

Governance Challenges in the Age of COVID-19 in the Republic of the Philippines: Lessons from Various Information from the Media and the International Community

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Abstract

The world has been facing a major global crisis in recent years in the form of a pandemic. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) situation was proclaimed a pandemic by the World Health Organization and has greatly affected the lives of the global population. There have been millions of infections, hundreds of thousands of deaths, health care system failures, and economic disasters initiated by the pandemic. Most importantly, the weaknesses of countries' governance systems have been exposed. The coronavirus' complexity is detrimental not just to individual persons, but also to society as a whole. Lives, livelihoods, long-term health, and economies are at stake. Now more than ever, public integrity and good governance should not be overlooked. COVID-19 related scandals have been identified in both developed and developing countries such as Indonesia, Brazil, Germany, Iran, Vietnam, South Africa, USA, Serbia, and Russia. This paper, however, focuses on the Philippines. The predominantly Catholic nation has had its fair share of governance failures, corruption, and is somewhat transitioning to a more autocratic government. Poor government response, military generals leading the pandemic response, various corruption scandals, high cases, deaths, and economic and job losses – all indicate that the country's pandemic response was a failure, such that the country was ranked last in terms of pandemic response in both Bloomberg and Nikkei Asia. This research mainly drew lessons based on observations on media coverage in the Philippines and the international community.

Key words: *autocracy, COVID-19, corruption, governance, pandemic response,*

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I. Introduction

The world has been dealing with a major global crisis in the form of a pandemic in recent years. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was proclaimed a pandemic by the World Health Organization and has severely affected the lives of the world's population. The pandemic has caused millions of infections, hundreds of thousands of deaths, health system failures, and economic disasters. Most importantly, it exposed the weaknesses of government systems in countries around the world. The complexity of the coronavirus is harmful not only to individuals, but also to society as a whole. Lives, livelihoods, long-term health, and economies are at stake. Public integrity and good governance should not be ignored now more than ever.

A total of 244,171,008 infections, 4,958,308 deaths, and 6,842,086,729 vaccine doses were recorded as of October 2021. The USA, UK, and Russia have the highest number of recorded infections in October 2021 (JHU 2021). Although those countries have the highest incidences, it can be attributed to a bigger population. Moreover, the vaccination rates in those countries fare better than those of developing nations (Figure 1).

In terms of the case-to-fatality ratio, the regions of Latin America and Southeast Asia were the worst places to be in the world in a pandemic. For instance, Peru has a 9.1% case-fatality and 615 deaths per 100,000 people while Brazil logged 287 deaths per 100,000 people (JHU 2021). Over in Southeast Asia, Malaysia recorded 89 deaths per 100,000 people while Indonesia logged 54 deaths per 100,000 cases. The Republic of the Philippines on the other hand has 39 deaths per 100,000 people but with a smaller population than the aforementioned countries, their case-fatality was one of the worst in the region with 1.5%.

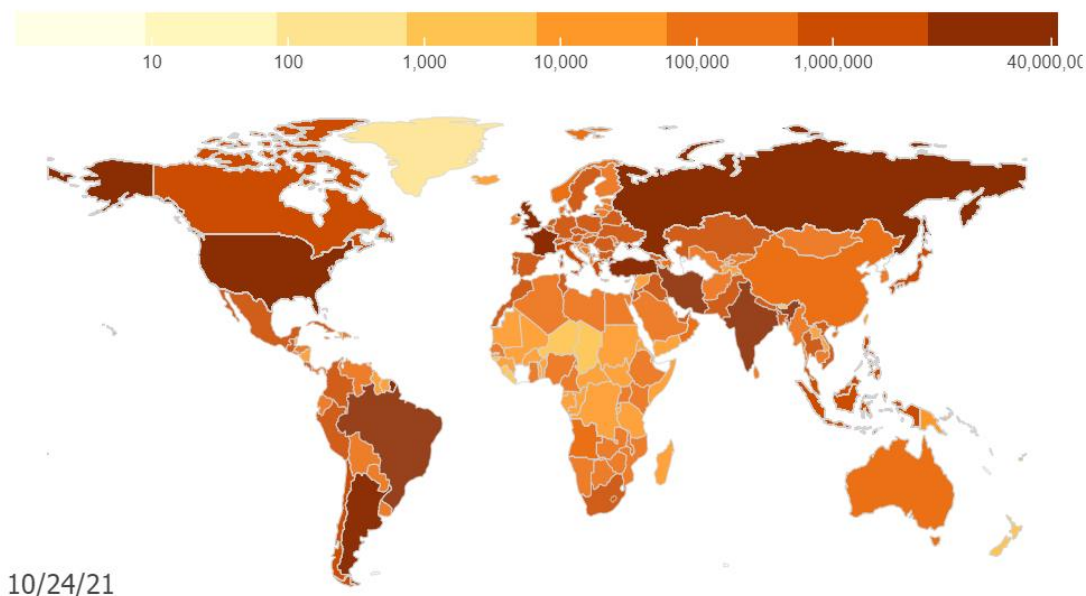


Figure 1. COVID-19 Infection Map as of October 24, 2021

Source: John Hopkins University, 2021

State governments and international organizations alike have put together resources to combat COVID-19. The World Bank shelled out USD 160 billion in funding designed to respond to the health,

economic, and social shocks while the International Monetary Fund allocated USD 11 trillion as financial assistance to the COVID-19 response. In addition, the IMF also pledged USD 50 billion for low-income and emerging market countries. The United Nations appealed for an additional USD 2 billion as support for an organized international humanitarian response scheme to tackle the pandemic (TI 2020). Amid the global commitment to fight the pandemic, large-scale emergency spending by donors and state governments creates various risks that may undermine the effectiveness of government responses which could result in health, social, and economic distress.

COVID -19 scandals have been identified in both developed and developing countries, including Indonesia, Brazil, Germany, Iran, Vietnam, South Africa, the United States, Serbia, and Russia. In Indonesia, the Minister of Social Affairs was arrested for accepting large amounts of money as bribes in connection with food aid to the needy Indonesian population during the pandemic. In Brazil, the mayor of the largest city, Rio de Janeiro, was found guilty of embezzling funds in the construction of a medical facility COVID-19. The level of corruption in Brazil has been described as “extraordinary” because in April 2020, the Brazilian Parliament passed a law allowing all levels of government to make emergency purchases without delay and without the need for competitive bidding or conventional procedures. In this scenario, ventilators were purchased at an absurdly high price from a liquor store to be used in various field hospitals around the country. In reality, they were never built or put into service.

