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# **Epidemics (Philippines): Duterte responds to COVID-19 with authoritarianism, corruption and neglect**

Sunday 19 April 2020, by [MOHIDEEN Reihana](#) (Date first published: 25 March 2020).

**In the Philippines we have a combination of the worst features of the state under the current conditions of global capitalism.**



*The Duterte regime's strong-armed response to the COVID-19 pandemic contrasts with its failure to deliver basic public services, including healthcare, to the people. Image: PULPOLitika/Facebook.*

The capacity of the Philippine state to provide even the modicum of public services such as health, water, power, housing, public transport and education has been gutted after decades of structural adjustment programs, debt and neoliberal economic policies imposed by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), and through bilateral and multilateral agreements with imperialist countries, enthusiastically embraced by the country's technocrats and successive elite governments.

This ailing public sector, co-exists with “the strong arm” of a state that has increased its capacity to mobilise the military and the police to impose a range of authoritarian measures — from a war against the urban poor resulting in the death of tens of thousands, mainly youth, in the guise of a campaign against drugs, to martial law in the Southern island of Mindanao. Today, this dual character of both a weak and strong-armed state is starkly demonstrated in the Duterte regime's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of March 22, the Department of Health reported 380 cases of COVID-19, with 17 recoveries and 25 deaths — a high mortality rate of approximately 7%. With no mass testing undertaken, these figures are unreliable. Meanwhile, health services are starting to flounder, though the anticipated exponential rise of the disease is still ahead.

Eleven hospitals and medical centres have issued an “urgent appeal” that an “alarming number” of their personnel were under the 14-day mandatory quarantine for individuals exposed to COVID-19 patients, as persons under investigation “continue to flock” to their emergency rooms. These hospitals and medical centres report that most of their “regular rooms have been turned into

Covid-19 isolation areas”, leaving less healthcare resources for other patients with life-threatening conditions.

“The panic is escalating, mortality is increasing, our supplies of personal protective equipment are running short,” the appeal states.

“Our frontline staff are increasingly depleted, as more of them are quarantined or physically and emotionally exhausted, and a number of our medical colleagues are already hooked up to respirators, fighting for their lives in various ICUs [Intensive Care Units].

“Even our ICUs are getting full. Soon, we will have a shortage of respirators. We have every reason to be scared; we are, indeed very scared because we feel that we are on our own to face our countrymen in dire need of help.”

The appeal points out that they are dealing with COVID-19 patients with “increasing mortality”, which exposes their attending medical staff to more danger than usual. The country has no comprehensive universal health care system and one of the most expensive health services in the region.

Instead of addressing the weakness in the health system and infrastructure as its main priority, the Duterte regime’s response has been to declare a lockdown of the entire National Capital Region (NCR) around Metro Manila from March 15 to April 14.

It describes the lockdown as “imposing stringent social distancing measures”, with land, domestic air and sea travel to and from Metro Manila suspended, mass gatherings prohibited, community quarantine imposed, government work suspended (except for a skeletal workforce) and the suspension of classes.

The announcement was made by Duterte at a press conference ringed with the chiefs of the Philippine National Police (PNP) and Philippine Armed Forces (AFP), and police and troops were immediately deployed at checkpoints to prevent people from travelling in and out of the NCR.

No attempt was made during this or subsequent press conferences by Duterte to announce any public health measures to be undertaken. This was followed by the March 17 lockdown of the entire island of Luzon.

We are currently under “enhanced community quarantine”, which is strict home quarantine for all households, with transportation suspended, provision for food and “essential health services” regulated, and a heightened presence of uniformed personnel.

This has been enforced at local checkpoints within Local Government Units, for which a pass is needed to pass through, allowing only the driver of the vehicle on the main highways or the driver and one assistant.

These checkpoints, visible outside my bedroom window, now cordon off and isolate barangays (local neighbourhoods). Except for grocery and drug stores, all shops have been closed. In some barangays, 24-hour curfews have been imposed.

Duterte has repeatedly announced that anyone violating these measures will be arrested. Students, workers and people simply trying to shop for food are now being arrested.

Unlike in South Korea where the military and police carried out temperature checks, testing, clean up and disinfecting, the armed personnel at the checkpoints here are doing none of this. In the first

few days, they were not even provided with basic safety equipment, such as masks and hand sanitiser.

The most immediate impact has been on workers and the army of the underemployed who make their livelihoods in the “informal sector”. On the first day of the lockdown, this led to tense scenes at the checkpoints ringing the borders of the NCR, with commuters venting their anger and despair.

The impact on the livelihoods and lives of working people and the poor has been immediate and devastating. The lockdown has limited efforts by mass movement activists to the communities that they work in, such as food, masks and other aid, with activists at most being only able to assist a couple of hundred households at any one time.

Meanwhile, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has announced a one-time financial assistance of ₱5000 for every worker who could not work during the one-month lockdown. This very measly amount (US\$3 per day for 30 days) can only be procured if the employer sends the required documents to DOLE.

