify the aura of invincibility of the state and contribute in administrating a crisis-stricken society, they have also been instrumentalized to expand presidential powers and consolidate an illiberal regime.
The remainder of this article will proceed as follows. A conceptualization of the state and society in Duterte’s Philippines, as well as the significance of bolstering the state’s power amid a crisis, will be provided in the next section. It will be followed by a brief discussion of the 2016 Philippine presidential election, Duterte’s rise to power, and the role of PNP in the drug war, which was a centerpiece of his election campaign. Reviewing such matters will allow us to trace and understand his penchant for politically instrumentalizing the coercive apparatus of the state. Subsequently, the article will discuss the government’s responses to combat COVID-19 and how such actions are shaping the social order in the Philippines. Across these sections, the instrumentalization of PNP in attaining the objectives of the Duterte-led state—whether it be to safeguard the citizens and instill order or violate their rights and aggrandize a repressive regime—will be identified, highlighted, and discussed.

**Conceptualizing the State and Crisis-Ridden Society in Duterte’s Philippines**

Amid the pandemic, the Philippines has been under duress both due to the onslaught of virus and the Duterte presidency’s imprudent responses to the crisis. Instead of considering the pandemic as a global health concern, his administration opted to view it largely as a security issue. Thus, positions of greater authority were bestowed upon retired military generals and members of PNP to instill social order and play pivotal roles within the pandemic response apparatus of the state. This was underscored when, during the announcement on March 12, 2020 of the lockdown measures imposed in the National Capital Region (NCR), uniformed police personnel sat behind Duterte not only to project the “optics of power” but also as a “way of saying this is henceforth a peace and order issue” (David, 2020). Such spectacle was unsurprising, given that Duterte’s rise to presidential power is attributed to his claims of success as the longtime mayor of Davao City. Once notorious as a crime-infested area, Duterte transformed the city and restored order by undermining human rights principles and unashamedly condoning the summary killings of suspected criminals. These murders were carried out by the Davao Death Squad, a vigilante group which included members of the police (Neistat & Seok, 2009, p. 2). Duterte, thus, made his way to the presidency by projecting himself as “the man that Davao precisely needed” (Isaac & Aceron, 2016) “the Punisher” and tough-talking mayor who salvaged the city from...
criminality (Teehankee & Thompson, 2016) and the public servant who “transformed Davao City through unconventional means” (Hernandez, 2017). In the time of pandemic, however, the state’s coercive apparatus has been mobilized not only to intensify the state’s invincibility and ensure social order but also to expand illiberal regime of Duterte.

The instrumentalization of coercive apparatus by the Duterte-led state during the crisis can be understood by contextualizing it vis-à-vis the proposition of Migdal (2001) on the significance of amplifying the state’s aura of invincibility. In a society dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the state’s level of power—or the people’s perception of such facet—is crucial, given that the more the state is deemed powerful, “the more likely are subjects to accept it in their ordinary lives and, in the process, reduce the burden of enforcing all its dictates” (Migdal, 2001, pp. 114–115). Maintenance of social order is arguably important, given the circumstances brought forth by the crisis, thereby putting the state, especially the executive authority, at the crux of the matter, especially in terms of how it will enforce policies, effectuate public compliance, mobilize its coercive apparatus, and mitigate the inimical impacts of the pandemic. The overt influence of and powers exerted by the coercive apparatus, particularly PNP in Duterte’s Philippines, nonetheless, have been at the receiving end of public condemnation, as will be discussed later. Instead of being mobilized to guarantee order within the society, Duterte has instrumentalized PNP to consolidate his grip on power and violate the people’s fundamental rights. The explicit and excessive mobilization of coercive apparatus of the state—instead of public health experts and epidemiologists—has evidently been ineffective and detrimental in managing the consequences of a complex, viral, and existential threat such as COVID-19 (Beltran, 2020; Juego, 2020; Teehankee, 2020).

The Rise of Duterte and Illiberal Governance

Before delving into the government’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to first trace, discuss, and understand Duterte’s rise to the presidency and his penchant for politically instrumentalizing PNP—the same apparatus that was ultimately given crucial and controversial roles amid the public health crisis.

