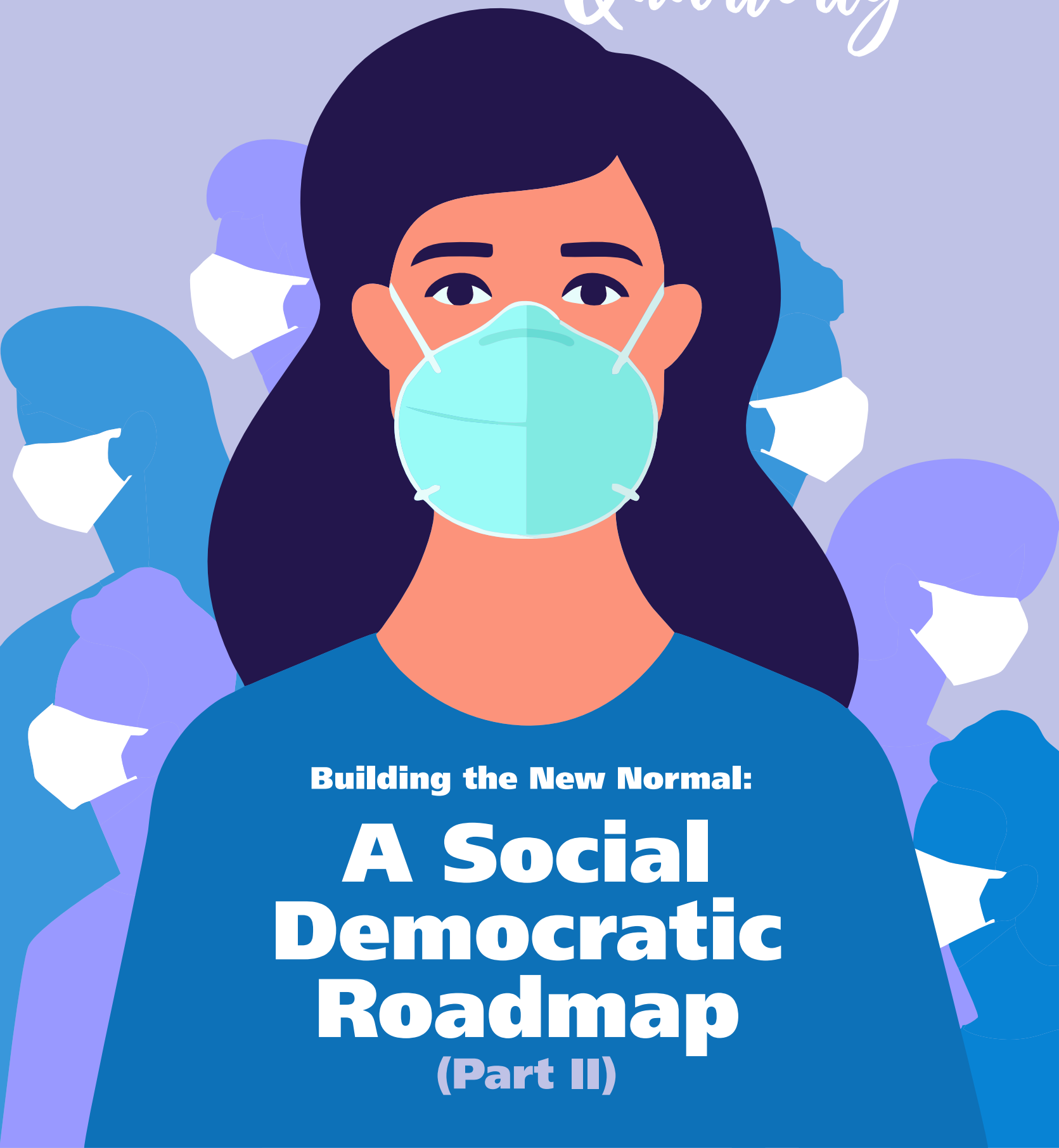


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Building the New Normal:

A Social Democratic Roadmap (Part II)

Building the New Normal: A Social Democratic Roadmap (Part II)

This latest issue of the *Socdem Asia Quarterly* appears a year after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic because of its “alarming levels of spread and severity.” Since then, the virus has infected more than 123 million people, and has claimed the lives of nearly 3 million individuals. But apart from its horrific death toll, the social consequences of the disease are also equally catastrophic—devastating even the strongest economies, heightening global inequality and plunging millions of people into ever deepening poverty.

