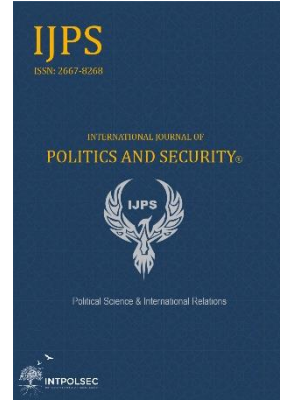


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Author(s) / Yazar(lar) : Christopher Ryan MABOLOC

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President Rodrigo Duterte and Biopolitics in the Philippines

Christopher Ryan MABOLOC*

Abstract

In this paper, I use the concept of biopower to reflect on the strategy of President Rodrigo Duterte when it comes to the Covid-19 pandemic in the Philippines. A term that originated from Michel Foucault, “biopower” refers to the idea in which the state controls the physical bodies of the population by employing rules, laws, and basic protocols enforced in the name of public health. In the Philippines, the government has imposed lockdowns and restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus. The type of Biopolitics practiced in the country has been described by his critics as a form of “medical populism”. However, such an assessment lacks a thorough recognition of the reality of power relations in Philippine society. Why must we understand the reality of structural injustice in Philippine society, as well as the hegemonic nature of global politics, in the middle of a public health crisis?

Keywords: Biopower; Biopolitics; Covid-19 Pandemic; Governmentality; President Duterte;

Devlet Başkanı Rodrigo Duterte ve Filipinlerde Biyopolitika

Özet

Bu makalede, biopower kavramı Başkan Rodrigo Duterte'nin Filipinler'de Covid-19 pandemisine yönelik stratejisini yansıtmak için kullanılmaktadır. Michel Foucault'a ait bir kavram olan “biyo-iktidar” ise, devletin halk sağlığı adına uygulanan kuralları, yasaları ve temel protokolleri kullanarak nüfusun fiziksel bedenlerini kontrol etmesi fikrine atıfta bulunur. Filipinler'de hükümet, virüsün yayılmasını önlemek için sokağa çıkma yasağı ve kısıtlamalar getirdi. Ülkede uygulanan Biyopolitikanın türü, eleştirmenleri tarafından bir “tıbbi popülizm” biçimi olarak tanımlandı. Ancak, böyle bir değerlendirme Filipin toplumundaki güç ilişkilerinin gerçekliğinin tam olarak tanınmasından yoksundur. Neden Filipin toplumundaki yapısal adaletsizlik gerçeğini ve küresel siyasetin hegemonik doğasını bir halk sağlığı krizinin ortasında anlamalıyız?

Anahtar Kavramlar: Biyogüç; Biyopolitika; Kovid19 pandemisi; yönetimsellik; Başkan Duterte;

1. Introduction

To truly understand Philippine society, any inquiry must recognize the context of power relations in the country's history and how the same has shaped the perspectives of its people. Why must we understand the reality of structural injustice in Philippine society, as well as the hegemonic nature of global politics, in the middle of a public health crisis? The hugely uneven structures in the country, the way resources are redistributed, and the powerlessness of millions in the peripheries give rise to a type of radical or progressive politics. The reality of political contestation, in this way, is the obvious starting point. The country is divided in terms of the

* Associate Professor, Ateneo de Davao University, Department of Philosophy, ryanmaboloc75@yahoo.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-7057-4032.

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elite and the powerless. The unjust socio-economic and political systems that define the everyday life of Filipinos since colonial times continue to repress those in the margins. To understand the unequal situation of people, an analysis of structures rather than a simplistic criticism of the President's personality is the more substantive approach to uncover what is wrong as Philippine society tries to overcome a crippling public health crisis.

Using the interpretive method of research, this investigation will try to examine and put into question the assumptions of critics when it comes to the style of leadership of President Duterte. The paper hopes to put forward an alternative view when it comes to the character and radical nature of Covid-19 politics under President Duterte's watch. The research is divided into two parts – an explication of the concept of biopower and analysis of Covid-19 politics under President Duterte. The concept of radical democracy in the Philippines was introduced for the first in this journal as a response to the liberal-reformist criticisms against the current Philippine president. It has been argued that the liberal critics of the President have failed to consider the reality of antagonism in Philippine society, as reflected in the elite type of democracy practiced in the country after its colonizers have left. This paper does not seek to exonerate anyone when it comes to what is wanting as the country tries to overcome the public health crisis. Rather, it desires to understand the value of radical politics by reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic in the Philippines.

