

The COVID-19 Pandemic, the “War on Drugs,” and Duterte’s Brute Force Governance in the Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

Philippine President Rodrigo R. Duterte’s response to the COVID-19 virus has been in line with his “macho populism,” similar to Donald Trump’s in the US and Jair Bolsonaro’s in Brazil. Like these illiberal leaders, a lockdown of Metro Manila and most of the rest of the Philippines since mid-March was implemented only after Duterte’s initial “denialism,” “bravado” and “masculinity contests” in the face of the growing threat from the rapidly spreading virus.¹ Once Duterte did finally act, it was in a haphazard and highly militarised fashion due to the lack of planning and heavy reliance on the military and police. After the shutdown, many health workers had no way to get to work. When one enterprising mayor, Vico Sotto of Pasig, organised transportation for them to hospitals, he received a summon from the Philippine National Bureau of Investigation for violating the lockdown for his efforts.

Often lacking adequate protective gear and sufficient test kits, by mid-May 2020, 35 healthcare workers had died and over two thousand sickened during the crisis, amounting to nearly 20% of the total cases at the time. Philippine hospitals’ efforts to deal with the virus outbreak under such difficult circumstances

¹ A. Santos, “The Price of ‘Machismo Populism’ in the Philippines,” *The Atlantic*, 7 June 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/duterte-kiss-philippines/562265/>; P. Piccato and F. Finchelstein, “Trump’s Macho Populism,” *Open Democracy*, 3 October 2016. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/trump-s-macho-populism/>; S. Parmanand, “The Dangers of Masculinity Contests in a Time of Pandemic,” *Oxford Political Review*, 18 April 2020. <https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2020/04/18/the-dangers-of-masculinity-contests-in-a-time-of-pandemic/>. Duterte began lifting the lockdown on 1 June 2020 despite a lack of “discernable” fall in the number of new cases: R. Dancel, “Coronavirus: Sweeping, Strict Manila Lockdown Ends on June 1, After Three Months,” *Straits Times*, 28 May 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/coronavirus-president-rodrigo-duterte-set-to-lift-manila-lockdown-after-3-months>.

have been nothing short of heroic, such as the new blood plasma treatment strategy being developed by the University of the Philippines' (UP) Philippine General Hospital and a new test kit being developed by researchers at the same university and the Philippine Genome Center. A "hero doctor" led a UP team that developed ReliefVent, a locally made and inexpensive but high-quality ventilator that has been used to help those who have fallen severely ill from COVID-19.²

Under the lockdown, the social conditions of the poor have worsened dramatically, which culminated in Duterte threatening to shoot demonstrators demanding food. "Shoot-them-dead," Duterte said of those slum dwellers defying the lockdown to protest. "I am not used to being challenged," he said. "Not me. Let this be a warning to all."

But social distancing and working at home are luxuries for elites and the small middle class in a developing country like the Philippines. Being kept locked down in overcrowded slums provides little protection (and may make matters worse as Singapore has discovered with the virus spreading rapidly in dormitories housing migrant workers). The poor have also lost daily earnings they were dependent on for survival. In a Metro Manila slum, a resident was quoted recently as saying, "People are more likely to die of hunger than the coronavirus." Erratic delivery of crucial government food support and subsidies to the poor has led to hunger and growing desperation. Local leaders, the barangay captains, had to be warned not to play politics with food distribution.

It is thus not surprising that a recent opinion survey shows hunger levels have doubled in Metro Manila and most other parts of the country during the pandemic. Many of the country's richest tycoons, several of them recently the subject of Duterte's wrath, stepped in to provide assistance to fill the void of an inadequate government reaction, forcing the Philippine president to apologise for his recent

