

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

**Populism and the Pandemic in Southeast Asia:
Focus on the Philippines and Indonesia**

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Geographically close to the Central Chinese epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak, Southeast Asian states were among the first to experience local transmission of the virus. The first locally acquired case in Thailand was reported on January 31, 2020, and in Singapore on February 4; from Singapore, it quickly spread to Malaysia, with local cases evident by February 6. A separate cluster of cases also began to emerge in Vietnam in February. The Philippines and Indonesia confirmed their first locally acquired cases in early March, while Cambodia and Myanmar followed suit later that month. The public health response to the crisis across Southeast Asia has been mixed. Although the regional average masks some variation, most states fall roughly in the middle of the global norm in terms of the number of infections and deaths in proportion to the population. Singapore, although one of the first affected, remains among the world's best performing states, while Vietnam has also done well despite its lower level of development. Containment measures in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand were initially reasonably effective. However, the emergence of more contagious strains of the virus led to a large surge in cases across Southeast Asia in the first half of 2021. Indonesia and the Philippines have been especially hard hit in this latest wave.

This issue brief examines the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia, focusing on the Philippines and Indonesia. Specifically, it assesses the role that populism has played in the public health response to the virus and the reciprocal effect of the pandemic on the fate of populists in the region. Populists are distinctly personalistic leaders who aim to mobilize voters without the use of deeply institutionalized political parties.¹ The relative weakness of parties and the consequent over-reliance on the distribution of patronage to maintain political control in the region has left democratic leaders susceptible to populist outflanking when factional allegiances inevitably become frayed.² Populists thus often exploit crises, both real and artificial, to gain and retain power; at the same time, their anti-establishment approach, along with their tendency to repress political dissent, could hamper the effectiveness of their crisis response. Nowhere have

¹ For more details on what is typically known as the “strategic approach” to populism, see, Paul D. Kenny, “The Strategic Approach to Populism,” in D. B. Subedi, Alan Scott, Howard Brasted, and Karin Von Strokirch (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Populism in the Asia Pacific*. London: Routledge (forthcoming); available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352573494_THE_STRATEGIC_APPROACH_TO_POPULISM

² Paul D. Kenny. *Populism in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge University Press (2020)

these conflicting trends been more evident than in democratic Southeast Asia.

It is important, however, not to extend the application of the populist label excessively. Seeking to mobilize the people directly, populism, though often illiberal in practice, depends on mass political participation. Populism is therefore something that tends to only occur in democratic or democratizing states. Following the military coups that ousted partially populist governments in Thailand and Myanmar, and the ongoing governmental crisis in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia remain the most democratic among the region's major states. Moreover, although populists often utilize polarizing rhetoric, not every case of illiberalism, nationalism, or egalitarianism is an instance of populism. At present in Southeast Asia, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines is the only undoubted populist, while Indonesia's Joko Widodo (typically, and hereafter, known as "Jokowi") is what I call a partial populist.

The Philippines

Since his bid for the Philippine presidency in 2016, Rodrigo Duterte has become one of the world's most notorious populists. Like that of several of his presidential predecessors, Duterte's populism is most evident in the charismatic nature of his appeal. He has little time for parties, seeking to connect directly with voters through public events, television, and social media. Duterte's early-2016 presidential campaign built on his record as the rough-hewn, tough-on-crime mayor of Davao City, the city he personally ran since the ousting of dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. Duterte's main message in 2016 was the promise of an aggressive crusade against the sale and use of illegal drugs, giving rise to his characterization as a "penal populist."³ Never one for political correctness, Duterte pledged to dump the bodies of so many drug dealers in Manila Bay that it would "fatten all the fish."⁴ In-office, Duterte has made good on his macabre promise. Official figures put the number killed in police operations at 6,165 (June 2021), but the true figure may be much higher.

Although initially dismissive of the danger posed by the virus, once the first locally acquired cases were confirmed on March 7, the government—and Duterte—responded aggressively. On March 8, Duterte issued Proclamation 922, declaring that the National Capital Region (NCR), home to about a fifth of the Philippine population, would be put in a State of Public Health Emergency. On March 17, Duterte expanded the scope of the lockdown to cover the entire island of Luzon, in which the NCR is located. The main response to the outbreak has been the utilization of lockdowns, quarantines, and curfews. After some partial easing of these restrictions in the second half of 2020, the surge of cases in mid-March 2021 brought on the return of strict community quarantine conditions across the archipelago. The lack of capacity in the public health system has limited the use of more technologically intensive tactics such as location tracking, regular testing, and contact tracing. Although reasonably effective against the early variants of the virus, the scale of the August 2021 surge, mainly due to community transmission, has strained the already overburdened health and administrative system.

Survey data from June 2021 show that almost every Filipino (95 percent) remained

³ Paul D. Kenny and Ronald Holmes. "A new penal populism? Rodrigo Duterte, public opinion, and the war on drugs in the Philippines." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 20(2) (2020): 187-205.

