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# Philippine Government's COVID-19 Narrative: **A SELF-PRODUCED, POLITICAL INTEREST-FUELED INFODEMIC**

by **Vino Lucero**

The Philippine government started talking about SARS-CoV-2 in early 2020 by quelling fears and dismissing concerns—President Rodrigo R. Duterte himself said that there is nothing to be “extra scared” about the virus and that everything is well in the country, despite recording the first COVID-19 case the day prior<sup>1</sup>. This is despite its very own Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) recommending a temporary restriction of visa issuance for those traveling from the Hubei province of China<sup>2</sup>.

This effort to minimize concerns on the emerging virus outbreak from the national government despite increasing concern from experts translated to how the country controls travel to and from COVID-19 areas of concern. Despite reports of international transmission as early as mid-January<sup>3</sup>, the government failed to take decisive action in limiting inward-bound international travel, including those coming from China<sup>4</sup> and countries with early cases of COVID-19.

The first COVID-19 case in the Philippines was reported on 30 January 2020<sup>5</sup>—a traveler from Wuhan, China—and just several weeks after, local transmission had already been reported in early March 2020<sup>6</sup>. While initially rejecting the idea of declaring lockdowns a week prior<sup>7</sup>, the national government enforced a strict local lockdown<sup>8</sup> due to the rising number of cases from local transmission.

From local lockdown classifications<sup>9</sup> to defining mass testing<sup>10</sup>, the government has continuously created confusion among citizens with its ever-evolving definition of terms, tentative pandemic response plans, and missteps in implementing COVID-19 support to ordinary Filipinos. This is partly due to how information systems were executed during the whole pandemic.

Initially, there is already an existing multi-agency task force capable of coordinating pandemic-related information and response efforts. The creation of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases, seen to be the cluster of government agencies coordinating on different aspects of COVID-19 response and relief, was done years before the pandemic. In fact, it was established in 2014 through an executive order penned by Mr. Duterte's predecessor<sup>11</sup>. The task force is currently chaired by the Secretary of the Department of Health and is composed of 34 executive agencies<sup>12</sup>.

The task force is expected to plan and oversee execution of policies and programs to combat the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the economy. Mandated to “establish preparedness and ensure efficient government response to assess, monitor, contain, control, and prevent the spread of any potential epidemic in the Philippines<sup>13</sup>”, the task force released resolutions on COVID-19 response as early as January 2020.

However, in reality, their expert opinion can still be overturned—it is still up to the Office of the President to take up these resolutions and announce them as official responses or policies.

## **MULTIPLE TALKING HEADS WITH COMPLICATED PANDEMIC MANDATES**

When local lockdowns started in March 2020, there were two main sources of COVID-19 updates: The Office of the President—either through the president himself during late-night or pre-recorded public briefings, or sometimes through the spokesperson, his chief legal counsel, or another cabinet secretary, all four of whom are not doctors or medical professionals—and the Department of Health, through its secretary or spokesperson.

The official national government stance or policy had to always come from the president's office, though information sources can come from the different government agencies

included in the task force. In some cases, recommendations from some information sources, medical experts included, did not translate to the official COVID-19 policy. The final say always comes from the president or his spokespersons and alter egos, all of which are not equipped to personally explain intricate medical processes and terminologies.

Later on, the president started adding COVID-19 czars<sup>14</sup>, appointed officials to be in charge of certain aspects of the pandemic, into the fold which further created redundancies and complications in information systems. New individuals are added to the mix without addressing issues in communication processes and concerns. The COVID-19 czars, most of whom are former military or police officials, serve as Mr. Duterte's point persons on key aspects of pandemic response—a role that can be seen as redundant to the mandate of the key officials of the existing inter-agency task force.

Local governments, meanwhile, also have their own policies and information systems on the COVID-19 pandemic. Coordination between the national and local government has not always been as smooth as both parties wanted, as manifested in the difference between the national government's daily COVID-19 cases bulletin and those being reported by local governments as the daily number of COVID-19 cases in their respective areas.

