

# Section 1. Theorising Authoritarianism



Verna Dinah Q. Viajar

## Chapter 2. Populist-authoritarianism in the Philippines: contentions, contradictions and hegemonic crisis<sup>1</sup>

The Philippines continues to battle rising Covid-19 infections despite pronouncements from the government that everything is under control (CNN 2021). However, the numbers say otherwise. Globally, the Philippines ranked 20th among the countries with the highest number of Covid-19 cases by February 2022 (Statista 2022) and 21st for the highest number of Covid-19 deaths (CNN 2021). Among the ten countries making up the Southeast Asia region, the Philippines (3.68 million cases and 54 930 Covid-19 deaths) was second only to Indonesia (4.7 million cases and 145 000 deaths) by February 2022, according to the Johns Hopkins University database. To ease the pressure on the health care system, and reminiscent of the 2020 lockdowns, restrictions on transport, business operations, public services and movement of people across borders are once again being enforced through a variety or gradations of ‘community quarantines.’ The lockdowns meant job losses for the millions of workers and starvation for the informal or hourly-paid precarious workers in the Philippines. The pandemic has exposed the unequal impact of restrictions for the poor and the rich (Kundnani 2020). The harsh enforcements of quarantine restrictions also exposed how some states around the world are exploiting the need for lockdowns and quarantines ‘to intensify patterns of violence that are already normalized in policing’ (Kundnani 2020).

### Covid response: A tragedy of errors

More than one year ago, on May 2020, the *Nikkei Asian Review* reported that the Philippines has the ‘strictest lockdown in Asia, but ineffective vs. Covid-19’ (Sangguniang Laiko ng Pilipinas 2020). At that time, the Duterte government had ‘brought down public mobility by 85% in transit stations; by 79% of retail and recreation; and by 71% in workplaces’ (Sangguniang

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1 This article is based on a web article submitted in May 2021 for the Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung Manila Office. <https://doi.org/10.37191/95597104036-13>, arXiv:2005.2624, 05.02.01  
Full access –  <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb>

Laiko ng Pilipinas 2020). However, the report further said that the harsh lockdowns have not been effective in stopping the contagion but instead used to consolidate Duterte's authoritarian rule. The 'lockdowns' were heavily criticized for harsh penalties and arrests of quarantine violators, such that there were more people apprehended for violating community quarantines than tested for coronavirus. In April 2020, more than 120 000 people were apprehended for violation of community quarantines by the police and the military, but only 70 000 were tested for coronavirus (Cana 2020). The United Nations, on 29 April 2020, rebuked the Philippines for its 'highly militarized response' to lockdown violators (Ornedo 2020). The strict enforcement and harsh penalties were encouraged by Duterte himself. In one of his late-night press statements, Duterte warned that anyone caught violating the restrictions would be shot (FP 2020). After a month of strict lockdown, there were more people suffering from being arrested for quarantine violations than from coronavirus infections (Viajar 2020).

### **Duterte's populist-authoritarian leadership: contentions and contradictions**

After more than 200 days of lockdown, the year 2020 closed with an economic flatline and the worst contraction among all the countries in Southeast Asia. The Philippine economy contracted by 9.5% due to pandemic restrictions in 2020 (Lafargo 2021), the worst since World War II, and became the worst performer compared to the ten other economies in Southeast Asia (Business World, 2020). The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) also reported that close to 10 million Filipino workers lost their jobs after one year into the pandemic (Cordero 2021). However, in the midst of the pandemic, Duterte's trust ratings rose to 91% according to a survey by Pulse Asia, a private polling firm that conducted the survey on September 2020 (CNN 2020).

As the pandemic shows, Duterte's authoritarian leadership is expressed through and thoroughly in collusion with the military and the police, which possess the legitimate use of state violence, to enforce the harsh Covid restrictions, repress dissent and critics and suspend civil and political rights. Duterte's authoritarian attributes are expressed through two aspects: (a) the narrowing of freedoms and democratic spaces such as civil, political and human rights, of communities and social movements; and (b) the demobilization of people's participation in determining the future of their communities. The narrowing of freedoms such as the freedom to dissent and to express political views under Duterte contributes to the death of

pluralism as we know it. A recent survey by the Social Weather Station (SWS), released on March 2021, found that ‘65% of Filipinos perceive it is dangerous to publish anything critical to the administration’ (Mercado, 2021).