Over in Germany, the police have alerted their citizens regarding swindlers pretending to be health workers supplying coronavirus testing kits (CMI 2020). In Iran, there are details of a “well-connected network” managing the delivery and means of things necessary for the country’s COVID response (CMI 2020). Vietnam’s director of the Center of Disease Control was found guilty of collusion with suppliers to raise prices for medical equipment three times its original price. In South Africa, the government stopped officials allegedly abusing the COVID-19 situation to buy goods worth USD 2.4 million which were supposedly for purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE) and blankets for the poor. Moreover, the Eastern Cape Town province’s health department, which is also one of the country’s poorest areas, is facing allegations of buying 100 ambulance scooters for a ridiculous cost which was almost triple the original value of one unit. The CARES Act funding in the United States, which was a USD 55 million contract for N95 masks went to a firm in bankruptcy with no current employees and no history of producing or supplying masks. The company may have participated in cost-overcharging to boot, charging the US government approximately eight times as much as the other providers. In Serbia, their president openly cited that because of the limited supply of ventilators accessible in Europe, they were compelled to procure them on the semi-grey market. This scenario raised suspicion on the integrity of the procurement procedure. The Russian oligarchs on the other hand, set arrangements with physicians to be on standby to make sure that they can prevent seeking care in the Russian state-owned infirmaries. Moreover, with regards to the providers of ventilators, private buyers comprised of 30% of current sales (TI 2020). These are only examples of many cases of COVID-related corruption scandals around the world. This paper, however, will focus on examining the worst place to be in a pandemic (in the month of September 2021), the Philippines as reported by Bloomberg (2021).

The “COVID Resilience Ranking” by Bloomberg for September 2021 showed that the country has a resilience score of 40.2. The Philippines ranked 53rd out of 53 countries. Bloomberg compiled its data using 12 indicators that extend over virus control, the condition of health care, vaccination, general mortality, and development toward restarting travel and relieving border restrictions of which the Philippines ranked in last place.

A. Study Framework of an Effective COVID-19 Response

Figure 2 illustrates the framework of the study of an effective COVID-19 response which begins from the response by the national government and consists of testing, contact tracing, support for the medical sector, subsidies, and vaccination. Testing refers to the test done to an individual to indicate if they are

infected by the virus. Contact tracing in this study would refer to the action or method of detecting persons who were in the vicinity of a person identified with an infectious disease in order to quarantine, test, or treat them. Support for the medical sector should include better pay and safety of the medical frontliners while subsidies come in either cash or in kind. Subsidies should be given especially to those whose economic status is heavily affected by the pandemic. Lastly, a high vaccination rate of the population is essential to attain herd immunity.

The challenges the governments face include the composition of the response team, logistics, behavior of the public, and corruption. The composition of the pandemic response team should be, in principle, medical and virology experts, as well as logistics experts for smoother implementation of various processes. These challenges will then influence the outcomes such as the number of cases, recoveries, deaths, job, and economic losses. The desired outcomes of countries amid the COVID-19 pandemic include low number of daily cases, high recoveries, prevention of deaths, and minimizing job and economic losses. To attain these ideal outcomes, the challenges to the government response should be minimized. The pandemic response team should be composed of medical and virology experts as well as logistics experts. The public's behavior is also very important as they should follow health protocols such as wearing face masks amongst others that the government impose. Lastly, corruption at all levels should be addressed. Effective government responses and minimizing the challenges as much as possible can lead to positive outcomes such as low COVID cases, high recovery rates, low to zero deaths, and reduced job and economic losses.

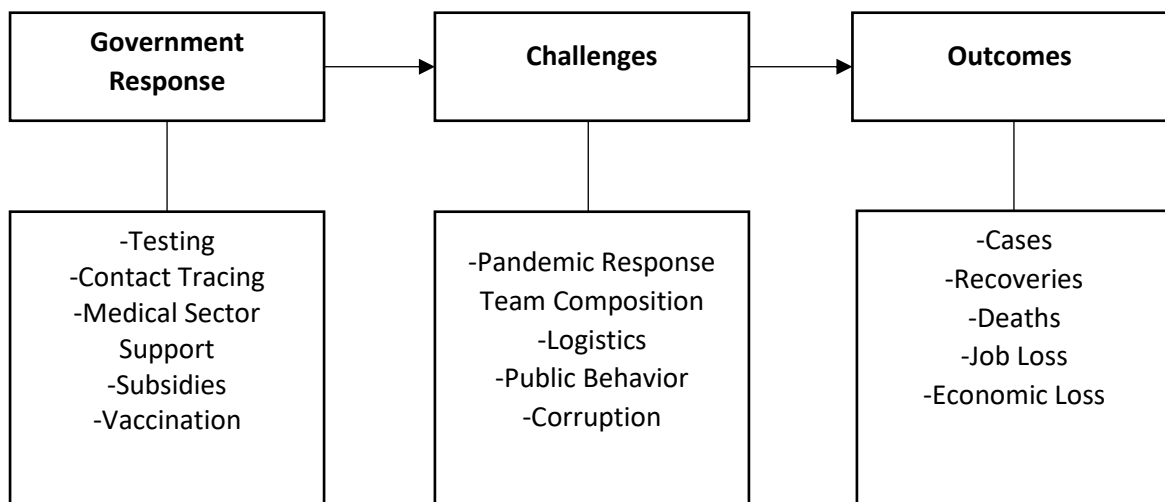


Figure 2. Framework of the Study

Source: Authors

B. Organization of the Paper

Following the introduction section of the paper, the pandemic situation such as cases, recoveries, and deaths in the Republic of the Philippines will be tackled. This will be followed by a section discussing the government response as well as the challenges facing the Philippine government in terms of governance and overall handling of the pandemic situation. A segment about post-pandemic governance will be discoursed before concluding the paper. This research mainly drew lessons based on observations on media coverage in the Philippines and the international community.

II. COVID-19 Situation in the Republic of the Philippines

As of October 2021, the number of people with COVID-19 in the Republic of the Philippines totaled 2,765,672, according to John Hopkins University data (2021). The number of deaths in the country was 42,077, while 25,955,669 people were fully vaccinated, representing 24.01% of the total population. In comparison, neighboring Southeast Asian country Indonesia has 25.22% of its population vaccinated, while

Singapore leads the region with 82.33%. In Japan, 70.33% of the population is fully vaccinated, while the percentage of fully vaccinated population in the United States is 58%. Apart from the relatively low vaccination rate, the country also has a high mortality rate of 1.5%, as shown in JHU data (2021). It was reported that the country has an average of 39 deaths per 100,000 population. In addition, the Philippines is notorious for the longest lockdown in the world, which began in March 2020 (Aljazeera 2021). Recently (as of October 2021), the Philippines was ranked as the worst place to be in the event of a pandemic, according to Bloomberg's resilience ranking, despite the decline in infections in the country (Philippine Star 2021). Apart from the Philippines, Southeast Asian countries ranked the lowest.

