Structural Social Work Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic:
A Look into Authoritarianism in the Philippines, the Duterte Administration, and the Country's Pandemic Response

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Abstract

As the Philippines approached its second-year anniversary since its first lockdown on March 15, 2020, the current conditions of millions of Filipino families show one bleak and austere picture of a country's drastic descent into hunger, poverty, and unemployment. For two years, the country has cycled through multiple versions of lockdowns with minimal differences in each and without lifting any at least once. In those two years, the Duterte administration has failed to reopen schools, ensure job security for all working Filipinos, and address the immediate concerns of many who have fallen into hunger and homelessness following mass loss of jobs due to the pandemic.

President Duterte's highly militarized response to the public health emergency was expected. From the very beginning of his administration, President Duterte has continuously championed his populist tactics in framing each and every national emergency as needing authoritarian intervention. It has further curtailed civil liberties and currently exacerbated the situation of pandemic-stricken families.

Through the structural social work approach, social workers are called to recognize the existing oppressive structures that not only provide band-aid or short-term solutions for Filipinos but help sustain President Duterte's authoritarian rule. This paper examines the relationship between the emergence of authoritarianism and the spread of infectious diseases, the Philippines' history with authoritarianism, and how structural social work can help address the root causes of not only the pandemic, but also the pervasive economic inequality in the country.

Keywords: authoritarianism, COVID-19, President Duterte, inequality, structural social work, emancipatory practice

Introduction

The year 2020 marks one of the most momentous yet devastating events in the 21st century with an easily transmissible virus that essentially brought the entire world to a total halt. The first case of SARS-CoV-2, more commonly known as COVID-19, was recorded in December 2019 but was only declared a public health emergency towards the end of January 2020. The healthcare system all over the world was quickly overwhelmed and, by March of the same year, lockdowns were imposed to contain the spread. At a time where mobility has been at its highest, especially in highly urbanized areas, quarantine and social distancing measures have engendered a complete adjustment on almost all sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic has completely redefined what can be considered normal now. It was only when physical interactions

and going out had been banned, that people realized the importance and invaluable role of physical day-to-day interactions in almost every industry and institution.

What was known about the virus was minimal at the time. Vaccines had yet to be distributed and misleading information had been widespread as well. This led to a constant feeling of stress, anxiety, and panic that drove many into a kind of conduct that further exacerbated the situation (Bochicchio et al., 2021). A rise in Asian hate and panic buying or hoarding were some of the common news headlines all over the world. The lack of clear and definitive information further fueled feelings of anxiety as the gravity of the disease and the end of lockdowns seemed to be vague and ambiguous. The lack of clarity simultaneous with an onslaught of varying rules or guidelines eventually set the stage for authoritarianism to take hold given these unprecedented situations.

The urgent need for immediate control of the COVID-19 pandemic to mitigate its effects became a gateway for authoritarian governance which, if left unchecked, would have also lent it the opportunity to cement itself further, especially in countries with weakening democracies. Seeking control, order, and swift responses from institutions are to be expected in times of calamities and public emergencies but if such is not rooted in the protection of the rights and welfare of the people, long-standing issues such as unemployment, poverty, abuse, and more will continue to subsist even long after the pandemic.

In this article, the Philippine's history of authoritarian regimes strengthened by neoliberal policies and heightened militaristic intervention will be examined, as such appeared more strongly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Various literature on the emergence of authoritarianism during global catastrophes will also be presented to further explore linkages between nationwide crises and autocratic rule. Within the context of President Rodrigo Duterte's pandemic response during its first two years, the ways in which structural social work can be used as a guiding principle for social workers in addressing the impact of the pandemic as well as the worsening political climate will be discussed as well.

The COVID-19 Pandemic, Authoritarianism, and the Parasite-Stress Theory of Authoritarianism

In 2020, the novel coronavirus posed great danger especially to the elderly and immunocompromised, already claiming 11,300 lives around the world by the end of March 2020 (Pharmaceutical Technology, 2021). COVID-19 was highly transmissible and, without a cure or vaccine in sight, different countries and states eventually had to impose stay-at-home quarantine measures to contain the spread (AJMC Staff, 2021). Many had to transition their school and work online and while some were able to do so successfully, there were still a myriad of occupations that simply could not shift to the digital world. This resulted in a mass loss of jobs and a sharp increase in unemployment (Aaronson & Alba, 2020). Multiple business establishments had to close down and social services became even harder to come by.

Studies have shown that, when faced with the risk of unprecedented threats, individuals will tend towards policies that highlight control and conformity (Zmigrod et al., 2021). This is due to the fact that unprecedented risks or threats to health such as an infectious disease can engender feelings of panic and distrust which can lead people to seeking control and deference to authority.

