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The Philippines’ COVID-19 Response: Securitising the Pandemic and Disciplining the Pasaway

Karl Hapal

Abstract

The Philippine response to COVID-19 has been described as being one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world. Why has the Philippine government relied heavily on draconian measures in its “war” against COVID-19? And what discourse informed the framing of its response as a war against the virus? This article argues that the government’s reliance on draconian measures was a consequence of securitising COVID-19, appreciating the virus as an “existential threat.” The securitisation of COVID-19 was reinforced with a narrative characterising the situation of the country as being at war against an “unseen enemy.” This war-like narrative, however, invariably produced a subject, the pasaway. As the perpetual enemy of health and order, the pasaway became the target of disciplining and policing. The targeting of the pasaway was informed by deep-seated class prejudices and Duterte’s authoritarian tendencies.

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Philippines, COVID-19, securitisation, Duterte, populism, policing

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It was the third week of April 2020, five weeks since Metro Manila and other provinces were put under “enhanced community quarantine” (ECQ). Under ECQ, school and university classes were suspended, mass gatherings were prohibited, government offices were run with a skeletal workforce, businesses were closed except for those providing essential goods and services, mass transportation was restricted, and people were ordered to observe social distancing measures and to stay at home. At that time, the Philippines had 6,456 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) confirmed cases, 426 deaths, and 612 recoveries. Quarantine rules specified that only one person was authorised to go out and buy essential goods for the rest of their family. As the designated “authorised person outside of residence” (APOR), I was given a “quarantine pass,” a document issued by the barangay. With my quarantine pass securely kept in my bag, I went out to buy food and medicine in a nearby market. Without any public transportation, I walked for nearly thirty minutes to get to the market. The street leading to the market was relatively empty. Apart from people who were, like me, walking towards the market, very few vehicles plied the road. Occasionally, an ambulance would pass by as well as illegal motorcycle taxis. As I neared the market, I saw slow-moving vehicles occupying the street. It was as if I had gone back to the “old normal.” Soon I saw police vehicles. I also saw several buses where people were being loaded. I thought the buses were there to transport frontline workers. I was later told that the buses were there to transport people apprehended for violating quarantine guidelines. My brief encounter with the government’s campaign to apprehend violators of quarantine guidelines is hardly an aberration. Elsewhere in the greater Metro Manila area, the joint forces of the police and the military cracked down on erring individuals.

The Philippine response to COVID-19 has been described as being one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world. Entire provinces and cities were put into lockdown, mobility was restricted, and the wearing of masks and social distancing were strictly enforced. Violations were met with punitive action. The government relied heavily on the police and the military to ensure that order was maintained and that all health protocols were followed. This has led some observers and scholars to describe the government response as either “draconian,” “militarised,” or “police-centric” (Maru, 2020). For the government, these measures were all part of the nation’s “war” against COVID-19. Why has the Philippine government relied heavily on draconian measures in its “war” against COVID-19? And what discourse informed the framing of its response as a war against the virus?

In this article, I argue that the government’s draconian response was a consequence of securitising COVID-19 (see next section for background of the term “securitisation”). In this process, the virus was perceived as an “existential threat” that “[justified] the use of extraordinary measures to handle [it]” (Buzan et al., 1998: 21). The securitisation of COVID-19 was produced by framing the pandemic response as a war against a so-called “unseen enemy.” To wage this war, the government required extraordinary powers and the unconditional co-operation of Filipinos. Consequently, this war-like narrative produced oppositional archetypes. These archetypes were perceived to either contribute to or derail governmental efforts to win the war. Contributing to the war was the virtuous
archetype embodied by healthcare professionals, frontline workers, police, military, so-called “homeliners,” and law-abiding citizens. On the other hand, was the errant archetype embodied by the “pasaway.” The term “pasaway” is a Filipino word loosely refers to an importunate, stubborn, or obstinate person. Amid the lockdown, the term pasaway referred to people violating government-imposed health protocols. Feared for spreading the virus, the pasaway became the bane of the government’s pandemic response. In many ways, the government’s war against COVID-19 has also sought to “salvage” the virtuous from the pasaway.¹ The act of salvaging took the form of policing and punishing the pasaway.

I also argue that the securitisation of COVID-19 and the production of oppositional archetypes is no accident. The Philippines’ response to COVID-19 reflects a continuation of President Rodrigo Duterte’s populistic brand of leadership (Curato, 2016; Juego, 2017; Thompson, 2020). Broadly speaking, populism relies on the depiction of a bifurcated society – elite versus the masses, criminals versus law-abiding citizens, the corrupt versus virtuous citizens, “angels versus demons” (Jensen and Hapal, 2018). Amid the pandemic, Duterte exercised his populistic tendencies by depicting the virus as a sinister menace embodied by the pasaway. In many ways, the pasaway is a construct resembling the drug addict in the context of the war on drugs or, more broadly, the colonised and racialised others. Seen this way, it is no surprise that the government’s pandemic response has, by far, closely resembled its approach with its war on drugs (Robertson, 2020). In both its war on drugs and its COVID-19 response, the government has relied on brute force to eliminate its perceived enemy, and it has peddled a narrative of a bifurcated nation. Torn between the virtuous and criminal elements, it has become the government’s duty to “salvage” the nation, lest the Philippines be destroyed (Curato, 2016; Jensen and Hapal, 2018).