Like all countries in the world, the Philippines has had its share of impacts from COVID-19. The country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) shrank by 0.2% in early of 2020, the first drop since the last quarter of 1998, a year after the Asian economic disaster (Venzon 2020). Following the country's 16.5% GDP contraction in the second quarter of 2020, the country suffered a "technical recession" (Manila Standard 2020). Philippine GDP experienced its worst shrinkage since the second world war, putting up negative growth of 9.5% in 2020, as reported by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA). The last shrinkage for a complete year was in 1998, in the midst of the Asian economic disaster, when the GDP shrank by negative 0.5%. The shrinkage in 2020 was also worse than the negative contraction of 7% in 1984 (ABSCBN 2021). The country managed to overcome the recession in the second quarter of 2021 and recorded a growth of 11.8% (Business World 2021). Similar to most other countries, the Philippines' retail sector was hardly affected. As reported by the Philippine Retailers Association, the "overall retail environment" recorded a decline of 30% to 50% (Van 2020). Regardless of the drop, most retailers providing basic services, including pharmacies, hardware stores, supermarkets, and convenience stores stayed open throughout the country to cater to customers, while other stores in malls were shut down (Philippine Star 2020). On the other hand, classes were suspended starting early March 2020 (Casas and Araja 2020). Like most countries in the world, the Philippines also moved to online learning. While online learning has continued, the Philippines is one of the countries that have yet to implement face-to-face classes. According to UNICEF, the Philippines is one of the last nations to allow face-to-face education to be conducted again. The only other country that still allows face-to-face instruction is Venezuela as of September 2021 (Deiparine 2021). This could have several implications for the country's education system in the foreseeable future.

III. Philippine Government Response to COVID-19

After the verification of the initial transmission of the disease in the Philippines on March 7, 2020, the Philippine Department of Health raised the alert level to "Code Red Sub-Level 1" (CNN 2020). Philippine President Duterte subsequently declared the "Proclamation No. 922" on March 9th of the same year, to officially declare a public health disaster, and allowing local government units (LGUs) to use their resources for disaster risk management (Parrocha 2020). On March 24, 2020, the "Bayanihan to Heal as One Act" was signed into law, giving President Duterte more power to address the pandemic. This law was then annulled by a supplemental law, which was the "Bayanihan to Recover as One Act" which was signed on September 11 of the same year (Rey 2020).

Right after the explosion of the confirmed COVID-19 cases, President Duterte asked Congress to conduct a special assembly on March 23 to authorize the "Bayanihan to Heal as One Act" that would give authority the President to use the needed powers to take emergency procedures to tackle the nationwide emergency linked to COVID -19 for an initial three months, of which can be prolonged by Congress. The law would permit President Duterte to reorganize, reprogram, and realign a budget amounting to approximately PHP 275 billion (about USD 5.37 billion) from the projected 2020 approved national budget of PHP 438 billion (about USD 8.55 billion) in response to the pandemic (Parrocha 2020). It also allowed President Duterte to momentarily take control of the procedure of public amenities and private health amenities and other essential amenities to use as quarantine facilities, housing of health employees, and delivery and storage of medical goods, and facilitate and streamline the approval of test kits (Luci-Atienza 2020).

As mentioned earlier, the Philippines has the longest lockdown in the world. The famous lockdown began on March 12, 2020, when President Duterte declared a partial lockdown in the capital Manila, which was then put into effect on March 15 (Esguerra 2020). The lockdown was stretched on March 16, when the president enforced an “expanded community quarantine” (ECQ) covering all of the Luzon Island and its neighboring islands. It was a complete lockdown that limited transportation, enforced a harsh home quarantine on all homes while shutting down all unnecessary private enterprises in the country. This quarantine was lengthened and re-instated numerous times throughout the pandemic. The LGUs out of the Luzon Island and the capital also took numerous procedures to restrict the propagation of the virus in their areas. In the middle of 2020, most of the country was put under a more relaxed and integrated “general community quarantine” (GCQ), though harsher measures persisted in place in some regions. Numerous outbreaks of COVID resulted to new local lockdowns (Luna 2020).

Amid the world’s longest lockdown, the Philippine government has provided cash to Filipinos hit hard by the pandemic. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) is the department in charge for executing the government’s “Social Amelioration Program” (SAP). This is an emergency assistance in the form of cash to be given to disadvantaged families impacted by COVID-19 and its quarantine procedures (Cudis 2020). The department’s aim is to make 18 million poor families the recipients of the program. Families with monthly salaries of less than PHP 10 thousand (about USD 200) are granted priority. The DSWD has given the LGUs the authority to distribute the cash, although the department maintains its support to the efforts of the LGUs, together with the on-the-ground authentication of recipients (Manila Bulletin 2020). Interestingly, in the second part of the SAP, President Duterte’s administration transferred the duty of disseminating the cash assistance to the military and police from the LGUs because of criticisms about the sluggish payments and the misuse of the resources meant for certain sectors. The national government downloaded the relief funds under the first tranche of the SAP to local government units to provide crisis support to poor families and employees affected by the lockdown constraints (Punongbayan and Romero 2020). In addition to cash assistance, the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) declared that it will release PHP 30 billion (approximately \$581 million) in advances to its official health facilities to give health workers with the funds they need to effectively tackle the COVID-19 crisis (CNN Philippines 2020). In addition, President Duterte signed “Administrative Order No. 26”, which would give the country’s frontline government officials and employees a regular hazard allowance of PHP 500 (about USD 10), as reported by Merez (2020).

There are various controversies about the country’s mass testing. Separately, in May 2020, the national government began establishing mega swab centers by converting various existing facilities to conduct mass testing in the country. The test kits used “reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction” (RT-PCR) (Mendoza 2020).

Police Chief Archie Gamboa instructed his bureau to boost its prominence in different areas and to detain without warning the persons engaged in events that disrupt quarantine procedures on spatial distance and mass meetings (Marquez 2020). Boundary barriers provided by the Philippine army, police, and coast guard were established in communal quarantine regions to regulate the movement of citizens and supplies and eventually suppress the propagation of the virus (Rita 2020). The Philippine Police also arrested persons hoarding basic commodities in shops and reporting companies that did not conform with the Department of Trade and Industry guidelines by controlling the costs of these supplies throughout the pandemic (Ramos 2020). In turn, the Navy and Air Force used their planes and ships to deliver personal protective equipment and medical necessities, and to transport health workers to different areas in the country (Sadongdong 2020).

IV. Global Efforts to Tackle COVID-19

The world can learn from the COVID-19 response failures of the Republic of the Philippines as other national governments have a totally different approach in responding to the pandemic. For instance, the main government body that spearheads the COVID-19 response in the country is mostly retired army

generals. This will be discussed further in the subsequent sections. In comparison, virologists and medical experts are the ones that make decisions in most countries around the world.