> For instance, upon sight of a potentially contaminating substance, humans typically experience the emotion of disgust, which fosters aversion and avoidance. Similarly, ecological conditions characterized by high levels of infectious diseases can promote behavioral adaptations associated with conforming to established traditions and avoiding foreign and potentially-infectious stimuli. (Zmigrod et al., 2021, p. 457)

A surge of panic arose in different parts of the world that directly and indirectly led to people panic buying and emptying shelves at grocery stores (Imbong, 2020), to protests against wearing masks (Aratani, 2020), and to intensified and racially charged hate crimes against Asians in multicultural areas (BBC News, 2021). This panic and other subsequent behavioral responses of fear, distrust, and anxiety due to the virus were revealed to be part of what has been termed as the Parasite-stress theory of authoritarianism. The theory posits that "the costs of being infected by outgroup human members would motivate authoritarian behavior" (Zmigrod et al., 2021, p. 465) where outgroup generally refers to those to avoid. In Zmigrod's study, a positive correlation between the disposition for authoritarian attitudes and the prevalence of non-zoonotic infectious diseases (diseases which are spread by human-to-human transmission) in particular areas was found. This means that, in order to protect oneself or one's community from such communicable diseases, seeking heightened order and control becomes a typical response and such may even lead to authoritarian tendencies.

It therefore comes as no surprise that, as the virus rapidly encroaches into different parts of the world, the reactions of each individual can vary and even clash against each other. What may bind these people together is the relatively uncontained panic and anxiety due to this unprecedented threat to their lives and livelihood. While others may want to approach the pandemic the way they have mostly responded to other national crises, according to Zmigrod et al. (2021), there is however a significant number of people who would strongly demand for a more authoritarian approach, bringing forth conformity and obedience in their societies. The study also states that "recent investigation demonstrates personality traits interact with the social context to shape citizens' social distancing behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Ludeke, Vitriol, Larsen, & Gensowski, 2021, as cited in Zmigrod et al., 2021, p. 468).

Avoidance is inevitable in the face of infectious diseases. Logically, one would think that if everyone wanted to avoid the same problem or threat, then everyone must work together methodically in order to effectively evade such dangers. This would then necessitate strict adherence to the rules and guidelines imposed by those in authority. On the surface, this seems sensible as living through a pandemic requires widespread compliance and cooperation whether through strict mask wearing, maintaining proper distances, or being transparent in one's test results and whereabouts. However, fear and the need for widespread control are two of the principal requisites of authoritarianism which makes the COVID-19 pandemic an ideal channel for its complete entrenchment into public governance.

> …a serious threat like COVID-19, which demands controls of the movements of individuals, intensive contract tracing, the diversion of major industries to the manufacture of medical supplies and radical top-down economic measures, also set ominous precedents for would-be authoritarians and accustoms citizens to the erosion of civil liberties and enlargement of executive power. (Simon, 2020, p. 110)

To refer back to "parasite stress," people develop new behaviors and values as a way to survive and authoritarianism appears to be becoming more appealing. In attempting to establish community-wide conformity and obedience, people begin to associate authoritarianism with order–the kind of order that can effectively contain the adverse impact of the pandemic. Those who are found to defy or dismiss such order become prone to stigmatization or discrimination. On one end, this manifested as short videos of celebrities and influencers going viral on social media as they complained about Filipinos who "refused" to stay home (Madarang, 2020) while on the other was a series of executive orders and policies that were hinged on suppression and punishment (Simon, 2020).

The level of distrust, anxiety, and stress reached alarming levels during the first few months of the pandemic and was eventually taken advantage of by authoritarian leaders. When healthcare sectors were becoming overwhelmed, resources were growing scarce, and fear of contracting the virus was increasing, authoritarian rule swept in, branding itself as nationwide and direct interventions. Many of the measures that arose during the pandemic were blatant violations of human rights and, moreover, enabled heightened surveillance that in certain contexts, spelled great dangers for particular groups.

> Authoritarian governance in the name of public health intervention is understood in the present context as being characterized by diverse combinations of governmental and administrative overreach, the adoption of excessive and disproportionate emergency measures, override of civil liberties and fundamental freedoms, failure to engage in properly deliberative and transparent decision-making, highly centralized decision-making, and even the suspension of effective democratic control. In a nutshell, the pandemic has served as a powerful justification for authoritarianization—the process by which state authorities 'slowly undermine institutional constraints on their rule,' through various combinations of the above—and populations have largely responded with obedience. (Frantz, 2018, as cited in Thomson & Ip, 2020, p. 4)

Thus, authoritarian attitudes succeeded in taking hold of public health responses across some states and metropolitan regions in the United States of America as well as in other countries. The above-mentioned study was able to establish a correlation between authoritarianism and the frequency of nonzoonotic infectious diseases in certain regions or countries. Once again, this proves that individuals, in the face of unprecedented risk, will conform to authoritarian governance if it can assure them effective mitigation plans that can protect them.