## **A Gramscian perspective on Duterte’s authoritarian and fascist tendencies**

Duterte came into the 2016 presidential elections as a dark horse propelled by popular discontent over the ineffective liberal-democratic institutions. His supporters mainly come from the new middle class, those that benefited from recent economic growth and from working abroad, seeking quick solutions to everyday issues such as crime and horrendous traffic, frustrations over the dominance of the ‘politically-correct’ or intellectual crowd and persistent socio-economic inequalities. Duterte swept the electoral stage with the slogan ‘change is coming’. In his campaigns, he promised to single-handedly solve all problems (crime, corruption, drugs, and so on) in just a few months in office. More than 16 million Filipinos believed his rhetoric, entertained by his self-styled bravado and charismatic language. However, five years into office, the persistent problems such as corruption, drugs, crime and traffic that Duterte promised to eradicate remained and even intensified.

To understand Duterte’s populist yet authoritarian leadership, Antonio Gramsci’s discussion of fascism and hegemony may be instructive. Gramsci’s use of hegemony refers to leadership or dominance, and the power of ideas, values, and beliefs in a particular historical moment over a particular political-economic context: ‘political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class’ (Bates 1975). This article situates Duterte’s populist authoritarian leadership during a time of hegemonic crisis in Gramscian terms.

A hegemonic crisis happens when the ruling class has failed to completely dominate or used force to dominate (war), until such time that a broad mass puts forward demands and seizes a particular political moment (Adamson 1980). In such a hegemonic crisis, the political field becomes open and ‘a violent solution led by “charismatic men of destiny”’ may provide the alternative. Without any strong challenge from other social forces, the moderates or the conservative elite, Gramsci likened the change towards fascism as ‘Caesarism’ which ‘refers to a political intervention by some previously dormant or even **previously unknown political force capable of**

asserting domination and thus of restoring a static equilibrium during a hegemonic crisis' (Adamson 1980: 628). In this political moment, according to Gramsci, the fascist take-over may emerge through 'the sudden creation of a single heroic figure, or it may be the gradual and institutionalized outcome of a coalition government' (Adamson 1980: 628).

The peculiarity in the emergence of charismatic and populist leaders such as Duterte in the Philippines, Trump in the USA or Bolsonaro of Brazil, fuels many debates in characterizing the new forms of authoritarianism and fascism. Legitimized via electoral contest and buoyed by popular support, Duterte's populist-authoritarian leadership with fascist tendencies has been coined 'Dutertism' by political analysts in the Philippines. Insights from Gramsci's discussion of the Caesarism/Bonapartism model to explain the rise of 'charismatic leaders' places the emphasis more on transformations in society and reconfiguration of social forces, or the 'breaking up and the rebuilding of social blocs' (Antonini 2021: 105). Rather than focusing on the inevitability of the rise of populist and charismatic leaders in a moment of hegemonic crisis, Gramsci argues that, due to the weakness of the dominant class, 'having exhausted its "propulsive" force, puts itself under the protection of a leader in order to remain in power and to defer (at least temporarily) its defeat' (Antonini 2021: 109).

## Conclusion

Duterte's brash brand of leadership contributes to the current polarization of the country's political and civil societies. Culturally, Duterte upended the long-held Filipino values and beliefs in solidarity, community and respect. Duterte has also thwarted liberal policies and norms regarding human rights and women's empowerment that Filipinos have come to live with in the last 40 years. Family ties and friendships have become strained over Duterte's polarizing, hateful stance against his critics, and brutal and militarized policies, such as the killings of drug addicts and communists, as well as unconstitutional restrictions on human rights and other freedoms. Duterte's mode of governance and policy responses during the Covid-19 pandemic exposed his authoritarian leadership with fascist tendencies. These were expressed through the narrowing of freedoms and democratic spaces for peoples' civil, political and human rights and the demobilization of peoples' participation in determining the future of their communities. Likewise, more than one year into our pandemic lives, we have learned that the virus does not discriminate on the basis of wealth, power and material possessions; nevertheless, whilst everyone is in the same

storm, not everyone is on the same boat. Some boats have more social protection than others.

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