In his July 18 Nelson Mandela Lecture, United Nations Secretary General António Guterres stated that “the pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of our world” since humanity’s progress in “eradicating poverty and narrowing inequality have been set back years, in a matter of months.” In fact, the UN’s own estimates suggest that 400 million people from the developing world now form part of the “new poor,” with global poverty shifting towards South and East Asia.

Journalist Fareed Zakaria offers an equally grim prognosis, warning that COVID-19 will likely reverse a quarter of a century of economic gains and “return us to a world of great and widening global inequality.” In the previous year alone, the global economy shrank by 4.3%, thereby increasing the wealth gap between the rich and the poor. The pandemic’s economic effects are most strongly felt by those from the developing world, with their limited industrial base and fragile health systems. Because of the sheer disparity in resources, the deep divide between the Global North and the Global South has now become even more abysmal.

Nothing highlights this problem better than how the global supply of vaccines is currently being distributed. In a February 2 article, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus admitted that “rich countries with just 16 percent of the world’s population have bought up 60 percent of the world’s vaccine supply,” even as lower-income countries are “struggling to purchase enough doses to cover just 20 percent

of the population.” Despite his urgent appeal to strengthen “the international community’s ability to stop COVID-19,” it is unlikely that the WHO can immediately reverse the ongoing trend.

This, of course, is hardly surprising, for as David Harvey avers, our existing economic system “has tended throughout its history to produce ever-greater levels of inequality.” Christina Sathyamala, a physician working for the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), also made a similar observation, stating that “in the context of COVID-19, the virus and capitalism have shown a remarkable propensity to nurture and cohabit as intimate bedfellows.”

Fortunately for us, we can always draw inspiration from Indian independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru. “Crises,” he noticed, “have at least this advantage, that they force us to think.” This latest issue of the *Quarterly* illustrates what Pandit Nehru had in mind. The articles found in these pages not only describe how progressives are

responding to the pandemic; they also examine how the world can be reshaped based on the principles of freedom, justice and solidarity. This present edition, therefore, continues the conversation that the *Quarterly* had begun in its previous issue—that of developing a roadmap towards a new social democratic normal.

We begin our issue with a think-piece from Filipino youth activist Justine Balane, which argues that the Philippine government's "priorities around a new normal are misaligned" since tax cuts are being given to corporate elites even as their workers "went on for months without aid." Asserting that the "new normal should not be a 'neolib' normal," Balane cites the examples of India, Hawaii, Spain and New Zealand to prove that ordinary workers are capable of self-management "through principles of community wealth-building."

This aversion for market-led solutions is also shared by Faiz Mustafa who is pushing for "more equitable, redistributive taxation and welfare policies." A member of Malaysia's Democratic Action Party (DAP), Faiz maintains that "the current crisis bares clear the flaws of the previous neoliberal policies," as well as the need to "push the government to increase public expenditure, especially in the health sector."

The ill effects of neoliberalism are strongly felt in Nepal where the private sector has considerable presence in the country's healthcare system. In his article, journalist Kamal Dev Bhattarai wrote that there is now a growing demand for greater public investment in health services, after several private hospitals refused admitting patients with corona-like symptoms.

A similar experience has also been observed in Indonesia where the government is now undertaking far-reaching reforms by providing citizens with healthcare insurance. According to Martin Manurung, a member of the Indonesian

parliament, the pandemic has shown that "the market is not enough" and that a more interventionist state is required to adequately address the crisis. At the same time, the Jokowi administration, Manurung adds, has rolled out an ambitious stimulus program to create jobs, revive the country's industries, and "prevent the health crisis from becoming an economic crisis."

Despite our contributors' unique experiences, they all agree that democratic governments are in the best position to address the pandemic. This is underscored in Cecilia Lero's comparative study of Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte, and the United States under Donald Trump. Though these three leaders

represent "the most emblematic cases of the current global wave of authoritarian populism," Lero observes that they all "failed to adequately ameliorate the pandemic's devastating effects on vulnerable populations, especially the poor."

This issue of the *Quarterly* is dedicated to the brave men and women who risking their lives to combat the pandemic. We also offer our thanks to all our readers who have been with us for the past eight years. Rest assured that Socdem Asia will not cease in providing you with the most cogent analyses on issues affecting the region, albeit in a much-improved form. This is our pledge and our mission.