Rodrigo Duterte's Authoritarian Reign

The combination of a highly transmissible virus and the presence of authoritarianism in democratic countries can spell a further decline of resources, access to social services, and even violation of the rights among marginalized groups. While varying degrees of discrimination and exploitation have always been present among these groups, the COVID-19 pandemic is especially poignant as it not only worsens their plight but also unearths the reality of state institutions and systems. Such have been responsible for the hardships of these marginalized groups before, during, and possibly still after the pandemic. The Philippines in particular has long suffered a turbulent history of inaccessible healthcare and insufficient funds for hospitals, equipment, and medical staff (Chanco, 2019; IBON Foundation, 2020).

Despite such, acceptance and even support for authoritarianism and military intervention, dubbed as "real change" (*tunay na pagbabago*), grows steadily among Filipino citizens as evidenced by the acceptance of President Duterte's strong-man approach to national issues that had led to the war on drugs (Curato, 2016) and to the crackdown of activists through red-tagging and the anti-terrorism law (Esguerra, 2021). As he is now followed by the 17th president of the Philippines, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., the return of the Marcoses raises questions of how the Southeast Asian country that championed and subsequently became the touchstone of democracy and peaceful protest in past decades (Thompson, 2016; Jayasuriya, 2020) turned into a reemerging authoritarian nation.

Then dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. was ousted from his seat by millions of Filipinos during People Power I (Garrido, 2021), and more than 30 years later his own son returns. It brings about the question of how national-scale crises can bring about change to a country, so much so that its citizens may switch their political leanings completely. How did authoritarianism seep back so easily into the country that valiantly fought for its democracy?

Historically, the political battle between democracy and authoritarianism posed significant problems in multiple countries and the Philippines is no stranger to such (Jayasuriya, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic appeared to be the catalyst for decision and if the past six years under the Duterte administration were anything to go by, it would have seemed aberrant for President Duterte to respond to the pandemic in any way other than the latter. He had once asserted his inclination for authoritarianism during his presidential campaign, even warning Filipinos of such, and has continued to do so during his regime from his notorious war on drugs (Curato, 2016) to today's COVID-19 pandemic response which had been handed off to military control from the very beginning (Beltran, 2020; Imbong, 2020).

Given Duterte's history of misleadingly catastrophizing the country's problems to the point of necessitating police and military intervention, it was foreseeable for the administration's pandemic response to be wholly centered on the military's role, leaving little to no room for professional insight from medical health experts (Beltran, 2020; Imbong, 2020). Even before his presidency, he had propositioned drug users and drug dealers as the downfall of the country that urgently needed police intervention (Thompson, 2016; Curato, 2016; Bello, 2017). He has spent much of his regime framing liberal politicians with their associated oligarchs as failures and enemies (Thompson, 2016; Bello, 2017; Jayasuriya, 2020; Garrido, 2021), while bouts of criticism and opposition he branded as anti-government and communist propaganda (Salamanca, 2020). He has even insulted members of international bodies such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC) whenever they bring to light the human rights violations committed through the drug war ("Duterte Attacks Rights Officials," 2018; Ranada, 2021). Disillusioned by the liberal takeover during the post-Marcos Sr. era, Duterte championed a nationwide frustration of the Filipinos (Thompson, 2016) by reinstating a new brand of authoritarianism concomitant with a strong military presence and a seemingly purposeful derision of human rights. Curato (2016) stated as well that "his currency is his promise of certainty, anchored on the rhetoric of violence and machismo" (p. 149).

This new brand plagued vulnerable groups for almost six years and had set the tone for the country's pandemic response. Its consequences, alongside that of the war on drugs, the anti-terrorism law, and other anti-democratic policies, will certainly have a long-term impact that might even be deemed irreversible. Bello (2017) referred to Duterte as "fascist sui

generis" (p. 42), characterized by his strong antagonism towards liberalism and his immutable predisposition towards violence and military intervention when it comes to the country's most pressing concerns. These are necessary conditions to a strongly bolstered authoritarian rule that exploits a historical struggle for democracy and genuine reform.