As more and more officials were being summoned and appointed to work towards COVID-19 response, less-than-due attention has been given to data systems and case tracking. Lapses in COVID-19 patient data being reported by the Department of Health were exposed, including some being reported dead but are actually alive<sup>15</sup>.

Disregard for the much-needed contact tracing data continued for months into the pandemic. There has been no unified contact tracing system established in the Philippines<sup>16</sup>, according to the appointed contact tracing czar during a House of Representatives hearing in March 2021—one year into the pandemic.

Despite this statement from its own czar and other manifestations of gaps and lapses, the Philippine government is decisively convinced that it handled the pandemic in an “excellent” manner. They stated having the spread of disease under control<sup>[17]</sup> while reporting 3,356 new COVID-19 cases on the same day despite continuous lockdowns in different parts of the country—a fact that show less than stellar performance of pandemic response. A few weeks later, stricter local lockdowns were reinforced again as the tally for new daily COVID-19 cases hit more than 10,000<sup>18</sup>.

Such statements—claims of success or victory against the COVID-19 pandemic without supporting data, or worse, with actual data contradicting these claims—have been and continue to be a common occurrence in the COVID-19 information ecosystem of the Philippine government.

In fact, Mr. Duterte's communications office has mandated all government media platforms to specifically portray that the Philippines is doing better on pandemic response compared to other countries through a memorandum<sup>19</sup>, despite the reality of rising tolls of new COVID-19 cases and slow vaccination rollout at the time.

The April 2021 memo, however, seemed more like just a reiteration of what had been the practice in the first year of the pandemic—an act that makes it an official command instead of just being an unspoken rule.

## CONFUSION EMANATING FROM THE PALACE

In addition to unfounded claims to COVID-19 wins, the Office of the President has also been perceived as a major source of disinformation during the pandemic.

Philippine news organization VERA Files, in its 2020 fact-check year-end report, actually pointed to Mr. Duterte and his spokesperson as the top sources of COVID-19 misinformation based on the fact-checks its team did for the year<sup>20</sup>. The news organization reported 41 fact-checked claims on COVID-19 from different government officials. Out of this number, 19 were from the president himself, and 10 which are classified as false information. Seven of the fact-checked claims, meanwhile, came from Mr. Duterte's official spokesperson, and two came from his chief legal counsel<sup>21</sup>.

Indeed, Mr. Duterte has consistently shared inaccurate information on COVID-19 on top of providing confusing pronouncements on his plans to respond to the health crisis, contributing to the infodemic the public had to deal with as they struggled with the pandemic.

To name a few, the President provided misinformation on COVID-19 during the following instances:

- He contradicted himself in April 2020 by saying that [he warned the country about the danger of COVID-19 from the start, and to be on guard](#). This is completely false, as what he actually did was dismiss concerns and say that the virus will die a natural death even without vaccines<sup>22</sup>.
- Mr. Duterte claimed the [SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is similar to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus \(HIV\)](#). The World Health Organization said that it is not right to do a comparison of the two viruses as they are different in nature—as HIV attacks the immune system and weakens the body's defense to sickness while 80 percent of COVID-19 cases recover without needing special medical attention<sup>23</sup>.
- Mr. Duterte also got his history wrong – in one of his speeches, the President claimed that [the Spanish flu started before World War I started in 1914](#). The real story is that the Spanish flu outbreak started in 1918, four years after the first World War started, with the mass movement of the military probably aiding in the spread of the disease<sup>24</sup>.
- Mr. Duterte also suggested to the public that [when alcohol is not available, the poor can use gasoline to clean their masks and to disinfect](#), when prolonged contact to petrol can be harmful and a fire hazard<sup>25</sup>.
- The president also flip-flopped on [the power of local government leaders to implement local policies on responding to the pandemic situation](#). In just a span of four days, he went from saying that they would not need permission from the national government in implementing local ordinances related to the public

health crisis, to telling mayors to stand down and obey the directives of the national government<sup>26</sup>.