² J. C. Gotinga, "PH Healthcare Workers with Coronavirus now 2,315," *Rappler*, 19 May 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/261384-health-workers-coronavirus-cases-philippines-may-19-2020>; R. San Juan, "COVID-19 Plasma Treatment: Everything You Need to Know," *Philippine Star*, 25 April 2020. <https://www.philstar.com/lifestyle/health-and-family/2020/04/24/2009556/covid-19-plasma-treatment-everything-you-need-know>; E. Deyro, "How a Team of Filipino Scientists Developed a COVID-19 Test Kit," *CNN Philippines*, 13 March 2020. <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2020/3/13/covid-test-kit-scientists.html>; P. Caña, "Meet the Hero Doctor Helping Fight COVID-19 By Developing a Filipino-Made Ventilator," *Esquire Magazine*, 20 April 2020. https://www.esquiremag.ph/life/health-and-fitness/hero-doctor-leads-development-filipino-made-ventilator-covid-19-a00289-20200420?ref=feed_8.

outbursts. A Manila-based UN official warned that the current health situation remains a looming “humanitarian crisis.”³

Whether it is the extremely bloody war on drugs or now the pandemic lockdown, Duterte has instrumentalised them with his narrow “repertoire” of the “iron fist” as a “vigilante president” in order to demonstrate decisiveness, distracting from the larger picture of his failure to help significantly the poor majority in the country. This article briefly explores what is termed Duterte’s “brute force governance” using the example of the COVID-19 crisis and his “signature” programme, the war on drugs. When institutions are too weak to produce favourable governance outcomes, particularly when issues have become “securitised”, leading to demands for immediate solutions, and a lack of accountability allows the massive violation of human rights, brute force governance is the result, as the case of Duterte in the Philippines has sadly demonstrated.⁴ It is argued that, at least until the COVID-19 outbreak (there are some indications that the pandemic has dented his seeming political invulnerability), the success of this strategy has allowed Duterte to distract effectively from the country’s failure of economic development and the lack of adequate social welfare programmes to reduce poverty significantly in the country, leaving the majority of the population poor. The broader significance of Duterte’s

³ “Shoot them dead,’ Philippine’s Duterte Warns Coronavirus Lockdown Violators,” *France24*, 2 April 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/20200402-shoot-them-dead-philippine-s-duterte-warns-coronavirus-lockdown-violators>; D. Sim and K. Xinghui “How did Migrant Worker Dormitories Become Singapore’s Biggest Coronavirus Cluster?” *South China Morning Post*, 17 April 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/explained/article/3080466/how-did-migrant-worker-dormitories-become-singapores-biggest>; J. Gutierrez, “In a Manila Slum, Coronavirus Lockdown Hits Hard,” *New York Times*, 15 April 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/world/asia/manila-coronavirus-lockdown-slum.html>; M. Mangahas, “Hunger, Fear, Caution, Dependency,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 30 May 2020. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/130306/hunger-fear-caution-dependency#ixzz6NzZFPYTp>; C. Venzon, “Duterte Apologizes to Philippine Tycoons He Threatened to Jail,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, 5 May 2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Duterte-apologizes-to-Philippine-tycoons-he-threatened-to-jail>; R. Holmes and P. Hutchcroft, “A Failure of Execution,” *InsideStory*, 4 April 2020. <https://insidestory.org.au/A-FAILURE-OF-EXECUTION/>.

⁴ This term is inspired by the concept of “blunt force regulation”: D. Van der Kamp, “Blunt Force Regulation and Bureaucratic Control: Understanding China’s War on Pollution,” *Governance*, published online 4 March 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12485>. Van der Kamp argues that China resorts to such regulation because “institutions are too weak to hold bureaucrats accountable”, which results in leaders using blunt force measures (e.g., closing all factories in a particular industry, not just those which have violated pollution limits). Duterte goes a step further, bypassing bureaucratic procedures and laws to impose deadly “solutions.”

rule is that when there is a populist breakthrough in a weak state with a poor record of human development it can even lead to mass murder.