Duterte, who announced his presidential bid on November 2015, swore throughout the campaign period that he will be governing the polity with an iron fist should he be elected as the president of the Philippines after
the May 2016 general election. In an interview by Ressa (2015), Duterte avowed that he will not hesitate to shut down the Congress if the lawmakers threaten to impeach him; that his administration will be “bloody”; and that the police and military will be the “backbone” of his government. His declarations, albeit controversial, did in no way damage his standings in pre-election surveys. According to the national survey on the May 2016 elections by Pulse Asia Research, Inc. (2016) from April 26 to 29, 2016, Duterte obtained a voter preference of 33% compared to his rivals which included former Interior Secretary Manuel Araneta Roxas II (22%), Senator Grace Poe (21%), Vice President Jejomar Binay (17%), and Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago (2%). In a separate survey by Social Weather Stations from May 1 to 3, 2016, Duterte also attained substantial double-digit leads with a voter preference of 33% compared to Poe (22%), Roxas (20%), Binay (13%), and Santiago (2%). In both survey results, only 4% were undecided and/or not inclined to choose any of the aspirants. The level of support manifested in the surveys translated into victory on election day, with Duterte garnering 39% of votes (16,601,997 out of the total 42,552,835 popular votes). The Philippines follows a first-past-the-post system, and thus, Duterte was elected president in 2016 even without obtaining a majority of the popular votes. As demonstrated by these results, the Filipino people did not have any apprehension against his agendas—or threats—of establishing an illiberal regime.

Duterte made good on his promise to heavily instrumentalize the state’s coercive apparatus upon his assumption of executive authority, and even before the COVID-19 pandemic, PNP has already been playing an important but controversial function in his administration. In particular, the police have been tasked to spearhead one of his primary election promises: the “war” on illegal drugs. Since its launch, PNP has been frequently dominating the headlines, of which the most controversial were the deaths of 19-year old Carl Angelo Arnaiz and 17-year old Kian Loyd delos Santos on August 17, 2017, during separate drug-war operations.

Arnaiz was killed in a police shootout after he allegedly robbed a cab driver and fought back against the police who tried to capture him (nanlaban in Filipino) (Torres-Tupas, 2017). Marijuana and methamphetamine were supposedly retrieved in his possession as per police reports. Upon the autopsy conducted by forensic experts, however, it was found that Arnaiz was shot when he was either kneeling or on the ground facing up based on the trajectory of the gunshot wounds; thus,
it was concluded by experts that it was difficult for him to fight back if he really did so (Requejo et al., 2017). The death of delos Santos, likewise, raised sharp concerns. According to Caloocan City police, delos Santos sprinted away from them upon noticing that they were about to approach him, and he also allegedly fought back by firing a gun toward them (Subingsubing, 2017; Ganibe & Navallo, 2018). Moreover, delos Santos allegedly possessed two sachets of methamphetamine, a caliber 0.45, and four fired cartridge cases. A closed-circuit television footage from a barangay and a witness statement, however, revealed a different scenario. In the footage, men who were believed to be members of Caloocan police were seen dragging Kian. Also, as per the witness, the men gave delos Santos a gun and instructed him to fire it twice and sprint as fast as he can, but before delos Santos could run away from his death, the men shot him multiple times (Cayabyab, 2019). In both instances, the nanlaban narrative was used by the police. It must be emphasized that this narrative has been repeatedly used by state agents to justify the killings and their use of force throughout the drug war. The deaths of Arnaiz and delos Santos at the hands of PNP received widespread criticism (Ballaran & De Jesus, 2017; Mogato, 2017; Talabong, 2017). The funeral procession for delos Santos, held 9 days after his brutal murder, was attended by more than a thousand people, thereby making it one of the major remonstrations against the drug-war operations.