- In line with his administration's fascination with setting legacies and being the frontrunner of sorts, Mr. Duterte boasted that the Philippines is the [first one in Asia to impose local lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic](#). This misinformation was corrected by the press, as China, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and Mongolia have placed lockdowns before the Philippine lockdowns started in mid-March of 2020<sup>27</sup>.
- The president also falsely claimed that the inter-agency task force he created to manage COVID-19<sup>28</sup> was convened immediately to deal with pandemic response, when in fact [it took the task force around three weeks to meet and release pronouncements about COVID-19 after the WHO released a notice about the virus](#)<sup>29</sup> and when it was actually his predecessor who established the mentioned task force<sup>30</sup>.

More recently, the president also made blunders when it came to his vaccination program for the Philippine population. In August 2020, for example, he erroneously claimed that vaccines are made from the human body when the true process of creating vaccines is mostly in laboratories and would just interact with the human body during clinical trials<sup>31</sup>.

The Duterte administration's past disinformation efforts also bit back hard now when campaigning for public inoculation on COVID-19. Early in the president's term, allies of Mr. Duterte, led by his very own appointed chief public attorney<sup>32</sup>, were being blamed for vaccination hesitancy after the scandal they made for the past administration's dengue vaccine. Vaccine hesitancy is high, with a recent survey showing that six out of 10 Filipinos do not want to get vaccinated<sup>33</sup>. Now, the country needs to sign an indemnity deal or agreement with vaccine manufacturers as fears rise that they might face the same liability for the COVID-19 vaccines<sup>34</sup>.

And while the president continues to portray great control over the pandemic through his pronouncements, actual reports contradict the realities on the ground: the rising number of cases, increased poverty and unemployment due to economic fallout brought by the pandemic, and the continuation of one of the longest lockdowns in the world<sup>35</sup>.

## MORE MISTAKES FROM MORE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

As cited in the VERA Files report<sup>36</sup>, Mr. Duterte's spokesperson has also been identified as a major peddler of COVID-19 response misinformation in 2020. Secretary Harry Roque, given his role to communicate the executive's good work in handling pandemic, has provided answers that were erroneous, or at the very least, with a spin towards the government's favor.

VERA Files also reported that Roque, on 12 March 2021, erroneously claimed a better spot for the Philippines when compared to a global ranking of countries with the highest number of active COVID-19 cases and the number of cases per million population<sup>37</sup>, all in an effort to improve the portrayal of the national response of the government since putting the biggest island group of the country a year before. Roque claimed at the time that the Philippines

ranked 40th among countries with active COVID-19 cases, when in fact, the country ranked 28th on 11 March and 26th on 12 March 2021.

Roque's work as a spin master also extends to the COVID-19 deals made by the Palace. Early this year, VERA Files also reported that Roque misstated interim clinic results of CoronaVac, a vaccine developed by a China-based firm Sinovac BioTech, by repeating a higher efficacy rate (91.25 percent) reported in Turkey when mentioning the vaccine's reported efficacy rate in neighbor country Indonesia, which is just at 65.3 percent<sup>38</sup>.

The spokesperson's erroneous data mentions came days after the Philippine government sealed an agreement to get 25 million doses of CoronaVac for 2021, continuous defense of the quality of this specific brand of COVID-19 vaccine<sup>39</sup>, and getting praise from another pandemic response official for being the only one to give a definite dose delivery timeline<sup>40</sup>.

Mr. Duterte's chief legal counsel also has his fair share of COVID-19 blunders. One year after claiming that eating bananas and gargling can help in fighting the virus and prevent transmissions<sup>41</sup>, Presidential Chief Legal Counsel Salvador Panelo made a similar claim about gargling salt and water can prevent getting infected by the virus<sup>42</sup>—something that has been debunked by studies and dismissed by health experts.

