

Why is Philippines doing so badly in virus suppression? 'Medical Populism' is the problem.

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Medical journal The Lancet ranks Philippines 66th among 91 countries in coronavirus suppression, noting President Rodrigo Duterte's 'medical populism' as a factor

After the Philippines was ranked by 66th among 91 countries in a [study](#) by an independent medical journal submitted to the UN General Assembly, the Department of Health (DOH) said it would continue fighting to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

"We always receive comments. There are rankings, specific comments. But *ang sa amin, magtatatrabaho lang kami ng tuloy-tuloy. Kami ay sama-samang nagtatatrabaho* (But for us, we will continue to work. We will work together)," Health Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire said in a virtual press briefing on Wednesday, September 23.

Vergeire added, "*Kung ano man maging comment, tayo ay patuloy pa rin na magtatrabaho para labanan ang sakit na ito at alagaan ang buong population* (Whatever the comment is, we will continue to work to fight this disease, and take care the whole population)."

The peer-reviewed medical journal *The Lancet* [published the study on September 14](#), which ranked 91 countries based on incidence or the number of new cases per million population per day, averaged during the month of August.

The "*Lancet* COVID-19 Commission Statement on the occasion of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly," said that newly confirmed infections are "the most straightforward measure of the rate of transmission of the virus." It classified countries under 5 categories:

- suppression: new cases is less than or equal to 5;
- low transmission: new cases is less than or equal to 10;
- moderate transmission: new cases is more than 10 but less than or equal to 50;
- high transmission: new cases is more than 50 but less than or equal to 100;
- very high transmission: new cases is more than 100.

The Philippines was under "moderate transmission," with 37.5 new infections per million a day for the month of August, and recorded 0.5 new deaths per million per day in the same period.

The publication also noted that the country conducted 8.2 tests per case daily last month and had an effective reproduction rate of 1.2.

'Medical populism'

Another reason for the failure of countries to suppress the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the COVID-19 disease, was “medical populism,” *The Lancet* said.

Citing Filipino physician and medical anthropologist Gideon Lasco, *The Lancet* defined “medical populism” as “simplifying the pandemic by downplaying its impacts or touting easy solutions or treatments, spectacularizing their responses to crisis, forging divisions between the ‘people’ and dangerous ‘others,’ and making medical knowledge claims to support the above.”

The publication noted the leadership style of US President Donald Trump, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, and [Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro](#), which hindered the implementation of health protocols such as wearing of face masks, and “breeds misinformation and rumor trafficking.”

“We call on all nations to combat the rampant rumor-mongering and misinformation that abounds on COVID-19, and we call especially on leaders to desist in expressing personal viewpoints that are at odds with the scientific and public health experts of their nations,” *The Lancet* said.

On February 14, 2 weeks after the Philippines saw the [first coronavirus death outside China](#), Duterte encouraged Filipinos to travel with him around the country, assuring them that everything was safe.

In his televised speech in July, Duterte advised cash-strapped Filipinos to just [use gasoline to disinfect their masks](#), which science community said that this is harmful to humans especially when inhaled.

As of Tuesday, the Philippines still has the most number of COVID-19 infections in Southeast Asia at 291,789 confirmed cases, despite having the one of the longest lockdowns in the world.

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