

Covid-19: Its Impact on the Philippines — Part V

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We publish below the fifth article of a series of five.

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In an unprecedented uncertainty with the country's \$331 billion economy put in frozen animation by a pandemic, what more would it mean for another lockdown in whatever form? When do policy-makers of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte's (PRRD) administration see the interrelatedness of the locking down of millions of people to serious and aggressive efforts of mass or targeted testing, much more than the timely and regular social amelioration and food subsidies are inseparable from forced social control?

When does PRRD's government see the funds coming from loans, donations and realignment of allocated annual budget are not limitless and therefore there can hardly be another social amelioration fund without adding another burden on people and on their next generation through more taxes and loans? When can the policy-makers see that the economic aid package for the big enterprises should not be considered as dole out to save their profits but should be a stimulus to help restart the country's economy in the new normal and should be in the context of ensuring that workers can start working with dignity and a corresponding living wage.

When will we ever learn that trust is inseparable from truth and that today more than ever people need to know the truth through information and that in the COVID19 pandemic- timely and truthful information can indeed save lives? That stifling and muffling the country's biggest television and broadcasting company like ABS-CBN and putting it off the air is a clear manifestation of a dictatorship even without formally declaring one. Putting this network off the air is also cutting off the people from the biggest source of their information. While people stay inside their homes, they should stay informed. Obviously, PRRD administration cannot handle the truth and this kind of people fear the truth

The traitorous action of the National Telecommunication Commission (NTC) as pressured by PRRD's Solicitor General against the giant network was timed during the 5th day of the second extension of lockdown and while the latter was in the middle of its playing a very major role in the country's struggle against the COVID19 pandemic. The message was delivered loud and clear— that is the current administration will not be kind to anybody who dares to cross the line of PRRD.

COVID19 pandemic and the government's action or non-action have not only continued to kill people but has eroded the economy and is fast tiring the system. It has simply outlasted all the economic stimulus and the social amelioration programs. The cutting off the air of the major source of information is basically depriving the people to know what is happening and to have informed

decisions and avoid a social condition susceptible to fake and dictated information.

More than 50 days after the lockdown and the country is still nowhere near “out of the woods” situation, the country is obviously just managing around the COVID-19 pandemic.

Poor Health System Aggravates the COVID-19 Triggered Crisis: Fighting Fire with one Arm Tied Behind our Backs

The SARS-COV2 could ravage the country given the low testing rates with very weak testing infrastructure, a barely functional health system, vast densely packed population and a government which has waited too long for action against the pandemic and locking down millions of Filipinos for a longer period is not a very good option.

At the start of the 2nd extension of Enhanced Community Quarantine (May 1-15), the Philippines had recorded the 3rd highest number of COVID-19 cases among the South East Asian countries and 38th in the world. As of April 30, 2020, there were 8,488 cases with 1,043 recovered and 568 deaths, and as of May 12, there were 11,350 positive cases.

The health infrastructure and capacity of the country is still very low with daily testing capacity between 2,895 -6,420 in spite of repeated announcements of the Department of Health (DOH) that at the end of the 1st extension of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), the daily test would be around 8,000. Again, a few days before the end of the second ECQ (or whatever from it will take), the DOH has been announcing to have a daily testing capacity of 30,000 at the end of May 2020. The testing, which should have the character of mass testing on April 14 as announced, have been done on the first week of May in 19 testing laboratories and 151,872 test kits available, at least 1 laboratory from Mindanao, 2 from the Visayas and 16 laboratories in Metro Manila.

The Mindanao laboratory caters to 6 regions and 22 provinces. The two laboratories in the Visayas cater to 3 regions and 16 provinces and the 16 laboratories in Metro Manila cater to 8 regions and 38 provinces.

With the abovementioned set-up, the laboratory results are significantly delayed especially in the Visayas and Mindanao areas. There are cases where patients die before their test results are communicated to the concerned families. This slow and oftentimes delayed processes have caused added difficulties in containing the spread of the virus which affect immediate action for contact tracing. Further, the local transmission becomes widespread and prevalent albeit silently.