2. The Theory of Biopower

According to Daniel Mishori, the term biopower and Biopolitics originated from Michel Foucault. The term Biopower is meant to address “the role states play in shaping citizens' health, including techniques to control and directly affect the human body.”¹ In his four-volume “The History of Sexuality,” Foucault explains that sex was not repressed during the 17th to the 19th century.² Foucault writes that “sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit.”³ The care of the self for Foucault is a matter of technique. In the concept of Biopower, the body is the object of control. Public health is subjected to the

¹ Daniel Mishori, “Medical Technocracy, Extreme Biopower, and Human Rights.” In *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*. Special Issue (July 2020): 242.

² Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 1-2.

³ Ibid, 3.



state apparatus. People are to be defined based on the condition of their physical bodies. The population is to be classified, the mental health of individuals is stereotyped, and every citizen is marked as desirable or undesirable. Philip Sarasin explains that Foucault's concept of biopower can be understood by way of three models.⁴

The first model is leprosy.⁵ Lepers were to be excluded from society so that they cannot infect those who are healthy. This is an apt representation of social and economic exclusion. This model could be seen as outdated, as leprosy is no longer considered a threat to the population's health. However, its influence is felt in the social and economic realm. Some people, like lepers, are discriminated against because of society's unfounded prejudices. While leprosy is gone, this model contributes to the way we interpret the reality of socio-economic and political exclusion. The Rohingya Minority in Burma, for instance, is a prime example. But this is not just a question of identity politics. It is about the privileged position of others who dictate the rules of the game. The Rohingya are a people with no nation. They are, in a way, stripped of their humanity and of the basic right to be a citizen of the state.

The second model is the plague.⁶ In this case, the coronavirus pandemic is applicable. The plague is concerned about the discipline of human behavior. Quarantines are meant to separate the healthy part of the population from those who are already infected. To do so, governments must impose rules. Herein, borders are meant to separate citizens from non-citizens. The idea of otherness is emphasized. The other is seen as an enemy to another's state of being. Quarantine is not about treatment or cure. It is about separating the desirable from the undesirable in society. This theoretical construct is about how the state uses its power to enforce the protection of the healthy from the risks and consequences of getting the infection. But in the process, it is actually at the expense of the vulnerable who do not have the means to protect themselves when left on their own.

The third model is smallpox.⁷ Due to its virulence, this model reflects the totalization of the general population. Persons must be identified and marked. This symbolizes the absolute

⁴ Philip Sarasin. "Understanding the Pandemic with Michel Foucault." [Internet article]. <https://www.fsw.uzh.ch/foucaultblog/essays/254/understanding-corona-with-foucault>. Accessed February 12, 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.



control of the state over the lives of the people. It is about making a judgment as to who is wanted and who is not. The latter is expended and is considered as without relevance to the objectives or goals of society and its instruments of power. In this way, science plays its role when it comes to statistics as people are characterized based on their health conditions. The unhealthy is considered a danger to society and must be exterminated. In the broader context of a state of emergency, undesirable people are left on their own to die since they are seen as a threat to the social body. In this instance, the state uses all its means to subjugate those it does not consider as a part of its existence.

Mishori explains that the idea of Biopower is manifest in terms of the optics of power. The state imposes its will on the population. The state is like the image of a sword that decides who dies and who lives. But the power of the same cannot be possessed. The power of the state lies in the way the public unwittingly submit themselves to the rule of the sovereign who uses whatever means at its disposal to sow fear. It is this fear that conceals the reality of power. But this fear, however, is not rooted in the sovereign. It is about the way people react or behave based on laws and rules that are imposed on them. The idea is not about what the law tries to prohibit or tell them not to do, but what it dictates as normal. People who obey are rewarded and those who don't are punished. An individual who does not follow the law is immediately judged as undesirable. In a disciplinary society, a person is reduced into a conformist because one is afraid to be labeled as unwanted.