International organizations and national governments alike created guidelines to tackle COVID-19 both at the international and local levels. It is up to each national government to implement them effectively, while incorporating or using their own domestic strategies. Each country has their own style, such as aiming for zero COVID cases and imposing strict lockdowns. Other countries on the other hand, choose to adapt and to “live with” coronavirus. The World Health Organization (WHO) provides intensive guidelines to respond to the pandemic. The United Nations, on the other hand, promotes their three pillars of operation – 1) delivery of a large-scale, coordinated, and comprehensive health response; 2) adoption of policies that address the devastating socioeconomic, humanitarian, and human rights aspects of the crisis; and 3) recovery process that builds back better (UN 2020).

As for national governments, Taiwan was considered an early role model as it learned its lessons from the last SARS pandemic. On the other hand, mainland China decided to take the road to zero COVID – which meant strict lockdowns and quarantines, severe border restrictions, rapid mass testing and vaccination. The hermit country of New Zealand followed a similar path but was less stringent than China. The country focused on putting funds into contact tracing, testing, and a central quarantine approach to stop community spread of the virus. New Zealanders have essentially accomplished this and essentially live in a world without COVID (Chang, Hong, and Varley 2020). South Korea certified local symptomatic kits within weeks of the virus’s development, made its own, and numerous super-fast contact detectives scouring over the credit card data and camera recording to chase down COVID clusters. Similar to Pakistan, Japan, and other parts of Asia, Korea has gained from its current epidemic experience after the “Middle East Respiratory Syndrome” (MERS) outbreak in 2015 (Chang, Hong, and Varley 2020).

Western democracies have largely chosen to live with COVID but imposed lockdowns as cases increased. Western Europe is now being hit by a fierce wave that is forcing governments to enforce new lockdowns. The restraint attained during the spring was reversed when restrictions were relaxed, which allowed COVID to be scattered again by holiday travelers (Chang, Hong, and Varley 2020).

The United States recently issued its nationwide plan for responding to COVID-19 and preparing for the pandemic, which consists of seven goals: 1) restore confidence in the American people; 2) conduct a safe, effective, and comprehensive vaccination campaign; 3) contain the spread by expanding masking, testing, treatment, data, workforce, and clear public health standards; 4) immediately expand emergency response and invoke the Defense Production Act; 5) safely reopen schools, businesses, and travel while protecting workers; 6) protect the most vulnerable and promote equality, including across racial, ethnic, and rural/urban lines; and 7) restore U.S. leadership in the world and better prepare for future threats. Japan has also chosen to live with coronavirus as the country avoids the “3Cs” i.e., enclosed spaces, crowded places, and close contacts.

In addition to the Philippines, Latin American countries are also unable to cope with the pandemic. President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of Mexico have frequently toned down the risk of COVID (Chang, Hong, and Varley 2020). This scenario resulted in many cases and deaths, making these countries two of the worst places to be in the midst of COVID.

The countries with an effective COVID -19 response have a common denominator - on which the study framework of this paper is based. National governments should be able to effectively implement mass and repeat testing, contact tracing, medical sector support, subsidies for those most affected, and vaccination, while minimizing corruption and strong public cooperation have a positive impact on a country’s pandemic response. Unfortunately, there are several factors that affect a country’s response to a pandemic, including incompetent leaders, corruption, and lack of resources. In the following sections, we will explore these challenges in more detail, using the Republic of the Philippines as an example.

V. Governance Challenges, Corruption, and Path to Autocratization in the Philippines

The Republic of the Philippines was branded by Bloomberg as the “worst place to live during a pandemic” recently. The predominantly Catholic nation has had its fair share of governance failures, corruption, and is somewhat transitioning to a more autocratic government. This section will shed light on the country’s response agency, the on-the-ground situation of the medical community, corruption, and the country’s possible path to autocracy.

A. Inter-agency Task Force

The Inter-agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Disease, or more commonly known as IATF, is a multi-sectoral collaboration aimed at providing preparedness and ensuring an effective government response to evaluate, monitor, curb, and thwart the transmission of a potential epidemic in the Philippines. The Department of Health (DOH) is the lead agency of the IATF, working across sectors with a wide range of members of the executive branch of government. The IATF is co-chaired by the Cabinet Secretary and the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources. It has a total membership of 34 executive agencies (IATF 2021).

On January 28, 2020, this interagency task force was activated in light of the threat posed to the country by the novel coronavirus. Its members include the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) and the Department of State (DFA). Regional interagency task forces have also been established in their respective regions to respond to more local issues and concerns (IATF 2021). On the surface, the IATF looks organized and well-coordinated, but the agency’s shortcomings are well known. IATF’s chairman, Francisco Duque III, who is also secretary of the country’s Ministry of Health, is in the middle of a multibillion-dollar corruption scandal. The other leaders of the IATF are anything but medical experts. For example, co-chair Karlo Nograles is a politician, while the other co-chair, Roy Cimatu, is a retired army general. In addition to Cimatu, Interior Minister Eduard Ano, National Task Force Chairman Delfin Lorenzana, and vaccine czar Carlito Galvez were also former military officers. By comparison, the United States’ response to a pandemic includes consultations with the medical community, particularly the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Japan, on the other hand, has an advisory body called the Novel Coronavirus Expert Meeting. The advisory body is composed of the Japanese medical community. Many other countries around the world are letting their respective medical communities lead the fight against the pandemic. Retired army generals with no medical expertise may be one of the reasons the Philippines is losing the fight against COVID -19 and has been named the worst place to have a pandemic.

B. Actual Situation of the Medical Community

The pandemic has taken a toll on the Philippines, and at the forefront of the fight is the medical community. Even before the pandemic, the country did not have a solid medical sector. Equipment is poor, and medical personnel are not well paid. In fact, many nurses trained in the Philippines choose to work abroad after graduation. The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) reported that an entry-level registered nurse receives an average salary of PHP 8,000 (about USD 160) to PHP 13,500 (about USD 270) per month. Registered nurses hired by private hospitals typically get a median income of PHP 9,757 (about USD 195) per month. In government facilities, the basic monthly income of nurses is PHP 33,500 (about USD 671). On the other hand, the average monthly salary of nurses in the U.S. ranges from USD 4,000 to USD 8,000, according to the website for registered nurses in this country. This scenario tempts many of the Philippines’ best medical professionals to seek opportunities abroad instead. For several years, Filipino nurses leave the country after fruitlessly trying to struggle for better wages and working circumstances (Magsambol 2021).

