The Militaristic Pandemic Response of Duterte: How Did It Affect Social Movements?

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Abstract

This article is based on extensive original research that aims to examine how the opposition movement against Duterte employed various mechanisms of political engagement, shaped by the administration's lockdown-centric response amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic impacted individual social mobility, motivations and forms of political participation were still observed both physically and in the digital world. The study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on data from secondary sources to analyze the interplay between the administration's governance strategies and the actions of political interest groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. By using rational choice theory, we gain a clearer understanding of Duterte's perceived interests and goals, as well as the costs and benefits of resistance during the pandemic lockdown. The findings show that the Duterte administration's policies curtailed physical forms of political engagement, often described as "militarized" and "police-centric," thus shaping opposition dynamics and forms of dissent. Despite this, the civil society fostered alternative spaces for resistance, such as community pantries and digital activism. While existing literature has largely focused on democratic backsliding in the context of combating COVID-19, the novelty of this study is its nuanced exploration of the practicality of militaristic measures. Although the Duterte administration's militarized response did not achieve the expected outcomes in terms of managing the health crisis and suppressing opposition, it still represented the most practical strategy for controlling pandemic dissent. These insights contribute to understanding how government responses to the COVID-19 crisis influence the behavior of both the state and civil society.

Keywords: Social Movements, Activism, Duterte Administration, Resistance, COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

It is no wonder that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted social movement mobilization across the globe. Physical distancing measures have made it challenging for activists and civil society organizations to gather and mobilize. The case of the Philippines is not an exception. Due to the pandemic outbreak, Duterte implemented strict lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus. Despite implementing one of the strictest and longest lockdowns in the world, the Philippines is one of the three countries among the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that have struggled to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Teehankee, 2022, p.1). He even established the National Task Force Against COVID-19, in which the army and security forces dominated (Auethavornpipat & Tanyag, 2021, p.9). While the main enemy of the government's pandemic response must be the virus's deadly potential, it has legitimized its coercive power against Filipinos who are blamed for the spread of the virus, as if they are the perpetual enemy of health and order. Given this narrative, this study aims to answer the question, "How did the pandemic response of the Duterte administration impact social movement mobilization in the Philippines amidst state repression?".

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines in January 2020, cases steadily increased, leading the government to implement an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) across Luzon, including Manila, to curb mobility and protect the healthcare system from being overwhelmed. As the situation improved, the ECQ was gradually replaced by the Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ) and General Community Quarantine (GCQ), which featured progressively eased restrictions. These stringent measures significantly constrained people's ability to gather and organize in person. Despite these challenges, social movements adapted by utilizing virtual platforms to continue their activities. The pandemic and the associated restrictions posed significant obstacles, but protests and demonstrations persisted, underscoring the determination and adaptability of civil society. This pattern mirrored a global trend where social movements found innovative ways to sustain momentum despite public health constraints (Duliba et al, 2022, p.442). In the Philippines, this resilience illustrated how civil society navigated state-imposed limitations while advocating for their causes during unprecedented times.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have become vital communication tools connecting society with the government, especially during the pandemic. These platforms have facilitated the organization of social movements and the advocacy of various causes, compensating for the inability to hold traditional street protests due to lockdowns and stringent restrictions (Moskal et al., 2022). Given the Philippine government's extensive use of mobility restrictions throughout the pandemic, it is essential to critically examine the response through terms such as "draconian," "militarized," or "police-centric"[2]. These descriptions offer insight into the nature of the government's actions and their implications on civil liberties and public health, revealing how the Duterte administration's pandemic response was weaponized to suppress dissent and political opposition, thereby affecting the broader socio-political landscape. The Philippine government faced significant criticism for its pandemic response, characterized by the use of force against quarantine violators and mismanagement of the economic consequences of

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[2] Maru, Davinci (Maru 2021, as cited in Hapal). ABS-CBN News. Available at: https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/07/22/20/f-as-in-falfak-ph-govt-gets-failing-marks-in-covid-19-response-from-these-experts

lockdowns. This analysis examines the government's reliance on stringent lockdowns and how the militarized approach during the pandemic undermined democratic principles. The restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 lockdown, which limited civil liberties and political freedoms, particularly the right to assembly, effectively stifled social movements and curtailed public opposition. These actions demonstrate how pandemic responses can serve as tools for consolidating state power and curbing democratic engagement.