But the real danger when it comes to the reality of power is when people are no longer able to question things. In institutions, this comes about when an order some someone in a position of authority is meant to be obeyed with question by means of notices, memoranda, and policies that like proper consultation and democratic legitimacy. In social media, many assume that what they see is some form of gospel truth. They follow what is trending and easily confuse what is only popular with what is factual. Translated into the extreme, it is about how the state and government control the behavior of the population. Mishori explains that experts derive their authority "from both their bureaucratic role and their academic/scientific aura of expertise. In the case of physicians, this authority is reinforced through disciplinary mechanisms."⁸ However, it is important to distinguish what is legitimate and what is not. In the first, the

⁸ Mishori, "Medical Technocracy, Extreme Biopower, and Human Rights," 242.



behavior of people comes from blind obedience. In the second, such is rooted in the role of knowledge in society.

Foucault distinguishes power into two – repressive power and normalizing power. The first refers to how the state punishes people by using force or violence, whether legitimate or illegitimate. Foucault, however, believes that the purpose of power is more subtle. He explains that power is often normalized under the scheme of institutional rules. As a result, the pandemic has provided some in positions of power the reasons to legitimize their abuses. While ordinary people who are caught violating protocols are humiliated by punishing them in public, reports indicate that some alleged corrupt practices by powerful government officials often go unnoticed or unpunished because of the protection given by those who dictate the rules. As a result, the type of impunity enjoyed by others serves as a normalizing situation that put to doubt the moral role of the state. As a result, ordinary folks resign to their fate, thinking that corruption is normal and acceptable as a way of life.

Foucault tries to expose how this unjust mechanism has prevailed in our modern society. In what way has power hidden from the mind of the public? Foucault explains the answer by describing how the norms of punishment have metamorphosed in history. In his *Discipline and Punish*, he states that torture, through the story of Damians the Regicide, was then a form of a public spectacle. The reason for the display of the terror is to remind the public that any violence committed against the sovereign should be felt more intensely by the criminal. The public watches in awe of the spectacle or the theater of execution so that they also become participants in the torture. The sovereign transfers to the people the authority to punish. The idea of penal reform, for Foucault, has been used to ease the guilt and burden on the part of the jury.

But Foucault writes that as time went by, the reality of physical punishment has become so subtle and has been transformed into a latent tactic of controlling the population. This is manifest in the prison system, the clinic, and the school in which people become automatons or mindless bodies meant to follow orders. The strict regimen inside the prison system has one purpose and that is to make prisoners conform. The goal is to subject the human being to a subtle kind of punishment to make him docile. Translated into the present scheme, schools produce students like manufactured products from a factory. The outcome of education is not the empowerment of human freedom or the celebration of what it means to be human but the reduction of the person into a productive being who can contribute to the economic mega-



machine. In this way, people are judged based on their skills and not on their ability to understand. Foucault writes:

“One of the great innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of ‘population’ as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, the population as manpower or labor capacity, population balanced between its growth and the resources it commanded. Governments perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with a ‘people,’ but with a ‘population,’ with its specific phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation.”⁹

The people have become subservient to the will of the sovereign. Their autonomy has no meaning or value to them. They become subjugated, exploited, and manipulated. Society, thus, is just like a prison system where people are subjected to observation, surveillance, or monitoring. In this way, the fear of being monitored will influence the behavior of people. In itself, the rule has no meaning unless it can effectively control people. To illustrate, the QR codes exemplify the reality in which a person is being constantly watched. It is the new Panopticon. The rules and protocols during the time of Covid-19, as such, are the actual means of the state to influence and necessarily, control human behavior. The number of deaths posted daily serves as a warning that anyone can die anytime.

Governmentality explains the way power operates within the system.¹⁰ When it comes to the Coronavirus, experts act as messengers of a certain kind of mindset. They insist that it is never safe to go out not based on reasonableness but based on the “carrot and stick” approach. It makes the person unable to rationally process the situation. Health experts, for Mishori, have now become agents of the state when it comes to extreme biopower. At the start of the pandemic, public transport systems were shut down such as in India, without due consideration for the hard life of folks who did not have the means to return to their homes. The pandemic has become the excuse for harsh rules that strip people of their basic liberties. In the Philippines, ordinary men and women have been subjected to a type of punishment that is meant to embarrass rather than teach them the protocols and their purpose. Indeed, it now seems that only those at the top of the hierarchy are considered bearers of wisdom. Foucault writes:

⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 25.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population*. Translated by Graham Burchell. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 20.