This article offers a critical analysis of why the government relied heavily on draconian measures and the political discourse that has informed and animated its war against the virus. I do this by examining the government’s COVID-19 response through the lens of securitisation and populism. This article is divided into four main sections. First, I will look into securitisation and populism, and the linkage between the two concepts as a means to outline the overall conceptual framework of the article. Second, I offer a broad description of how the Philippines fought its war against COVID-19. Third, I turn to the production of the pasaway, and the consequences of the oppositional archetypes produced by the war-like narrative informing the government’s pandemic response. Finally, I end by briefly returning to populism and securitisation to contextualise the government’s actions and explore the consequences of combatting a health crisis of pandemic proportions through fear and force.

Securitisation and Populism

The Philippines’ approach in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic has been characterised as “securitised” (Atienza et al., 2020; Pitlo, 2020; Quijano et al., 2020). This characterisation stems from an observation of the overall militaristic and police-centric
approach of the government. Officials leading the fight against the pandemic are mostly composed of retired generals. The President himself has repeatedly emphasised the importance of “his” military and police in the nation’s war against the virus. The Philippines is not alone in declaring war against COVID-19, nor is it unique in employing draconian measures to curb the spread of the virus. As Varma (2020) put it, “[the] metaphors comparing the COVID-19 pandemic to war have become ubiquitous.” Further, Varma (2020) argues that “by connecting medicine and militarism, we imagine war [against COVID-19] as necessary, positive and productive.”

This section contains two main theoretical explorations. First, I discuss the salient theoretical points of securitisation as a means to inform my exploration of why the Philippines relied heavily on draconian measures in its “war” against COVID-19. In this discussion, I mainly rely on Buzan et al.’s (1998: 21) “conceptual apparatus.” In particular, I briefly discuss how issues like COVID-19 are rendered as existential threats, and how extraordinary measures are justified through the securitising acts of various actors. Second, I highlight the underlying factors that allow the successful securitisation of an issue. According to Buzan et al. (1998), the process of securitisation is situated in social structures and political practices. These allow or inhibit the success of any given securitising act. I argue that it is Duterte’s populistic rhetoric (and the congruence it enjoys with many Filipinos) that informed the speech act that securitised COVID-19. Central to this speech act is the narrative of a nation in peril against a perceived enemy that requires swift, decisive, and a wide latitude of powers, lest the nation is destroyed. To borrow from Curato (2016), it was Duterte’s populist rhetoric that tapped into “latent anxieties” and the “politics of hope” that has propelled him into the presidency, propelled him to embark on a deadly war against illegal drugs, and to now wage war against COVID-19. Seen this way, the securitisation of COVID-19 is not a one-off event. Instead, the government’s war against COVID-19 is contiguous with its other wars.

According to Quimpo (2017: 146), securitisation is a conceptual framework that examines “how security threats are constructed and how extreme measures in addressing such threats are justified.” The securitisation of an issue consists of three main processes: “[the production of] existential threats, emergency action, and effects on interunit relations by breaking free of rules” (Buzan et al., 1998: 26). The production of existential threats requires an underlying discourse and a congruent political configuration. Hence, while any issue or referent object may be construed as an existential threat, it only becomes securitised once a certain degree of congruence between the discourse being presented and the attitudes of actors within a given social unit is achieved. Until then, the act of construing a referent object as an existential threat is just a securitising act. As Buzan et al. (1998: 25) said, “a referent object does not by itself create securitization – this is a securitizing move, but the issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it as such.” Once a discourse is accepted, emergency actions or measures beyond the ordinary take effect and are rendered legitimate.

The act of securitising a referent object is performed by securitising actors, “someone, or a group, who performs the security speech act” by arguing that something or someone is an existential threat (Buzan et al., 1998: 40). The state is not the sole
securitising actor. Other actors may include political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists, or pressure groups (Buzan et al., 1998: 40). However, state actors are particularly important, not least due to the significant power and influence they wield. Take the case of former US president Donald Trump. In an article, Magcamit (2017) examined how former president Donald Trump securitised the US economy. The securitisation of the economy allowed extraordinary measures to be implemented, such as waging a trade war against China. Magcamit (2017) observes that Trump’s successful securitisation of the US economy primarily relied on convincing his base that drastic measures against, say, China, is necessary to restore the greatness of the USA. Trump ostensibly relied on his populistic appeal to make his case and convince many Americans in the process. In other words, Trump’s populist rhetoric informed the speech act that argued for and justified the trade war against China. For Magcamit (2017), Trump’s rhetoric serves as the “linkage” between securitisation and populism. It is by drawing from and acting on the “America First” rhetoric, together with the political capital he wields, that Trump became successful in securitising the US economy. It must be noted that Magcamit (2017) does not suggest that populist leaders are, by default, securitising actors. Instead, it points to the importance of examining how populist leaders, through their speech acts (securitising moves), make their case to render a referent object securitised.

