

EDITED BY NILS RINGE AND LUCIO RENNÓ

POPULISTS AND THE PANDEMIC

HOW POPULISTS AROUND THE WORLD
RESPONDED TO COVID-19

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN EXTREMISM AND DEMOCRACY



POPULISTS AND THE PANDEMIC

Populists and the Pandemic examines the responses of populist political actors and parties in 22 countries around the globe to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of their attitudes, rhetoric, mobilization repertoires, and policy proposals.

The responses of some populist leaders have received much public attention as they denied the severity of the public health crisis, denigrated experts and data, looked for scapegoats, encouraged protests, questioned the legitimacy of liberal institutions, spread false information, and fueled conspiracies. But how widespread are those particular reactions? How much variation is there? What explains the variation that does exist? This volume considers these questions through critical analysis of countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa by leading experts with deep knowledge of their respective cases. Some chapters focus on populist parties, others on charismatic populist leaders. Some countries examined are democracies, others autocracies. Some populists are left wing, others right wing. Some populists are in government, others in opposition. This variation allows for a panoramic consideration of factors that systematically influence or mediate populist responses to the pandemic. The book thus makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the intersection between two of the most pressing social and political challenges of our time.

The book will be of interest to all those researching populism, extremism, and political parties and those more broadly interested in political science, public policy, sociology, communications, and economics.

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*Edited by
Nils Ringe and Lucio Rennó*

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In memory of Luz do Céu B. Rennó

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THE PHILIPPINES

Penal Populism and Pandemic Response

Paul D. Kenny and Ronald Holmes

As of mid-August 2021, there had been some 1.8 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and just over 31,500 deaths in the Philippines. Based on an estimated population of 110 million, these figures place the Philippines roughly in the middle of the global pack. Situated in the Asian epicenter of the outbreak, the Philippines has experienced three major spikes in the spread of the disease, the first beginning in July 2020 and extending through mid-September; a second, more intense surge beginning in March 2021 before declining and leveling out through mid-July; and a third rise beginning in late July, bringing the seven-day average of new daily cases to an unprecedented level of over 13,000 by mid-August.

The record of President Rodrigo Duterte's government in response to the crisis has been mixed. Initially dismissive of the threat, the administration soon adopted a hardline, if crude, approach to containment of the virus, emulating in some respects the law and order paradigm of the war on drugs—the military and police forces arguably playing more prominent roles than public health officials (Dizon 2020). Weak administrative capacity, manifested especially in the failure to develop a national agency to coordinate the public health response, more than any other factor, has meant an inability to progress from crude containment measures toward more effective track-and-trace approaches. The take-up of vaccinations against the virus remains slow, with the result that the Philippines remains prone to further surges amid the spread of more virulent strains of the disease.

In part, as a result of the reliance on crude instruments such as lockdowns, the Philippines has experienced an especially sharp contraction of economic growth over the course of the pandemic. Moreover, the government's August 2021 decision to restrict the emigration of the country's normally highly mobile healthcare workers in response to crisis will likely have further knock-on effects (Ratcliffe

2021). With remittances being one of the country's major sources of foreign currency, continued limits on international mobility into the medium term do not bode well for the Philippines' economy.

While other leaders worldwide with such mixed records in responding to the crisis have seen their popularity drop, President Rodrigo Duterte retains an enviable approval rating. In June 2021, it stood at 83%, slightly down from the February 2021 level of 87%, but ultimately not much changed from the level observed throughout his presidency.¹ Elected president in May 2016, a survey in September that year gave Duterte an 85% approval rating, while a December 2019 survey—just prior to the COVID-19 outbreak—put him at 86%.

This chapter seeks to explain the curious resilience of Duterte's support through the pandemic. We argue that Duterte's past record of being able to successfully take personal credit for achievements while attributing blame for failures to implementing agencies—not least in the course of his administration's war on drugs—has thus far served him well during the pandemic. Although Duterte remains very much in charge, he has looked to delegate to public health officials much of the response to the crisis. To the extent there have been failures, most people seem to absolve Duterte of responsibility. However, this is not to suggest that Duterte's popularity is fully detached from fundamentals. The state of the economy does appear to reflect directly on him; as a result, the political fallout of the epidemic for Duterte and his followers may therefore be felt more acutely through the indirect effect on the economy rather than in the area of public health per se.