As of May 6, 2020, the total number of individuals tested nationwide based on the 7th report to the Congress by President Rodrigo Roa Duterte (PRRD) was 131,089. It is only 1% of the 13.8 million projected number for the 2020 population in the National Capital Region (NCR). Quezon City, part of NCR and the epicenter of COVID-19 in the country has targeted a total of 30,000 testing to represent 1% of their 3 million population. The geographical distribution of the cases are the following: 70% from Metro Manila, 23% from Central Visayas and 8% from other parts of the country.

At the beginning of the second extension of the Enhanced Community Quarantine, the bed capacity in the country for COVID-19 patients is 11,807. Twenty-two percent(22.1%) are allocated for ward beds in which 1,002 are occupied and 1,611 are still available, 67.2% are isolated beds in which 3,301 are occupied and 4,638 are still available, 10.6% is reserved for the Intensive Care Units (ICUs) in which 475 are occupied and 780 are still available. There are 1,775 mechanical vents which 361 are currently used and 1,414 are still available.

At the moment, only severe cases are catered in the hospitals but Influenza like Illness (ILI) and Severe Acute Respiratory Infections (SARI) are also managed and treated as COVID-19 cases. While mild, asymptomatic probable and suspected cases are in the community isolation or have been advised to go on home quarantine. Further, there are cases, usually in the communities who have mostly asymptomatic and who do not go to the hospitals for testing and become silent but dangerous carriers of the virus.

The positive cases of COVID-19 are data coming only from the hospitals and not saying on the cases especially from the communities and the densely populated areas. It is therefore of paramount importance that aggressive targeted community testing should be implemented in the communities especially in populated areas in order to get more or less realistic picture of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Currently, the PRRD's administration through the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) has classified areas as high risk, which will be put on Enhanced Community Quarantine, low and moderate risks or combinations of different forms to unfreeze the economy of the country in selected areas.

This kind of classifying areas are mainly based on the data provided by the Department of Health (DOH) and inputs on the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) - both are members of the IATF.

However, the University of the Philippines COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team has raised an alarm on error in patients' data. The team pointed out discrepancies of data on specific dates before PRRD decided for the second extension of the community quarantine like the following: the interchange of sex classification of the patients-45 cases, there are 75 cases where age of patients do not match but more especially are the 516 cases where the geographical locations of patients are simply imaginary. The worst is the announcement that a person died of COVID19 yet the next day, he is alive again. Further, there is a continuing mismatch on the data between the DOH and the local government units (LGUs). A very serious case in point here is the situation of the province of Laguna (part of Luzon island) and near the National Capital Region (NCR). Laguna's Data on May 3, 2020 on death cases was 29 while the DOH's record on the same date has only 7 deaths. Based on this mismatched data, Laguna has been categorized under the Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ) where there will be economic activities on essential products but people's movement will still be strictly regulated. This kind of category will be imposed on Laguna and its people on another and 3rd extension of the locked down communities this coming May 15-31, 2020.

This situation has highlighted the basic fact that there is no central database of the department (DOH) which is spearheading the country's campaign against COVID19 pandemic. It has a direct bearing in the contact tracing efforts of the carriers of the virus which should have been the basis of categorizing the areas.

Meanwhile, it is very important to note that the Chinese government had sent its 15 member team of medical experts last month where they had visited different medical facilities and interviewed the countries medical professionals managing the COVID19 pandemic. They had interesting suggestions before they ended their visit like; there is a dire need of personal protective equipment, face masks, ventilators and second, they had mentioned that the COVID19 facilities in the country were generally okay but it still badly needs additional units.

The same Chinese medical experts advised the country's medical practitioners that face masks like N95 can only be used up to 4 to 5 hours, an obvious result of their observation that face mask like N95 have been used for several hours and even days by the country's frontliners. However they got the highest respect for the country's medical frontliners' commitment and dedication.

And after their very much publicized visit, Chinese PPEs and other medical equipment both donations and paid orders by the Philippine government through DOH have begun to arrive. With regards to the safety quality of these medical supplies only PRRD's DOH can tell but everybody just hopes that these Chinese experts did not suggest to the country's medical practitioners their method of fitting the figures of cases to their political agenda just like they did in Wuhan.