The act of invoking populist rhetoric as a means to securitise a referent object may also be seen in Duterte’s leadership. Take the case of his deadly campaign against illegal drugs. According to Quimpo (2017: 146), “populist Duterte has shrewdly picked on an issue of broad popular concern – drug trafficking – and securitized it.” Duterte’s securitising act hinged on peddling a narrative of a nation overrun by illegal drugs which, if left unmitigated, would lead to the destruction of the Philippines. In turn, this dire depiction evoked a sense of urgency and warranted extraordinary action. These extraordinary measures were framed in such a way that it valorised and protected the innocent and dealt harsh or deadly consequences to the errant (Curato, 2016; Pratt, 2007). As a presidential candidate, Duterte’s populist narrative resonated with the hopes and fears of many Filipinos and proved to be strong enough that it propelled him to the presidency (Curato, 2016; Teehankee and Thompson, 2016). This tacit approval of his populistic rhetoric allowed him to “govern through killing” (Johnson and Fernquest, 2018). In power, Duterte pursued a “police-centric and militaristic” approach in an attempt to address the various issues plaguing Filipino society swiftly and decisively (Juego, 2017). However, nearly four years into his term, Duterte has yet to put an end to illegal drugs (and/or corruption). In any case, the human toll has been immense. For Thompson (2020), the sheer magnitude of deaths and incarceration led him to believe that penal populism was not sufficient. Instead, he referred to Duterte’s leadership and rhetoric as “violent populism” (Thompson, 2020). Duterte’s successful securitisation of illegal drugs has effectively moved the issue out of the realm of public debate; the anti-illegal drug campaign must be pursued no matter what.

Amid the pandemic, again Duterte invoked the narrative of a nation in peril, but now from an unseen health hazard. This narrative was employed to justify the draconian
measures of the Philippine government against the pandemic. As I will discuss later, this narrative did not only emphasise the need for order and discipline. It also justified the expansion of the government’s policing powers. Consequently, it also produced a bifurcated depiction of Filipino society. This produced the pasaway archetype, the perpetual enemy of order and the embodiment of COVID-19’s deadly potentials.

The War against COVID-19

This section discusses the government’s war against COVID-19. In this section, I focus on describing how the war revolved around COVID-19 being framed as an existential threat and extraordinary measures employed to address it. The discussion begins at the onset of the crisis in March 2020 when the lockdown was imposed in Metro Manila, and soon after to other parts of the country. The discussion then moves through the period when restrictions were eased from June to July 2020 and the return to lockdown by August 2020.

Lockdown

On 16 March 2020, President Duterte put Metro Manila and the entire island group of Luzon under the “enhanced community quarantine” – or the total lockdown of the largest island group in the Philippines. Soon after, major cities were also put under lockdown. Unlike his nonchalant tone weeks prior to this, Duterte shockingly said, “We are in the fight for [our] lives. We are at war against a vicious and invisible enemy, one that cannot be seen by the naked eye. In this extraordinary war, we are all soldiers” (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2020a). By the end of his address, Duterte issued a warning:

Obey the police and the military. Do not quarrel with them and do not start [a] ruckus that would amount to a violation because you will be arrested and brought to prison […] You can be arrested. [Just follow and we will have no problems]. (Presidential Communications Operations Office (2020a)

Immediately, the police and military were brought in to impose lockdown measures. Images of special action forces operating checkpoints reinforced by their armoured personnel carriers (APCs) or tanks were a common sight (Mayol et al., 2020). Lockdown measures were implemented notwithstanding issues or concerns relating to income, livelihood, food security, space, population density. While lockdown measures were implemented indiscriminately, it was noticeably more intense in places where population density was high, namely urban poor areas. Former generals turned cabinet members also occupied key positions in the Inter-Agency Taskforce on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID), the main policy-making and executive apparatus of the government dealing with COVID-19. The Manila Times columnist Makabenta (2020) described the composition of the IATF-EID as “the oddest task force to fight the pandemic, a squad
full of soldiers without a single epidemiologist.” On 24 March 2020, Congress granted President Duterte emergency powers through Republic Act 11469, otherwise known as the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act. The law allowed the government, among other things, to provide emergency subsidy to 18 million low-income households, re-appropriate and re-align the 2020 national budget, direct the local government units to comply with national government guidelines, and direct the operations of privately owned hospitals and health facilities to combat COVID-19.

Suffice to say, the lockdown was difficult especially for the poor. Their situation was further exacerbated by the slow distribution of emergency subsidies under the government’s Social Amelioration Programme (SAP). While the delivery of subsidy was running at a glacial pace, it became apparent that much of the government response was focused on containment and law enforcement strategies. Amid the pandemic, the police began arresting people. Among those arrested were the so-called “San Roque 21,” residents of Sitio San Roque, Quezon City, who (on 1 April 2020) gathered alongside Epiphanio Delos Santos Avenue (EDSA) after receiving news that relief goods were to be distributed. While some residents of Sitio San Roque queued for relief distribution, the police came and arrested twenty-one residents. They were arrested for allegedly violating quarantine rules. The San Roque 21 were later charged with violating the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act but were later released through bail amounting to 17,500.00 Philippine peso (approximately USD 350.00) per person. Several days after, the police raided the soup kitchen feeding the residents of Sitio San Roque and tore down placards protesting or pleading for help from the government.

In many ways, the Philippines has ostensibly fought the virus with an iron fist. The message to maintain discipline and follow the government’s orders has been repeated constantly since the President began his weekly address to the nation on 12 March 2020. In his speech on 16 April 2020, Duterte threatened that if the lack of discipline among Filipinos persists “the military and the police will take over. I am ordering them now to be ready. The police and the military will enforce social distancing and curfew. They will. It is just like martial law too. You choose” (Presidential Communications Operations Office (2020b)). This remark came nearly two weeks (2 April 2020) after Duterte infamously ordered the police and military to “shoot them dead.” By “them,” the President was seemingly referring to the incident in Sitio San Roque. Drawing from the president’s threat to impose martial law-like lockdown measures, Philippine National Police (PNP) Chief Archie Gamboa gave the order to undertake mass arrests. Soon after, the PNP Chief announced that quarantine violators will no longer be warned; instead, they will be arrested immediately and will be brought to court for inquest proceedings. By the end of April 2020, 156,000 individuals had been apprehended since lockdown measures were imposed on 15 March 2020; 41,000 of them were charged, while the rest were released with a warning (Biong, 2020).