Rehashing such is however incomplete without the role played by other pivotal events in the Philippines' political history which were the repercussions of the liberal reformism heralded by the two Aquino presidencies. Thompson (2016) writes, "Duterte's victory and the neo-authoritarian narrative of his campaign can be best understood not in contrast to the successes of the latter Aquino administration but as a product of its failings" (p. 220). In other words, Duterte weaponized the Filipinos' vexation at the post-Marcos era's empty promises for a better, more democratic future. It allowed him the perfect avenue to reinstate his new take on authoritarianism that parades impunity and the subjugation of his constituents. Peralta (2021) terms it as "authoritarian nostalgia," and Duterte successfully managed to achieve this by repurposing a sense of order and stability founded during Marcos' dictatorship about 30 years ago.

It was therefore terrifying and demoralizing to realize that the COVID-19 pandemic would be treated the exact same way even though this should have been considered a public health crisis, and preferably put under the advisement of medical professionals in lieu of retired military officials. This fear, however, was dwarfed by the panic over the COVID-19 virus itself, particularly during its first year as there were no vaccines yet at the time and the Philippines had failed to flatten the curve in all those months—with the highest number of cases peaking at 83,109 on August 15, 2020 (Gonzales, 2022). That fear was especially instrumental in justifying an authoritarian pandemic response as it could easily be weaponized to weaken opposition in order to prioritize and direct all focus towards health and prevention of the virus. In his 1941 book *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm wrote about the connection of fear and authoritarianism: "When people perceive an increase in disorder, they feel tremendous anxiety. Inevitably this anxiety leads to a quest for security. To bring a sense of safety back into their lives, they latch on to authoritarianism and conformity" (Gelfand, 2020). The country is no stranger to government administrations trading off people's freedom for an illusion of conformity and control. In addressing the country's biggest socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues, an authoritarian route has always been taken.

The Effects of Duterte's Failed Pandemic Response

The Philippines began its nationwide lockdown on March 15, 2020 (Atienza, 2021) and two years later the current conditions of millions of Filipino families show one bleak picture of a country's drastic descent into hunger, poverty, and unemployment. In those two years, the country has cycled through multiple versions of quarantine measures (See, 2021). Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Extreme Enhanced Community Quarantine (EECQ), Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ), and General Community Quarantine (GCQ) were some of the early levels of quarantine during the first year of the pandemic. These levels alternated among each other and not once have been completely lifted in any region (See, 2021).

The national government has failed to reopen schools, ensure job security for all working Filipinos, and address the immediate concerns of many who have fallen into hunger and homelessness following the mass loss of jobs due to the pandemic (Beltran, 2020). While

progress has been made in the two years since the first community quarantine, such progress quickly comes to a halt and then declines when ineffective policies continue to be made and many have yet to receive sustained and tangible aid from the local and national governments. The exponential increase of human rights violations, expansion of neoliberal policies, and the stagnation of the national minimum wage are just but a few ways the current administration has failed to prioritize and safeguard the needs and welfare of Filipinos. As news of a highly contagious virus was emerging around January 2020, questions arose as to how the Philippines would respond to an impending pandemic without having universalized healthcare and free or affordable access to other basic services, as well as having a history of vaccine hesitancy (Vergara, 2021).

The first misstep of the administration was to delay closing its borders to international flights, except from Wuhan, China. The reasoning behind this was even more disconcerting as "Department of Health (DOH) chief Francisco Duque, attributed to a reluctance to upset relations with China" (Beltran, 2020). Soon enough, the first case of COVID-19 in the Philippines was detected from a tourist hailing from Wuhan, China (Rappler, 2020). Two months later, the country tallied more than 600 cases (Siena, 2022) and, all over the world, panic ensued as more and more individuals became infected with the virus.

The conditions of marginalized groups in the Philippines had not changed at the onset of the pandemic but their plight has been exacerbated. In the same study from Zmigrod et al. (2021), authoritarian tendencies in an event as devastating as the COVID-19 pandemic set the precedent for vertical laws or laws that are hierarchical in nature. This means that there are laws and policies enacted that unfairly affect select groups over others. These laws isolate marginalized groups and allow heightened surveillance, mass incarceration, unequal access to resources and opportunities, and blatant silencing to run rampant (Simon, 2020). As part of the need to strengthen conformity and obedience, vertical laws impose excessive control over marginalized groups while simultaneously allowing ruling classes to break such laws whenever they deem fit (Zmigrod et al, 2021).