See you all soon.



Image: www.bangkokpost.com

Socdem Asia Quarterly is published by the Network for Social Democracy in Asia (Socdem Asia) to share perspectives and analyses from leading social democrats from across the Asian region and the rest of the world.



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By: Justine Balane

The New Normal Shouldn't Be a “Neolib” Normal

2020 was a fever dream for most of us. It exposed the fact that in a crisis, we are not all on the same boat.

For daily wage-earners in the informal economy, most of whom are women, the effects of the lockdown were carried on their backs. They went on for months without aid and when it did arrive, it wasn't enough to feed a family of five until the next round came. They were told to work hard and find other ways to earn but when they did, they were locked up for going out past the curfew and without a quarantine pass.

The deadly fusion of neoliberalism and authoritarianism in our state is the worker's worst nightmare; it blames you for your empty stomach and punishes you when you want to do something about it.

The story is different for the elites. When operations are suspended, big corporations are given a free hand to violate labor rights. This was the case of a Coca-Cola plant in Pampanga, a province located an hour away from the Philippine capital of Manila, where unionists were dismissed and accused of economic sabotage for

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The deadly fusion of neoliberalism and authoritarianism in our state is the worker's worst nightmare; it blames you for your empty stomach and punishes you when you want to do something about it.

Image: www.facebook.com/SaveCokeWorkers



taking care of fellow worried workers. Protection in the workplace are lax with the country's Department of Labor and Employment issuing a set of guidelines in May without sanctions to companies that fail to provide safety for their workers. Immediately after operations had resumed, more than 400 workers in a construction site in Metro Manila tested positive for the virus.

While some farmers were prevented from going out in the field to tend to their crops, multinational corporations brought out their equipment and continued their plunder of our natural resources while the communities were in lockdown. In April, mining giant OceanaGold exploited the lockdown and dispersed a people's barricade in Nueva Vizcaya, a province 290 kilometers north of Manila. The mining company's operations were endorsed by President Rodrigo Duterte who allowed the entry of fuel tankers in the mining site, despite the expiration of their permit to operate.

New Normal

It was apparent to everyone that old systems just won't work while the virus is on a rampage. Society needs new ways to allow people to work, buy food, and go across provinces without spreading the risks. The consensus is on building a new normal. But what would it look like?

So far, the priorities around a new normal are misaligned. A bill mandating a new way of greeting people in public places passed faster than a bill that would have provided billions of wage subsidies to millions of workers. On public safety, the responsibility is passed on to the individual to wear masks and keep distance from other people. But the failures in planning for public spaces and transportation make congested trains and buses a viral breeding ground. Infrastructure for alternative transportation such as bike lanes weren't built fast enough that bikers had to improvise demarcation lines with orange water bottles.



Image: news.abs-cbn.com

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Bold solutions are needed to upend the worst economic crisis in 30 years. New economic principles should be drawn around the culture of cooperation and collective care.

The government's priorities include losing ₱625 billion (US\$12.5 billion) in revenues by lowering corporate income taxes, a disaster given the massive spending needed to create jobs and fund social services. The government is under the illusion that cutting taxes would help small enterprises when in fact big companies stand to benefit the most.

There was nothing new with the new normal. The neoliberals in government just dusted off their old position papers and tweaked a few phrases to cloak their policies in the name of recovery. Their plans for a new normal are still bound by the same principles of individualism, theft of public wealth for private gain, and the lawlessness of deregulation. This roadmap is a lonely slope that could lead us to more crises.

Bold Solutions Needed

If the lockdown taught us anything, it's the working people who create wealth but have little control over it. Whereas corporate managers before would bend over backwards to label these workers as “unskilled” or “inessential” to justify low wages, big businesses pleaded for the return of grocery clerks, construction workers, and other essential workers to reopen the economy.

Bold solutions are needed to upend the worst economic crisis in 30 years. New economic principles should be drawn around the culture of cooperation and collective care.

We can start by rethinking how companies are set up.

Workplaces that are set up like mini-dictatorships, as economist Richard Wolff would describe it, where the fate of thousands of workers are dictated by a small group of managers, should be fundamentally changed.

Worker-owned-and-managed cooperatives have better responded to the needs of their workers during the pandemic. In India, members of the SEWA Cooperative Federation were provided with health kits, food, and cash aid at the height of the sudden lockdown. They were able to document the issues of their member organizations transparently, allowing for a better community response.