Many workers are complaining that their employers are not doing this, as they still want employees to work during the lockdown. Contract workers have restricted access to the assistance as their “employer” is a third party agent that may not even be registered. Workers in the informal sector receive no assistance.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) has temporarily suspended its poverty alleviation cash grants and unconditional cash transfer (Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program or 4Ps) as well as the distribution of 4Ps cash cards to the country’s poorest families. This is supposedly to “minimise the exposure of the beneficiaries and DSWD employees to the threats of COVID-19”.

There are only six testing sites across the entire country — three hospitals in the NCR, and one each in Baguio, Cebu and Davao. A petition by Scientists Unite Against COVID-19, an alliance of more than 1000 biologists, health experts and others, and 336 other organisations, has called for widespread testing and expanded, decentralised testing facilities across the country. Instead, Duterte’s family members and cronies have been given preferential treatment.

A test kit was quickly developed by scientists from the University of the Philippines and is capable of fast detection of the novel coronavirus, but it will only be available for use only after two to three weeks, the time it will take the Department of Health to validate the tests.

Some local government units (LGUs) are taking the initiative. The Pasig City Mayor ordered the limited mobilisation of tricycles in the city to bring health workers and patients with immediate medical needs to hospitals. The regime has banned such use of tricycles for public health and safety, as the lockdown allows a maximum of two people per vehicle.

All Pasig City Hall employees will be paid full salaries with hazard pay and overtime for those employees in the frontlines.

The City of Marakina is another LGU taking positive steps, setting up local testing units using the University of the Philippines test kits. The regime has responded by threatening mayors with criminal charges.

Duterte has announced a ₱25.1 billion “war chest” to fight COVID-19, but only ₱3.1 billion has been allocated to actually combat the virus, including the purchase of test kits and drugs, while a ₱14 billion boost to the tourism budget will be used to “bail out” the anticipated losses of airlines, hotels, casinos, resorts and tourism-related capitalists. Only ₱2 billion has been allocated to compensate

workers affected by the crisis.

Duterte put the Bayanihan Act of 2020 to Congress on March 23. The word bayanihan means community assistance or “communitarian”.

“The title itself is fake. It is a lie,” said Party of the Labouring Masses (PLM) chairperson Sonny Melencio.

“Where in the bill does the spirit of ‘bayanihan’ prevail? Where are the people, where are the doctors, nurses, health workers, grocery employees, transport workers and all the front-liners who are heading the fight against COVID-19?

“Are they empowered in this bill? No. The bill merely extends more power to Duterte, the bureaucracy and his minions.”

“This bill is sinister in many ways. First, it aims to give wide powers to a president who’s been proven incompetent in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. One who has led us to this crisis by ignoring the effect of POGO [Philippine offshore gaming operators], of Wuhan visitors, of the severity of the coronavirus itself, during the first crucial months, when it was devastating Wuhan and WHO [the World Health Organisation] had just declared it to be a pandemic.

“Second, one of the highlights of the bill is the President’s power to temporarily take over any private public utility businesses so as ‘to address the needs of the public’ — as determined by the President himself!

“The bill gives Duterte the power to take over private hospitals, medical and health facilities, hotels, public transportation, telecommunications facilities, and many other businesses — including factories and businesses that produce or manufacture medicine and medical supplies, including personal protective equipment (PPE), alcohol, tissue, hand soap - and, perhaps, supermarkets and groceries.

“Who gets to run the enterprises that the Duterte government will take over? Although the bill says that the management ‘shall be retained by the owners of the public service or enterprise’, it will be under the direction and supervision of Duterte or his duly designated representative — that is, his minions that are already well placed in the bureaucracy and the oligarchs — old and new.

“Third, Duterte will have more money in his hand as the bill says that ‘notwithstanding any law that has been passed by Congress’, he can reallocate and realign and use them for any project or activities he ‘may deem necessary.’

“So nothing in the bill is about bayanihan, or the people sacrificing almost everything to fight the pandemic. We cannot cheer about ‘nationalisation’ of private hospitals and establishments, if it is only going to give more power and line the pockets of the ruling class.

“Nationalisation should go hand in hand with workers’ control: this time around, the front-liners — doctors, medical workers, and all those doing the fight — should be in control.”

The left and progressive movement here has been campaigning against Duterte’s military response to a public health crisis and has put forward a platform of demands that includes: Mass testing for all; Free hospitalisation of victims, persons under investigation (PUI) and persons under monitoring (PUM) for COVID-19; Mass disinfection in all communities; Food and water rationing for workers and the poor; Distribution of face masks, hygiene kits, vitamins and contraception; Assistance to farmers, drivers and other affected workers; Release of 4Ps payments for beneficiaries; Paid

emergency leave for uninsured workers; Refunding tuition to students due to class suspensions; Price controls on commodities; Electricity, water, and communications to be provided 24/7; Allowing vehicles and tricycles to provide transport to medical workers and people with medical needs; Suspension of rent, water, electricity, communications and other fees; Disarming the large numbers of military and police forces deployed so as not to cause terror to the people; and a Debt moratorium.

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**P.S.**

- Green Left Weekly Issue 1258. March 25, 2020:  
<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/philippines-duterte-responds-covid-19-authoritarianism-corruption-and-neglect>