Contact tracing, Case isolation, and physical distancing are identified as the foundation of a successful COVID-19 response, as mentioned by the Lancet Regional Health Western Pacific (LRHWP 2021). A prerequisite for the effective execution of these approaches is a strong public health system and an

adequate workforce, which were seen as insufficient and inadequate in the Philippines even before the COVID era. Inadequate financing in the infrastructure of the health sector as well as the scarcities of health workers hinder the system, while health imbalances further threaten the access to health facilities in the country. In addition, the pandemic is putting more strain on the disjointed public health system. In addition, the deficient government response has led to a lag in mass testing and contact tracing, an overworked medical system, and slow vaccine introduction (LRHWP 2021).

Medical personnel in the Philippines are also overworked, underpaid, and dying. Magsambol (2021) mentioned that frontline health workers endure the poor working circumstances and postponed services while the country grapples with the repeated rise in infections from the highly communicable delta variant. Not only are these employees' wages low, but payment of the risk premium has been delayed. Some have not even received them. Frontline medical workers were supposed to receive benefits as a reward for their service on the front lines. But in reality, that is not the case. The DOH clarified that problems with administration added to the setbacks in releasing reimbursements, as it first had to verify that the medical personnel actually treated infected persons directly. Philippine senators mentioned that all health employees, whether or not they directly treat COVID-19 patients, should receive the "special risk premium" because they are all in danger of getting the virus (Magsambol 2021). In addition, two out of five COVID -related deaths in the Philippines are health care workers, and about 2% of all positive cases also worked in the health sector (Sabillo 2021).

Although the President has the power to allocate resources to fight the pandemic, it is evident that the resources are not in favor of the weak health sector. The president of the country's Nurses Association, Maristela Abenojar, criticized the government's response, saying, "Many promises have been broken. This is their pattern of behavior: they will investigate this and that. We are in a national health emergency, so any action should be fast. Every hour, every day you waste can cost someone's life." These scenarios caused several health care workers to quit their jobs or go abroad (De Vera 2021).

C. Corruption

The Republic of the Philippines is one of the most corrupt nations in Asia and in the whole world. The young democratic country, which was under colonial rule for four centuries, suffered two decades of dictatorship and has never really bounced back since then. The COVID-19 pandemic yet again provides opportunities for corruption. Easy examples include the procurement processes as the nation's heavily bureaucratic system buckles under the misappropriation of funds.

In testing for the virus alone, there are many anomalies that can be identified. The Morningstar (2020) broke down the expenses. It begins with screening which costs PHP 510 followed by diagnostic work-up amounting to about PHP 800, followed by specimen collection costing PHP 947. Then another PHP 451 for specimen transport. Finally, the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing costs PHP 5,422. All these make for a total of about PHP 8,150 or about USD 162. Medical experts mentioned that it is not necessary to do screening and diagnostic work-up since testing only requires nasal swabbing, which would not cost the PHP 947 being charged for specimen collection. Moreover, it is absurd to pay for specimen transport (or courier service), thinking that patients needed to go to the laboratory to get tested (Morningstar 2020). In a dialogue at the House of Representatives, Congresswoman Janette Garin, an ex-secretary of health, stated that a private establishment is surrounding the importation of Natch-CS (a fully automated extraction instrument used for testing COVID-19) as well as MA-6000 tissue culture kits, by claiming to be the exclusive distributor of their manufacturers. Government bureaus were "forced" to purchase from this private enterprise, instead of dealing directly with foreign manufacturers. Garin also admonished the DOH for not buying PCR or swab-testing kits immediately from overseas producers to slash the testing cost. She said that the real price of the test kits (complete with reagents and consumables) obtained promptly from overseas producers is only PHP 800 to PHP 900 (about USD 16 to USD 18) per complete set (Morningstar 2020). From these figures alone, we can calculate those billions of pesos have already been misappropriated.

In addition, the costing of USD 162 is just too high especially for a developing nation like the Philippines. By comparison, the average cost of testing in the United States is between USD 36 to USD 180 depending on the location according to the data by John Hopkins University (2021), while in Japan, the average cost of testing is between JPY 3000 to 46000 (about USD 30 to USD 460) according to Metropolis Japan (2021). In Vietnam, the average cost of testing amounts to VND 734,000 or about USD 29 (Vietnam News 2021).

Another major corruption scandal in the Philippines amid the pandemic involves the country's national health insurance fund. Representatives of the troubled Philippine Health Insurance Corporation were accused of stealing some PHP15 billion (about USD 300 million) through various fraudulent schemes, according to a former official (Jalea and Peralta 2020). The corporation's former anti-fraud officer, Thorsson Montes Keith, who had previously quit over "widespread corruption" within the agency, claimed that "mafia members" were responsible for what he called the "crime of the year" because of irregular dealings (Jalea and Peralta 2020). The missing funds were the unlawful discharge of temporary compensation mechanisms or funds earmarked for "random events" like the COVID situation to hospitals that had not yet registered COVID -19 cases. The sum also consisted of the allegedly overvalued information technology systems that the corporation would like to acquire (Jalea and Peralta 2020).

Among the corruption scandals in the country, nothing is more scandalous than the Pharmally Pharmaceuticals Corporation scandal. The Pharmally scandal brought into focus the role of middlemen in buying agreements, which are not deemed as unlawful. However, it is a caution when intermediaries are making billions from dubious contracts while many citizens are enduring the negative effects of the pandemic COVID-19 (Baclig 2021). The government lost PHP 5 million in its first purchase deal with foreign-owned Pharmally Pharmaceuticals Corp or simply Pharmally. A chart by Ed Lustan (2021) summarizes Pharmally's transactions with the Philippine government (Figure 3).

A Senate inquiry described the costly first transaction between TigerPhil, Pharmally, and the PS-DBM as follows:

- March 12, 2020: Greentrends Trading International sells TigerPhil 500,000 face masks at a unit price of PHP 18, for a total amount of PHP 9 million.
- March 12, 2020: TigerPhil buys 500,000 face masks from Greentrends at a unit price of PHP 18 each, or for a total of PHP 9 million.
- March 25, 2020: TigerPhil sells the face masks to Pharmally at a higher unit price of PHP 23.90, the latter paying PHP 11,950,000.
- March 25, 2020: PS-DM purchased the face masks acquired from Pharmally at a unit price of PHP27.72, which was PHP9.72 higher than the price set by Greentrends and PHP3.82 higher than TigerPhil's unit price. The government procurement agency paid a total of PHP13.86 million for the said face masks.

By adding the markup to the price of the face masks originally sold by Greentrends, TigerPhil earned at least PHP2,950,000, while Pharmally earned around PHP1,910,000 in just one transaction.

The company acted as a middleman and still earned a total of PHP393 million from government contracts for the supply of face masks and face shields from April to June 2020, Senate Minority Leader Franklin Drilon said last month. Aside from the estimated profits from the multibillion-dollar contracts, Senator Richard Gordon revealed the brand-new luxury vehicles worth PHP52.9 million registered to Pharmally's top three executives shortly after the company landed the juicy government contracts (Baclig 2021).