Cooperatives are also better poised to help the community. Mondragon, one of the most prominent success stories of cooperativism, was able to produce

over 60 million masks through one of its cooperatives to strengthen Spain's supply of protective equipment.

In the Philippines, the government lost more than ₱1 billion (US\$20 million) from overpriced PPEs imported from Chinese companies. This could have been averted if the government provided support to local industries through principles of community wealth-building. After all, the country still has an active garment and textile industry that could have benefited from the government's massive emergency funds. It was also a lost opportunity to curb unemployment as 27 million Filipinos lost their jobs during the lockdown.

Community wealth-building is an economic model designed to circulate state investments back to local

industries and programs, instead of funneling it to big multinational suppliers. In Spain, Magnet Coop together with the local government, created a digital market that helps local businesses sell goods at a price partially covered by the government. This ensures that public funds for COVID directly help local enterprises and the workers.

The beauty of a cooperative system to respond to a crisis is better explained by Xabier Igartua, a member of the Oñati town council, where Magnet Coop is located.

“Because we are a co-operative we can make these fast adaptations while looking after each other. We work less but we maintain a base level income for everyone and maintain jobs,” he said in his interview with OpenDemocracy.

Community wealth-building is an economic model designed to circulate state investments back to local industries and programs, instead of funneling it to big multinational suppliers.

Image: www.facebook.com/JamaMapunSLT



A better normal will also require a rethinking on social spending and aid. The Philippines' Department of Finance tightened its grip on the people's purse even as hunger and joblessness rose during the pandemic. It's a basic economic principle that encouraging more people to spend—and providing them the cash for spending—helps the economy in the long run.

The government jumped the gun when it expects to kickstart the economy, relying on foreign investors and infrastructure spending, when the health, safety and confidence of its own people are still low.

The world can learn from Hawaii's unapologetically feminist recovery plan that seeks to provide a universal basic income and a US\$25 minimum wage for single mothers, among other bold plans. They also geared for massive spending on maternal health services and subsidized child-care for women workers.

The New Zealand Labour Party headed by Jacinda Ardern is investing in a program that would provide 11,000 jobs across the Aotearoa community as part of their COVID-19 recovery plan. This program called Jobs for Nature will address issues around employment through nature conservation programs. If replicated on a massive scale, it is akin to the Green New Deal proposal where state investment is provided to programs that create jobs and mobilize millions to end the climate crisis.

It's Possible

This isn't a wish-list. These are solutions that are already taking root in local communities everywhere in the world. But more than that, this could be our lifeboat away from future crises brought out by the pandemic and the deteriorating planet.

The first step away from the lonely slope of a neoliberal normal is to shift the frame of what is possible.

Before the pandemic, we wouldn't have imagined for labor and business groups to come together to pressure the government for more wage subsidies and to ease premium hikes in social benefits. We wouldn't have imagined that key cities will provide cash aid and food packs to include

households with same-sex partners. These are events that didn't emerge out of the goodwill of leaders. It required years of efforts to push the frame away from a selfish culture and into a more caring, responsive community.

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The first step away from the lonely slope of a neoliberal normal is to shift the frame of what is possible.

Image: <https://think.ing.com>



By: Faiz Mustafa

Power Grab and COVID-19 in Malaysia

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The Pakatan Harapan government collapsed with Mahathir's resignation as Prime Minister.

Image: www.cnn.com



Background

As COVID-19 was breaking out in Wuhan in February 2020, Malaysia was in a period of political instability, with tensions building up in the governing *Pakatan Harapan* (Coalition of Hope, PH) coalition.¹ *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (People's Justice Party, PRK), the then largest component party of PH, was seen as putting pressure on the incumbent Prime Minister, Mahathir Muhammad, to put a fixed date for the transition of power as agreed upon during the formation of *Pakatan Harapan*. This created discontent within *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (Malaysian United Indigenous Party, PPBM), headed by Mahathir.

By the end of February, the PH government collapsed with Mahathir's resignation as Prime Minister and the withdrawal of PPBM from *Pakatan Harapan*. A new *Perikatan Nasional* (National Alliance, PN) government was sworn

¹ *Pakatan Harapan* came to power in May 2018 after the 14th Malaysian general elections—the editor.

in by March, led by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin from PPBM, and supported by *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS), United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), *Gabungan Parti Sarawak* (a grouping of Sarawak regional parties that left the former ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional* after the 14th general elections), and a few other regional parties from Sabah.