**Combatting Coronavirus Disease 2019**

At the onset of government-imposed measures to manage the health crisis, the coercive apparatus of the state was likewise given extensive roles and no less than Duterte himself constantly underscored their importance in the state’s pandemic response apparatus. Specifically, PNP was immediately put on the spotlight by Duterte during his first press conference on the crisis, as they were instructed to coordinate with the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) “to ensure effective and orderly implementation” of public health measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In mobilizing PNP amid the pandemic, Duterte assured the public: “It is not a martial law. It’s not even something extraordinary. But what is sought—what is sought to be solved here is the again, walang iba (nothing else) except to fight the virus and to exact compliance” (Duterte, 2020a).
Nevertheless, Duterte went on to militarize the response apparatus by assigning significant roles to the military and members of PNP to manage the society and by appointing former generals in vital positions within the IATF-EID. On March 24, 2020, Duterte (2020b) announced that PNP together with the Department of National Defense (DND), Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), and Armed Forces of the Philippines would be implementing the National Action Plan, envisioned as the “overall national strategy to deal with the COVID-19 problem and its aftermath” of the government (Gotinga & Tomacruz, 2020). Also, the National Task Force (NTF), chaired by DND Secretary Delfin Lorenzana with DILG Secretary Eduardo Año as his co-chair and Peace Process Adviser Carlito Galvez as chief implementer, was established to operationalize the policies of IATF-EID. Two officials were later appointed to work under NTF: Department of Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Roy Cimatu as the COVID-19 overseer for Cebu City⁴ and Baguio City mayor Benjamin Magalong as the country’s “contact tracing czar.”⁵ Lorenza, Año, Galvez, and Cimatu were all former Philippine Army generals before being appointed by Duterte as cabinet members, while Magalong was a former PNP Deputy Chief for Operations before being elected as city mayor.

Aside from militarizing the response apparatus, PNP had also been provided a wider leeway to instrumentalize violence amid the crisis. On April 1, 2020, a commotion between the police and civilians arose in Barangay Bagong Pagasa, Quezon City (see Figure 1). According to a report by Talabong (2020), the civilians were residents of Sitio San Roque, a community occupied by low-wage workers that had been severely affected by the lockdown. They reportedly arrived in the area upon learning that relief will be provided to them. Instead of the anticipated aid, however, they were unexpectedly met with violent force by the police which resulted in the detention of 21 civilians (Luna, 2020a; Reysio-Cruz, 2020; Santos, 2020).

The arrests and instrumentalization of police forces were lambasted by the workers’ group Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino in a press statement:

To arrest hungry and desperate people is a new low for this administration. Not only did they dilly-dally in addressing the crisis in late February, the government treated the health crisis as a peace and order issue and deployed security forces instead of medical practitioners. (Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino, 2020)
Worse, instead of consoling the residents and promising a provision of assistance, Duterte opted to assure the deployment of more state agents and ordered them to gun down dissenters hours after the incident:

My orders are to the police and military, also the barangay, that if there is trouble or the situation arises that people fight and your lives are on the line, shoot them dead. Do you understand? Dead. Instead of causing trouble, I’ll send you to the grave. (Duterte, 2020c)

A few weeks after the commotion, he also reneged on his earlier pledge that martial law will not be imposed: “That is why I am now warning everybody and putting notice to the Armed Forces and the police. I might declare martial law and there will be no turning back” (Duterte, 2020d).
However, given the militarized response arm, excessive mobilization of state agents, and the enactment of a controversial law, it is as though the polity has been placed under a quasi-martial law.

**Toward a Police State: Enacting a Contentious Security Law During a Health Crisis**

Arguably, the most controversial move by Duterte amid the pandemic was the enactment of Republic Act No. 11479 or The Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 2020. Its bill version was passed by the legislature on June 5, 2020, and was signed into law by the president on July 3, 2020. ATA thereafter took effect on July 18, 2020. While Duterte’s threat of imposing martial law remained merely as a threat, it can be argued that there was no more necessity for him to formally do so, given that the contentious ATA was enough to further exploit the pandemic for expanding the powers vested upon both the executive authority and the state’s coercive apparatus.

The primary objective of ATA is to prevent, prohibit, and penalize terrorism. To attain this purpose, the law, however, vaguely defined what constitutes “terrorism” and who can be considered a “terrorist.” Under this law, state authorities are allowed to wiretap, surveil, and conduct warrantless arrests based on mere suspicions. As provided in Section 4 of ATA, “terrorism” is defined as an act, regardless of the stage of execution, that seeks to:

...intimidate the general public or a segment thereof, create an atmosphere or spread a message of fear, to provoke or influence by intimidation the government or any international organization, or seriously destabilize or destroy the fundamental political, economic, or social structures of the country, or create a public emergency or seriously undermine public safety... (ATA, 2020)