**Easing of Restrictions**

By the end of May 2020, lockdown restrictions in Metro Manila and the rest of the country were gradually loosened, except for a few hotspot areas. Looser quarantine rules
entailed the re-introduction of mass transportation, albeit on an incremental and staggered basis; the opening of government offices and certain businesses; and the partial or full resumption of work in some sectors. The decision to loosen quarantine restrictions was a calculated risk by the government, balancing health concerns and the struggling economy. The prolonged lockdown had taken its toll on the economy. According to Philippine Statistics Authority (2020a), the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) growth declined by 0.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2020 and by 16.5 per cent in the second quarter. The unemployment rate rose to 17.7 per cent, equivalent to 7.3 million unemployed Filipinos (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020b). Likewise, 26 per cent of businesses in the Philippines have closed, while 52 per cent are operating at a limited capacity (Gonzales, 2020). The pressure to reopen mounted – a phenomenon Nunes (2020) refers to as “epidemiological neoliberalism.”

Amid the gradual easing of quarantine restrictions, the Philippines saw an accelerating increase of COVID-19 cases. From 18,620 cases on 1 June 2020, 93,354 confirmed cases (with 2,023 deaths and 65,178 recoveries) were recorded by 31 July 2020 – nearly a five-fold increase in a span of sixty days. The increasing number of cases further stressed the country’s healthcare system, especially in COVID-19 hotspots such as Metro Manila. By the end of July, 75 per cent of beds in intensive care units (ICUs), 82 per cent of isolation beds, and 85 per cent of ward beds in Metro Manila were occupied (Department of Health, 2020a). The rise in the number of COVID-19 cases coincided with the gradual easing of quarantine restrictions to spur economic activity. Experts from the University of the Philippines (UP) attributed the rise in the number of cases to the increased testing capacity of the Philippines (David et al., 2020). However, they also suggest that rates of positive cases must be closely monitored as the positivity rate for the month of July 2020 showed an upward trend, which suggested the acceleration of the spread of the virus.

Despite the alarming increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, testing and contact tracing of suspected COVID-19 cases continued to lag. The government largely failed to achieve its target of conducting 30,000 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests by the end of May 2020 and 50,000 PCR tests by the end of June 2020. Moreover and, as of 31 July 2020, the government achieved the 30,000 goal only seven times. From 1 to 31 July 2020, the government conducted an average of 25,703 tests per day. The government cited the lack of supply and human resources as the main reasons for its inability to achieve its testing targets. Despite the failure to achieve its goals, more than a million Filipinos had been tested, nearly passing the halfway mark of the government’s target to test at least 2 per cent of the country’s population (Esguerra, 2020). However, contact tracing continued to be the weakest link of the government’s COVID-19 response due to the lack of budget and decisiveness (David et al., 2020). As of June 2020, the Philippines had only 52,463 contact tracers. In response, the national government moved to hire 80,000 contact tracers (Hallare, 2020a).

As testing remains limited and contact tracing remains weak, the Philippines public health system remains ill equipped to effectively suppress the spread of the virus, at least from a healthcare approach perspective. The inadequacies of the government’s response
become more glaring when the experiences of neighbouring countries in the Western Pacific region such as South Korea, Singapore, and New Zealand are considered. These countries have managed to control and suppress the transmission of COVID-19 without relying heavily on draconian measures or imposing prolonged lockdowns. For Mendoza (2020), the country’s slow response, weak institutions, reliance on lockdowns, and use of the police and the military as a “silver bullet” effectively prevented the Philippines from using the “scalpel” to address the pandemic and only left the country with an “axe” as its main tool to deal with the virus.

The use of this metaphorical axe came with the criminalisation of behaviour that was not compliant with the government’s minimum health standards and other protocols and the apprehension of violators. These were undertaken in conjunction with what General Carlito Galvez (retired), chief implementer of national policy on COVID-19, calls the first imperative of the Philippine’s national action plan against COVID-19; that is, ensuring people’s compliance and vigilance to the minimum health standards. Galvez further reiterated that the plan is anchored on “changing [the people’s] mindset that the success of our campaign is basically anchored on the people’s support and active participation and vigilance to strictly observe and promote the minimum health standard and disease prevention.” Likewise, other government officials emphasised the importance of people’s co-operation and discipline. Even Vince Dizon, the so-called “testing czar,” claimed that “the single most important step in curbing COVID-19 is good, old-fashioned discipline” (Panti, 2020). He went on to suggest that the discipline of the population is more important than testing, tracing, scaling up the healthcare system, and various technologies. For the president, failure to comply with the minimum health standards is “a serious crime.” In a televised address to the nation, Duterte put everybody on notice when he said, “we will have to ask our police to be more strict. [Violators] will be arrested. A little shame would put them on notice forever. […] that would give you a lesson for all time” (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2020c). Local governments soon instituted their own intensified enforcement measures to ensure that minimum health standards are maintained. For example, in Quezon City, the local government issued a memo imposing hefty fines for violators and even allowing warrantless arrests of errant individuals. Similar measures were also instituted in other cities and municipalities all over the Philippines, emphasising discipline and apprehending the pasaway above everything else.