THE “WAR ON DRUGS” AS BRUTE FORCE GOVERNANCE

Duterte has become the most popular president in the post-Marcos Philippines, with about 80% of Filipinos polled consistently expressing their support. This is not despite his brutal war on drugs but *because of it*.⁵ The war on drugs has involved police vigilantes killing (usually unarmed) suspected drug criminals based on lists compiled at the local level and according to a template in which those killed have guns planted on them by police to claim they “fought back.” It is difficult, if not impossible, to provide an exact figure on deaths in the “war on drugs” given that after a brief “acclamatory” phase when police bragged about those killed to the press, officials began deliberately to obfuscate data to foil accurate counts after domestic criticism and international pushback. During the first six months of the drug war, estimates by police, media, and human rights groups were between 7,000 and 10,000 killed. By late 2018, the chair of the Philippine Human Rights Commission, Chito Gascon, estimated the number killed in the drug war at up to 27,000.⁶

Duterte excoriated his liberal predecessors over the supposed breakdown of law and order, which has resonated with a public angry about a dysfunctional ju-

⁵ “Third Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Pres. Duterte’s Net Satisfaction rating at ‘Very Good’ +65,” *Social Weather Stations*, October 9 (2019): Accessed 20 October 2019. <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcyscode=ART-20191009121030>; R. Cabato “Thousands Dead. Police Accused of Criminal Acts. Yet Duterte’s Drug War is Wildly Popular,” *Washington Post*, 23 October 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/thousands-dead-police-accused-of-criminal-acts-yet-dutertes-drug-war-is-wildly-popular/2019/10/23/4fdb542af494-11e9-b2d2-1f37c9d82dbb_story.html; M. Thompson, “Why Duterte Remains so Popular: The Failures of the Philippine’s Liberal Reformism,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 9 (2018): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/philippines/2018-10-09/why-duterte-remains-so-popular>.

⁶ S. Coronel, “The Vigilante President,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October, 2019. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/philippines/2019-08-12/vigilante-president>; “Initial ‘Tokhang’ Files Show ‘Template Nanlaban’ Cases,” *ABS-CBN*, 4 April 2019. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/04/19/initial-tokhang-files-show-template-nanlaban-cases-lawyers-group>; D. Johnson and J. Fernquest, “Governing through Killing: The War on Drugs in the Philippines,” *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 5, no. 2 (2018): 359-390; D. Maru, “CHR chief: Drug War Deaths Could be as High as 27,000,” *ABS-CBN News*, 5 December 2018. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/12/0518/chr-chief-drug-war-deaths-could-be-as-high-as-27000>; Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University, the University of the Philippines-Diliman, and Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism formed the Drug Archive in 2019 in a major effort to make a reliable count, with regular updates on their website: <https://drugarchive.ph/>.

dicial system. Duterte practises what has been termed “penal populism” but goes much further than the excesses of such policies in “developed countries” where the rule of law usually constrains politicians promising to “get tough” on criminals. He politicises latent anxieties about crime and social disorder, pointing to his supposed ability to clean up Davao, a major city in the southern island of Mindanao where he was mayor, and which has been ruled by either him or his surrogates, most recently his daughter, for over thirty years. He campaigned saying only he could bring “true change” to the Philippines and was the country’s “last card” in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. By “securitising drugs”, he created a dichotomisation of “good citizens” versus “evil” drug criminals and instrumentalised it to legitimate mass killings.⁷

Even though the drug war has targeted a wide range of people (primarily young urban poor males), it is not widely *perceived* as targeting the impoverished. As a recent study of an urban poor neighbourhood in Metro Manila has shown, residents “largely accept” that the drug war aims “to mould the poor into a ‘moral citizenry’” while excluding those who do not adhere to civic morality and thus become “undeserving of rescue.” It is thus believed that “good citizens” would be saved while victims were “immoral others.”⁸

In addition, the handful of opposition leaders targeted have either themselves been accused of drug dealing (such as opposition senator Leila de Lima, jailed after leading a Senate investigation into the drug war) or have been accused of betraying the country for criticising the drug war (such as Vice President Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo, who condemned the drug war killings at the United Nations).

Duterte himself admitted that the drug war has failed as the supply of illegal drugs has “worsened” and police were close to giving up in the fight against it. In

⁷ N. Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte’s Rise to Power,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 91-109; M. Thompson, “Duterte’s Violent Populism: Mass Murder, Political Legitimacy and the ‘Death of Development’ in the Philippines,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (forthcoming 2020); N. Quimpo, “Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs’: The Securitization of Illegal Drugs and the Return of National Boss Rule.” In *A Duterte reader: Critical essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s early presidency*, Nicole Curato, ed. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2017: 145-166.