While the same section also provides that “advocacy, protest, dissent, stoppage of work, industrial or mass action” will not be considered as acts of terrorism, Section 9 of ATA, however, states that persons who will “incite others” to partake in the commission of terrorist acts through “speeches, proclamations, writings, emblems, banners or other representations” will also be penalized. In simpler terms, any person—even those who are merely expressing their opposition to the government—can be deemed a terrorist.
It is nonetheless worth emphasizing that the apprehensions of the people against ATA, particularly on the abovementioned sections of the law, can be mainly attributed to PNP’s hideous record of weaponizing its social media accounts to disseminate unfounded claims against perceived enemies of the state. As per the findings of Tuquero et al. (2020), PNP-managed Facebook pages have been used in red-baiting schemes to “spread false claims and misleading content that incite hate against activists and critics. These pages and accounts either directly posted these or shared them from dubious, anonymously-managed pages that habitually circulate content against left-leaning personalities.” Furthermore, PNP spokesperson Bernard Banac admitted that they have no capacity to monitor the dubious social media posts made and shared by its units, and that they instead “always give them the presumption that they are doing all these following the strict adherence to the guidelines” (Tuquero et al., 2020). It, thus, behooves one to ask how PNP can appropriately implement ATA in today’s age of social media if they cannot even oversee and rectify the problematic utilization of official media pages by their own personnel.

Considering its contentious provisions and untimely enactment, several public demonstrations against ATA were organized notwithstanding the threat of COVID-19 (see Figure 2). On June 5, 2020, the same day its bill version was passed by the Philippine legislature, protesters who observed social distancing guidelines were violently dispersed and arrested in Cebu City by heavily armed police (Israel, 2020). A week later, a protest took place in Iligan City in which student activists voiced their objections on the anti-terrorism bill and the lack of mass testing programs. As reported by Luna (2020b), the protesters were arrested, intimidated by the police throughout their 8-h detention, and not one of them were informed of their rights to remain silent and to have an attorney during interrogation. On June 26, 2020, arrests were also made during the Pride March in Manila City where its participants did not only highlight issues that impact the gay community but also other important sociopolitical concerns such as the passage of anti-terrorism bill, clamor for mass testing, and the impending jeepney phaseout. According to a report, safety guidelines were observed by the participants and the event was peaceful “until the police came and eventually arrested 20 of the attendees” (Jaucian, 2020).

On July 14, 2020, merely few days before ATA took effect, DILG Secretary Año announced that PNP together with health and local government officials will be conducting house-to-house searches and transfer
Figure 2.
Map of the Philippines. Major Demonstrations against the ATA (2020) Took Place in the Cities of Manila, Cebu, and Iligan

Source: Google Earth (n.d.).
patients who are either asymptomatic or with mild symptoms to quarantine facilities (Gavilan, 2020; Jazul, 2020; Navallo, 2020). This contact tracing strategy, part of the government’s “Oplan Kalinga (Operation Plan Care)” which aimed to curtail household and community transmission of COVID-19, stoked anxieties among the public, given the timing of the announcement and fears that it may lead to violations similar to the drug-war operations. Different notable organizations thereafter criticized the deployment of state security forces in this strategy: the Commission on Human Rights, an independent constitutional body, stated that “to assign state security forces, police officers and local government unit representatives, to conduct house-to-house searches to look for and transfer COVID-19 patients under home quarantine to isolation facilities managed by the government – is susceptible to overreach in terms of guaranteeing the right to privacy and right of individuals to be secure in their abode” (Commission on Human Rights, 2020) the National Union of Peoples’ Lawyers (2020) asked “With a government that has emboldened its own uniformed personnel to violate human rights with impunity, how can we be sure that police will not abuse this new power”?, and Karapatan (2020) argued that the policy may “further facilitate State terror and police brutality in communities”. Due to widespread criticisms, the government back-pedaled and assured that health workers would lead the program implementation. Moreover, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque clarified that the police would only “provide support or assistance in the transport of patients and the implementation of lockdown in the affected area” (Roque, 2020). He, however, defended their inclusion in the contact tracing strategy by asserting that it was “a valid exercise of police power by the State to protect the majority of citizenry from public health threats” (Roque, 2020).

Instead of protecting the populace, the police were nonetheless mobilized to facilitate state-sanctioned harassments days after ATA formally took effect. On July 26, 2020, police units raided an office of urban poor organization Kadamay and confiscated copies of news magazine Pinoy Weekly, which they deemed as containing subversive information and a threat to the government (Recuenco, 2020a). The following day, police entered the Quiapo Church in Manila City and forcibly seized protest paraphernalia containing calls to junk ATA. It should be noted that, as per the report of Madarang (2020), a holy mass—and not a protest—was being held inside the church when the harassment took place. The police were also implicated in the death of Randall Echanis, peace consultant
and chairperson of Anakpawis, which represents the marginalized sectors in the country’s legislature. His slain body was found on August 10, 2020, bearing evidence of torture (Colcol, 2020; Ellao, 2020; San Juan, 2020). PNP initially claimed that it was not the body of Echanis but of a certain Manuel Santiago based on identification cards that were allegedly retrieved in the crime scene. The Anakpawis, however, lambasted such claim and contended that the police were attempting to diminish the gravity of the murder of Echanis by framing it as a common crime instead of being politically motivated.