Due to their similar foundational ideology that is based on the idea of ethnic Malay supremacy, PPBM and UMNO (the two biggest component parties of PN) find it hard to work together. The two parties overlap so much since they are both targeting the same section of the electorate. Paired with the fact that the PN government does not enjoy any comfortable majority in Parliament (with only 113 out of a total 222 MPs), Malaysia now has a very tumultuous government.

Political Instability

On October 2, 2020, Liew Vui Keong, a member of parliament (MP) from *Parti Warisan Sabah* (Sabah Heritage Party) who represented the constituency of Batu Sapi, died due to lung failure. A month later, on November 16, the MP for Gerik, Hasbullah Osman of UMNO, succumbed to heart attack. These developments left the ruling government with a razor-thin majority, with only 112 MPs supporting the government against 108 in the opposition bench. A localized form of state of emergency was declared to suspend the constitutional requirement for an election to be done within 60 days of a seat being vacated.

Because of its slim majority, the PPBM-led government was forced to give concessions to UMNO in order to pass the 2021 Budget. It should be

noted that while the government bench consists of 112 MPs, one member of parliament, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah from UMNO publicly declared that he will be abstaining from voting for the budget and urged other UMNO MPs to do so, believing that the budget will not help people face the economic crisis that is being brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is believed that this backbenchers' revolt was meant to pressure the government to halt the prosecution of senior UMNO MPs, most notably the party's president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and the former Prime Minister Najib Razak, for charges relating to breach of trust, among others. But this call by Tengku Razaleigh was ignored by most UMNO MPs after the government accepted Najib's demand to allow people to tap into their retirement savings in the Employees' Provident Fund.

The process of passing the budget caused anxiety within the government that it even tried to declare a state of emergency, in order to avoid having to go through the Parliament. Fortunately, this request for a state of emergency was rejected by the King, and instead urged all political parties to work together to ensure the passage of the budget. Despite some resistance in Parliament and with a few amendments, the government managed to pass the budget through all three readings.

Despite passing the budget which is claimed to be the biggest in the nation's history,² UMNO is still restless with the prosecution of its leaders. In January, most of UMNO's divisional branches issued statements urging the party to leave *Perikatan Nasional* and put pressure on their MPs to withdraw their support from

the government. This led to two more MPs from UMNO—Ahmad Jazlan Yaakub of Machang and Nazri Aziz of Padang Rengas—publicly announcing their withdrawal from the ruling coalition, leaving the government (in theory) with 109 MPs and possibly 111 in the opposition.

Emergency

As all these were happening, the country was recording an increasing number of COVID-19 cases. On December 24, Malaysia breached the 100,000 mark, and by January 10, the country was seeing a daily average of 2,416 new cases. The government responded by announcing that it will re-implement the Movement Control Order (MCO)³ in order to try to bring down the new cases figure by January 13. On January 11, the Prime Minister appeared on a live telecast, announcing to the nation that the King had given consent for a state of emergency to be declared and the Proclamation of Emergency was gazetted on January 14, applied retroactively from January 11.

This proclamation (which is to last until August 1, 2021 or until the Emergency Proclamation is lifted on a much earlier date) would, in effect, suspend Parliament and all state legislatures, give police powers to the military, and restrict legal recourse, among other things. The proclamation also specifically stated that the current federal and state governments will continue to hold executive power and the government may issue regulations that are necessary for the purpose of enacting the Emergency Ordinance.

The slim majority of the government brings instability, but it also brings a new space for inter-coalitional cooperation between the parties in the government and the parties in the

² It is important to note that most of the previous budgets were bigger than the one before it—*Faiz Mustafa*.

³ The Movement Control Order (*Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan*) is a lockdown measure that was first imposed by the Malaysian government on March 18, 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19—the editor.

opposition. Previously, in Malaysian politics, the government coalition and its component parties tended to be hostile towards the opposition bloc. The uncertainty, weakness, and distrust within the ruling coalition allows for intra-coalition competition, which can be seen in how some UMNO leaders echo the view of *Pakatan Harapan* leaders on certain issues that they previously rarely paid attention to.