**Return to Lockdown**

August 2020 began with the Philippines exceeding the 100,000 mark in terms of COVID-19 cases. Soon after, various healthcare worker organisations pleaded with the government for a “time-out,” suggesting areas where the virus was spreading rapidly such as Metro Manila be put again under the ECQ – the strictest lockdown configuration. Healthcare workers issued this plea to alleviate the already overwhelmed healthcare system and to recalibrate the government’s response (Hallare, 2020b). By 4 August 2020, President Duterte placed Metro Manila and the provinces of Rizal, Laguna, and Bulacan under the modified enhanced community quarantine (MECQ). This meant that
while economic activities related to the production and sale of essential goods are
allowed, all other forms of economic activity are restricted. Likewise, public transpor-
tation was, once again, suspended, and the strict enforcement of stay-at-home orders
was implemented. By 4 August 2020, the Philippines registered 112,593 cases with
44,429 active cases, 66,049 recoveries, and 2,115 deaths (Department of Health,
2020b).

The return to MECQ came with a stern warning – that quarantine violators would be
arrested. This warning was reinforced with a sense of urgency, lest the re-imposition of
strict lockdown measures be wasted. In Quezon City, the Task Force Disiplina (Task
Force Discipline) chief expressed his unwavering fervour to implement the govern-
ment’s lockdown measures by issuing a threat. “Beginning tomorrow [4 August 2020]
shoot to kill for those violating MECQ,” said the task force chief (Talabong, 2020).
While the Quezon City mayor was quick to reprimand the task force chief, the crack-
down on quarantine violators took place, nonetheless. Between 1 August 2020 to 11
August 2020, the police apprehended 23,660 quarantine violators, 39 per cent of which
were apprehended for disobedience or violation of curfew (One News, 2020). Overall,
from 17 March 2020 to 11 August 2020, the police apprehended 303,859 quarantine
violators, of these 47 per cent were warned, 25 per cent fined, and 28 per cent were
charged (One News, 2020).

Amid the pandemic, Duterte has responded to the COVID-19 crisis as he did with
other crises perceived to pose a threat to the nation’s integrity and well-being such as
illegal drugs; that is, to impose discipline and order through brute force. As with the war
on drugs, Duterte securitised COVID-19, ostensibly using an “axe” rather than a “scal-
pel,” to suppress the spread of the virus (Mendoza, 2020). At the cutting edge of this
metaphorical axe are the police, military, and other law enforcement apparatuses of the
state, which Duterte made the primary institution to handle the crisis. This is readily
apparent if one listens to or reads through the president’s weekly addresses where he,
apart from lambasting the pasaway, his critics, and corrupt officials, expressed his trust
and confidence in the military and the police. It is no wonder then that maintaining dis-
cipline and order has taken a central position in the government’s response against
COVID-19, a function performed and ingrained in policing.

The Pasaway

Informing the Philippines’ draconian COVID-19 response is an entire discourse sur-
rounding the archetype of the pasaway. The pasaway, seen as a bullheaded character
ignoring the ill-effects of COVID-19, serves as the embodiment of an existential threat
that needs disciplining. By arresting the pasaway, the government is, in effect, protecting
the well-being of law-abiding Filipino citizens. The antithetical relation between the
pasaway and law-abiding citizen reinforces the war-like narrative and justifies the
intense policing of the former. The construct of the pasaway is informed by deep-seated
class prejudices, amplified by a populist leader peddling oppositional narratives in an
attempt to maintain control and gain power. The pasaway is such a concern for the
government that no less than President Duterte himself has repeatedly lambasted Filipinos for their lack of discipline. On one occasion, he said:

This quarantine […] it is really intended to protect the other guy. […] if you do not want to believe, you are stubborn and lack discipline, this will really not end because every time you come together […] I saw you in cockfights and, drinking too. (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2020d)

During the same address, Duterte threatened to impose martial law-like conditions to impose discipline. This informed the policing-centric and discipline-oriented war against COVID-19 centred on arresting, figuratively and literally, the pasaway. By emphasising discipline as the key issue in the COVID-19 crisis, Duterte established the pasaway as the eternal enemy of order. In this section, I discuss who the pasaway is, the discourse behind the term, and explore its implications on the government’s COVID-19 response. I also explore how the term pasaway is situated in and relates to the cosmology of Duterte’s other wars – the pasaway being the oppositional and destructive force against the virtuous.

The word pasaway is a pejorative term that is often used to describe the Filipinos’ lack of discipline. It has been used to explain or characterise the horrendous traffic in Metro Manila; pollution in creeks, rivers, and waterways; long and unorganised queues in government offices, malls, or public transportation; recidivist offenders, especially children, and so forth. Filipinos’ lack of discipline has been a resonant and enduring issue on which Duterte ran and won the presidency by promising to put things in order and to keep Filipinos in tow. As a subject, the pasaway loosely refers to a person who is bullheaded, importunate, stubborn, or obstinate. In popular discourse, however, it often pertains to poor people, specifically young, out of school or unemployed men (Jensen et al., 2013). During the pandemic, it was used to describe people who violate stay-at-home orders, do not wear masks, do not practice social distancing, argue with authorities, or display any other errant behaviour (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2020). The pasaway has been repeatedly blamed by the government for the accelerating rate by which the virus has spread all over the Philippines. While the pasaway reflects class prejudices, pejoratively it refers to any behaviour that is disagreeable contingent to a person, or group’s moral and ethical judgement. In this sense, the pasaway has a wide latitude of applicability. Theoretically speaking, one could think of the pasaway as an empty signifier, able to unite a range of different negative traits with implicit class contempt. In this way, the pasaway helps to stabilise the middle class as well as legitimate violent actions dealt to the underclass.