All through the pandemic, Duterte has enacted vertical laws that unjustly make the working class bear the brunt of the pandemic and police those who express criticism heavily. Even cash grants, subsidies, and other social protection measures were unevenly distributed across groups and regions (Umil, 2020). These policies range from the "no vaccine, no ride" and "no vaccine, no work" policies (De Santos, 2022) to approving the anti-terrorism law which dangerously conflates criticism against the government as terrorism (Amnesty International, 2020). As a show of silencing journalists, the country's biggest entertainment franchise ABS-CBN was shut down in 2020 laying off over 11,000 workers (Rey, 2020) over allegations of tax evasion and political bias in news coverage (La Viña, 2020). The country's press freedom remains repressed as the targeting and killing of journalists remain strong until today.

While these vertical laws continue to intimidate and further marginalize the vulnerable, public figures and officials remain unchallenged and unpunished by the quarantine restrictions meant to be complied with by all. Back in 2020, Senator Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel III, for instance, went to a hospital to visit his pregnant wife despite being aware that he was COVID-19 positive (Beltran, 2020) and Major General Debold Sinas attended a large gathering despite restrictions banning such activities (Talabong, 2020).

More than enough research into authoritarianism has shown implicit connections between such kind of governance and high levels of intolerance, most especially of minorities. Conformity and obedience, although proclaimed as acting equalizers for all groups in society in order to reach a common goal, mostly just apply to minorities and marginalized groups. Control over these groups entails the safeguarding of the status quo—the widening of socioeconomic class gaps, the ruling classes' monopoly of resources, and the subsequent exploitation of the working class. The connection of authoritarianism and intolerance can be surmised in this way: "research into authoritarianism began as an effort to find the roots of widespread intolerance for Jews in Nazi Germany, and the powerful relationship between authoritarianism and intolerance for minorities of virtually all kinds has well been established then" (Adorno et al., and Stenner, 2005, as cited in Solt, 2012, p. 710).

In pure Duterte fashion, anchored by a resignified fusion of theatrics and violence (Curato, 2016), the country has been led to erroneous sanctioning of continuous human rights violations and suppression of constitutional freedoms—all in the name of saving the Filipinos from this virus. In the six years under the Duterte administration, his military intervention did not shy away from declaring martial law in Mindanao, assigning cabinet seats to retired military officials, as well as red-tagging independent organizations and individuals through unfounded claims of associations with the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army, the party's armed wing. Those who do not conform to Duterte's authoritarian response to the pandemic join the roster of "public enemies" and, in their dissent, are divested of their individual freedoms.

Structural Social Work for the People with the People

Marginalized groups suffered the most during the pandemic due to restrictive lockdown measures and inadequate resources. Already impoverished by the prevailing political and economic conditions in the country, the pandemic made it even more clear that individual aid can only go so far if existing systems that enforce inequality are retained by the state and private institutions. To genuinely make possible positive changes in one's life, there is a need to acknowledge how systems, though outside the control of the individual, can still altogether impact them in significant ways. Social work's goal towards social change and development is realized not only at the individual level but through the complete transformation of society where the emancipation of the people and social justice are at its core (Hick & Murray, 2009). Complete transformation therefore requires the abolition of oppressive systems followed by a comprehensive overhaul of social and economic structures. Structural social work is centered on this kind of radical approach with its ultimate goal of transforming society to emancipate disadvantaged groups (Longres, 1986, as cited in George & Marlow, 2005).

Structural social work first emerged in Canada during the 1970s as a challenge to social work's chief approach, casework, defined as the "pseudo-medical methodology for diagnosing and treating individual behaviors that came to incorporate Freudian psychoanalytic principles" (Hick & Murray, 2009, p. 90). To some degree, casework was a vital methodology to the social work practice. However, it has become clear that what has been negatively affecting its clients' social functioning stem from even larger social problems that are rooted in widespread oppression and exploitation (Mullaly, 1997). It seemed as though social workers and the profession itself were acquiesced into accepting the present conditions, helping individuals as much as they could but would have eventually met the limitations of their aid and support.

This drew criticism that pointed to the entire profession as just another entity that ended up sustaining the inequalities of society. Hick & Murray (2009) wrote that "radical authors criticized social casework as ineffective, elitist, forcing adaptation to injustice, pathologizing social problems and valuing self-interest over client needs" (p. 91). Structural social work was a response to these criticisms, thus creating its primary objectives that put equal emphasis on the individual as well as the collective sphere.

> The two-fold goal of structural social work is to alleviate the negative effects on people of an exploitative and alienating social order while simultaneously working to transform society through social reforms and fundamental social change (Galper, 1980; Gil, 1998; Payne, 1997). "Social change is not a part of social transformation unless it represents one step in a long-range strategy for more fundamental change" (Mullaly, 2002, p. 193, as cited in George & Marlowe, 2005, p. 7).