In June 2020, Cebu Governor Gwen Garcia also fell trap to another disproven method of curing COVID-19 infections. In an online public address, the governor erroneously said that *tuob*, or steam inhalation while covering the patient's head, can kill SARS-CoV-2<sup>43</sup>. This was later debunked by the Philippine Department of Health, saying that *tuob* does not kill the said virus. Unfortunately, *tuob* kits were already included in the provincial strategy on pandemic response<sup>44</sup>.

These high-level government officials should have known better—similar social media misinformation when it comes to fighting and curing COVID-19 has caused 5,800 people to be admitted in hospitals in the first months of the pandemic, according to a study published in the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene<sup>45</sup>.

The president's allies in the legislative also misspoke on pandemic-related information. A representative of a party-list supposedly advocating better healthcare has expressed in early April 2021 that he will distribute Ivermectin, an anti-parasitic drug, despite earlier pronouncement by government health experts cautioning against the use of it<sup>46</sup>. In an attempt to justify this, he then stated that the United States allowed the use of the drug "off-label", when the US Food and Drug Administration actually released an article stating that it does not approve it for treatment of COVID-19 patients<sup>47</sup>.

Another party-list representative belonging to the Duterte-allied supermajority in the House of Representatives also made rounds online when he claimed that teachers are the last in the vaccination priority of the government<sup>48</sup> when official releases actually show teachers in the upper half of the vaccination priority list<sup>49</sup>.

In April 2020, the Philippine Department of Information and Communications Technology and the Philippine National Police teamed up to launch a campaign to combat and prevent disinformation on COVID-19, saying those who peddle fake news can be charged with cyber-libel<sup>50</sup>.



As of writing, none of the government officials mentioned earlier have been charged with said case by the police despite sharing wrong COVID-19 information. The disinformation provision at the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act<sup>51</sup>, the government's first COVID-19 response law, has not been used to penalize or sanction these officials as well.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA MACHINERY AS AN AMPLIFIER OF NARRATIVE SPINS**

While news organizations attempt to keep misinformation from official sources at bay through fact-checking and editorial gatekeeping, Philippine social media is a different field—wherein influencers and self-proclaimed public-interest but highly partisan Facebook pages use their following to misinform by the thousands, and for a few pages, even by the millions.

And while organized public efforts to report disinformation online have forced these allied influencers to be more careful in directly posting wrong information with the fear that Facebook will take down their pages, like in the case of the Mocha Uson Blog in March of 2020<sup>52</sup>, they now instead angle wrong information as a question or by sharing from another source instead of writing an original post on their own, and counting on these technicalities to defend themselves when called out for disseminating disinformation.

These social media personalities continue to employ tried and tested tactics to keep their readers engaged and their followers' views of the government still positive. These efforts are also being weaponized against opposition figures and critics<sup>53</sup>—a well-established pattern of their social media strategy even before the pandemic<sup>54</sup>.

A well-documented case of this would be on one of the early vaccination activities, wherein it was alleged that Vice President Leni Robredo, the leading opposition figure, was the subject of a symbolic vaccination photo-op wherein it was pointed out that the sleeve was not raised during inoculation and was just taken for publicity.

It was widely shared by allied social media influencers and pages of Mr. Duterte, with some saying that Robredo should have at least raised her sleeves to make the photo-op more believable. This information was later disproved in two levels—that the subject in the photo was not Robredo but a pediatric surgeon, and that it was an actual vaccination, it just happens that the doctor's blouse had slits on the arm, which made it possible to inoculate without the need to raise the sleeves<sup>55</sup>.

Most social media influencers and allied pages did not take the time to rectify their erroneous posting and continued with their regular programming. A few placed a correction at the bottom of their post but did not take down the original claim despite requests from followers and concerned readers to delete the erroneous post.