⁴ Paul D. Kenny. "Populism and the war on drugs in Southeast Asia." *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 25(2) (2019): 121

concerned about contracting the virus.⁵ However, the uptake of vaccines remained low; just under 30 percent were fully vaccinated as of early September 2021. In part, this has been due to problems in the supply of vaccines, but another survey reports that only two-thirds of Filipinos would be willing to get a vaccine even if available; this compares with over three-quarters of respondents in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and 71 percent in Thailand.⁶ Vaccine hesitancy thus poses a significant public health challenge for the Duterte administration in its final year in government, with the majority of those refusing to get vaccinated having concerns about vaccine safety. Given this problem, Duterte has repeatedly urged people to get vaccinated, even threatening coercion when he stated, “you choose, vaccine or I will have you jailed,” in a live television address in June 2021.⁷

Nor has Duterte’s coercive response remained at the level of rhetoric. Known for his federalist (centralizing) ambitions, well before the onset of the pandemic, Duterte had been accused of seeking to concentrate power and curb dissent. Under the exigency of the crisis, these trends have become more pronounced. Since March 2020, critics of Duterte have argued with justification that an already cowed Congress has ceded almost unlimited legal and financial powers to address the crisis to the President.⁸ Duterte has hardly been slow to appreciate the inability of the judiciary or the legislature to function as restraints. Unsurprisingly, given the frequency of lockdowns, around half of Filipinos are concerned that individual freedoms may be curtailed because of the pandemic.⁹

Despite the early missteps and continuing deficiencies in the handling of the pandemic, Duterte’s popularity has remained amazingly resilient through the crisis, hovering around 85 percent. As of June 2021, survey data showed that just under two in three Filipinos approve of the government’s performance in containing the spread of the virus, however, this is down from three in four in February 2021.¹⁰ It is noteworthy, however, that accountability for public health tends to fall on local agencies rather than the national government. During the pandemic, Duterte has leveraged this tendency, by calling on the public to report to him directly when they encounter problems with their local governments or bureaucrats. Moreover, survey data show that a significant majority (79 percent) of the population believes that the public’s lack of compliance with health protocols is the “real cause” of the spread of the virus in the Philippines. Duterte has thus far managed to avoid being held to answer for the continued spread of cases or, thus far, for the impact on material wellbeing.¹¹

⁵ Survey data drawn from Pulse Asia Inc. unless otherwise stated. For a more detailed analysis, see Paul D. Kenny and Ronald Holmes: “The Philippines: Penal Populism and Pandemic Response,” in *Populism and the Pandemic* edited by Nils Ringe and Lucio Rennó, London: Routledge (forthcoming). Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354537555_The_Philippines_Penal_Populism_and_Pandemic_Response

⁶ Edward Aspinall, Nicole Curato, Diego Fossati, Eve Warburton, and Meredith Weiss, COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Public health, social impacts, and political attitudes, *Policy Briefing-SEARBO*. August 2021. Retrieved from: https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/SEARBO_COVID-19-in-Southeast-Asia_Public-health-social-impacts-and-political-attitudes_final.pdf

⁷ “Philippines’ Duterte threatens vaccine decliners with jail, animal drug.” *Reuters*. 23 June 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-duterte-threatens-those-who-refuse-covid-19-vaccine-with-jail-2021-06-21/>

⁸ Hutchcroft, P. D., and Holmes, R. D. “A failure of execution.” *Inside Story*. 4 April 2020. Retrieved from <https://insidestory.org.au/a-failure-of-execution/>

⁹ Aspinall et al. COVID-19 in Southeast Asia

¹⁰ Kenny and Holmes. “Penal populism and pandemic response.”

¹¹ “First Quarter 2021 Social Weather Survey: 79% of adult Filipinos say violators of health protocols are the real cause of the current spread of Covid-19.” Social Weather Stations. 28 May 2021. Retrieved from

Indonesia

Since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, Indonesian politics has been characterized by a persistent tension between the approach of patronage-based machine parties like PDI-P (The Indonesian Party of Struggle) and Golkar on the one hand and that of personalist electoral vehicles like Prabowo Subianto's Gerindra and former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Partai Demokrat (PD) on the other. While the former rely especially on locally entrenched political brokers to mobilize voters, the latter instead draw primarily on the charismatic appeal of their leaders. However, some political movements have in practice utilized both types of appeal.¹²

The PDI-P remains under the factional leadership of Megawati, yet the party nominated the charismatic, independently-minded governor of Jakarta, Jokowi, as its presidential candidate in 2014.¹³ For a long time eschewing the polarizing rhetoric of rivals like Prabowo, Jokowi has been described as a pragmatic populist.¹⁴ Moreover, if we are to interpret populism as a personalist political strategy, Jokowi's party is considerably more institutionalized—and less populist—than that of Duterte. Even as he appeals directly to voters, he remains constrained by the PDI-P organization and, especially since his reelection in 2019, his coalition partners. The fact that he brought his long-time opponent, Prabowo, into his administration as Minister of Defense suggests the predominance of patronage over ideology. It is thought that Prabowo is angling for Jokowi's support to run for the 2024 presidency.¹⁵ The increasing salience of political Islam, however, especially since 2016, has added a new element to the equation.¹⁶ However, as several observers have noted, Jokowi's response has been to clamp down on the opposition rather than to revivify his own organization.¹⁷