As reported by the Philippine Daily Inquirer, the prices of the expensive vehicles allegedly owned by the three Pharmally executives were PHP13.5 million for Lincon Ong's Porsche Carrera and another PHP5.9 million for his Lexus RCF, PHP13 million for Twinkle Dargani's Lamborghini Urus and PHP8.5 million for Mohit Dargani's Porsche 911 Turbos S.

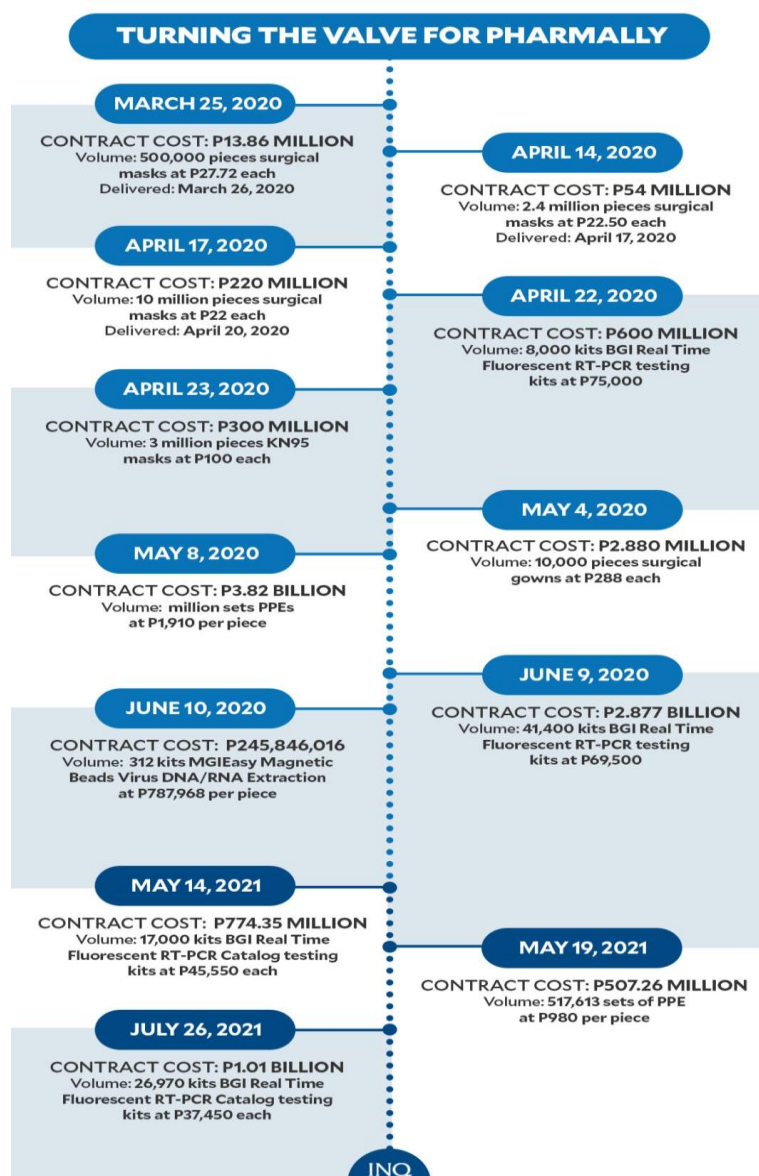


Figure 3. Turning the Valve for Pharmally: History of Transactions between Pharmally and the Philippine Government

Source: Ed Lustan, the Philippine Daily Inquirer

Aside from these corruption scandals, the Philippines is also one of the largest borrowers from the World Bank. San Jose (2021) reported that the Philippines was named by the WB as its top borrower for fiscal year 2021 with USD 3.07 billion in loans requested by the country for its fight against COVID-19. The funds were also lent to boost the local economy as we face the largest pandemic-related output gap in the East Asia and Pacific region. By comparison, in 2020, the country borrowed only USD 1.87 billion through the World Bank's lending arm, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). In stark contrast, while we are the largest borrower of COVID -19-related loans, the Philippines ranks last in the latest Nikkei COVID-19 Recovery Index, as reported by San Jose (2021). Of the 121 countries in the index, the Philippines ranks last in the following categories: infection management, confirmed cases of COVID -19 compared to the number of peak cases, confirmed cases per capita, tests per case, vaccine introduction, total vaccine doses administered per capita, new vaccine doses administered per capita, proportion of people fully vaccinated, mobility, community mobility, Oxford Stringency Index, and flight

activity. It is interesting to note that, as mentioned earlier, the predominantly Catholic country also ranks last in the Bloomberg list.

These are only a few examples of major corruption scandals in the country as countless more put the lives of the Filipino people at risk. Undeniably, as stated by UN Secretary General Guterres, “corruption is even more damaging in times of crisis as the world is experiencing now with COVID-19”. The Republic of the Philippines is just one of many examples where corruption has been more rampant amid the pandemic. These scenarios provide glimpses of the future of democracy and post pandemic society.

D. Changes in the Perception of Corruption in the Philippines

The assessment of corruption in the Philippines has deteriorated for the second straight year according to the report by Transparency International (TI) (2021). The country’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI) slid two places from 113 in 2019 to 115 out of 180 countries in 2020. In 2018, the country ranked 99. This is the lowest since 2011, when the country ranked 129th out of 178 countries included in the index at the time.

According to the Philippine Star (2020), the CPI is an annual report that ranks nations and territories based on the observed levels of public sector corruption, based on evidence from experts and businesspeople. The report employs a range from zero to 100, in which zero is extremely corrupt and 100 is extremely clean. The Philippines was first incorporated in the list in 2010, having a ranking of 134. It constantly improved in the succeeding years, with a rank of 129 in 2011, 105 in 2012, while 94 in 2013. The country achieved its highest ranking in 2014 at 85 (PhilStar 2020). The decrease in the country’s CPI ranking can be attributed to the corruption scandals related to the government’s handling of the coronavirus. Although there are no domestic reports yet regarding how the Filipino people perceive the corruption levels in the country, the public’s impatience with the government is evident, as seen in social media and as reported by other media outlets. Perhaps the coming 2022 elections will reveal what the Filipino people really think about corruption in the country.

VI. Democracy and Post-Pandemic Society

The case of the Republic of the Philippines sets a prime example of a democratic nation transitioning into an autocratic nation as the COVID-19 pandemic looms. The Philippines is not alone though, as world autocracies are now home to 68% of the global population (V-Dem 2021). According to the Democracy Report by V-Dem (2021), most democracies acted responsibly but nine democracies registered major violations and 23 moderate violations of international norms. Moreover, 55 autocratic regimes engaged in major or moderate violations. In addition, two-thirds of all countries, imposed restrictions on the media while one-third of all countries have had emergency measures without a time limit (V-Dem 2021).