Meanwhile, some pages also seemingly take cues from government leaders in peddling conspiracy theories, inaccurate information, and ill-advised medical remedies and precautions to COVID-19. This ranges from the supposed home remedies to COVID-19 infection up to how the Duterte administration is winning the war against the pandemic in various ways. They continue to contribute to the infodemic as their readership takes in the content shared by these influencers as fact or as sound advice.

And to make matters worse, paid trolls also contribute to the infodemic by amplifying the reach of misinformation by mobilizing to share these on interest groups and pages within the social media platforms. Some are even being disseminated on group chats and topic boards. They also drown out valid dissent and criticism directed towards the government's pandemic response<sup>56</sup>.

This, however, is not a scenario that came with the pandemic. In fact, it has been here for quite some time already.

Social media trolling has been an industry in the Philippines years before and has been quite observable in the months leading to the 2016 Philippine elections. Mr. Duterte in 2017 actually admitted to employing trolls in social media to defend him during his presidential campaign, saying that his team spent maybe around PHP10 million (USD200,000) for that<sup>57</sup>. That amount was also seconded by a study released by the University of Oxford<sup>58</sup>.

The industry, it seems, has become more and more expansive and evident years after. Philippine news website Rappler released a report in February 2021 concluding that social media influencers and even local entertainment celebrities have been earning millions of pesos to spread propaganda favoring Mr. Duterte and to disseminate disinformation to their thousands, and for some even millions, of followers<sup>59</sup>.

Philippines-based troll farms can also expand their operations given the rising global demand to interfere in national and local elections through utilizing the unprecedented reach in social media. They may be used to support the dissemination of propaganda of politicians and government leaders outside of the country, especially with other case studies of the effectiveness of troll farms in the elections in the United States<sup>60</sup>. The local industry can grow exponentially in reach and in the money involved as more and more politicians equip their campaigns with this widely unregulated strategy.

There have been a few movements towards addressing this issue in troll farms and disinformation. In 2019, Facebook took down 200 groups, pages, and accounts for "coordinated inauthentic behavior"<sup>61</sup>. In its detailed report, the social media platform named Nic Gabunada, Mr. Duterte's 2016 campaign strategist, as the person linked to this network, which was assessed to be peddling disinformation about elections, candidates, political opponents, and events. These efforts were done under the operations of Twinmark Media Enterprises—an entity that Facebook has since banned in its platform<sup>62</sup>.

Facebook also took down military-affiliated pages, groups, and accounts as well in September 2020, some of which were linked to spreading disinformation targeted towards activists while sharing propaganda favoring China<sup>63</sup>.

News organizations in the Philippines have established fact-checking teams dedicated to correct disinformation on COVID-19 and other public-interest issues. VERA Files and Rappler, for example, have dedicated fact-check web pages and are signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network, which gives them the chance to work with platforms like Facebook in correcting disinformation spreading in the platforms.

Civil society groups have also stepped in to address confusion in pandemic-related information brought about by the disinformation efforts. For one, a citizen budget tracker

was made to address confusion and bust the spins on funding for needs related to pandemic response and relief<sup>64</sup>. The Catholic Education Association of the Philippines also launched an information campaign on COVID-19 vaccination targeted to students, parents, teachers, and educational communities<sup>65</sup>.

Some social media influencers, including actors, beauty pageant title holders, and ordinary netizens with huge social media followings also used their platforms to disseminate factual and data-driven information on COVID-19<sup>66</sup> to balance out the disinformation efforts of bad actors in the digital space. This led to more organized efforts to spread correct information on COVID-19, and to exact accountability to government officials who spread wrong information to the public, may it be intentional or not.

Following an uptick in the public clamor to hold her accountable, the Philippine National Bureau of Investigation on 18 May 2020 also summoned Mocha Uson, an appointed government official who started her political career as one of the most followed Duterte-allied social media influencers, for spreading a fake photo of personal protective equipment (PPE) which she claimed was purchased by the government<sup>67</sup>—an alleged violation of Bayanihan to Heal As One Act. Apparently, the photo contained PPEs donated by a mall chain. As of writing, it is unclear, however, if the case progressed or if Uson received any penalty or disciplinary action due to the incident.