Opportunity

While it is wise for social democrats to continue to be cautious when dealing with right-wing politicians from the opposite aisle (as the cooperation showed might simply just be an opportunistic token from them to spite their internal enemy), we should not waste such opportunity away. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it an economic crisis that directly and indirectly affects the lives of many Malaysians, even as the current unstable ruling coalition fails to present a clear direction and ideology for the people. This fact presents an opportunity for social democrats in Malaysia to push progressive ideas and agenda forward.

Social democratic reforms in this country have always been plagued by racist identity politics. Ideas about bringing a fairer, more equitable society has always been labelled as an attempt to challenge the constitutional privilege of the *bumiputra*.⁴ Government aid tends to be formulated along racial lines and so do affirmative actions. But this pandemic presents us with a crisis that affects all Malaysians equally and shows that all Malaysians require help from the government to survive. Now is the perfect time for social democrats to push for an equitable, just, and fair policy to help the people—policies that go beyond the country's racist past, so that we can slowly embrace a social democratic future.



Image: www.straitstimes.com

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Now is the perfect time for social democrats to push for an equitable, just, and fair policy to help the people—policies that go beyond the country's racist past, so that we can slowly embrace a social democratic future.

Because the income of people is greatly affected, their ability to provide for themselves and their family are thus affected too. To address this challenge, social democrats should push for more equitable, redistributive taxation and welfare policies. The current crisis bares clear the flaws of the previous

neoliberal policies of the Thatcherist (Mahathirist, within the Malaysian context) era, in pursuit of industrialization at all cost, while suppressing wages and labor rights in the country. More and more people are also now realizing how inadequate is country's welfare and safety net system.

⁴The term *bumiputra*, which literally means “son of the land,” refers to Malaysia's ethnic Malays—the editor.

The housing crisis in the country is also further aggravated by the pandemic. Previously, the lack of tenant's protection seems to be tolerated as renters typically are able to move from one place to another. But with the pandemic, with more and more Malaysians seeing a reduction or loss of their income, they are vulnerable to evictions. Despite the government putting in a loan moratorium last year, it is not clear how much of this moratorium

translates into helping renters. As more and more Malaysians face this problem, it is a good time to push for a rental regulation act, perhaps as part of a bigger plan, to avoid the total collapse of the housing market.

The economic crisis brought by COVID-19 also presents us with an opportunity to break away from the obsession with having a budget surplus. Social democrats in the country should push the government

to increase public expenditure, especially in the healthcare sector that has always been strained for so long. With the pandemic quite close to bringing the public healthcare system to its knees, we should demand that the government start increasing the capacity and manpower of the public healthcare system. With unemployment rising, this is a good way to absorb the excess manpower that is now available.

The Malaysian civil service has always been criticized as being bloated and overmanned. Now is the perfect time to push for its reform. The criticism, while not being unsubstantiated, is not totally fair. There are parts of the civil service that are indeed too big, but there are also parts of it that are sorely lacking, such as the public healthcare system, the public school system, and social welfare workers. Social democrats in Malaysia should push so that the civil service is appropriately reorganized to put emphasis on providing public service first and bureaucracy second. This is also a good time to reform the old affirmative action policies and outdated practice in recruitment as there is a great need for an increased manpower capacity.

The emergency proclamation brought with it some worries about the erosion of civil rights in the country. Previous emergencies were enacted under the hegemony of the *Barisan Nasional* government, which did not care much about civil rights. But the emergency proclamation that we have today brings new allies for social democrats, who are equally worried about themselves and can be capitalized to safeguard basic civil liberties and human rights in the country.

A weak, incompetent government during a crisis presents us with an opportunity to pursue social democratic ideas to the voters and to work with new allies. It is up to us whether we will make use of it or waste it away.

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A weak, incompetent government during a crisis presents us with an opportunity to pursue social democratic ideas to the voters and to work with new allies. It is up to us whether we will make use of it or waste it away.

Image: www.aljazeera.com



By: Kamal Dev Bhattarai

Nepal's Response to COVID-19

Nepal was the first South Asian country¹ to report the deadly COVID-19 disease. The first case of the virus was reported on January 24, while the second was reported only in the third week² of March. The long gap between the first and second cases meant that Nepal had sufficient time to make necessary preparations to contain the spread of the virus.

But Nepal only started to take strategic measures after the surge of cases in India and the Gulf countries. Due to an open and porous border, there was a high risk of transmission from India to Nepal. Additionally, with the outbreak in the Gulf countries, large numbers of migrant workers and students started to return home. With a warning from the World Health Organization (WHO) that Nepal was under high-risk of outbreak of the virus, together with the increased movement of people from India and increased domestic

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Nepal only started to take strategic measures after the surge of cases in India and the Gulf countries.