This means that, through this approach, social work will not only continue to assist and aid the individual but further examine and identify the root causes of his/her plight. Moreover, "structural social work aims to assuage people's immediate needs while simultaneously engaging in consciousness raising and direct action to dismantle a system of domination undergirding unequal life chances" (Mullaly, 2007, 2009, as cited in Chan, 2018, p. 28). By doing so, social workers put forward the concept that the "personal is political" where individual problems and issues are symptomatic of a much larger political aim—to further marginalize, exploit, and oppress the vulnerable. Working within, outside, and beyond social institutions mark the dual capabilities of social work to address multi-level and intersectional concerns until the attainment of the profession's ultimate goal of social change hinged on radical and liberating practice. From lending a hand to the individual to challenging society's essential social institutions, "structural social work facilitates both personal change and structural change" (Mullaly, 1997, as cited in Chan, 2018, p. 29). The Philippines' history, encumbered with decades of land monopoly, authoritarianism, imperialism and now, the global agenda of neoliberalism, justifies the need to dismantle the systems founded upon such systems.

One of the lockdown measures imposed during the pandemic was named *granular lockdown* which "typically covers just a few streets or certain barangays of a given city, as determined by LGU officials" (Luna, 2021). However, these restrictions managed to impact a huge segment of the population that heavily depends on hourly or daily wages. Simply a day without work can mean possibly weeks to months of unpaid bills, insufficient funds to continue medication, and ultimately hunger and homelessness. A minimum wage worker in the National Capital Region (NCR) earns Php 512 per day which is already the highest across regions and yet still not enough to raise the standard of living (IBON Foundation, 2018). Taking just one day of work away from these groups can dramatically change their situation in the midst of a raging pandemic.

The Philippines has always faced growing inequality and exploitation of the working class. Access to basic social services remains inequitable and investments in human capital such as education, health, and training seem nonexistent as more and more Filipinos are unable to attain higher education and train for high paying jobs (International Labour Organization, 2020). According to Rutkowski (2015), the country's glaring problem with unemployment and poverty stems not from the lack of jobs but from scarce job opportunities for many Filipino workers. A

good portion of these jobs can only provide minimum, or just slightly above minimum wages. If most families are only living paycheck to paycheck, there are less chances for their upward social mobility and, more often than not, this pattern continues on for generations. Rutkowski (2015) also demonstrates this by illustrating it as a "vicious circle" wherein lack of investments for human capital continue to produce low-skilled workers with minimal pay thus decreasing the incentive to hone and advance their skills (p. 2). At the same time, there are not enough skill-intensive jobs which pay higher salaries, which means many Filipino workers are bound to take on low-skilled jobs that do not pay much. Simply put, unemployment in the Philippines is rooted in little to no investments in human capital and little to no job opportunities that pay above minimum wage. Contractualization is still practiced as well in many workplaces despite legislation prohibiting it, causing many workers to be exploited by employers, laid off unreasonably, and deprived of regular employment benefits.

Due to these issues in the employment system, millions of Filipino families are struggling to make ends meet and social protection measures are mostly distributed unequally. Neoliberal policies exacerbate these conditions by privatizing basic needs. This increases their costs and, by deregulating the market and lessening state intervention, local production loses to its foreign counterparts (Watson, 2021).

Alongside these issues, indigenous groups are continually displaced from their ancestral lands due to heightened militarization and land-grabbing by foreign corporations. Many families in urban cities are homeless or living impermanently, moving from area to area as they are forced out with demolition threats in order for private condominiums, buildings, malls, etc. to be built. These consequences of a growing neoliberal market coupled with authoritarian rule can only bring about unforgiving conditions for many which may become even more dire in the future. In summary:

> It is an eclectic mix of market reform and state intervention that favours certain domestic firms. It is a specific form of authoritarian neoliberalism that—in contrast to the governance reform agenda—provides a dose of state intervention with deepening market reform and with a strong nationalist and religious hue. (Jayasuriya, 2020, p. 51)