It must be noted that the campaign against the behaviours displayed by the pasaway is not a wedge (political) issue. There is little debate about the appropriateness of wearing masks, hand washing, and social distancing. Instead, the debate lies in whether a militaristic approach is the most effective way to suppress the virus and whether punishing the so-called pasaway is the correct strategy to deter people from violating the minimum health standards. This is unlike other countries such as the USA and Brazil where
the wearing of masks and even the deadly potentials of COVID-19 is subject to doubt
and intense political debate. Instead, the campaign against the pasaway represents a fight
to secure and protect the health and well-being of law-abiding Filipinos which, if neces-
sary, warrants the use of force to eliminate the threat. This framing is similar to how
Duterte’s war on drugs is imagined and articulated (Quimpo, 2017). In some ways, the
treatment of the pasaway resembles how the drug addict is treated in the context of the
government’s war on drugs (Jensen and Hapal, 2018; Jimenez-David, 2020), or how the
urban poor was dealt with in the government’s urban renewal efforts (Jensen et al.,
2020). More broadly, the pasaway resembles how the colonised and racialised other has
been dealt with. In this sense, the anti-pasaway campaign is animated by class preju-
dices, and the state’s response reflective of its ingrained tendency to rely on punitive
measures to impose order and discipline in the name of some moral or ethical claim.

The government’s accusation of Filipinos being pasaway, however, is belied by sev-
eral studies that have shown that many, if not most, Filipinos have been following quar-
tantine rules (Crisostomo and Romero, 2020; Punongbayan, 2020). For Lasco (2020a),
blaming the pasaway for the rising number of COVID-19 cases is an attempt by the
government to dodge blame for its ineptitude – “the pasaway as scapegoat” using Lasco’s
words. Studies have shown that, despite limitations, Filipinos, in general, have stayed at
home, worn their masks, and washed their hands. In a survey performed by Imperial
College London & YouGov (2020), the Philippines was at the top in terms of using face
masks. According to the study, 91 per cent of Filipinos “always” wear a mask when
going outside their homes. Similarly, the Philippines was at the top of the rankings in
terms of people avoiding going out in general. Sixty per cent indicated that they have
avoided going out. The survey has also suggested that Filipinos, in general, adhere to the
prescribed preventative behaviours in response to COVID-19, such as hand washing,
avoiding social gatherings, touching objects in public (Imperial College London &
YouGov, 2020). The survey was reinforced by an Asian Development Bank (2020) study
and a report from Google (2020), both indicating a sharp decline in terms of mobility
outside one’s residence relative to a pre-pandemic baseline.

These studies suggest that the government’s accusations of Filipinos being pasaway
are baseless. Further, it shows how the government was disproportionately focused on
law enforcement and disciplining. The government’s focus on law enforcement is
directly tied to its perception of the pandemic response as a war against COVID-19. As
with any other form of warfare, this narrative positioned the state to look for and destroy
the enemy. It also legitimised its use of its coercive power. While COVID-19 was the
enemy, without the necessary tools (e.g. mass testing and contact tracing) the virus
remained invisible. The government instead set its sights towards the embodiment of the
virus’s deadly potentials, the pasaway. The pasaways, due to their bullheaded or cavalier
attitude, became the enemy. This was used to justify the disproportionate degrees by
which they are policed or punished.

Searching for and arresting the pasaway has relied on pre-existing class prejudices
that were heightened during the pandemic. These prejudices point to so-called “usual
suspects” – all of whom are blamed for or represent the maladies of Filipino society. It
is no wonder that policing operations cracked down on the various incarnations of the pasaway, which includes the tambay, the gossips (tsimosa), the drunkards (manginingom), and the gamblers (sugarol) – archetypes that refer to poverty. This is especially true for the urban poor, some of whom have been subjected to “hard lockdowns” (City of Manila, 2020). Restrictions and arrests were performed without due consideration to various socio-economic and geospatial factors that might, say, impede a person’s ability to wear masks or the possibility of performing physical distancing in a congested neighbourhood. Yet, the groups are still blamed for the spread of the virus, as if they were the bane of the government’s COVID-19 response. This is not entirely surprising despite Duterte’s anti-elite rhetoric and the seeming wide support of the masses he enjoys (Social Weather Stations, 2020). As Juego (2017: 142) put it, Duterte’s governance “has been police-centric and militaristic in its approach […] It also lacks a class perspective, notwithstanding [his] leftist, socialist, and anti-elite rhetoric.”

Blaming the urban poor for the spread of COVID-19 is no different from other tropes and schemes that have characterised them as an “enemy” of the city, referring to them as “mendicant” or as “economic saboteurs” (Doherty, 1985). As the bane of the city, the urban poor has been blamed for arresting development. This, in turn, justified their displacement from the city centre and eventual relocation to far-flung provinces as former president Ferdinand Marcos did and other administrations preceding him. These were done to promote a vision of “development” that invariably created class-based divisions within the city (Tadiar, 2007). Within the city, it also meant the creation of disciplinary regimes that imposed civility, law, and order, effectively criminalising activities by the poor who seek to find their own spaces in the gaps within the city (Kusaka, 2017). In this sense, the campaign against the pasaway is but a manifestation of deep-seated prejudices against the urban poor.