⁸ M. Thompson, “Poor Filipinos’ Lives Don’t Seem to Matter,” *New Mandala*, 12 August 2016. <http://www.newmandala.org/poor-filipinos-lives-dont-seem-matter/>; “Philippines: The Police’s Murderous War on the Poor,” *Amnesty International*, 31 January 2017. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/01/philippines-the-police-murderous-war-on-the-poor/>; Kusaka, W. “Bandit Grabbed the State: Duterte’s Moral Politics,” *Philippine Sociological Review* 65 (2017): 40-75.

October 2019, the country's top policeman resigned when it was revealed he had links to officers involved in selling drugs. Duterte then dared his vice president Leni Robredo, who is from the political opposition, to take over the direction of the "drug war" after she had continued to criticise it, an obviously insincere offer which she surprisingly accepted, putting him further on the defensive. When Robredo began questioning the need for drawing up lists of purported drug abusers, criticised the drug-war killings again and spoke to a wide range of stakeholders, she was unceremoniously fired by Duterte after less than three weeks.

Despite these obvious failings, Duterte's brute force governance has won him legitimacy, reinforced by effective political messaging backed by trolling on social media. While Duterte browbeats his enemies in his mainstream media appearances, pro-government trolls continue the attack on social media, reinforcing his messaging. This allowed Duterte to use repression more selectively (although brutally) and more easily hide his administration's creeping illiberalisation through legalistic measures designed to undermine checks on his power (through the courts, media, and civil society in particular) than many other illiberal regimes. In the Philippines, a rump opposition party, the Liberals, has little support and middle class activists have been unable to sustain anti-regime protests. Opposition "yellow" forces have struggled to get their voices heard, particularly on social media dominated by pro-Duterte trolls.⁹

DUTERTE'S FAILURE TO REDUCE WIDESPREAD POVERTY

Although Duterte called himself a "socialist" several times during his 2016 presidential campaign, it soon became clear that Duterte was "swinging to right-wing populism, in terms of discourse, governance style and his political support base." He also more openly revealed "his predisposition to authoritarianism," repeatedly expressing his "fascination with Marcos-era martial law" while resorting "to state

⁹ J. Cabañes and J. Cornelio. 2017. "The Rise of Trolls in the Philippines (And What We Can Do About It)." In *A Duterte reader: Critical essays on Rodrigo Duterte's early presidency*, Nicole Curato, ed. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2017: 231-250; P. Combinido, "When Illiberal Social Media takes over Democratic Philippines," *New Mandala*, February 6 (2019): <https://www.newmandala.org/when-illiberal-social-media-takes-over-democratic-philippines/>; J. Dreisbach, "Social Media and Blogging: The Changing Philippine Media Landscape under the Duterte Regime," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 23 (2018). <https://kyotoreview.org/yav/social-media-blogging-under-duterte-regime/>; M. Thompson, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy in the Philippines: Duterte's Early Presidency." In *From Aquino II to Duterte (2010-18): Change, continuity - and rupture*, Imelda Deinla and Bjoern Dressel, eds, Singapore: ISEAS, 2019: 39-61.

violence as the solution to the problems of criminality and illegal drugs, leaving aside any thoroughgoing socio-economic reforms.” In July 2020, Duterte signed a sweeping “anti-terror” bill which a broad array of groups, from civil society activists, to the Catholic Church, Muslim representatives, and a number of business groups, condemned as a means to target peaceful opponents and stifle free speech.¹⁰

Thus, it is not surprising that Duterte’s social policy initiatives have either been directed toward the middle class (free higher tuition in state higher education institutions to which few poor students have access because of the competitive advantage of expensive private schools in preparing students for the university admissions process) or are underfunded and largely unimplemented (universal healthcare).¹¹ Instead, Duterte has poured money into an ambitious infrastructure programme despite doubts about government agencies’ capacity and competence to undertake such projects as well as the lack of qualified construction workers, concerns which delays in the start of the construction of all but nine of the 75 projects underline. As money was “pumped into infrastructure projects, the health budget was haemorrhaging with big cuts.” Similar to Trump, Duterte cut funding for pandemic disease control, with funds for disease surveillance cut from P263 million in 2019 to P115 million in 2020. In the same period, the Department of Health’s budget of P172 billion was substantially under the World Health Organisation’s suggested 5% of GDP.¹²