Despite these little victories and movements in battling social media trolls and their coordinated disinformation efforts, it can be observed that the trolling industry in the Philippines remains alive and active today despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and maybe more so as we head towards another election year.

## OPAQUE GOVERNMENT IN A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Philippine society could have had at least a chance to combat the massive infodemic around COVID-19 if public access to government information prior to the pandemic was established. Unfortunately, the Philippines does not have national legislation acknowledging the peoples' right to know or freedom of information<sup>68</sup>, nor did recent legislations and policy releases related to the COVID-19 pandemic acknowledge the right to accurate and timely information as a basic right of citizens.

Some see that consolation to a lack of an FOI Law under Mr. Duterte is his freedom of information executive order. The President signed this as one of his earliest—the second one since he took the oath of office, in fact<sup>69</sup>.

However, the application of the executive order has been for the whole of the Executive branch of the Philippine government, uneven appreciation of the policy across agencies can still be observed almost five years since its signing.

There are definitely a few bright spots in improving access to information, but most agencies are hurdled by their archaic information systems to be able to effectively answer FOI requests especially during the pandemic, wherein government offices work on skeleton workforce and most information officers are tasked to work remotely or from their homes.

Weak points for FOI in the Philippine government, therefore, have been more apparent under the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Right to Know, Right Now! Coalition, a broad alliance of civil society organizations advocating for better access to government information, monitored the public access to pandemic-related government information, as well as those supposedly released proactively to the public as part of the government response to the challenges brought about by the public health crisis.

The coalition's report, which used info access tests, monitoring, and research in the span of almost four months, unveiled that the coordination among agencies during the early months of the pandemic seemed inadequate and that while COVID-19 cases bulletin was reported daily, information on the use of government budget, available assistance programs for sectors badly hit by the pandemic economically, and recipient list of subsidy funds were limited<sup>70</sup>.

Agencies who granted FOI requests only shared partial and incomplete information mentioned in the requests. Information on reprogrammed funds to COVID-19 efforts, IATF regional task forces and teams, and status of Overseas Filipino Workers affected by COVID-19, to name a few, were either only partially provided or denied<sup>71</sup>.

The coalition also specifically noted the president's late-night television pressers, as it did not add value towards informing the public better of the COVID-19 situation and response in the country. These instead just rehashed earlier statements from other government officials and, in cases, went off-topic to criticize independent news media organizations, the left, corruption in the government, and oligarchs in the business community<sup>72</sup>.

This came as no surprise to some as even before the pandemic, off-topic ramblings, backpedals, and changes for the worse have already been heard from the president and the executive branch on several situations, especially when the topic relates to much-needed information tied to public interest.

In fact, the president himself is a breaker of his own promise of transparency through FOI when he neglected to ensure public access to his personal Statement of Assets, Liabilities, and Net Worth (SALN)—a document mandated by law to be accessible through the Office of the Ombudsman.

The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), in a December 2019 article, reported that Mr. Duterte failed to publicly disclose his SALN for 2018 eight months after the deadline of its filing—a first among Philippine presidents since the Republic Act. No. 6713, also known as the SALN Law, was passed in 1989<sup>73</sup>. All previous Philippine presidents have consistently disclosed their wealth records year on year without fail, according to PCIJ.

This tone from the top when it comes to disclosing wealth records has sent other branches of the Philippine government, including the Senate, the Supreme Court, and the House of Representatives, to install or maintain stringent guidelines on providing public access to their wealth declarations like the need to seek individual approval from SALN filers when requesting declarations filed annually by sets of officials, requiring FOI requests to include

an oath of undertaking which may need notarization, and exorbitant fees for photocopies of the filings.

It is predicted that access to these documents will be much tougher during the COVID-19 pandemic, as most agencies require the personal filing of SALN requests, and those that indeed grant such requests also require personal pick-up and manual payment for printing or photocopy costs.