Populism in the Philippines

Although Rodrigo Duterte ran for president in part against what he described as a corrupt Manila establishment, coming from a recognized, if minor, political clan, he was only a partial outsider to the system. Thus, although he has deployed some anti-elite rhetoric over the course of his rise and his presidency (Miller 2018), it does not appear that populist ideology—as typically understood—has had much to do with his appeal (Webb and Curato 2019). In surveys conducted in September 2016 and September 2017, in which we included a common six-item instrument for populist attitudes (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2013), we find no direct association between this set of beliefs and approval of or trust in Duterte, although these anti-establishment attitudes, along with the attribution of charismatic leadership traits to Duterte, are correlated with support for the war on drugs (Kenny and Holmes 2020).

Known for his simple tastes, crude manner, and misogynistic rhetoric (Miller 2018), there is a stronger case to be made that Duterte fits a stylistic understanding of populism (Moffitt 2020). He has repeatedly joked about rape, called each President Obama and the Pope a “son of a whore,” and consistently dehumanized drug addicts and other social outcasts. Certainly, voters appreciate Duterte's

directness and his assertiveness, but it is not clear that his crude rhetorical style or common man persona is what attracts most voters to him (Arguelles and Pantaleon 2020). Rather, Duterte's strongest support comes from better educated and better-off voters, those more likely to be put off by, not attracted to, his buffoonery (Holmes 2016).

Duterte is nevertheless a singularly populist leader, at least when the term is understood primarily in strategic rather than ideological or stylistic terms (Kenny 2019). Populists, according to the strategic approach, are "charismatic leaders who seek to establish unmediated links with otherwise unattached mass constituencies in their quest to gain and retain power" (Kenny forthcoming). The strategic approach to populism is neutral with respect to the content of mass appeals (e.g., law and order, nationalism, inequality). Charismatic leadership is theorized to be of greatest appeal when the alternative bureaucratic and patrimonial sources of legitimacy are weak—thus, periods of crisis are especially hospitable to the populist strategy.

Philippines politics are highly personalized, with parties counting for very little (Rood 2020). Party membership is almost nonexistent and electoral volatility is extremely high. Vote buying remains an important strategy at local levels, but as the role of clientelism has diminished in presidential elections (coinciding with the growth of the electorate), celebrity, or notoriety, has become an increasingly valuable political asset. Most recently, Joseph "Erap" Estrada was a popular actor who used his celebrity status to become president from 1998 to 2001. Despite his own wealth, often playing the role of the downtrodden hero, Estrada found his strongest electoral support from among the poor. Ferdinand Marcos, prior to the authoritarian Martial Law period, also sought to circumvent local political bosses by appealing directly to voters on the basis of a strongman image. Marcos was, in turn, refining techniques pioneered by Communist insurgent fighter, Ramon Magsaysay, president from 1953 to 1957 (Kenny 2019, 31–32).

Like that of several of his presidential predecessors, Duterte's populism is most evident in the charismatic nature of his appeal. By this, we mean that Duterte's followers attribute to him exceptional personal leadership qualities (Kenny and Holmes 2020). For his part, Duterte has cultivated a strongman image through direct appeals to voters on television and especially social media. Duterte's early 2016 presidential campaign was built on his record as the rough-hewn, tough-on-crime mayor of Davao City, the city he had personally run since the ouster of dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.

Duterte's main message in 2016 was the promise of an aggressive crusade against the sale and use of illegal drugs. With the economy still growing well in 2016 and little public interest in his proposal for constitutional reform, his campaign instead played on concerns over drug-related crime and portrayed Duterte as the only candidate with the will and the capacity to resolve the disorder. The issue of criminality was driven in part by Duterte, but Philippines National Police (PNP) data also show the real incidence of recorded crime rising in the two years prior to his election. Never one for political correctness, Duterte

pledged to dump the bodies of so many drug dealers in Manila Bay that the fish would grow fat. In office, Duterte has made good on his macabre promise. Official figures put the number killed in police operations at 6,165 (June 2021), but unofficial estimates, which include vigilante and related killings, are many times higher (Lalu 2021). This heavy-handed approach has attracted considerable criticism from liberal quarters, with Duterte, in turn, responding by cracking down on the press and the political opposition.