Currently, the number of cases of the country's healthcare workers affected by COVID19 rose to more than 3,000 which can be broken down in the following: 2357 nurses, 1069 doctors whom 29 had died, 107 nursing assistants, 70 medical technologists, 34 radiology technicians, 21 midwives and other medical workers. Excluded from these numbers are the thousands of community-based frontliners like the Barangay Health Emergency Response Team or BHERT. These people are tasked to monitor probable and suspected cases doing home isolation and those with mild symptoms and even the asymptomatic patients. In fact the latter are the most exposed among the medical front liners but they are the least protected in terms of PPEs.

Excluded also from this data are the hundreds of thousands Health Care Professionals who have worked as front liners in various hospitals around the world. Not a few of them have died working with their patients notwithstanding the stigma and the discrimination that many of them had been subjected into their own communities and their working places.

In the US alone, there are 150,000 nurses working in different states and more than a dozen of them offered their lives in the call of duty to face the pandemic. In the United Kingdom, there are 19,000 nurses working in different hospitals and like in the US and other countries they all gave their all in their sworn duty.

The psychological impact for these health care professional frontliners of being used to be the caregivers and now they become themselves patients which they could hardly have imagined earlier because they simply faced the pandemic head on despite the very limited supplies of personnel protection equipment and very inadequate health infrastructures. Now, they became part of those who are reckoning with their own mortality as they continue to face the pandemic with so much uncertainty.

With the current situation and where almost all the hospitals in the country are in their breaking points with a significant number of them having continued to be affected by COVID-19, the country's infrastructure has been further weakened as a result, some hospitals have to turn down and refuse accepting patients because of limited space and inadequate health capacity. The country's premier testing laboratory like the Research Institute of Tropical Medicine (RITM) was seriously affected when forty three (43) of its medical staff were tested positive of COVID-19 and were put on quarantine for more than two weeks. Earlier on, the Institute's Deputy Director, Dr. Salvacion Rodriguez Gatchalian had died because of the COVID-19. Such a situation has scaled down its testing capacity from 3,000/day to 300/day.

While the medical frontliners are obviously overworked and underpaid, there is a need for them to face COVID-19 with a positive attitude, inspire the patients, give them morale booster but at the same time they have to face and understand the stigma with their being medical frontliners in their own communities.

CONTROL in the Open Society. Forcing People to Stay Home...Where Many of

THEM Consider the STREETS as their Homes

When PRRD made his 7th weekly report to Congress since the lockdown, it was obvious that he or his team did not do their homework. Everybody has been eagerly waiting about the announcement of full or partial lifting or any combination of both but hearing none, they become exasperated. They felt flabbergasted to hear from him about how he played footsie with the Communist Party of the Philippines New People's Army (CPP-NPA) when he was still the mayor of Davao City, southern part of the Philippines. But it was ironic for him to mention his relationship with the NPAs while he was delivering his stern warning to other local government unit (LGUs) officials of doing the same with NPAs. Then he began to offer out of his "own" pocket a reward of P2 Million for those who would inform him of the location of an NPA commander.

The next day, it was the spokesperson who made the announcement of the new categorization of different areas. The long awaited announcement has created more confusion than clarity. The 16 city mayors and 1 municipality of Metro Manila was divided on whether to continue with enhanced community quarantine or with the general community quarantine. But everybody has been expecting that the categorization of their areas could be based on science which means the results of the COVID19 testing. The local government officials are well aware of the extreme anxieties and the growing unrest among their people who are locked down and severely punished for any violations by the police and military apparatus of the state. The social amelioration packages have been very slow that after several extensions of social control and many deadlines many of the poor people have yet to receive any food packages. Further, the COVID19 testing are done in several areas in some cities but not yet done in broader communities and one cannot really tell where the exact areas to quarantine.

The situation is seen nationwide including the newly administrative region of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. At an earlier stage, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) had provided the list of beneficiaries for non-4Ps in BARMM as 300,000 households but later the same department released only 27,000 DSWD cards which means the budget of the social amelioration program would be based on this latter number. The BARMM has to make do with whatever amount they have in the region to distribute food packages to the 300,000 households. As of this writing, only 58% of the households beneficiaries have received the funds and food aids from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) led region.