“Wisdom means governing by the order of things. It means governing according to the knowledge of human and divine laws. It means governing according to God’s prescriptions. It means governing according to what the general human and divine order may prescribe. In other words, when one sought to identify how the sovereign had to be wise and in what his wisdom consisted, one tried to regulate and model government in terms of the truth”.¹¹

The above explains the condescending attitude of some lawyers, judges, police officers, and many politicians. But Foucault says that it should be of no interest to us where power is from. Rather, our concern should be how it governs us in terms of its tendency to totalize. Torture, as a public spectacle, was replaced with new forms of control employed in society, such as an ID system that reduces persons into barcodes. Torture was, at the outset, according to Foucault, “made the body of the condemned man the place where the vengeance of the sovereign was applied.”¹² Power undermines the common people without them knowing about it. This is what disciplinary power is all about. For Foucault, the idea of power “was at the heart of all mechanisms of punishment and that it is still to be found in contemporary penal practice but in a quite different form and with very different effects.”¹³

The idea of disciplinary power makes people think that the state has total power over them. Public behavior is influenced by fear. Bentham’s Panopticon is the symbolic representation of penal power in the socio-political body. In the Philippines, the tower of the New Bilibid Prisons in Muntinlupa City symbolizes this very representation. The same symbol has been assimilated in Philippine popular culture, with the tower getting prominent exposure in crime movies in the 80s and the 90s. It has come to be the representation for the criminal justice system. Foucault writes that “the reform of criminal law must be read as a strategy for the re-arrangement of the power to punish, according to modalities that render it more regular, more effective, more constant and more detailed in its effects.”¹⁴

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Edited by Michael Sinelart. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 311.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Translated by Alan Sheridan. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 55.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.



3. Covid-19 Politics in the Philippines

Lockdowns, known as “community quarantines” in the Philippines, are meant to prevent the spread of the virus. These quarantines have been classified by the *Inter-Agency Task Force on Covid-19* as “Enhanced”, “General”, or “Modified”.¹⁵ During the first quarter of 2020, airports, seaports, and railways have been closed or limited in terms of capacity, thereby restricting public transportation across borders and between regions. Such has resulted in a tremendous impact on the economic output of every country and the life of the people globally. A developing country like the Philippines, for example, has suffered since it is fueled by its services sector. The many prolonged lockdowns meant the closure of commercial establishments, hotels and restaurants, and other shops. But more significantly, lockdowns restrict the social and economic life of the people. To mitigate the impact of the pandemic, governments gave subsidies to millions who have been affected.

As the Delta Variant of the coronavirus has become the dominant cause of infections in the Philippines as of August 30, 2021, important factors will have to be considered when it comes to the national strategy against the Covid-19 public health crisis.¹⁶ In the beginning, vaccine nationalism emerged as an initial problem due to the desire of European Union states to prioritize their citizens. As such, the delay in the vaccinations in the Philippines during the first quarter of 2021 was due to lingering supply problems. But the President’s pivot to China was again put into the limelight when the Philippines received the latter’s first donation of about a million dosage of Sinovac. While the Covax Facility enables developing countries to have access to financing in the purchase of the Covid-19 vaccines, supplies have been scarce in the early part of 2021. Access and allocation prove to be the big problem when it comes to vaccines.¹⁷

Critics mention how President Duterte appears to have downplayed the pandemic. They have argued that the purpose of simplifying the enormous problem that people are faced with is to secure that false sense of hope on the part of the general public. For Gideon Lasco, “health

¹⁵ Department of Health, “Covid-19 Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases Resolutions.” [Online] <https://doh.gov.ph/COVID-19/IATF-Resolutions>

¹⁶ Bonz Magsambol, “Delta now dominant Covid variant in the Philippines”, [Online] *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/who-says-delta-now-dominant-covid-19-variant-philippines-august-31-2021>

¹⁷ World Health Organization, “Access and allocation: How will there be fair and equitable allocation of limited supply.” [Online] <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/access-and-allocation-how-will-there-be-fair-and-equitable-allocation-of-limited-supplies>



emergencies create latitude for populists to make a case for the swiftest possible response ...offering of common sense solutions to complex issues.”¹⁸ Lasco, in pursuing this position, says that “in the case of pandemics, these include downplaying the virulence or severity of the outbreak (e.g. ‘It’s just like the flu’), promising quick fixes like an effective drug (e.g. hydroxychloroquine)... or making simplistic arguments that pit liberty and the economy against public health.”¹⁹ Lasco says that this attitude is a form of “medical populism”. For him, it is about how a leader tries to highlight the conflict between the rich and poor while at the same time touting himself as somebody who is in favor of the latter.