Since the pandemic began, many democratic countries on the verge of autocratization have started their transitions. The Democracy Report of 2021’s data (Figures 4 and 5) provided evidence on the worsening quality of democracy globally. These gradual erosions in democracy are leading to constraints in freedom and a recession in democracy leads to autocratization. With the disparity evident in the predicted conventional theory of democracy, democratization is stagnant despite the economic development in developing or emerging countries. There is evidence that there is a shift to supporting and strengthening autocratic regimes, as illustrated in Figure 5. While there were some countries that democratized, more democratic countries turned autocratic. The United States, India, and Brazil are large countries that have contributed to the rapid increase in autocratization globally. Aside from these population giants, Belarus, Ethiopia, and other African nations, the Philippines, and Thailand in Southeast Asia were among the countries autocratizing substantially and significantly.

Autocratization usually follows a similar pattern. First, the ruling government attacks the media and society. Then follows the polarization of society by disrespecting opponents or spreading misinformation.

In the case of Philippine President Duterte, his attacks and tirades against the media are very well documented. Duterte attacked Rappler News and initiated the closure of ABS-CBN, the country's largest media network. The franchise of ABS-CBN was not renewed, leading to the closure of the station. The station, which used to broadcast ABS-CBN, became the station of the People's Television Network, better known as PTV-4. The network is the flagship of the Philippine government and is under the supervision of the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO). This network can be easily used to carry out propaganda and spread false information among the Filipino masses. Especially in the most remote rural areas, PTV-4 is the only source of information for the people. The Duterte government also uses false information to attack political opponents. As Jenkins (2017) noted, "Now to the Philippines, where foul-mouthed online trolling is not only legal but openly courted to support political campaigns or denigrate opponents". Hosts of trolls have helped President Duterte rise to power, while his rivals have been accused of similar dirty tricks. These are the foundations that have greatly strengthened support for autocratization in the Philippines.

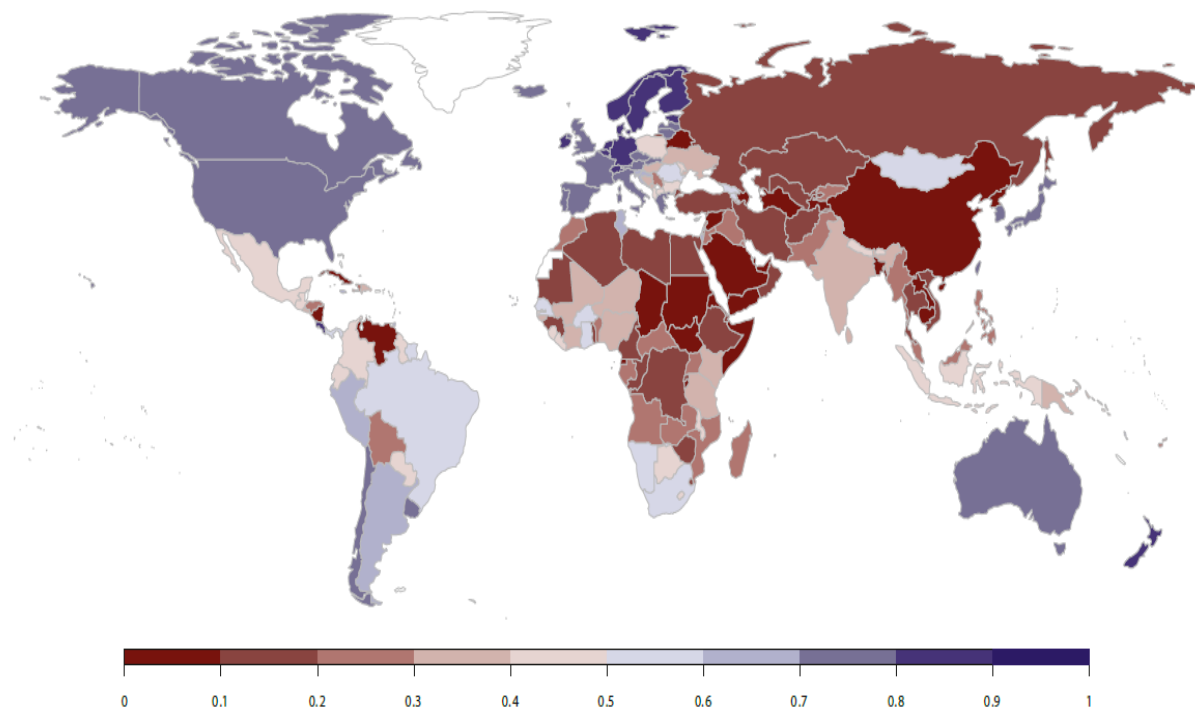


Figure 4. The State of Liberal Democracy in 2020

Note: Countries marked in red show where the LDI has declined substantially and significantly over the past 10 years. Countries marked in blue show where the level of democracy has advanced. Countries in grey are substantially unchanged.