Through March 2020, the number of recorded cases of the virus in Indonesia remained low. As a result, even if the spread of the virus in neighboring countries should have sparked alarm, the Jokowi government appeared nonplussed by the outbreak. Moreover, as the true extent of the caseload became clear in the months that followed, Jokowi continued to play down the seriousness of the virus. Having long staked his reputation on the country's economic development, Jokowi gave every indication that he was more concerned about the economic impact of the looming pandemic, not its public health consequences.¹⁸ While Duterte responded by imposing stringent lockdowns, Jokowi has resisted such measures, even hampering the efforts of local governments to limit mobility. Over time, Jokowi, like Duterte has increasingly relied on the military and the police to observe compliance with the restrictions that are in place. As the number of new daily cases surged to over 50,000 in July 2021, more restrictions were introduced. Overall, however, the

<https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20210528105657>

¹² Kenny, *Populism in Southeast Asia*

¹³ Eunsook Jung, "Indonesia: From the pandemic crisis to democratic decline," in *Populism and the Pandemic* edited by Nils Ringe and Lucio Rennó, London: Routledge (forthcoming)

¹⁴ Marcus Mietzner. *Reinventing Asian populism: Jokowi's rise, democracy, and political contestation in Indonesia*. East-West Center. (2015).

¹⁵ Greg Fealy. "Jokowi in the Covid-19 Era: Repressive Pluralism, Dynasticism and the Overbearing State." *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 56(3) (2020): 301-323.

¹⁶ Thomas B. Pepinsky, R. William Liddle, and Saiful Mujani. *Piety and Public Opinion: Understanding Indonesian Islam*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

¹⁷ Marcus Mietzner. "Populist anti-scientism, religious polarisation, and institutionalised corruption: How Indonesia's democratic decline shaped its COVID-19 response." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39(2) (2020): 227-249.

¹⁸ Jung. "Indonesia"

Indonesian response has been substantially less coercive than that of the Philippines.¹⁹

Yet it is not clear that the Indonesian government's half-hearted response has much to do with Jokowi's populism or lack thereof. Jokowi's early dismissal of the virus might be dismissed as credulous or even deceptive, but ultimately, he has sought to limit the decline in economic output at the expense of a higher rate of infection. This may seem a callous tradeoff, but in an otherwise open, developing economy with a vast population living on the brink of poverty, the prioritization of maintaining income levels is far from irrational. Jokowi has not obviously used the outbreak as a means of concentrating power in the presidency. In contrast, Duterte, building on the militarized approach to the war on drugs, has focused on containment through the instrument of lockdowns. Moreover, with greater political control at the outset of the crisis, Duterte has been able to lean on the private sector to step in with financial support for workers in a way not possible for Jokowi.

Yet the consequence has been an economic decline in the Philippines that is much more severe than elsewhere in the region. According to World Bank figures, the Philippines saw its economy decline by 9.6 percent, while Indonesia recorded only a 2.1 percent drop in GDP. Interestingly, 62 percent of Indonesians remain somewhat or very satisfied with the response of the national government compared with 46 percent in the Philippines.²⁰ Moreover, in the Philippines, far more people reported that their primary issue of concern is the economy—whether be it jobs, inflation, or wages—rather than the virus.²¹ Additionally, it is far from clear that the coercive, centralizing approach of Duterte is necessarily unpopular. Both the war on drugs, and the curfews periodically implemented as part of the campaign, have consistently attained the support of around 85 percent of the population.²²

Populism and the Pandemic

The Duterte and Jokowi governments have responded differently to the crisis, although in the end, the toll on public health in the Philippines and Indonesia seems to have been remarkably similar. The greater populism of Duterte—that he is a much more personalistic leader with greater control over the legislative and judicial process—has made the implementation of a coercive response both more feasible and desirable. Yet part of Duterte's popularity to date has been due to his ability to keep growth rates high and inflation under control. In Indonesia, Jokowi has always been relatively more constrained, and thus, less populist. Although now at the head of a grand coalition, he is not able to operate without his allies' support. His coalition partners have a range of interests and agendas, both political and financial, that cannot be neglected, not least as Jokowi looks to secure political futures for his adult children.²³ Despite Duterte's impressive polling numbers, even a year after the outbreak of the virus, the continued decline in the Philippine economy could hamper his efforts to secure the presidency for his progeny. Only time will tell whether or not Jokowi's populism-lite proves to have been the better political strategy. ■

¹⁹ Mietzner. "Populist anti-scientism."

²⁰ Aspinall et al. COVID-19 in Southeast Asia

²¹ Kenny and Holmes. "Penal populism and pandemic response."

²² Kenny and Holmes. "A new penal populism?"

²³ Greg Fealy. "Jokowi in the Covid-19 Era"

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