Image: kathmandupost.com



¹ Zhou, Cissy (2020). “China Coronavirus: Nepal Reports First Case of Infection as Virus Reaches South Asia.” *South China Morning Post*. January 25. Retrieved from: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3047625/china-coronavirus-nepal-reports-first-case-infection-virus>.

² Dhakal, Sabitri (2020). “Nepal Confirms Second COVID-9 Case.” *The Himalayan Times*. March 24. Retrieved from: <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/nepal-confirms-second-covid-19-case>.

pressure to take necessary measures, the Nepali government started to act. Nepal, sandwiched between two Asian giants, has an open border with India but its border with China is restricted and the movement of people is very minimal.

Strategic Measures Taken to Curb the Virus

First, international flights were banned from March 22,³ followed by a decision to close international borders with India and China. A week earlier, Nepal had made it mandatory for all foreign and Nepali nationals entering the country to stay in self-quarantine for 14 days. Similarly, long-distance domestic travel was banned. Before that, universities and schools were closed, and people were urged to avoid crowded places and stay home as much as possible.

Realizing that these measures were not sufficient to contain the spread of the virus, a nationwide lockdown⁴ was implemented, beginning on March 24. Only essential services were allowed to function, and the movement of people were restricted. But people kept going to and forth through the Nepal-India border. Thousands of Nepali citizens had arrived at the border from Indian cities with hopes of entering their country.

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Despite the strategic measures taken by the government, there were bottlenecks which contributed to the spread of the virus.

The government ordered those returning from India to undergo home quarantine. Nepal also talked with India to manage the thousands of migrant workers who wanted to come home. Later, the two countries agreed to take care and feed⁵ each other's citizens so that people could stay where they were, but this agreement was not effective. Despite the border shutdown, hundreds of Nepalis returned home. It turned out that some of them were already infected, which spiked up infections in bordering districts. The government ensured the supply of daily essentials during the lockdown. But the government wasted the time it had to make preparations to contain COVID-19. The number of

infected people increased substantially after one and a half months of lockdown.

Bottlenecks

Despite the strategic measures taken by the government, there were bottlenecks which contributed to the spread of the virus. First, there was a lack of robust federal structures to deal with the virus. The previous centralized structures have crumbled, and new ones are yet to be built. There was lack of coordination among the three tiers of government: federal, provincial, and local. There was also no proper chain of command to mobilize health workers during the crisis.

Image: www.newindianexpress.com



³ Nepal, Roshan S. (2020). "Lockdown Extended Til April 7 Midnight." *The Himalayan Times*. March 30. Retrieved from: <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/lockdown-extended-till-april-7/>.

⁴ Pradhan, Tika R. (2020). "Nepal Goes Under Lockdown for a Week Starting 6am Tuesday." *The Kathmandu Post*. March 23. Retrieved from: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/03/23/nepal-goes-under-lockdown-for-a-week-starting-6am-tuesday>.

⁵ Giri, Anil (2020). "Nepal and India Agree to Take Care of and Feed Each Other's Citizens Stranded on the Border: Crossings to Remain Closed." *The Kathmandu Post*. March 31. Retrieved from: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/03/31/nepal-and-india-agree-to-take-care-of-and-feed-each-other-s-citizens-stranded-on-the-border-crossings-to-remain-closed>.

Another bottleneck has been centralized hospitals. Both private and government hospitals are centralized either in the capital or in major cities. People in the peripheries have to travel long distances for medical care. Government authorities too have faced difficulties in bringing coronavirus patients to hospitals from remote areas. Due to the restriction of movement, people have been deprived of other basic health services. There have been instances of deaths of patients presenting themselves with corona-like symptoms after private hospitals refused to admit them.

The callous behavior of private hospitals and clinics during the coronavirus pandemic has sparked public criticism, and there are calls for a revision of the country's three-decade-old health policy. Nepal opened its door for private investment in the health sector along with the economic liberalization of the 1990s. The National Health Policy 1990 strengthened the role of the private sector, which led to the opening of private hospitals and other health-related services. The private sector is now involved in two areas of healthcare: first as service providers, and second as producers of medicines and equipment.