But the worst case is that BARMM has not been included in some of the national government considerations in terms of budget and allocation during the pandemic period. According to Minister Naguib Sinarimbo- the current minister of Interior and Local Government- during his latest meeting with the Mindanao Humanitarian Team, the BARMM was not included in the Department of Agriculture's (DA) pandemic support package for the farmers. In addition, BARMM is also not included in the Department of Labor and Employment's (DOLE) cash amelioration program (CAMP) for the regular workers and the Tulong Pantawid Program (TUPAD) for the informal sector.

It can be a good learning process for the MILF in its political initiation inside the dominant and traditional politics under the PRRD'S administration. Besides, it seems that the national government is not yet ready for the MILF's participation in the affairs of the national government.

Meanwhile, thousands of poor people have been lining up, often violating social distancing rules, for several days under the heat of the sun and even under the pouring of rain just to get their social amelioration funds.

In several cases, one could hear and see people literally dying not because of COVID-19 but because

of heat strokes and fatigue of lining up for days and nights. And as if to add more salt to people's social injury, PRRD had announced to add another 5 million households who can benefit from the social amelioration program. This is in addition to the 18 million households mentioned in Republic Act 11649 to receive the SAP. Logically many should be happy with this kind of announcement but because of what they are experiencing with this seemingly unending process they treat it as another hollow promise and not to expect much from it to be realized.

Furthermore, PRRD through his spokesperson has announced that only those areas (province, city and municipality) which are categorized as belonging to Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) would receive the social amelioration funds. The reason is that the areas are in a high risk category— which means there are several cases of COVID19 positive and this number is increasing. But many have serious questions regarding the scientific bases of this reason with no real time results which means the results of the tests performed would take at least a week or more than 10 days in many cases to know the results — the categorization is simply based on projection or worse from imagination. In this case, science is seen as an instrument to serve politics and interest of the powers that be rather than used it in genuine efforts against the pandemic.

Further, many of the LGUs would want their province, city or municipality to be categorized to the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) because they do not have the capacity to continue with the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) while their people are still locked down. Besides, the law (RA11469) states that the SAP should be distributed to the 18 million households and in two tranches within 2 months' (April & May) period.

Furthermore, other LGU officials would want a hybrid categorization of their areas- that is- maintain the social control or lockdown because they know that they have limited capacity of testing but at the same they see the need to open up and restart the economic activities so that people can work and have income. This kind of hybrid arrangement is called Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ). The other categorization is called the General Community Quarantine (GCQ) or areas where there are low risks of COVID19 infections and where people can restart the basic economic activities while observing the social distancing. In all the categorizations, the domestic travel (as well as international) are generally not allowed except for the movement of the basic and essential goods and services, social gathering, or even religious gatherings and activities to allow them to celebrate religious masses as long as they continue to strictly observe the social distancing protocols. Everybody has followed these protocols that when a senior member of the country's Supreme Court had retired after more than forty years of government service they had to do the sending away through social media or the enhanced electronic technology.

But of course, it is different when the head of the Philippine National Police (PNP) in the National Capital Region (NCR) would celebrate his birthday. All the social distancing (even wearing of face masks) were set aside when this 2-star general had celebrated his birthday with the corresponding musical band last 8th of May 2020. It should be recalled that this same General had personally arrested ten (10) people in Marikina who according to him, had violated the social distancing protocols when they had distributed food relief to the poor people in the communities who did not receive the food packages from the government. This was even and in spite of the fact that the Mayor of the city of Marikina had approved the relief operation. These people were sent right away to jail.

Meanwhile, all the retired generals who have occupied strategic positions in PRRD's government and active generals as well have immediately come to the rescue of the birthday celebrant. Giving all explanations and justifications which nobody could simply believe. This obvious and shameless double standard appreciation of the protocols to safeguard people from COVID19 has reinforced the reign of terror by the PRRD's administration. And worst it would be the PNP Internal Affairs which

was tasked by PRRD'S Executive Secretary to investigate the violation.

The PNP Director General had already cleared NCR PNP Chief Head Major General Debold Sinas. Many become apprehensive whether something can happen in this investigation when the police investigates one of their own.