While Lasco points to the concept of medical populism as the basis of the government’s strategy in fighting the pandemic, what is absent from his analysis is the fact that the radical ways that President Duterte in approaching the problem may be borne out of the uneven power structures in the country. From a leadership perspective, the people believe that political will is necessary as the Philippines tries to overcome the crisis. Past administrations have been unable to provide strong leadership in terms of alleviating the plight of the poor whose lives have been destroyed by natural calamities such as Typhoon Yolanda. The difference lies in the personal manner in which President Duterte approaches the problem. The pragmatic aspect of his radical leadership means that government should be there for the people in times of crisis. In contrast, the administration of then-President Benigno Aquino III failed to address systemic failures. As a result, the people wanted someone who knows what needs to be done to make things work.

The President knows how to appeal to the sentiments of the masses. But the way he handles matters and how he speaks is often judged by critics as nothing but a form of bravado. However, this can also be interpreted as the “grammar of dissent” in which the country’s leader points to a resurgent type of nationalism that is meant to bring about change.²⁰ But for his many critics, the style of the President is a matter of optics. Lasco writes: “From that point onwards, the president and his allies dramatized their response to the crisis by using the language and imagery of war, threatening to use force and deploying uniformed personnel to staff checkpoints throughout the country. ‘I will not hesitate. My orders are to the police and military, as well as

¹⁸ Gideon Lasco, “Medical populism and the Covid 19-pandemic.” In *Global Public Health* 15:10 (2020): 1418.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, “Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte,” *Iqra: Journal of Al Qalam Institute* 4, (2017): 9.



village officials, if there are any trouble, or occasions where there's violence and your lives are in danger, shoot them dead,' he said on April 1."²¹

Lasco notes how President Duterte, at the outset, "declared that 'everything is well... since it will die on its own,' later going on to exhort the people "not to be hysterical... have faith in humanity... we are a resilient people,' till admitting in March 2020 that if things deteriorate, "I may have to call on China to help."²² Lasco said that the President did not bother to look into how neighboring countries put measures against the spread of the virus.²³ Lasco explains that the President did not act early in January 2020 because he was "concerned with the political and diplomatic repercussions, there were no travel restrictions placed on mainland China, and there was no banning of flights from Wuhan."²⁴ While these observations are valid, the fact of the matter is that certain things also need to be contextualized. First World countries such as Japan and Australia are still battling the pandemic. The right question to ask, then, from a leadership point of view, is whether or not the President is acting in the best interest of the Filipino people.

For Lasco, the "Philippine example shows how leaders evolve their political styles based on the situation, with Duterte shifting from simplification to spectacularization as the number of cases grew."²⁵ However, President Duterte has never shown the same behavior expressed by President Bolsonaro of Brazil who dismissed the scientific approach in fighting the pandemic. President Duterte consults with his experts in the Inter-Agency Task Force before making any decisions. There is no available blueprint or manual in terms of how a society can win this fight against the virus. But for Lasco, Duterte is "resorting to his default punitive posture, after protests over access to food and medicine occurred, his order to the police to 'shoot to kill' against 'anyone causing commotion' or 'spreading misinformation was seen as an attack on all his critics, especially those in the media."²⁶

²¹ Lasco, "Medical populism and the Covid 19-pandemic," 1421-1422

²² Ibid., 1422.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ David Camroux, "Covid-19 and Strongman Rule in the Philippines." SciencesPo: Center for International Studies. [Online]. <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/en/content/covid-19-and-strongman-rule-philippines>. Accessed February 13, 2021.

²⁵ Lasco, "Medical populism and the Covid 19-pandemic," 1422.

²⁶ Camroux, "Covid-19 and Strongman Rule in the Philippines."



Lasco has failed to distinguish the difference between policy pronouncements and what is pure rhetoric on the part of the Filipino leader. The point is that the words of the President must be contextualized as a way of warning citizens to observe basic health protocols. There is a need to separate political rhetoric from reality. It is the language of the “masa” [translated as mass] that President Duterte is using for them to be able to understand directly from their leader’s mouth the danger and risks of Covid-19. It appears that the critics of the President are paying no attention to the efforts of the country’s various departments that have done their share in terms of implementing programs that are meant to help the public survive the crisis. One way or the other, a leader has to at least give them the means to see hope in a world that has been devastated by a malady. But critics choose to focus on the acerbic nature of President Duterte in a very Filipino manner of saying, “wala ng ginawang tama” [has not done anything right].