Source: Democracy Report 2021

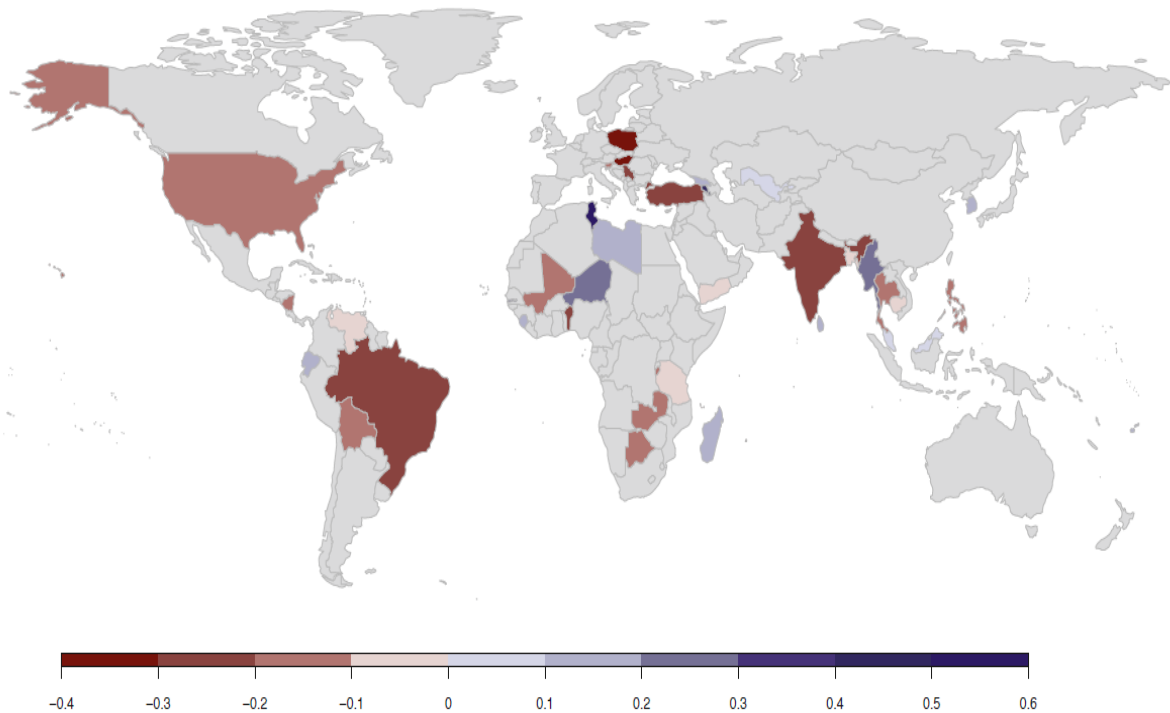


Figure 5. Countries Democratizing or Autocratizing Substantially and Significantly, 2010–2020

Note: Countries marked in red show where the LDI has declined substantially and significantly over the past 10 years. Countries marked in blue show where the level of democracy has advanced. Countries in grey are substantially unchanged.

Source: Democracy Report 2021

The justification for autocratization starts from protecting national sovereignty then ensuring the accountability and transparency of the local civil society organizations. Another justification of autocratization is fighting against terrorism and national security threats (Rutzen 2015). In the Philippines for instance, President Duterte signed into law the National Anti-Terrorism Act to “prevent, prohibit, and penalize terrorism”, thus rescinding Republic Act No. 9372, and evolving from the “Human Security Act of 2007” (Philippine Gazette 2020). This was a result of autocratization in a democratic country such as the Philippines. The phenomenon of “deconsolidation” in democracies begins with the public perception, where there is a decline of people’s trust in democracy, especially the younger generation. In another example, with the “soft power” of the two economic powerhouses of China and Russia, their policies are making democracy less attractive. Consequently, there was a rise in populist parties with politics of intolerance, putting emphasis on the countries’ own profits in foreign policy. For example, Former President Donald Trump’s “America First” policy. This scenario further undermines the charms of a Western democracy which then causes negative effects for democratization (Carothers and Brown 2018).

The economic downturn in western countries causes a decrease of aid flow in the emerging and developing countries. This equates to less pressure for the promotion of democratization. Amid the economic turmoil of the west, more and more developing countries are turning to the rising China for economic ties. Unlike the developing nations’ ties with the West, economic assistance from China is without conditions in human rights and internal political issues. This scenario means that the developing nations’ governments can impose more restrictions on the opposition party and have more control over the media, and only need comparatively less efforts in restricting civic space. Democracy is becoming less attractive globally as it was not able to keep its promise of achieving freedom and wealth. Instead, neoliberal economic globalization in western democratic countries has produced de-industrialization, increased youth unemployment, income inequality, and poverty. On the other hand, the autocratic China was able to recover from the Lehman Brothers crisis in 2008, which caused a global recession, and was able to maintain its long-term growth. The “Chinese style” state-led market economy, or “Beijing Consensus” is now considered to nurture economic growth and is more influential now than ever before.

The democratic recession of a country is the result of a combination of domestic factors, the weakening of international factors that promote democracy, and the increase of international factors promoting autocratization. Instead of a political party leading a coup d'état, an outwardly legitimate democratic erosion is mainly taking place. For instance, the Philippines domestic factor is the Duterte administration, which strengthened its ties with China and Russia, an international factor that promotes autocratization, while distancing itself from the western democracies. Values are silently shifting from supporting a democracy where policy making is time consuming, to having a strong and competent leader to pave the way, even at the cost of minimized freedom and rights. Especially now amidst the pandemic, many democracies are starting to autocratize further.

VII. Conclusion

Autocracy is swiftly on the rise more than ever before as the COVID-19 pandemic puts democracy at risk. On paper, it seems that autocratic countries handle the pandemic better than democracies, which has prompted other developing nation democracies to lean more on autocracy. The Philippines is one of those countries that is transitioning to autocracy, which was supposed to do better in responding to the pandemic. The study framework of the paper proves otherwise.

As governments across the world were gradually able to lift lockdowns, restrictions, and re-open their economies and schools, the Philippines are still lagging way behind. The country continues to impose different kinds of lockdowns in addition to the prolonged closure of schools. It is becoming more and more evident that the retired army generals, who are the leaders of the country's COVID-19 response, the IATF, do not know what they are doing, or what they are supposed to do. Yet, President Duterte would rather let them lead. Things have improved somewhat recently, as the government now listens to the advice given by OCTA Research, a research body of the University of the Philippines specializing in COVID-19. Aside from the poor choice of pandemic response leaders, government fund mismanagement has also contributed to the country's poor COVID-19 management. The PHP 15 billion (USD 300 million) from the country's Department of Health – the institution that was supposed to frontline the fight against COVID, instead mismanaged the Filipinos' taxes. As of writing this report, no officials have been punished and what happened to the mismanaged funds remains a mystery. A huge corruption scandal, which involved the private company Pharmally, allegedly earned billions from government contracts while they provide medical supplies to the government. Pharmally's price quotation was much higher than the average prices of COVID-related medical supplies. In addition to these, there are various government projects, such as the beautification of Manila Bay, that were non-essential especially during the pandemic. The country was also the top borrower from the World Bank, with USD 3.07 billion in loans. Despite this, President Duterte always tells the public that the government has emptied its coffers and that the country does not have any more money.

It remains a mystery as to what happened to the huge amount of loans and the mismanaged funds. The country has poor contact-tracing capabilities because it lacks infrastructure. The sustained closure of schools would also affect the education of Filipinos in the long run. Although the upper class can afford to conduct classes remotely, it might not be as good as conducting classes face-to-face. A different scenario can be seen in the lower class – as many of them have no access to digital infrastructure to attend online classes. The prevalent lockdowns on the other hand will have a lasting effect on the country's poor. The working class relies on jobs that are paid on a daily basis, and with the closure of establishments with little to no support from the government, the country's poor would suffer the most. The missing funds could have built a foundation for all these aforementioned problems; unfortunately, this is not the case.

Poor government response, military generals leading the pandemic response, various corruption scandals, high cases, deaths, and economic and job losses – all indicate that the country's pandemic response was a failure, reaching the point where the country was ranked last in terms of pandemic response in both Bloomberg and Nikkei Asia. Indeed, autocratization is not necessary to respond better to the pandemic and the world can learn from the Philippines' failures. The country's way forward will also be interesting to look

at, as a military man, a boxer, and the son of a former dictator will vie for the position of top official in the country.

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