On the other hand, persistent social issues and government inefficiency have driven civil society organizations to return to street protests and demonstrations after prolonged isolation. These social movements have become pivotal in fostering civic engagement and public participation during the pandemic. Notably, some movements mobilized communities to address public health needs and launched grassroots initiatives such as community pantries. These pantries, supported by volunteers donating essential items like rice, canned goods, and vegetables, aimed to aid individuals facing economic hardships caused by the pandemic. However, the initiatives were met with resistance; Ana Patricia Non, the lead organizer, and other volunteers faced baseless accusations of communist affiliations due to their critical stance toward President Duterte. This highlights how government responses sought to discredit and undermine grassroots efforts that challenged official narratives and addressed community needs independently[3]. In the Philippines, the label "communist" is often weaponized as a pejorative against perceived threats or opponents of those in power. Under President Duterte's administration, red-tagging became a common tactic to silence dissent, targeting critics and opposition figures. This strategy led to the arrest and detention of activists and journalists connected to NGOs and media outlets, effectively stifling civic engagement and undermining press freedom.

Literature Review

While substantial literature exists on Duterte's leadership style and resistance to his administration, the study of social movements, particularly in the context of the pandemic, remains relatively underdeveloped. This study aims to address this gap by examining two key elements: (1) the pandemic response of the Duterte government and (2) the response of social movements to the government's pandemic measures. The first component will critically analyze the Duterte administration's approach to managing the pandemic, which was marked by militarized, draconian policies. It will explore the implications of stringent lockdown measures, the use of force to enforce quarantine protocols, and the systematic suppression of dissent. The second part of the review will examine the political engagement of social movements during the pandemic, emphasizing their adaptation to physical distancing requirements and the growing reliance on digital platforms for mobilization. It will explore how social media has facilitated new forms of collective action, such as community pantries, and how these movements have acted as a form of resistance to the government's handling of the crisis. By bridging these two aspects, this study will provide a comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics at play during the pandemic, highlighting both state repression and the resilience of social movements.

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[3] Lo, Barnaby (2021). CBS News. Available at: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/philippines-covid-community-food-pantry-accusations-communism-red-tagging

Previous research on the Duterte government's management of the pandemic has predominantly focused on the militaristic and authoritarian aspects of his response, as well as the human rights implications resulting from varying degrees of state repression. This paper presents an alternative explanation regarding the impact of Duterte's response on the human rights of Filipinos, particularly in relation to social movements, where the government's approach to the pandemic has significantly affected civil liberties and freedom of speech. As a seasoned politician, Duterte is well aware of his own areas of expertise, beyond which he tends to delegate responsibilities to cabinet members or allies. This delegation allows him to avoid being held accountable in the event of failure, as he permits his subordinates to handle crisis situations and necessary interventions (Kenny & Holmes, 2021, 169). Throughout the latter part of his term, which spans almost two years of the pandemic, Duterte's skillful image management has effectively shielded him from being held accountable for the continued spread of COVID-19 cases. Social movements have played a crucial role in holding the government and other state actors accountable for their pandemic response, as well as in raising awareness among communities that have been disproportionately affected by the virus. During the COVID-19 pandemic, two major opposing movements have emerged worldwide: the anti-vaccine movement and the anti-lockdown movement (Moskal et al., 2022, p. 39). However, this paper will primarily focus on social movements that aim to expose and address the inefficiencies of the Duterte government's militaristic pandemic response. Hapal (2021, p. 226) argues that the government's draconian response is heavily securitized and treats "pasaway" or non-compliant Filipinos as enemies, representing an existential threat that requires discipline.