Nicole Curato says that the “Duterte regime is notorious for its systematic distortion of public discourse... uncovered the administration’s mobilization of state-sponsored troll armies, which creates a toxic online environment that punishes dissenting voices.”²⁷ She insists that “press freedom in the Philippines is also eroding, as news organizations not only face threats of being shut down but have been closed by congressional votes and judicial rulings.”²⁸ In this sense, the public sphere, critics of the President say, is toxic given the disruptive nature of President Duterte’s pragmatic leadership. But is President Duterte’s style of governance out to destroy state institutions? The problem of the Philippines is not President Duterte. It is its institutional deficits. The rise to power of the President is only a dramatic manifestation of what is wanting when it comes to Philippine society.

Beyond the lens of Biopolitics, it matters to look into the situation more closely. This will require putting aside any bias in terms of the optics of power. An ideology, including the liberal-reformist way, does not bring about an objective assessment of reality. It matters to reveal the facts without making any prior judgment. For instance, the government used the bulk of its 2020 National Budget to provide monetary subsidies to millions of Filipinos during quarantines. Local Government Units were told to use their savings, including their

²⁷ Nicole Curato, “Democratic expressions amidst fragile institutions: Possibilities for reform in Duterte’s Philippines.” *Brookings Institute: Democracies in Asia*. [Internet article]. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/democratic-expressions-amidst-fragile-institutions-possibilities-for-reform-in-dutertes-philippines/>. Accessed February 20, 2021.

²⁸ Ibid.



development funds, for pandemic relief. The people have been prevented from getting out of their homes, classes were suspended and factories were closed. The country, which prides itself on having some of the biggest shopping malls in the world, its economy being consumer-driven, also halted the commercial operations of the same. The only goods allowed for transport were food, medicine, and medical supplies. People are informed as to the dangers and risks of the coronavirus. The country has a competent health care force to reckon with when it comes to public emergencies.

The country, which gets a huge chunk of its Gross Domestic Product from tourism, closed resorts in prominent destinations like Boracay and Palawan. Two of its airlines have lost billions of pesos, with Philippine Airlines (PAL) retrenching 2,300 of its employees. Cebu Pacific at the beginning tried to support its workforce, with executives accepting pay cuts. But this was only temporary. In early February of 2021, the National Economic Development Authority, through its head Karl Chua, proposed the reopening of the economy.²⁹ The young secretary mentioned that this is necessary to mitigate hunger among the poor households, with millions of Filipinos unable to find work while economic activities come to a grind. Such a proposal is indicative that the country has bright technocrats. The real problem, it can be said, is not the President. Rather, it is the country's systemic issues that render as useless some of the things that the government is doing. For instance, loopholes in the distribution schemes of cash subsidies mean that such can fall into the hands of corrupt officials.

The Philippines, being a recent transitional democracy, is characterized by institutional gaps and failures. Transitional democracies are states that have shifted into a liberal type of government. It can be said that the country has not really recovered from its colonial past and is still suffering from the effects of the Marcos dictatorship. People Power I, which installed President Corazon Aquino, gave the country the chance to rectify the wrongs of President Marcos. But the first Aquino government did not do that. It restored the old order instead. For this reason, the country returned to its oligarchic past. The damaged institutions of the country have not evolved after subsequent administrations since 1986. The elite system of democracy

²⁹ Andreo Calunzo and Cecilia Yap, "Philippines must loosen Covid curbs more, economic planner says." In Bloomberg. [Internet article]. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-15/philippines-must-loosen-covid-curbs-more-economic-planner-says>



is still at work.³⁰ As a result, there is a problem at the local as well as the national level. Some people, while lacking qualifications, have been appointed to positions in government. Such instances hurt the public sector in terms of its desire to give the people the kind of service that they deserve.

Filipinos have experienced various types of discomfort due to a feudal economic system that has only enrich a few families. Towering buildings and high-rise structures are not signs of authentic human progress. Development can only commence the moment people get to enjoy the basic services that the government is mandated to provide. Now, the same issue is apparent in the area of health care. Before the pandemic, the country's national insurance system (Philhealth) was hounded by corruption issues that totaled 15 billion pesos.³¹ The President fired the head of the agency and appointed a former director of the National Bureau of Investigation to the post to end the culture of corruption in the insurance system. But the pandemic has only exacerbated and highlighted the many problems of Philippine society. These problems have existed ever since the colonizers have transferred the power to govern the Filipinos.