¹⁰ B. Juego, “The Philippines 2017: Duterte-led Authoritarian Populism and its Liberal Democratic Roots,” *Asia Maior*, XXVIII, 129-163, K. Lema and M. Petty, “Opponents Dismayed as Philippines’ Duterte Approves ‘Monstrous’ Anti-terror Bill,” *Reuters*, July 3, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-security/opponents-dismayed-as-philippines-duterte-approves-monstrous-anti-terror-bill-idUSKBN24419T>

¹¹ Only 12% of students in now tuition-free state universities come from the poorest fifth of the population: J. C. Punongbayan, “Why the Free Tuition Law is not Pro-Poor Enough,” *Rappler*, 8 February 2019. <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/222981-analysis-reasons-free-tuition-law-not-pro-poor-enough>. On the advantage private schools have in preparing students for the highly competitive admissions process to state universities and colleges see: J. C. Punongbayan, “Free Tuition Alone won’t Make College any more Accessible,” *Rappler*, 9 March 2017. <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/163691-free-tuition-not-enough-college-access>. On the lack of funding for universal healthcare see: *Business Mirror*. 2019. “Lack of Funding Won’t Stop UHC Law Rollout,” 24 October 2019.

¹² “Duterte’s ‘Build Build Build’ under Fire,” *ASEAN Post*, 1 November 2019. <https://theaseanpost.com/article/dutertes-build-build-build-under-fire>; B. Tuazon, “Jolted by the Coronavirus,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 4 April 2020. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/128597/jolted-by-the-coronavirus>.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines had been a laggard in Southeast Asia in combating poverty, with among the highest incidence in ASEAN and more than double Indonesia's. Several economic initiatives of the Duterte administration have deepened poverty, such as VAT tax increases which hit the poor hardest, and the 2019 rice tariffication law, which opened the country to cheaper rice imports without adequate safety nets, hurting millions of already marginalised family-based farmers due to an abrupt decline in farmgate prices. While government data shows poverty at about 20%, opinion polls of self-rated poverty show it is much higher. According to data from the Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey for the fourth quarter of 2019 – before the current pandemic, which has likely led to a huge increase in poverty – 54% of Filipino families rated themselves as poor, the highest since 2014.¹³ Duterte's murderous drug war has conveniently diverted attention from the continued failure of two decades of nearly uninterrupted high economic growth to improve the condition of the poor.

CONCLUSION

With the drug war and now his "tough" reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, Duterte has attempted to demonstrate "political will" in a series of poorly planned, arbitrary acts which are termed here "brute force" governance. Emphasising the voluntarism of his leadership and its primacy over the law and bureaucratic restraints, Duterte attempts to demonstrate his ability to "solve" festering problems even if his solution involves mass murder. Prioritising "order over law," the price of his brute force governance is liberal rights.¹⁴

But Duterte risks, like previous Philippine presidents, falling into a "narrative trap": i.e., having his projected image too obviously contradicted by events. Like Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III, his immediate predecessor, Duterte scored a major victory in the midterm elections last year. But also, like Aquino, whose second half of

¹³ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Key Figures 2019*. Jakarta: The ASEAN Secretariat, 2019; M. Raquiza, 2019. "SDG [Sustainable Development Goals] 8 and 10: Growth, Labor Productivity and Decent Work: What Needs to Happen to Reduce Poverty and Inequality in the Philippines." In *Social watch Philippines, The PH SDG agenda: Closing gaps, overcoming policy incoherence*, 10-45. Quezon City: Social Watch Philippines, University of the Philippines; "Fourth Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Self-Rated Poverty Rises by 12 Points to 5-year-high 54%," Social Weather Stations, 23 January 2020. <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcyscode=A> RT-20200123140450.