Despite the systematic state repression compounded by militarized lockdown measures, social movements, people's organizations, and civil society in the Philippines continue to persist in their struggle for rights and democracy (Sajor, 2022, p. 56). A notable example of this determination occurred in June 2020 when Bahaghari, a progressive LGBTQIA+ group, held a peaceful protest. During this demonstration, 20 individuals were arrested as they denounced the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act while commemorating the anniversary of the Stonewall riots in New York. This act of protest symbolized their ongoing fight against discrimination and violence targeting the LGBT community[4]. A series of state repressions was applied to public demonstrations following the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act in the legislature. Examples of this repression include the dispersal and arrest of protesters in Cebu by heavily armed police, who alleged that the protesters were not following social distancing guidelines. Additionally, student activists in Iligan were arrested for their objections to the Anti-Terrorism Act and the lack of mass testing programs (Israel, 2020; Luna, 2020, as cited in Agojo, 2021).

Philippine politics, like that of other nations striving for genuine social change, has been shaped by the presence of social movements throughout the colonial period and up to the present day. According to Colas (2002, p. 67), a key characteristic of social movements is their sustained and purposeful collective mobilization by identifiable, self-organized groups in direct confrontation with specific power structures, with the aim of achieving socioeconomic and political change. In this study, we are focusing on social movements that are aligned with opposition groups against

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[4] From Rappler. At Least 20 arrested at Pride March in Manila. Link: https://www.rappler.com/nation/264919-cops-arrest-individuals-pride-month-protest-manila-june-2020/

the Duterte administration, with a particular emphasis on the significant role played by digital tools. The development of this type of political digital ecosystem has enabled citizens to participate in social movements despite the considerable restrictions imposed during the pandemic, which have greatly limited mobility (Bahri & Widhyharto, 2021).

By the time the COVID-19 virus had local transmission in January 2020, the National Task Force Against COVID-19 had been created. This task force served as the operational command for day-to-day operations in areas such as human resources, logistics, and finance. It was headed by retired army general Delfin Lorenzana, who also serves as the Department of Defense Secretary (Auethavornpipat & Tanyag, 2021, p. 10). President Duterte further defended his reliance on former military officials in addressing the pandemic, stating, "You need not be a doctor here because you are transacting business. It is not really a matter of medical science that you are talking about," in one of his late-night addresses to the nation[5]. This kind of rhetoric arises from President Duterte's belief that the pandemic is akin to a war against the virus. To combat its transmission, he implemented measures such as restricting the movement of people and deploying the police and military to enforce stay-at-home orders (Teehankee, 2022, 2). However, this approach could also reflect the weaknesses in the Philippine public health system. Hapal (2021, p. 232) points out that when compared to neighboring countries in the Western Pacific region, such as South Korea, Singapore, and New Zealand, the shortcomings of the Philippine government's response become more apparent. These countries have successfully controlled and suppressed the spread of COVID-19 without heavily relying on draconian measures or imposing prolonged lockdowns.

Thompson (2020, p. 53) highlights that the pandemic poses an unexpected political challenge for Duterte and other illiberal populist leaders worldwide. The "us" versus "them" narrative becomes difficult to sustain in the face of a significant health crisis. Duterte has demonstrated populist tendencies since his time as the mayor of Davao City in Mindanao. Although the definition of "populist" remains disputed, populist leaders are often characterized as power-seeking politicians who act in a calculated manner to maximize their support among the public, measured in terms of popularity. This drives them to employ strategies of deideologization and other tactics to gain political prominence (Rueda, 2020, p.168). According to Walker's (2020, p. 516) definition of populist movements and parties, they often prioritize an expressive agenda of identity assertion. They place less emphasis on developing a detailed policy portfolio and, even after being elected, focus more on symbolic politics centered around resentment, protest, and obstruction. Duterte has indeed utilized populist rhetoric and tactics to present himself as a decisive leader who takes bold and necessary actions to safeguard the country and its citizens from the virus. Moreover, he has capitalized on this opportunity to push for policy changes and laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Act[6]. Arguelles (2020) argues that the populist Duterte capitalized on the opportunity presented

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[5] Ferreras, Vince (2021). CNN Philippines. Available at: https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/3/25/Duterte-defends-military-men-in-war-vs.-COVID-19--You-need-not-be-a-doctor-here.html

[6] Signed into law by Duterte on July 3, 2020, which seeks to expand the definition of terrorism in aiwm to prevent and counter terrorism and it authorizes the detention of terrorism suspects up to 24 days without charges. Department of Justice Anti-Terrorism Council. Link: https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/06jun/20200703-RA-11479-RRD.pdf

by the pandemic to further undermine Philippine democracy. Undoubtedly, the populist image he cultivated enabled him to gain renewed legitimacy and public support.