Meanwhile, as the document has been highlighting, the COVID19 does not respect territorial boundaries but seems to suggest that we should face it together in the framework of the pre-existing conditions like the reality of widespread presence of the informal sector and people who are living very closely packed together.

Given this concrete reality, there is a need to look with a frank and transparent lens to minimize the risk of an uncontrollable outbreak of COVID19. In addition, the prevalent and widespread social inequality very much speaks to health infrastructure and very slow distribution of SAP locking down millions of people would not be effective— unless it will have a nature of hamlet type of population control.

Obviously, many would think that it is this last type of social control that is being applied by the PRRD's administration. It has to mobilize 67,000 PNP personnel (more: than half of its total strength), 13,000 officers and members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFPs) and hundreds of thousands of civilian force multipliers to effect the hamlet type population control.

For lockdown to be effective, there are several factors that should be considered paramount among them are the peoples' support and they can only give this support if they participate in the whole process of decision making.

First factor or consideration is to immediately stop the COVID19 transmission, and given that it will be sometimes before the appropriate vaccine will be available, the transmission can only stop if everyone stays at home. People can stay at home if they have enough social and food support from the government.

Second, the healthcare system (given the poor quality state) needs the time and space to recover for beds to be freed up and medical staff and frontliners to be able to have enough space to take time off. Concerned government agencies should make sure that the medical system and infrastructure will not be overwhelmed. Mass and targeted testing should be done in selected communities in an organized and sustainable manner.

And thirdly, to get all systems in place, all isolation facilities quarantine capacity and protocols in contact tracing should be objectively implemented.

Based on the University of the Philippines (UP) Pandemic Response Team's projection of Metro Manila (MM) —the current epicenter of COVID-19 in the country, the epidemic will peak between April to June 2020. In the same projection, the UP scientists estimate that the virus could infect around 600,000 to 1.4 million individuals in the country with 80% from Metro Manila (based on the mathematical simulations). Further, in its report, the UP's team has emphasized the need for community collaboration to fight the deadly virus which has currently infected more than 4 million across the globe.

The UP team's estimate number includes possible asymptomatic individuals and unreported cases. The big number of cases in Metro Manila is mainly due to the high population size and density of the population in the region.

The projections were also based on the assumption on the reproduction rate between 1.5 to 4

numbers of people that will be directly infected by a COVID-19 positive person in a susceptible population. As of this writing, the total positive cases in the country is nearly 12,000.

In addition, if one takes the South Korea experience, it says that the only way to know the severity spectrum is to test a large number of people and especially in the outbreak period when it is actually the best setting for the testing. The result of the testing should be the only scientific basis for implementing social control or the lockdowns.

But most importantly, the country has also several experiences which one can categorize today as success stories, with regards to managing COVID-19 through lockdown and social amelioration support funds.

First is the case of the province island of Guimaras, one of the islands in the Visayas with 174,613 population. In spite of its fourth class status as a province, it has been successful in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Important factor here should be cited as an early step for closing the island from tourists as early as January 31, 2020. Gov. Samuel T. Gumarin, who is a medical doctor, knows the limitations of the province's health infrastructure and knows that the SARs COV2, is a virus and can be very contagious and therefore it could be difficult to control the transmission. When the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of the virus as an international concern, he, together with members of the provincial legislative council (some are also medical doctors) decided to ban the tourists coming from mainland China since at that time it was clear that the virus came from China. And since tourism is one of the main sources of income of the province, the Provincial Council has timely allocated and distributed food subsidies to the population while preparing the only hospital in the province and building quarantine areas for possible place of infected people. Now the province has zero COVID-19 case.

The Second success story which is good to study is another island province of Dinagat with a total population of 127,400 individuals. Dinagat province is part of Mindanao. Like the island Province of Guimaras, Dinagat Gov. Arlene Bag-ao, a Human Rights lawyer, has understood the implication of the virus transmission and therefore together with the provincial council decided earlier on (February 4, 2020) to lockdown the island from tourists. There are also massive information campaigns so that people will have informed decisions especially when they implement strict screening of boats arriving in their ports. To effectively do this, they have to close their smaller ports (7 ports) in the province and closely watch the main port. All these moves are done in a human-rights based approach. The provincial government has also continued to provide food packages to its people. To date, the island province of Dinagat is COVID-19 free.