¹⁴ T. Pepinsky, "Southeast Asia: Voting Against Disorder," *Journal of Democracy*, 28, no. 2 (2017): 120-131.

his presidency was marred by a pork barrel scandal, a botched rehabilitation effort after a devastating typhoon, and the killing of 44 Special Action Force soldiers in an ambush by Muslim rebels, Duterte is at a turning point in his six-year presidential term (no re-election is allowed in the Philippines) that threatens his legacy. A recent global ranking shows the Philippines to have had the poorest response to the pandemic in the Asia-Pacific (in terms of case numbers, mortality rates, effectiveness of government response, and emergency readiness). At the same time, his allies have undertaken unpopular measures like closing the country’s most popular TV station after Duterte openly criticised its owners, with the president’s social media defenders claiming, “the law is the law.” But the lockdown has revealed double standards among high-ranking Duterte officials, such as revelations of a birthday celebration by the Manila police chief, flouting a ban on social gatherings, or other Duterte officials getting a slap on the wrist for violating quarantine at a time when a man was shot to death for violating the COVID-19 lockdown and relatives cannot even visit a seriously ill relative or attend wakes of those who have died.¹⁵

Duterte’s response to the pandemic, particularly his “shoot-them-dead” comment, have triggered considerable pushback on social media. Duterte’s social media dominance is for the first time being seriously challenged as stay-at-home netizens now have more time to fight back electronically. The pandemic is a crisis that affects all Filipinos, unlike the drug war which has largely targeted young poor males in urban slum areas. During the COVID-19 outbreak, online outrage appears to have proved a match for the Philippine president’s propaganda apparatus.¹⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an unexpected political challenge for him and his illiberal populist counterparts around the world. An “us” versus “them” narrative is difficult to sustain in the face of an existential health emergency. It has been suggested that women leaders have performed better during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Germany’s Angela Merkel, New Zealand’s Jacinda Ardern, and

¹⁵ J. Teehankee, “Duterte’s COVID-19 Powers and the Paradox of the Philippine Presidency,” *Center for Southeast Asian Studies Kyoto University*, 28 April 2020. https://covid-19chronicles.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/post-007.html?fbclid=IwAR2-swiSiI-aehgjzSThLj5Tng0mmwhv35T0qi6HeoEt_4zDRRXKH2cYLZ8; “Law is Law Unless Friends Kayo:’ Netizens Slam Gov’t Double Standards,” *Rappler*, 13 May 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/260771-netizens-reaction-law-is-law-double-standards-government-ecq-guidelines>.

¹⁶ “Online Outrage Drowns Out Duterte Propaganda Machine,” *Rappler*, 24 April 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/258827-coronavirus-response-online-outrage-drowns-duterte-propaganda-machine>.

Scotland's Nicola Sturgeon). But perhaps the better explanation is "not that women leaders are doing better. It's just strongmen are doing worse."¹⁷

Promises of upholding "discipline" ring hollow when the poor go hungry. Duterte, who has maintained his pro-China stance, was slow to implement a travel ban against China and has not joined the international community in demanding accountability of China's slowness to report and deal with the virus outbreak in Wuhan. Duterte is hoping his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (now the second deadliest in Southeast Asia with the country being considered the least safe during the pandemic of all countries in the Asia-Pacific), will vindicate his "brute force" approach to governance.¹⁸ But for the first time in his presidency, he faces a situation in which his efforts to deflect from his failure to help the majority of Filipinos who remain poor may no longer work.

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¹⁷ A. Wittenberg-Cox, "What Do Countries with The Best Coronavirus Responses Have In Common? Women Leaders," *Forbes*, 13 April 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbe/Xrgcox/2020/04/13/what-do-countries-with-the-best-coronavirus-reponses-have-in-common-women-leaders/#7f0461b63dec>; H. Lewis, "The Pandemic has Revealed the Weakness of Strongmen," *The Atlantic*, 6 May 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/05/new-zealand-germany-women-leadership-strongmen-coronavirus/611161/>.

¹⁸ P. Caña, "Philippines Dead Last in List of Safest Countries in Asia Pacific To Be In During the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Esquire Magazine*, 15 April 2020. <https://www.msn.com/en-ph/news/national/philippines-dead-last-in-list-of-safest-countries-to-be-in-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/ar-BB12ErDm>; G. Baizas,