Another objective of this study is to shed light on the overall challenges and developments in organizing social movements during a time of state repression amid an unprecedented pandemic. The lockdown measures have significantly exacerbated the dire social conditions of the poor, leading to a point where Duterte himself threatened to shoot demonstrators demanding food. Referring to those slum dwellers defying the lockdown to protest, Duterte stated, "shoot them dead" (Thompson, 2020, p. 46). Despite the substantial restrictions on mobility during the pandemic and the daily threats to democracy posed by the Duterte administration, Corpuz (2021, p. 2) argues that many people continue to raise their voices and demand change through both traditional (face-to-face) activism and digital (online) activism.

This study employs rational choice theory to explain how political actors make decisions based on their interests and goals. Rational choice theory, also referred to as choice theory or rational action theory, assumes that the behavior of political actors is driven by self-interest, utility maximization, or, simply put, the pursuit of goal fulfillment (Petracca, 1991, p. 289). According to rational choice theory, rationality involves weighing costs against benefits to determine actions that maximize personal advantage (Friedman, 1953, p. 21). In political science, this concept translates into the assumption that governments aim to maximize political power, elected officials and bureaucrats prioritize maintaining their positions, and voters focus on maximizing their economic welfare (Simon, 1995, p. 50). In the context of social movements, however, collective actions are the result of individual actors who support or join a movement. Individual behaviors contribute to collective actions only when there are sufficient incentives or when citizens perceive a reasonable chance of success for their activities (Opp, 2013, p. 4).

Interestingly, despite the high inflation rate and human rights violations during the pandemic, Duterte's approval ratings did not decline but instead remained overwhelmingly popular[7]. Several studies characterize Duterte's political behavior as unpredictable and unruly, with an agenda aimed at catering to the will of the Filipino masses through populist-authoritarian tendencies (Mendoza, 2018; Kenes, 2020; Mamunta, 2022). On the other hand, while Duterte gained additional powers to address the COVID-19 pandemic, social movements were described as having lost the opportunity to expand mobilizations in public spaces, instead opting for online meetings, educational discussions, and protests (Santillan, 2020). To refine the analytical framework, Duterte's decision-making is examined in the context of how social movements responded to state policies during the pandemic in the Philippines. Ultimately, the Duterte administration's militaristic pandemic response significantly influenced the voluntary activities of social movements and the mass public as a whole.

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[7] Regencia, Ted (2021). Al Jazeera News. According to the Publicus Asia survey in July 2021, Duterte held a 58% approval rating and a 55% trust rating. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/28/duterte-still-rides-high-in-polls-amid-pandemic-economic-slump

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze how President Duterte's populism and syncretic rhetoric influenced social movement mobilization during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodology relies primarily on secondary data sources, including articles discussing civil society during the pandemic and reports collected from online news articles. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of the historical context, environmental factors, and the complex relationship between Duterte's militaristic pandemic response and the reactions of social movements.

The analysis will focus on two main themes that address the research question: (1) Rationalizing Duterte's militaristic pandemic response and (2) Understanding social movements during the pandemic. The findings will be presented in two parts: a macro-level analysis that examines the policies implemented by the Duterte administration to manage the COVID-19 crisis and a micro-level analysis that explores the response of social movements to these policies. This dual-level analysis aims to provide a comprehensive view of how state actions influenced social mobilization amidst challenges such as state repression and public health measures.

By examining the Duterte administration's approach to handling the pandemic, we can gain a deeper understanding of how social movements mobilize in complex and evolving political conditions. The study will investigate the influence of the Duterte administration's tenure amidst the pandemic on democratic dynamics and the functioning of social movements, aiming to build effective and sustainable political organizations. In this context, to capture the essence of Duterte's pandemic response, the narrative of its militarized nature and the state's validation of this approach will be explored.