Mr. Duterte's spokesperson, meanwhile, has also been criticized for how he handles press briefings and how he treats journalists covering the administration, which is reflective of the general hostility experienced by journalists covering the government's pandemic response. Instead of working with journalists on providing timely and accurate COVID-19 to the public, the relationship is much more strained, and at times antagonistic, than ideal.

In May 2020, Roque scolded a reporter for allegedly misquoting him about his previous statement on the government's readiness and capacity to do COVID-19 mass testing in one of the articles released by her news organization, despite the fact that it was not the same reporter that penned the article (the spokesperson said that it was hers) and the quote was in fact accurate based on the statement made by the spokesperson<sup>74</sup>.

Roque and his team also came under fire after repeated skips and interruptions during COVID-19 press briefings when it is the turn of journalists to ask questions, seemingly timed when reporters ask tough questions about pandemic response and situation. Initially, the spokesperson chalked up the blame to telecommunications or to the technical handlers, but video evidence showed that there were many instances wherein Roque moved on in the round of questioning even though some reporters were still in the process of finishing asking theirs<sup>75</sup>.

## CONTRADICTIONS GO BEYOND PANDEMIC RESPONSE

One thing the pandemic proved clearly for the Philippine government is that its duality extends well beyond its COVID-19 response, as it is also evident in other government affairs, showing that the presence of contradictions might be more intentional rather than incidental.

For one, the Philippine government has promoted through local and international events, television ads, and online pronouncements that they are a leader in advocating for media freedom<sup>76</sup> and have made great strides in making the country better for journalists and media practitioners. But in reality, the government leaders found time in the middle of the pandemic to continuously attack the press—especially through the shutdown of broadcast network ABS-CBN<sup>77</sup> and the multiple cases that Rappler Chief Executive Officer Maria Ressa had to face while leading a major newsroom during a pandemic<sup>78</sup>.

The Palace also claimed that the president respects the peoples' freedom of speech<sup>79</sup>. However, he signed into law the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020—a law that can be and has been used to stifle dissent, attack civil liberties, and neglect due process, especially for activists and those speaking against the government and its policies. The law gives unprecedented discretion to the police when it comes to doing surveillance and arrests of suspected terrorists while failing to provide a clear definition of who the police can qualify as such<sup>80</sup>.

The president also said that he will replace corrupt officials with the best and the brightest in civil service<sup>81</sup>. But in reality, Mr. Duterte has continuously reappointed or even promoted officials previously accused of corruption or misuse of funds during his administration<sup>82</sup> and appointed former military and police officials without public health background to lead the country's pandemic response<sup>83</sup>. Currently, at least six secretaries heading departments under Mr. Duterte are former military officials, and at least two of his COVID-19 czars are former uniformed officials.

The government also convinced the country that COVID-19 response and relief is its top priority, but its 2021 annual budget was earlier criticized for signalling towards different funding priorities based on funding allotment<sup>84</sup> while reviving campaigns and talks of revising the Philippine Constitution<sup>85</sup>. All while cuts on contact tracing<sup>86</sup> and other services related to pandemic response are happening or looming in the near future.

These realities might signal that the Philippine government is in a constant state of unpreparedness—lacking foresight of what will be needed down the road in relation to pandemic response, as well as in addressing the infodemic surrounding the public health crisis. It is also pointing towards the Philippine government's situation of having misplaced priorities, the loose grip of the pandemic, poor coordination, and failing to address much-needed points of improvement contributing to the chaotic reality of the COVID-19 response in the Philippines.

This might also mean that the government is symptomatic of an information problem, one that might have existed way before COVID-19—that it plays fast and loose with facts, disregards expert opinion, and willing to do anything to keep public perception in favor of Mr. Duterte and his allies against all odds.

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**HOW STATES SHAPED NARRATIVES DURING COVID-19**



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