When the pandemic came, these inequality issues were exacerbated. These structures that were flawed and monopolistic from the beginning were highlighted even more as they failed to mitigate the sharp increase in unemployment, hunger, and need for healthcare. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) was quick to launch the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) in multiple regions as part of the provisions of the Bayanihan to Heal as One law (Bisenio, 2020). However, these emergency cash grants proved to be inadequate as the pandemic and lockdowns persisted. Public transportation drivers could not work, street vendors were removed from their usual stations as part of social distancing measures, service industries had to lay off their employees, and those who could not transition their work to online platforms were left behind. These emergency cash grants were not even able to reach the reported goal of providing for roughly 18 million families (Bisenio, 2020). It was also predicted that in 2022, the unemployment rate would still be high, at about 6.7% to 7.6% (Nicolas, 2021). As of this writing, the unemployment rate declined to 4.5% in October 2022 which was attributed to the reopening of businesses and schools (National Economic and Development Authority, 2022).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic is not over yet. In a series of unjust policies that infringe on human rights and impoverish the masses further, accompanied by aggressive counter-insurgency tactics and indignities against opposing officials, Duterte has made it clear that his authoritarian rule is well on its way to staying more permanently. As Bello (2017) explains:

> This spells great danger for Philippine democracy, since Duterte will find that, to pursue his authoritarian project amidst rising opposition, he will have to resort to a curtailment of civil liberties and other repressive decrees. This will not be difficult to do since he has already committed the maximum violation of liberal democracy, the taking without due process of over 7000 lives, so that curtailment of civil liberties and declaring a dictatorship can be carried out as "mopping-up operations." (p. 43)

What can be done to begin reversing the damage from the first two years of the pandemic is to redirect funds from the national budget to public healthcare and widespread economic aid for Filipino families. However, this has not come into fruition despite proposals from the Department of Health (Buan, 2021) and the intense lobbying to pass the Bayanihan 3 bill that prioritizes increasing the financial aid allotted for vulnerable sectors (Suzara et al., 2021). These provisions have yet to be considered as a priority, given the excessive spending on counter-insurgency tactics such as increasing the budget of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) (Ramos, 2021). This has only led to baseless red-tagging and intimidation of progressive organizations, as well as continuing the Build Build Build program—Duterte's ambitious infrastructure project that would only benefit foreign investors and the country's own elites and oligarchs (Guzman, 2021).

The Duterte administration exploited this public health crisis to forward his fascist and authoritarian rule. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the causality between neoliberal policies and the worsening economic inequality in the country and "societies with higher levels of economic inequality are concomitantly more hierarchical, making experiences that reinforce vertical notions of authority more common and so authoritarianism more widespread" (Solt, 2012, p. 704). Public health is therefore political. Zmigrod et al. (2021) states in their study that "public and personal health can therefore have fundamental repercussions for regional politics, decision-making, and governance" (p. 466). Therefore, it is important to not separate the personal and political, rather acknowledge the ways in which both intersect and where the true problems lie (Mullaly, 1997). For the Philippines, the feudal model of land ownership that began during the Spanish colonization was retained, fostering "a massively unequal class system" (Simon, 2020, p. 108). The arrival of imperialism and neoliberalism later on, tacitly supported by the state, further aggravated the situation of the Filipinos but also bolstered progressive social movements and the resistance against oppressive powers.

Through a structural social work lens, oppressive structures are not ones to repair and mend but rather ones that must be abolished entirely. Many of these progressive social movements move toward this goal, championing radical approaches that evoke consciousness raising through public protests that bring to light the kind of restructuring the country gravely needs. Consciousness raising is a crucial aspect in structural social work as it is what leads to genuine solidarity with oppressed groups. Existing structures that continue to widen gaps of inequality are able to advance and persist due to proliferating hegemonic beliefs that culturally

alter the perceptions of society towards social classes and inequality. This hegemony that is centered on capitalist structures can be described as [a] "seamless cloth [that] covers all the contradictions and gaps in capitalist society, making glaring conditions seem like rational, natural occurrences understandable and agreeable to everyone" (Siebers, 2008, as cited in Chan, 2018, p. 28). Duterte, for instance, was able to sway the public into fostering anti-poor sentiments beginning with his war on drugs. It was able to cement further authoritarian policies as many have come to perceive the poor as problem areas of the country, thus needing what many international organizations have dubbed "'de facto programme of social cleansing,' and a 'war on the poor'" (Hadro, 2017, as cited in Ramos, 2020, p. 488).

The role of social workers then is hinged on genuine emancipation from these oppressive structures by way of dismantling them. This means standing in solidarity with oppressed groups (Chan, 2018), working in alliance with progressive movements (Madland, 2020), and undertaking continuous consciousness raising both in society and within social work agencies. The latter is crucial as bureaucratic management and the traditional processes in social work have laid the substantial groundwork in the practice, thereby making this part of the discipline for a significant amount of time. In the structural social work approach, social workers are called to move past traditional practices that were solely focused on individual problems to a more radical stance that champions structural changes, even if it means a restructuring of how social work agencies operate and distribute social services from now on.