Results and Discussion

Rationalizing the Militaristic Pandemic Response of Duterte

Duterte's militaristic approach can be interpreted as an attempt to establish order and discipline while ensuring strict adherence to quarantine and social distancing measures. Hapal (2021, p. 225) notes that the Philippines' COVID-19 response was marked by securitization, portraying the pandemic as a war against an "unseen enemy" and framing non-compliance as a driver of virus transmission. The democratic backsliding evident during Duterte's presidency can be linked to his 2016 presidential campaign, which combined liberal promises with illiberal aspirations (Curato, 2017, p. 6). While he projected an anti-corruption stance, his governance emphasized coercive measures that challenged the principles of liberal democracy. Central to this illiberal agenda was a war on drugs policy that sidelined human rights and due process in favor of aggressive tactics. This framework reflects Duterte's ambition to restore law and order through a militarized approach, positioning the military as a crucial tool for enforcing an authoritarian governance model and consolidating power amid crisis-driven contexts like the pandemic.

Going back to the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act, Duterte certified the bill as urgent, leading to its adoption into law[8]. The Anti-Terrorism Act grants the government broad powers to

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[8] Tomacruz, Sofia. Rappler. Available at: https://www.rappler.com/nation/duterte-certifies-urgent-tougher-anti-terrorism-bill

target and prosecute individuals involved in terrorism-related activities, including the authority to conduct warrantless arrests, prolonged detentions, and surveillance of suspected terrorists. While these provisions aim to enhance national security, they have raised concerns about their potential misuse to target political opponents and critics, particularly during a time when President Duterte's administration has faced significant criticism for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its failure to effectively mitigate the associated economic fallout. As the pandemic persisted during the later years of Duterte's term, global uprisings emerged, with protests erupting in countries such as the United States, India, and Hong Kong, where citizens decried poor government responses. In the U.S., protests against police brutality and racial inequality were exacerbated by pandemic-related hardships; in India, government neglect and corruption sparked widespread discontent; and in Hong Kong, demands for greater autonomy from China gained momentum. In contrast, the Philippines did not experience protests of similar scale or intensity. However, Duterte's government has implemented stringent measures to suppress potential uprisings and prevent widespread social unrest. These measures, which infringe on civil liberties, are part of a broader strategy of political repression that seeks to delegitimize dissent, particularly during a period of escalating socio-economic crises marked by widening income disparities and increasing inequalities.

The question arises: is a militaristic response necessary to combat the COVID-19 pandemic? The deployment of military forces to address the crisis has been observed globally, with armed forces supporting overwhelmed hospitals and assisting civilian medical personnel by setting up medical facilities (Megerian & Cloud, 2020, as cited in Kalkman, 2020, pg. 99). However, in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, governments have faced criticism for their delayed response to the pandemic and for framing the crisis predominantly as a security issue rather than a public health emergency. This approach, while emphasizing order and control, has raised concerns about prioritizing security over the welfare of citizens. Notably, this militarized response has been inconsistent, as key allies and officials of the Duterte administration, who violated social distancing protocols, have faced no consequences. Examples include Police Chief Debold Sinas, who hosted a crowded birthday event at a police headquarters; Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) Deputy Administrator Margaux Uson, who organized a mass gathering of quarantined overseas Filipino workers; Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque, who took a leisure trip to a marine park while restrictions were in place; and Senator Aquilino Pimentel III, who violated home quarantine to accompany his pregnant wife to a hospital in Makati. These incidents highlight the selective enforcement of regulations and raise questions about the fairness and legitimacy of the government's response, further undermining public trust in the measures designed to curb the pandemic[9]. Socioeconomic status and affiliations with high-ranking positions in the Duterte administration likely influenced the likelihood of arrest or penalties for quarantine violations, highlighting the role of power dynamics in enforcement practices.