The COVID-19 response

Early response

Although the Duterte government has come to adopt a hardline containment approach to the virus with curfews, lockdowns, harsh penalties, and the suppression of dissent being widely deployed, the early response to the outbreak was muted. Despite the growing number of COVID-19 cases in China by the end of January 2020, with the World Health Organization declaring a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, Duterte was initially dismissive of the risk. As late as January 28, the Department of Health (DoH) reported no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Philippines, but acknowledged that it was closely monitoring the condition of 22 persons. On January 30, a 38-year-old female Chinese national arriving from Wuhan via Hong Kong was admitted to a government hospital showing pneumonia symptoms. In a public appearance in early February 2020, Duterte still appeared dismissive, cursing the virus and quipping that he would “slap” it once he sees it (Lopez 2020).

Lockdown

This early dismissiveness aside, once the DoH confirmed the first local transmission of COVID-19 on March 7, the government—and Duterte—began to take the virus very seriously. The DoH raised the alert level to Red sublevel 1 and on March 8, Duterte issued Proclamation 922, declaring that the National Capital Region (NCR), home to about a fifth of the Philippine population, would be put in a State of Public Health Emergency. The declaration of a state of national emergency, Red sublevel 2, was declared on March 12. Duterte, flanked by members of his cabinet and with the high brass of the military and the police behind him, acknowledged the seriousness of the crisis, asking the public not to panic and invoking obedience to the quarantine regulations. On March 17, Duterte expanded the scope of the lockdown to cover the entire island of Luzon on which the NCR is located.

From March 2020 to the time of writing, the NCR was yet to exit from quarantine or semi-lockdown conditions. The new surge of cases in mid-March 2021 brought back strict community quarantine conditions across the archipelago. Under the most stringent lockdown conditions, so-called *Enhanced Community*

Quarantine, residents are required to remain indoors unless they have a permit that enables them to leave to purchase essential items. Businesses classified as nonessential must be closed and public transportation is limited. Under less severe levels of restriction, some businesses are allowed to remain open, but vulnerable groups, including the elderly, must remain inside. In spite of the apparent comprehensiveness of the lockdown, especially in metro Manila, the highly virulent Alpha (UK), Beta (South Africa), and Delta (India) strains of the virus have proven impossible to contain.

Testing, tracking, and tracing

The lack of capacity in the public health system has limited the use of more technologically intensive tactics such as location tracking, regular testing, and contact tracing. For instance, although Duterte ordered a temporary ban on travelers from Wuhan at the end of January 2020, it was clear that the government was administratively ill-prepared to combat the spread of the virus; a hearing in the Philippine senate revealed that fewer than a fifth of the passengers on the flight arriving from Wuhan that carried the first recorded Philippines case of COVID-19 had been tracked. Much of the implementation of advanced protocols was left to local government units which vary in terms of their capacity. Cities (c. 146) are better equipped with the financial resources necessary to mobilize human and other technological resources compared to municipalities (over 1,480) and provinces (80). The national government for its part failed to coordinate testing, tracing, and treatment during the first lockdown in March 2020. Indeed, never particularly effective, fully a year after the outbreak began, contact tracers were having greater, not lesser, difficulty in identifying close contacts beyond the household (Talabong 2021). As of June 2021, the Philippines had 226 testing laboratories and a testing rate of 407 per million. Regionally, this puts it above Indonesia at 259, but well below Malaysia at 2,308. The scale of the August 2021 surge, many due to community transmission, has strained an already overburdened system.

Masks, social distancing, and medical interventions

Following his initially dismissive attitude toward the virus, Duterte has been consistent in mandating social distancing, the wearing of masks, hygiene, and in complying with public health advice. We cannot fail to note Duterte's bizarre advice to citizens to disinfect face masks with gasoline, but generally Duterte has gone along with, rather than resisted, the scientific consensus. For instance, in April 2021, despite political pressure, Duterte took the advice of public health officials to wait for the results of a controlled trial before allowing the use of ivermectin as a treatment for COVID-19. At the height of the outbreak, Duterte, unlike Trump, wore a mask in public, and in mid-2021 even went as far as to threaten to imprison those caught wearing masks improperly (Ranada 2021).

The Philippines performance in treating those who have contracted the virus also places it somewhere in the middle of the pack, given its level of development. The ratio of deaths to reported cases in the Philippines is 1.7% compared to a global mean of 2.2%, which suggests that the Philippines has been more effective than average in treating those who have contracted the virus. However, given the inaccuracies in these numbers due to underreporting of cases with mild or no symptoms in countries with low testing rates—including the Philippines—these figures should be interpreted with caution.