Yet the term pasaway takes its most radicalised and insidious form when used as an all-encompassing pejorative term – an empty signifier – to describe those who defy (or are perceived to defy) government orders. This is evident in many of President Duterte’s late-night addresses where he explicitly expressed his spite for communist rebels, drug addicts, activists, corrupt officials, unco-operative local executives, political opposition, oligarchs, shrewd businessmen, and the critic or dissenter (reklamador). All of these groups are perceived to have committed an egregious act against the Filipino people. The President’s enmity towards some of these actors is not new nor was he shy to express his anger (galit) at them. For example, Duterte has vowed to crush the communist insurgency in the Philippines, bring down the oligarchy who have profited from the Filipino people, and, of course, kill the drug addicts. He vowed to do all of these either through litigation or brute force. Despite the pandemic, the President has not wavered but instead has intensified his efforts to bring these erring actors down. This tongue-lashing and its accompanying responses directed towards his (perceived) enemies might be interpreted as Duterte flexing his authoritarian tendencies. However, it also reinforces the war-like narrative and suggests the creation of a dualist and oppositional narrative – if you are not with me, you are against me...if you are against me, you are my enemy.
Arguably, this dualist and oppositional narrative was on full display when the various association of healthcare professionals asked the government for “time-out,” urging the government, among other demands, to revert Manila and nearby provinces back to a stricter community quarantine qualification. This plea was made while the healthcare capacity in Metro Manila reached critical levels and the number of COVID-19 cases exceeded the 100,000 mark by August 2020. Late night on 2 August 2020, President Duterte heeded the call of the healthcare professionals and approved the recommendation of his cabinet members to put Metro Manila and adjacent provinces under the MECQ. However, the president answered the call of the healthcare professionals in the most bizarre and puzzling manner. After sympathising with the plight of the healthcare professionals, Duterte went on to lambast, threaten, and taunt them. He said:

To the health workers who are not connected with the government, we will try to help. But there is no need for you and the guys, 1,000 of you telling us what to do publicly. You could have just written us a letter. (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2020e)

He continued:

Next time, you can just ask for an audience. But do not go out shouting for a revolution. You know, you do not know me. If you say revolution, do it now. Go ahead. Try it. Let us destroy our nation. Let us kill all those who are infected with COVID. (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2020e)

At the end of his address, Duterte said:

[that] revolution is more dangerous than COVID. If you will wage a revolution, you will give me a free ticket to stage a counterrevolution. How I wish you would do it. (Presidential Communications Operations Office (2020e))

The following day, the president’s spokesperson was quick to clarify that he made those statements only because he was hurt that the healthcare professionals took their pleas to the media first before calling his attention. The president was also insulted when he heard the Filipino version of the Les Misérables song Do You Hear the People Sing being sung at demonstrations. Taken at face value, Duterte’s tirade appears as if he was picking a fight with the healthcare workers, especially with those perceived to be critical (reklamador). In this sense, the healthcare professionals fit into the category signified by the pasaway by being perceived to be defiant, if not rebellious, actors. In any case, Duterte’s televised tirades effectively humiliated and intimidated health workers. Days after, some health workers’ associations formally apologised; they were kept in tow (Philstar, 2020). On the other hand, the police and military have been repeatedly valorised for their bravery, fortitude, and sacrifice. The president has repeatedly expressed his high regard and referred to them as the “backbone” of his administration. For the rest of the Filipinos, obedience remains their biggest contribution (ambag).
These late-night tirades are, in many ways, theatre or drama. Drawing from Lasco’s (2020b) discussion on “medical populism,” this dramatisation of the crisis draws from a war-like narrative and is an act to legitimise emergency powers. Likewise, the tirades directed against healthcare professionals sought to delegitimise their claims (for a better pandemic response) and silence dissent. To put it plainly, these are acts seeking to monopolise authority and righteousness. Beyond the drama, however, lies a tragedy. Drawing on Thompson (2020), this theatre (as with the war on drugs) effectively diverts attention away from what he calls the “death of development.” Duterte’s strong-willed and drama-filled tirades mask an inconvenient truth, that is, the Philippines continues to lag in its COVID-19 response, and Filipinos continue to suffer for it.

Conclusion

Duterte has securitised COVID-19. This was achieved by fulfilling the three main elements of securitisation – the identification of an existential threat, emergency measures, and breaking free of rules. The securitisation of COVID-19 relied on framing the pandemic as war – a fight for the nation’s survival. This was used to justify the draconian response by the government in an attempt to suppress the spread of the virus. This was primarily achieved by utilising and expanding the powers of the state’s law enforcement apparatus. While Duterte has successfully securitised COVID-19, he has done so in a peculiar way. Duterte’s securitising act relied on his populist rhetoric – a populist securitising act so to speak. Seen this way, Duterte’s populist rhetoric served as the speech act that argued for and legitimised the securitisation of COVID-19. A key element of his populist securitising act was projecting the Philippines under siege by a sinister menace that may undermine the well-being of Filipinos. Duterte’s populist securitising act invariably produced the pasaway archetype, an erring and bullheaded subject who, through its behaviour, became the embodiment of the virus’ deadly qualities. Consequently, this was used to justify the intense policing and disciplining campaign against the pasaway. The war against COVID-19 turned into a war against the pasaway.