In instances where the military commits human rights violations, it often receives immunity due to the perception that its actions are essential for combating the pandemic. This pattern of

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[9] Abovementioned examples of violators who are allies and officials of President Duterte are cited from Agojo (2021, p. 376). Policing a Pandemic: Understanding the State and Political Instrumentalization of Coercive Apparatus in Duterte's Philippines. Journal of Developing Societies.

military deployment during crises is not unique to the Philippines but has been observed in various Latin American democracies. Countries such as Colombia, Honduras, Peru, and El Salvador have deployed military forces primarily for border security. Military involvement in medical care has also been evident in countries like Mexico and Colombia, while Argentina has utilized the military for logistical tasks such as distributing food and masks. In Brazil, Honduras, and Peru, military operations have extended to border security, medical assistance, and logistics. However, research indicates that the increased involvement of the military in these countries has often exacerbated state-sponsored violence (Passos & Aćacio, 2020; Aćacio, Passos & Pion-Berlin, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly strained democratic systems, prompting democratic leaders to implement emergency measures that undermine core democratic principles. These measures have led to a backsliding of democratic values, with the concentration of power increasingly shifting to the executive branch. Furthermore, there has been a growing reliance on the military for operational support, a trend observed not only in fragile democracies but also in well-established ones (Rapeli & Saikkonen, 2020). These developments raise critical questions about the long-term effects of militarized responses to public health crises on democratic governance.

The Philippines' prolonged lockdowns failed to contain the spread of COVID-19, exacerbated by vaccine distribution missteps, a lockdown-centric response, and ongoing threats from Duterte and his allies against healthcare workers, accusing them of inciting insurrection. These actions only escalated tensions and undermined vaccination efforts. Moreover, loosening restrictions and subsequently blaming quarantine violators for rising cases perpetuated a cycle of lockdowns, rather than addressing the root causes of the pandemic's persistence. It is crucial to recognize that lockdowns have significant economic and social repercussions. The Duterte administration should have balanced the need to control virus transmission with the importance of minimizing the harmful effects of harsh lockdown measures on individuals and communities. A focus on human rights principles amid the pandemic would have helped maintain public trust and cooperation, ensuring that government actions were fair, transparent, and did not disproportionately infringe on the rights of citizens. This approach could have fostered more effective public health responses and greater compliance with measures.

Rationalizing Social Movements in the Time of Pandemic

In addition to the police and other state actors, social movements have shown significant interest in contributing to the pandemic response, primarily by protesting government policies that are perceived as harmful or unjust. These protests often target restrictions on civil liberties or cuts to social programs. As the International Monetary Fund (IMF) director noted in an interview with the Financial Times, the pandemic's economic impact exacerbates existing inequalities, potentially worsening income distribution and poverty levels. Resistance is often catalyzed by the combined experiences of state repression and economic hardship, which create fertile ground for social movements to emerge. During the pandemic, various forms of activism were evident, as stringent lockdowns severely restricted individual mobility, limiting traditional protest methods but also prompting the development of alternative forms of resistance. Public initiatives, such as donations and volunteerism, particularly through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), became important platforms for raising awareness about critical issues in healthcare, such as access to

testing and treatment and the protection of medical frontliners, who were marginalized by the Duterte administration. Moreover, joining progressive sectoral organizations became an act of protest against the government's militarized pandemic response, which many viewed as excessive and unnecessary. The so-called "pasaways" and lockdown violators were predominantly from the lower and middle social classes, who bore the brunt of the pandemic's economic impact, including job losses and financial difficulties. This demonstrates how social movements continue to challenge policies that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

The first major mobilization by militant organizations during the pandemic was on June 4, 2020, as a showing of indignation to the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act. Although no official count of demonstrators was reported, various groups, including Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan), Anakbayan, and Kilusang Mayo Uno, led protests calling for the repeal of the law despite ongoing lockdown restrictions[10]. These organizations continued to protest against political repression, which intensified during the pandemic as the government utilized such laws to silence political opposition. While protests in the Philippines during the pandemic remained relatively small and localized compared to large-scale protests in neighboring countries like Thailand and Hong Kong, they still demonstrated notable forms of resistance. Common protest methods included street demonstrations, online campaigns, and webinars, all of which focused on demanding accountability for state abuses. However, what sets the Philippine social movements apart from those in other countries is the emergence of community pantries. The first community pantry, established in May 2021, inspired a widespread movement that saw over 6,700 pantries set up across the country. This phenomenon not only highlights the resilience of social movements in the face of state repression but also illustrates the innovative forms of collective action that emerged during the pandemic.