Vaccines

Vaccine rollout has moved very slowly due to supply shortages, with the Philippines initially reliant on the less effective Chinese Sinovac vaccine. Almost every Filipino (95%) was worried about contracting the virus at the time of writing (based on data from June 2021). Vaccine hesitancy poses a significant public health challenge for the Duterte administration in its final year in government, with the majority of those refusing to get vaccinated having concerns about safety. Given this problem, Duterte has repeatedly urged people to get vaccinated, even threatening coercion: “You choose, vaccine or I will have you jailed,” said Duterte in a live television address (Reuters 2021). As of this writing, vaccine take-up appears to be improving, with the proportion of Filipinos willing to get the vaccine if available increasing from one in five in February 2021 to nearly one in two in June.

Welfare and economic fallout

The economic fallout from the crisis has been severe. In 2020, the Philippine economy declined by 9.6%, the highest level of contraction among Southeast Asian economies (ABD 2021). The longer-term path to economic recovery remains unclear, although the economy is expected to return to growth in 2021 with further strengthening in 2022. Unemployment sat at 7.7% in June 2021, down from its peak of 8.8% in February, although further lockdowns could see this rate rise again before the vaccination rollout is completed. Inflation rose to 4.2% in early 2021, in part due to global supply chain problems, but with further lockdowns in mid-year, this had fallen back to 3.2% by June.

In personal terms, some 56% of the population reported losing a job or source of income as of February 2021. The government has sought to deploy some welfare measures in order to alleviate the economic pain incurred by restrictions on movement. In March 2020, repeating his admonitions to obey the restrictions, Duterte assured the public that the government had the funds to mitigate the economic impact of the crisis. The government has spent funds on individual health and income support or what is referred in the vernacular as *ayuda* (help). In surveys fielded by Social Weather Stations (2021b), around 70% of the population reports receiving help from the government.

Although the government had some funds available to support business directly, with the president given authority by Congress under the *Bayanihan to Heal as One Act* to realign items in the 2020 national budget, and with the additional appropriations made under the *Bayanihan to Recover as One Act*, it has chosen not to do so. Rather, Duterte has leaned on big business to subsidize the state's response to the crisis by extending assistance to their employees and to the government. By way of compensation, the government has pushed for and secured the passage of a law that provides tax relief to beleaguered firms or in general reduces the rate of corporate taxes within the medium term. It is likely that only Duterte's unique stature, his ability to leverage his popularity and control over the reins of government, has made this pseudo-corporatist response possible.

Constitutional implications

Although on paper the Philippines has one of the strongest presidencies in the world, this authority has often lain dormant in the face of an oligarchic elite that is defensive of its prerogatives (McCoy 2009). Known for his federalist ambitions, well before the onset of the pandemic Duterte had been accused of seeking to centralize power and curb dissent. Under the exigency of the crisis, these trends have become more pronounced. Since March 2020, critics of Duterte have argued with justification that an already cowed Congress has ceded to the president almost unlimited legal and financial powers to address the crisis (Hutchcroft and Holmes 2020).

Duterte has hardly been slow to appreciate the inability of the judiciary or the legislature to function as restraints. Most recently, in one of his almost weekly addresses to the public, Duterte warned that he will refuse to follow the court if it interferes in the executive's action in addressing the pandemic. His comments came as a reaction to a case filed before a Philippine court asking for relief from the quarantine restrictions imposed on returning Filipinos. This again appears to be an exacerbation of preexisting trends rather than a new departure. Duterte's rejection of the power of the judiciary echoes earlier statements about closing Congress, which demonstrated his lack of regard for horizontal accountability and the rule of law.

It is notable also that operations against illegal drug use and distribution and against domestic terrorism have proceeded throughout the period of the pandemic. Indeed, the heavy role of the military and the police in the pandemic response—primarily in the form of enforcing compliance with lockdowns—suggests a complementarity between public health and security from the administration's perspective. Just months into the spread of the virus, the government passed the Anti-Terror Act of 2020. The legislation provides the military and police with even freer rein to surveil suspects and their networks and to detain individuals for questioning without charge. Continued curfews and lockdowns, especially in the NCR, have enabled an even more robust prosecution of the anti-illegal drug campaign. Figures from the PNP show that killings may even have increased following the outbreak of the virus.