The war against the pasaway is an attempt by the government to protect virtuous citizens from an unwanted and undesirable “other.” The disproportionate focus on the pasaway, however, is not only to mitigate its bullheaded behaviour. It is also informed by deep-seated class prejudices – the pasaway, in some ways, resembling the colonised and racialised other. The bifurcated narrative and the concomitant legitimisation of the use of the state’s coercive power have long been used to produce, maintain, and reinforce societal divides. Beyond class, however, the underlying discourse that informed the production of the pasaway soon spread to other groups’ perceived derailing of governmental efforts against the virus. In this sense, the pasaway became an empty signifier representing any other behaviour or actions deemed disagreeable. As an empty signifier, the campaign to address the pasaway extended to not only arresting bullheaded individuals but also to silence dissent. While the pasaway has become an encompassing pejorative term, it still relied on the bifurcated depiction of Filipino society and the need to save the virtuous from the errant.

These dualist and oppositional narratives are, however, not new. They resemble what has informed and animated Duterte’s campaigns against illegal drugs, criminality, corruption,
oligarchy, communism, and so on. These narratives serve to present a bifurcated society, an existential threat, and an accompanying justification to pursue actions with force and haste in the name of social justice and national integrity. Take, for example, the war on drugs. Duterte depicted the widespread sale and use of illegal drugs as “a clear national security threat […] an invasion of a new kind […] [and] a war against our families and children” (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2020). Moreover, Duterte was able to frame the war on drugs as a noble crusade to salvage the Filipino nation (Hapal, 2019). In this crusade, society is seen as composed of good people and of demons (demonyo). The role of the government (particularly law enforcement) is “predictably, like avenging angels, to eliminate the demons to protect society – in other words, to keep the integrity of the ‘thin blue line’” (Jensen and Hapal, 2018: 49).

In this sense, the war against COVID-19 may be understood in conjunction with Duterte’s other “wars on […]” Amid the pandemic, the government relentlessly continued its war on drugs, criminality, and corruption; intensified its war against terrorism alongside the passage of the controversial Anti-Terrorism Law; and escalated its campaign to dismantle so-called oligarchs, ABS-CBN – the largest media network in the Philippines – as one of the casualties. These wars are being fought to address a clear and present threat to ensure the well-being and future of the nation. And, more importantly, it presents an enemy to vanquish. The war on COVID-19 had serious consequences. Through the archetype of the pasaway, the government has, wittingly or unwittingly, turned the Filipino people into the enemy. This came to be as the virus, initially conceived as an “unseen enemy” creeping to infect, kill, and upend the lives of Filipinos, took a corporeal form. In other words, COVID-19’s deadly and devastating qualities were soon embodied with the bullheaded character of the pasaway. It became the enemy order and, consequently, the object of disciplining and punishment.

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Notes
1. The term “salvaging” was used colloquially to refer to an act of extra-judicial killing. Most of the victims were perceived enemies of the state, criminals, and erring police officers. Salvaging emerged during the martial law era where the act of killing of communists and criminals was equated to saving the nation from peril.
2. Securitisation was conventionally used in the field of international relations; the concept as shown earlier has seeped is analyses of Philippine studies. Bugarin (2020) discussed how the issue of terrorism was securitised in the Philippines. Recently, Chen (2020) and Baysa-Barredo (2020) used the term, albeit somewhat loosely, to describe the militaristic pandemic response of states in Southeast Asia. Prior to the pandemic, Quimpo (2017) and Thompson
(2020) discussed how Duterte securitised the issue of illegal drugs, paving the way for extra-legal measures resulting in the deaths of thousands. Despite these contributions, literature on securitisation in relation to Philippine politics remain sparse.

3. Not all securitising acts are negative. In some instances, as Biba (2016) has shown, it may result in “positive outcomes.” Likewise, not all successful securitisation moves become violent as illustrated by the case of US trade relations discussed by Magcamit (2017). Nonetheless, Biba (2016) notes that, broadly speaking, de-securitisation of issues is preferred.


5. Direct quotations of the president were retrieved from transcribed speeches from the website of the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO). The president delivered his speeches in a mixture of English and Tagalog. For the purposes of brevity, only the English translation (done by the author) is provided.

6. The subsidy amounts to 5,000 to 8,000 Philippine peso (approximately USD 100 to USD 160) per household.

7. Since the passage of the Bayanihan to Heal as One Law, it took the government nearly two months to distribute the first round of subsidies, and it targeted the end of July 2020 to finish the distribution of the second round of cash aid. For the second round of subsidies, President Duterte removed the local government units (LGUs) in the distribution of the subsidy due to allegations of corruption and slow implementation. Instead, he mandated the joint forces of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and the Philippine National Police (PNP) to handle the distributions. As of 16 August 2020, the government has yet to finish distributing the second round of cash aid.

8. Sitio San Roque is an informal settlement situated at the middle of the Quezon City central business district. For decades, residents of Sitio San Roque have fought for in-city relocation and decent housing conditions but were met with increasingly aggressive attempts by both the city government and private developers to displace them.

9. The World Health Organisation (WHO) suggests a contact tracer-population ratio of 1:800, meaning 135,000 contact tracers for the Philippines.

10. The imperative to impose strict discipline was complemented by two other policy and programme imperatives. These are establishing and maintaining unity and coherence of efforts between and among the national government and local government units; and ramping up the capacity of both national and local governments to detect, address, and manage COVID-19 cases.

11. Arguably, the response would have been drastically different if the pandemic response were framed in a different way. The implementation of the response would have also been different if, say, healthcare professionals were the ones making the decisions.

12. The word tambay is an appropriation of the English word standby. Tambay is a pejorative term used to describe people, usually young men, who are perceived as having nothing to do apart from loitering around their neighbourhood.
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