Community pantries are seen as a way to address the issues of social inequality and the lack of government support for poor communities. Civil society organizations started as an act of protest against the government's handling of the pandemic, and this action has been emulated across the country, and it has been inspiring other citizens to start their own community pantries as well. Although main initiators of this movement are not exempt from political repression, branding them as leftists and enemies of the state to discredit them has become a grimly predictable part of running any social movement in the Philippines[11]. Volunteers were falsely accused of being connected to communist or terrorist groups by government officials and pro-government groups. Ana Patricia Non, the founder of the first community pantry in the country, even stressed that, "Many people are hungry, and the attacks are directed at the person who started this. What is that? It's shallow. They have too much free time."[12], referring to state officials who take time on labeling progressive initiatives as destabilizing acts against the state rather than focusing on improving the government's pandemic response. The Duterte government has obviously expressed aversion towards community pantries, citing concerns over potential

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[10] Lalu, Gabriel (2020). Inquirer.Net. Available at: https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1286375/groups-protest-anti-terror-bill-passage-at-up-rally-despite-quarantine
[11] Royandoyan, Ramon (2021). Rest of the World: Reporting Global Tech Stories. Available at: https://restofworld.org/2021/communist-terrorist-satanic-how-dutertes-trolls-targeted-a-mutual-aid-movement/
[12] Ibid.

violations of COVID-19 protocols and suspicion that the pantries were being utilized by leftist groups to recruit members and advance their agenda[13]. This controversy surrounding community pantries has ignited discourse about the government's responsibility to provide aid to its citizens during times of crisis and the significance of community-led initiatives in filling the gaps left by state-sponsored programs.

Given the community pantry phenomenon, online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as messaging apps, were used to invite people to participate in volunteering. In order to manage the number of people that may come or help, some community pantry initiators use an online registration system for volunteers. May it be for community pantries or typical mass demonstrations, social media platforms are used to invite participation and reach a wider audience for more efficient coordination, especially in the time of a pandemic in which people are usually holding gadgets in their homes. In times of political crisis, Howard & Hussain (2011, p. 46) explain that digital media are powerful in spreading protest messages, driving coverage by mainstream broadcasters, connecting frustrated citizens with one another, and helping them realize that they can take shared action regarding shared grievances. According to Concepcion (2021, pg. 46), the COVID-19 pandemic is like a social paradox in which it made people's lives miserable and has violated people's right to life; however, this socio-economic condition made social justice activism flourish through the help of (a) modern technology such as the Internet and mobile banking to raise funds and (b) social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, for the public involvements as capacity builders.

Findings from various studies suggest that the existence of online platforms has indeed changed the strategies of social movements, particularly in the role they played during the pandemic. According to Zajak (2022, p. 137), the COVID-19 pandemic also brought new symbols of solidarity and new online spaces where people could exchange ideas and generate knowledge. In the case of Philippine social movements, while it is not new for progressive movements to generate hashtags, progressive groups went beyond that. Anakbayan, a militant youth organization, explored holding an online series of educational discussions in collaboration with student organization partners at some universities[14]. At the University of the Philippines, a student solidarity network raised an appeal for academic leniency, considering the rise of COVID-19 cases, while simultaneously calling out the Duterte regime for being incompetent, inefficient, and ineffective in handling the health crisis[15]. In these events, describing this as a two-pronged approach would highlight how activists balanced their tactics between advocating for pandemic-related issues, such as campaigning for more humane health measures and academic leniency, while also opposing levels of authoritarianism and repression. This demonstrated how social movements adapted to the new context to suit the constraints of the moment.