President Duterte, however, has become the image of a charismatic leader who possesses the political will to help the people. It is expected, henceforth, that he will get all the blame from critics. When the pandemic was raging in Western Europe, the European Commission issued a pronouncement that it will restrict the rules for Covid-19 vaccine exports outside of the European Union.³² President Duterte then lambasted the decision of the EU. He was one of the few leaders to do so, the others being afraid of retribution from the EU's most affluent countries. The way the President reacted at the time is nothing new. Many know that national interest is prioritized by the EU in that pronouncement, more than the desire to save humanity. In the end, the world's richest nations simply want their economy back on track. Foucault explains that, in reality, "liberalism, then, is to be analyzed as a principle and method of the

³⁰ Paul Hotchcroft and Joel Rocamora, "Strong Demands and Weak Institutions: The Origins and Evolution of the Democratic Deficit in the Philippines," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 3, no.2, (2003): 259.

³¹ Bonz Magsambol, "Philhealth execs misspent, stole 15 billion, says resigned anti-fraud official." *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/ex-official-says-billions-stolen-by-philhealth-fraud-schemes>

³² Holly Ellyatt, "Export Controls on Covid vaccines from Europe could spark collapse in global supply, experts warn." In CNBC. [Internet article]. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/01/eus-vaccine-export-controls-could-damage-global-vaccine-supply.html>



rationalization of the exercise of government, a rationalization which obeys— and this is what is specific about it—the internal rule of the maximum economy.”³³

However, the point of the matter is to know how the country can overcome the crisis. It is not correct, for instance, on the part of the President to defend public officials if the latter is involved in corruption. While the President’s approach to the problem may be typical of the traditional politics practiced in the country, arguing that others will also do the same if they were in his position, there is no institutional nor democratic gain from protecting any government official who has been tainted by alleged corrupt acts. It is a matter of fact too, for example, that the secretary of health has been hounded by various criticisms of incompetence. But the position of the President in terms of keeping Secretary Francisco Duque III in his post is that it is difficult to change the person who is calling the shots in the middle of a game. Of course, should it be proven that the same is guilty of what he has been accused of, then the same may be let go and cases should be filed against him for the greater good of the people and in keeping with the principle of honest governance.

The solution to the problem that the country is facing right now cannot be found in the exhortation of the moral ideals of liberal politics. The nature of Philippine society requires more than an exposition of who is the moral leader among the potentials that are being presented to the people. President Corazon Aquino before and her son later were moral persons but they both failed the Filipino people. While critics continue to hammer the unsmiling character of President Duterte, the problem lies somewhere. The reality is that it has something to do with power and the way it has metamorphosed in our political system. The only way for people to overcome the subjugation that they experience is to resist the tendency of power to normalize things in favor of those who only seek to usurp the system for their interests. The virus has no brain but it is getting way ahead of us. The reason is simple. We, the people, have become our very own enemy.

4. Conclusion

Biopolitics reveals the type of power struggles apparent in Philippine society. A deeper analysis will tell us that the context of power relations in the Philippines points to the structural injustices experienced by Filipinos. Any right kind of intervention this time of the pandemic

³³ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 318.



should consider this context. To understand the reality of Biopolitics, the transformation of the obvious into subtle forms of punishment explains how power hides under the guise of rules. Discipline has come to govern the way people are subjected to monitoring systems that render them mere automatons or docile bodies. The critics of the President of the Philippines have accused him of using the pandemic to advance his populist approach to power. However, it can be countered that the perpetuation of elite politics in the country is the real problem and not the radical style of the president when it comes to responding to the pandemic. In this way, what needs to be seen is that the problems that the Philippines is facing at this time of a public health emergency are due to the unjust power structures in the country. The President did not create this situation. It is a result of the country's harsh colonial experience that to this day has continued to shape and dictate the fate of Filipinos. The President's ascent to power in 2016 is a result of the decades of discomfort felt by the majority of the population. A lot was expected from him. But unjust global structures and systemic injustices have continued to hound the poor in Philippine society. This is apparent in the reality of vaccine nationalism in which a global hegemonic order dictates the future of the world.

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