**Double Standard in Enforcing Law and Order**

It goes without saying that ATA’s enactment gave PNP more leeway to exercise—and perhaps abuse—its powers. This is perilous, given that aside from the previously mentioned shoot-them-dead decree by Duterte, other government officials such as DILG Secretary Año, PNP Lieutenant General Guillermo Eleazar, and Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Salvador Panelo also made controversial statements that justified the excessive instrumentalization of police powers amid the pandemic (Bajo, 2020; Buan, 2020; Kabiling, 2020). Despite the rampant violations of rights and abuse of powers that transpired out of their excessive deployments, Duterte and his subordinates reasoned that this mobilization of police during the health crisis is necessary to discipline the pasaway (unruly) Filipinos.

Data nevertheless invalidate the government’s narrative of pasaway Filipinos. According to the COVID-19 Community Mobility Report of Google (2020), significant restrictions were recorded on the movement of Filipino people on March 29, 2020, (weeks after the government imposed the first lockdown measures) compared to the average movements recorded on January 3–February 6, 2020 (few weeks before the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization). As per the report, mobility nationwide plummeted by 82% in transit stations, 81% in retail and recreation centers, 59% in grocery and pharmacy, 59% in parks, and 54% in workplaces. In addition, a separate research by the Institute of Global Health Innovation at Imperial College London and YouGov PLC (2020) also attested that Filipinos are taking health and safety protocols seriously. Based on data gathered in 27 countries from August 31 to September 6, 2020, the Filipinos ranked 1st in avoiding crowded areas (78%), 1st in avoiding going out in general (59%), 1st in
avoiding large-sized social gatherings (78%), 1st in using hand sanitizer (82%), 1st in avoiding contact with people who have symptoms or who they think may have been exposed to COVID-19 (86%), 2nd in wearing a face mask outside their homes (93%), and 4th in avoiding taking public transport (54%, tied with the people of United Arab Emirates, Italy, and the United Kingdom).

While the abovementioned data verified the compliance of Filipinos with public health measures and movement restrictions, Duterte’s political associates including high-ranking PNP officials grabbed the headlines for breaking such regulations. However, unlike the general public, whose rights were trampled by state agents under the guise of enforcing laws and instilling social order, his allies and officials were neither reprimanded nor penalized. These violators include the then NCR Police Chief Debold Sinas who celebrated a crowded birthday serenade at the NCR Police Office headquarters (Recuenco, 2020b), Overseas Workers Welfare Administration Deputy Administrator Margaux Uson who led a mass gathering of quarantined overseas Filipino workers in Batangas province (Aquino, 2020; Malasig, 2020), Spokesperson Harry Roque who made a leisure trip to a marine park in Zambales province (Casilao, 2020), Senator Aquilino Pimentel III who breached his home quarantine and accompanied his pregnant wife at the Makati Medical Center (Gregorio, 2020; Robles, 2020), the then PNP Chief Archie Gamboa who held a so-called small gathering in Baguio City to celebrate his impending retirement (Esguerra, 2020), and lawyer Lorenzo Gadon who on separate occasions disobeyed protocols on wearing a face mask and a face shield in public places (Marquez, 2020). The double standard in the enforcement of laws was, therefore, apparent and undeniable. On the one hand, the coercive apparatus of the state was mobilized to assist the government in instilling order within the pandemic-hit society even if it led to abuse of power and violations of human rights, particularly of those who were seeking assistance and expressing their discontent on the government’s management of the crisis. On the other hand, no penalty was imposed upon the supporters and officials of Duterte who breached various government protocols. They were exempted from any form of punishment, thereby contributing to the pervasive climate of impunity in the Philippines.