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[13] Lalu, Gabriel (2021). Inquirer.Net. Available at: https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1427237/as-duterte-slams-pantries-civil-society-leaders-seek-special-congress-session-to-tackle-new-ayuda-bill

[14] See Ponpon, Niñajane (2022). *Anakbayan COC relives progressive books through storytelling, educational discussion.* Link: https://pupcocdakom.wixsite.com/my-site/post/anakbayan-coc-relives-progressive-books-through-storytelling-educational-discussion

[15] See Rise for Education - UP Diliman Facebook post last April 4, 2021. Link: https://www.facebook.com/r4eUPDiliman/posts/pfbid02N8q6hpVEPWqS4fYYhiqUu8WNKshn66Tb1x3rUPJEwjkr5 QS2yJTQQ45jJ46fdSh3l

Moreover, the emergence of new social movements, such as community pantries, and the reemergence of online education discussions and petitions, at the height of the pandemic in the Philippines, were caused by the combination of both the pandemic and the harsh approach of the Duterte administration in trying to curb the virus. However, Auethavornpipat & Tanyag (2021, pg. 18) demonstrate that grievances in the Philippines, compared to Thailand, did not fully materialize into mass street protests during the pandemic but instead took the form of online activism. The existence of a lower count of protesters in the streets compared to the pre-pandemic number, high levels of social media political participation, and also the surfacing of community pantries are mainly attributed to both the blending factors of the global pandemic and the militaristic response of the Duterte administration. The pandemic alone might be a significant phenomenon that could prompt increased online political participation, yet with the addition of the militaristic approach of the government, it contributed to a sense of solidarity and collective action among Filipinos through a new way of political organizing and mobilization. It is important to note the relationship between these variables, as they are complex and multifaceted, and further research is needed to fully understand the factors that have contributed to the abovementioned phenomenon in the midst of the pandemic. Community pantries have been seen as a way by the opposition movement to help those in need while challenging the government's failure to provide adequate support to its citizens during the crisis.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the complexities of governance under crisis conditions, particularly when state repression is used to control dissent. While the Duterte administration's militarized approach aimed to manage the health crisis, it inadvertently exacerbated socio-economic inequalities and fueled opposition. The government's focus on strict quarantine measures, coupled with the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Act and the granting of emergency powers, allowed for the rapid imposition of control but failed to address critical public health infrastructure issues. As a result, the prolonged lockdowns and economic fallout created fertile ground for social movements, which found new opportunities for mobilization despite severe repression. Ultimately, the pandemic has demonstrated that a heavy reliance on authoritarian measures not only hampers effective crisis management but also deepens political and social divides, making it harder to build the public trust and cooperation necessary for long-term recovery.

In conclusion, while the Duterte administration desired to suppress opposition, it was ultimately unable to completely eliminate social movements. The pandemic, despite its constraints, also created new avenues for democratic engagement. Although the number of demonstrators on the streets may have been limited by strict lockdown measures, social movements continued to thrive in alternative spaces. The rise of online protests and webinars has provided new platforms for political expression and organizing. Additionally, initiatives like community pantries exemplify how collective action remains vital and impactful, even in challenging times. Despite the restrictions, organizers have shown remarkable creativity in adapting to both online and offline spaces, highlighting the resilience of social movements in the Philippines. This indicates that, even amid efforts to quash dissent, new forms of political participation and solidarity are emerging,

ensuring that democratic spaces continue to evolve and persist in times of crisis. On the other hand, while we acknowledge the creativity and resilience of social movements amid the pandemic in advocating for a more efficient pandemic response and exposing the administration, it has little to no effect in mobilizing people on the streets as well as holding Duterte accountable.

The Philippine context during the pandemic illustrates that increased militarization is often a consequence of the government's failure to effectively address both public health and economic crises. While the Duterte administration's efforts to socialize public services are commendable, it is equally important to acknowledge the validity of public concerns during this unprecedented global crisis. The expanded role of the military in managing daily life has significant implications, which cannot be understated, particularly with regard to resource allocation and policy implementation. The gap between theoretical policy objectives and their practical application is evident in this case. Despite facing mounting pressure, the Duterte administration resorted to deepening military involvement as a means of mitigating the pandemic's impact. Nevertheless, the administration's civilian counterparts maintain the agency to critically expose state inefficiencies and malpractices. These civilian actors, alongside broader civil society, continue to advocate for policies that are better suited to an effective pandemic response and that foster positive societal transformation.

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