Politics of the pandemic

As we noted above, Duterte's popularity has remained astonishingly resilient through the crisis, despite the early missteps and continuing deficiencies in the handling of the pandemic. His approval ratings have remained at around the 85-point level throughout his presidency. As of June 2021, survey data show that just under two in three Filipinos approve of the government's performance in containing the spread of the virus, down from three in four in February 2021. It is, however, noteworthy that accountability for public health tends to fall on local agencies rather than the national government. During the pandemic, Duterte has leveraged this tendency by calling on the public to report to him directly when they encounter problems with their local governments or bureaucrats. Moreover, survey data show that a significant majority (79%) of the population believes that the public's lack of compliance with health protocols is the "real cause" of the spread of the virus in the Philippines (Social Weather Stations 2021a).

Another possible explanation for the absence of blowback for the government's mixed record is the relatively low salience of the pandemic vis-à-vis other issues. Even as some 95% of the population reports being at least somewhat concerned about contracting the virus, once other issues such as wages, unemployment, taxes, welfare, and economic concerns are considered, the virus pales in comparison in terms of salience—at least, according to data that precede the late July 2021 surge in cases. On the back of the early 2021 jump in consumer prices, a February 2021 survey showed that more people believed inflation (18.8%) to be the most urgent concern facing the country (compared with 7.8% for the spread of COVID-19). These ratios hardly changed even after the March 2021 surge in new cases, with June data giving figures of 17.1%–8.3% for respective concerns over inflation and the virus.

Given the weakness of the economy since the onset of the pandemic, this raises the question of why Duterte's approval ratings have not particularly suffered. The apparent lack of response is not due to voter ignorance. In fact, the one notable vulnerability in Duterte's approval ratings is with respect to inflation. Early on in his presidency, high food price inflation was sufficient to dent his approval ratings. Following a doubling of inflation to 6.2% in the third quarter of 2018, survey data show that between June and September disapproval of the Duterte government's handling of inflation shot up from 29% to 47%. The connection between other economic indicators, such as job growth, and Duterte's approval rating is, however, much weaker. Thus, at the same time that the pandemic has induced a general recession, aside from a temporary jump in early 2021, inflation itself has fallen, sitting at only 3.2% in June 2021. This return to low inflation may have mitigated some of the political fallout for the president despite other economic headwinds.

We cannot also discount the effect of Duterte's image management. Throughout the crisis, Duterte has astutely curated his own reputation, projecting himself as resolute, stern, and compassionate, much as he has in the course of the campaign against illegal drugs. A highly experienced politician, Duterte knows

his own spheres of competence, beyond which his habit is to delegate to cabinet members or allies. To avoid being held accountable in the case of failure, he allows his subordinates to take charge of crisis situations and to carry out the necessary interventions. This strategy leaves room for Duterte to subsequently arbitrate, if needed, should the public's reaction to the decision of his subordinates turn negative.

In the case of the pandemic, Duterte has thus far managed to avoid being held to answer for the continued spread of cases or, thus far, for the impact on material well-being. The altogether exogenous nature of COVID-19 as a public health crisis may have worked to absolve Duterte of direct blame for its effects—at least thus far. At the same time, Duterte, from around late March 2020, has stressed the government's limited resources, calling on the private sector to help out and fulfill its social responsibility. Even blame for the delay in the vaccine rollout has been displaced onto big pharma and supply problems in vaccine-producing countries.

Political prognosis

Leading into an election year at the time of writing, given the scale of the public health crisis, continuing tensions in the West Philippine Sea, and the death toll of the drug war, Duterte is likely to face substantial political opposition in determining his successor. Some erstwhile allies, including boxer and Senator Manny Pacquiao, have already begun to turn against him as the presidency approaches its lame duck period. Notwithstanding these criticisms, however, unless his domestic performance approval and trust ratings significantly drop, the fragmented opposition will still find it difficult to defeat whomever he anoints to run in 2022. With the tight control that Duterte enjoys over public financial resources, he possesses a huge carrot that he can dangle to solicit support from patronage-hungry subnational politicians.

Whatever happens at the 2022 elections, however, the legacy of the Duterte administration will have been to completely or substantially emasculate the institutions that typically ensure the accountability of the executive branch: a subservient Congress, a sluggish judiciary, a publicly emasculated supreme audit institution, a cowed electoral commission, and a self-censoring media. In short, Duterte has bequeathed Filipinos a presidency devoid of any significant institutional opposition, an inheritance that any successor with a similar illiberal bent would be free to exploit.

Note

- 1 We report survey data from Pulse Asia, Inc., unless otherwise stated. Links are provided to published reports. Unpublished data, where not embargoed, is available on request. We note that one of the authors, Ronald Holmes, is the president of Pulse Asia, Inc.

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