Conclusion: A Stronger Executive Authority and More Invincible State

The COVID-19 pandemic, without question, has been overwhelming the world with immense uncertainty. Its consequences have also gone
beyond public health concerns, as demonstrated by how the crisis is being exploited by leaders to expand their control over the people. In the Philippines, the pandemic has been exploited by President Duterte to consolidate an illiberal regime and encroach on the people’s rights, especially the vulnerable ones and those who express dissatisfaction against power wielders. This was attained by instrumentalizing the coercive apparatus, particularly PNP, not only to bolster the state’s aura of invincibility but also to abuse state sovereignty. The police were bestowed positions of authority within the state’s pandemic response apparatus, provided a broader leeway to wield violence through a contentious anti-terrorism law, and mobilized to unfairly enforce government-imposed measures. Therefore, amid the pandemic in the Philippines, civil liberties were violated, cultures of violence and impunity worsened, and the executive authority of Duterte was augmented.

It must also be emphasized that the state-sanctioned campaign against illegal drugs continues even in the middle of pandemic, and that the nanlaban narrative is still being cited by the police in the killings of alleged suspects in drug-war operations (Balbin, 2020; Velez, 2020a; Velez, 2020b). Based on government data, state agents carried out 20,840 anti-illegal drug operations from March 31 through October 31, 2020, which resulted in the imprisonment of 31,096 persons, 287 deaths, and confiscation of illegal drugs worth ₱13.41 billion (around US$278 million). Furthermore, authorities have also been arresting violators of quarantine regulations with the exception of administration allies, as discussed earlier. The Department of Interior and Local Government (2020) announced that from March 17 through October 23, 2020, a total of 124,527 apprehended violators have already been released, while 1,751 persons are still in detention.

Duterte’s political instrumentalization of the national police force is a great disservice both to the principled personnel who are responsibly fulfilling their sworn duties and to the people who deserve efficient services from these state agents, especially during critical periods. The police should always use their powers and be mobilized by leaders to serve and protect the people and not the interests of few political elites. Suffice it to say, state sovereignty should in no way be taken for granted, particularly in a polity governed by unscrupulous officials whose priority is the pursuit of their personalistic interests instead of providing public services.

By all indications, however, a post-pandemic Philippine society will have to endure other possible sociopolitical repercussions that may emerge out of this complex interplay of the COVID-19 pandemic,
stronger executive authority, and amplified invincibility of the state. In addition, the domineering powers of the police—if left unabated—will certainly result in a more dominant state apparatus, which in turn may be appropriated by predatory rulers for more inapt agendas. Taking these matters into consideration makes citizen vigilance and cross-sector collaborations even more important to make state institutions transparent, accountable, and effective for the betterment of society. These may be arduous tasks, but it should be underscored that the last thing we need in a crisis-ridden society are passive citizens idly allowing those in positions of power to instrumentalize the different apparatus of the state for their vested interests.

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NOTES

1. Most basic political unit in the Philippines.
2. The nanlaban narrative, as aptly described by Gacoscosim and Noriega (2020), “has been present in the police spot reports to justify shooting the suspect in legitimate operations. This narrative often comes with a specific firearm found at the crime scene.”
3. IATF-EID was established in 2014 to mitigate the impacts of potential infectious diseases in the country. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Health Secretary Francisco Duque was tasked to lead the task force with Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles and Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Roy Cimatu as his co-chairs.
4. Cimatu was assigned in this position in the aftermath of a surge in infections in Cebu City.
5. Magalong was assigned in this position after his success in keeping a low number of infections within his locality.
6. Leonen (2015) defined red-baiting as the Philippines’ version of McCarthyism in which progressive groups and leaders are incriminated by state forces to heinous crimes, which they do so by linking them to communist groups and, in the process, “making them easy targets of government military or para-military units.”

7. Few notable examples include Facebook post by PNP Police Community Relations Group—PULISerbis which claimed that Kabataan Representative Sarah Elago called for a large-scale remonstration against Duterte’s lockdown measures (Tuquero, 2020); Facebook post by Malaybalay City Police Office which claimed that supporting press freedom are akin to terrorism (Jerusalem, 2020); and Facebook posts shared by the police stations of Marcos, Ilocos Norte, Gerona, and Tarlac which attributed to Senator Risa Hontiveros a fabricated statement on lionizing rebels as “heroes of the land” (Tuquero et al., 2020).

8. It was later known through autopsy reports that Echanis was deliberately “made to suffer before he was eventually killed” by the assailants (Gonzales 2020).

9. Duterte promoted Sinas to the position of PNP Chief in November 2020.

10. Data published by RealNumbersPH (2020), the government’s report on operations related to the drug-war campaign.

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