> If social workers and managers of social service agencies become conscious and critical of themselves as actors in this struggle, they can share their awareness and analysis with their clients, and they can resist treating the problems of individual clients as only private troubles rather than systemic dysfunctions. (Hardcastle, 2011, p. 55)

The economic structures that have left Filipino workers in inhumane working conditions and the political climate that is deeply entrenched in authoritarian rule have undoubtedly impoverished the country further. And alongside a raging pandemic, a descent into far worse conditions can befall the Philippines. Without this strong radical stance to abolish these structures, social work will become a center for band-aid solutions—offering temporary fixes for symptoms of a much larger crisis. To alleviate the country's present issues, social workers must work and build alliances with grassroots movements to put forward their demands and resolutions. The structural social work approach is strengths-based (Chan, 2018) and, because of that, communities, labor unions, movements, and other mass-lead coalitions must be put at the forefront of these structural changes. They lead this change and lead other service practitioners such as social workers as to how they can all work together politically, economically, and culturally in creating more people-oriented systems.

By viewing the current situation of the country through a structural social work lens, a social worker's duty to serve the people rests on an uncompromising stand against authoritarian regimes—a staunch and unwavering opposition alongside the masses. Shoulder to shoulder with the people, social workers should be at the frontlines of the struggle towards universal health care, free education, increased minimum wages, genuine agrarian reform, and access to basic social services and opportunities. Moving forward calls for critical class analysis that allows social workers to distinguish oppressive systems, quash them, and provide "an alternative system of politics and welfare" that positions the needs and welfare of the masses first (Chan,

2018). In the long run, there will be no reforms powerful enough to strike a balance between authoritarianism and democracy, as the former directly contradicts the principles of the latter. A core principle in social work is social justice (NASW, n.d.) and therefore social workers should take "a strong value position on systemic discrimination" (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020). They must be at the side of the people at all times.

Conclusion

Authoritarianism has bred intolerance towards those of lower classes and marginalized groups as though they, rather than the structures that preserve and exacerbate inequality, are the root causes of the country's social issues. While it had been easy for the state to subject them to cruel, discriminatory, and inhumane policies, the situation with the pandemic is no better than when it started. When authoritarian leaders and elites are able to hegemonize a myopic view that frames marginalized groups as the root problems of society, rather than the structures that have marginalized them in the first place, oppression will continue and inevitably worsen—with homelessness, starvation, unemployment, and poverty reaching exponential heights in the near future.

After almost two years of living in a pandemic under the Duterte administration, it has become clear that the authoritarian rule he began his regime with can take an even more despotic form. Resorting to violence and anti-poor policies has been to the country's detriment, not the masses themselves who he has needlessly neglected, exploited, and even unjustifiably tagged as terrorists. As the country continues to face and manage the impact of the pandemic on the public health sector, the economy, and employment, the need for conformity and obedience has been underhandedly bargained for the dispossession of our individual freedoms. Fear, distrust, and anxiety have ultimately been exploited to reinforce an oppressive, authoritarian rule. As Hamid (2020) states, "After all, that's the implicit social contract imposed upon citizen-subjects: they may have to forego their freedom, but at least they get something in return" (para. 12).

Despite all these, there is hope to be had. A tyrannical government, without meaning to, becomes the greatest push for the people to build a forceful solidarity against all kinds of oppression. The masses, despite at some point being immobilized by their current material conditions and the dominant hegemony that acquiesced them to such (Chan, 2018), will inevitably gain "critical consciousness" to which Paulo Freire believed to be how the people will come to recognize and then challenge the structures that oppress them (Hick & Murray, 2009, p. 94). Social workers are called to focus now on the praxis, bringing to life the theoretical work and the body of knowledge that had been cultivated under the profession (Hick & Murray, 2009; Chan, 2018).

The pandemic had struck fear and brought irreversible damage to the country. Globally, authoritarian rule swept into many nations and took advantage of the situation to further suppress the masses' needs and neglect their welfare, particularly those in marginalized groups. However, authoritarianism did not appear solely as a result of the pandemic. Its oppressive systems have long been felt by the indigenous peoples whenever their ancestral lands are stolen from them, by street vendors, minimum wage workers, and the urban poor who are continuously alienated and treated inhumanely, by women who have yet to possess their own bodily autonomy, and by activists and revolutionaries whose deaths are debased as nothing more than military trophies. If there was anything to learn from the Philippines' history of authoritarianism, it is that the

masses will continue to repudiate authoritarian rule, no matter how hard dictators and fascist leaders try to sunder their united fronts. The weakening of democracy seems to be the clamor of the elites and authoritarian administrations, but the unwavering resistance of the masses has yet to be unmoored.

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