The Third success story that is worth mentioning here is the City of Ormoc. It is the capital city of Southern Leyte (an island in the Visayas) with 215,031 population. The current mayor is Richard Gomez - a once screen actor in the country - but his early move to save his city from the virus had paid a lot. The Mayor together with his City Legislative Council made a strict border control on March 13 - 2 days after WHO had declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic. They instituted the isolation of the city through border control and put in quarantine the new arrival in the city. The people of Ormoc City have patiently stayed at home because their government timely distributed food packages. According to the mayor, when they had decided to control the spread of the transmission they immediately bought food supplies, like 65,000 sacks of rice and canned goods. Later, when they understood that COVID-19 is here to stay longer, they bought vegetable seeds and distributed them to the population. Now, people are happy because after almost 2 months of the lockdown, they are beginning to harvest their own vegetables and their city as of this date, remains COVID19 free.

The common denominator of the 3 success stories are that they (officials) have understood the

nature of the virus and the nature of pandemic. They did not wait for the national government to make a move before they initiated their actions. They have educated their people and immediately implement the lockdown or secure their borders. They have acted early to supply the population with social amelioration programs and food packages from their own local funds. They have prepared their health care infrastructure in spite of its limitation and secure adequate protection for the medical frontliners. But most especially they work closely and together with their constituencies.

It will surely be too small in terms of population to compare the situation of the three(3) areas with the national government's efforts for the 109 million population of the country. But the principle of not acting the earliest possible time to prepare the nation and the people for the pandemic cannot be justified in any way possible. What had happened in the missing more than 2 months of the government's inaction? When you locked down millions of people and strictly instructed them to stay at home but did not ensure that they would have food and other basic necessities - you are simply and slowly killing them before the virus can catch with them. When you have waited for too long before preparing the already weak health care infrastructure, you are practically courting a sure disaster. When you do not have a central database for the COVID-19 cases then you are making the tracing of possible carriers of the virus very difficult.

The basic and natural characteristics of the country being archipelagic can also be a built-in defense against the virus transmission. As shown in the two examples of the island provinces mentioned earlier and how they secured their ports in the earliest possible states, the country could have been a COVID-19 free nation. If tourists, especially from China would have not been allowed to enter the country since the first admission of the Chinese government, the new coronavirus could be transmitted among and between humans then the first case in the country in the last week of January 2020 could have been avoided.

A national and coherent plan to combat COVID-19 could have been easily implemented with the 7,109 islands in the country. The country could have a national and centralized plan but could decentralize its operations and implementations- giving more creative initiatives among the government officials in the islands and the LGUs.

And lastly, but not definitely the least the AFP and the PNP or the security infrastructure of the country could have been oriented and tasked to secure the nation's territorial areas in the economic exclusive zones in the West Philippines Sea (WPS) and from the blatant invasion of the Chinese people flooding the nation with illegal and anti-social activities under the cover of the Philippine Offshore Gaming Operations (POGOs).

These Chinese “invasions” and illegal activities are the only significant areas where the COVID19 have not stopped as almost all economic, political and even cultural and religious activities have come to a halt because of the pandemic.

But for a country like the Philippines, the one that COVID19 pandemic has clearly highlighted has been the need for the rectification and the change which should be worked out by the people is the one which did not create the social economic and political infrastructures which have allowed the easy “invasion” of these kinds of virus in its territory. The change can surely come from a different framework other than the current one.

As the people prepare themselves for the new normal that is aside from the faceless future and enhanced information technology, it should definitely be what it is not today.

Meanwhile, as the country braces itself with the arrival of a very strong typhoon Ambo (“Vong fong”- international name)-first typhoon for this year, many people are still waiting for the completion of

the 1st tranche of the SAP. Their immune system and their energy seriously sapped because of these inadequacies and inaction of their own government, it will be unimaginable if people could still survive and withstand another storm of any kind.

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(5th of 5 Series)

P.S.

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