There are growing voices that the government should increase its investment and minimize the role of the private sector in healthcare. In the past three decades, there has been insufficient investment and effort in improving the state of government hospitals and in decentralizing them. Right now, they are desperately short of vital staff and equipment and are disproportionately concentrated in urban pockets. This fact has been acutely exposed during this pandemic. On the other hand, both private and government hospitals are desperately short of ICU beds and ventilators.

There was a painful delay in purchasing test kits and medical equipment. Due to the low number of testing, government authorities were unable to know the actual situation of COVID-19. So, the only viable option left to the government to stop the spread of the virus was to impose a lockdown. Medical doctors, nurses, and other frontline health workers faced shortages of gloves, medical masks, respirators, goggles, face shields, gowns, and aprons. On March 29, the Cabinet instructed the Nepali Army to initiate government-to-government (G2G) purchase of test kits and equipment to fast track the process. The army explored options with China, India, Israel, Singapore, and South Korea. It decided to purchase from China. But the delivery was delayed and it took almost two months for the first lot to arrive from China.

Despite several weaknesses at the central level, some local government units did a good job in containing the

spread of the virus in their respective areas. These units constructed quarantine facilities and temporary hospitals overnight. They also closely monitored the movement of people and kept records of those coming from abroad before and after the outbreak of COVID-19. These local units played a vital role in creating public awareness about the virus. Nepal had adopted a federal set up with three tiers of government along with the promulgation of its constitution in 2015.

COVID-19 Severely Affects the Economy

The pandemic has badly affected the country's economy and it is not sure how long the virus will stay. The World Bank, in its *South Asia Economic Focus* report⁶ released in April 2020, projected Nepal's growth rate to be in the range of 1.5% to 2.8% in the current fiscal year, followed by 1.4% to 2.9% in 2020-2021 and 2.7% to 3.6% in 2021-2022.

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The pandemic has badly affected the country's economy and it is not sure how long the virus will stay.

Image: asiafoundation.org



⁶ World Bank (2020). *The Cursed Blessing of Public Banks: South Asia Economic Focus* (Spring). Washington, DC.



Image: thewire.in

The COVID-19 is sure to have political, social and economic ramifications.

Tourism—the country's major foreign exchange-earner—employs half-a-million people who are now on the verge of losing their jobs. The tourism sector's contribution to Nepal's national economy stood at 7.9% in 2018. It is unlikely to rebound fully until a vaccine is available against the virus. To revive the tourism sector in the short-term, the government is planning to provide special packages for domestic tourists, offering holidays from the government. The government will also ask the private sector to offer similar packages.

Another badly hit area is foreign remittance, the backbone of the country's economy. Remittances sent by migrant workers, mainly from the Gulf countries, Malaysia, and India, contributes 24% to 28% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to the report of the Nepal Rastra Bank, *The Status of Remittance Inflow in Nepal*, the country received a total of ₹879.3

billion (US\$ 7.8 billion) in remittances in the fiscal year 2018/19, which makes up 25.4% of GDP.

Five countries— Malaysia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—employ more than 92% of Nepali migrant workers and these countries are badly hit by COVID-19. There are also some effects of the pandemic in the agriculture sector. According to a report prepared by the Nepal Rastra Bank, the combined contribution of agriculture, forestry and fishing, industry, and the services sector to GDP is 27%. As the crisis of COVID-19 continues, it is not sure how badly it will affect the country's economy. With political stability after the promulgation of a new constitution in 2015, there were hopes that the country's economy would rebound but COVID-19 has posed severe challenges.

Political and Social Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 is sure to have political, social and economic ramifications. Some impacts are already visible and additional severe impacts are in store. COVID-19 is likely to send the country into poverty. In the last three decades, Nepal has made substantial progress in reducing poverty. The *Multidimensional Poverty Index 2018*,⁷ prepared by the National Planning Commission says, “Our computations show that 28.6% of Nepal's population is multidimensionally poor. The indicators that contribute most to multidimensional poverty in Nepal are undernutrition and households that lack any member who has completed five years of schooling.” A preliminary study of the Ministry of Finance shows that poverty may increase by 2% due to the coronavirus.

⁷ National Planning Commission (2018). *Multidimensional Poverty Index 2018: Analysis Towards Action*. Kathmandu.

Nepal has not yet fully recovered from the 2015 earthquake. Thousands of poor and vulnerable people are still living in temporary makeshift shelters⁸ as they are unable to build proper houses due to lack of money. According to the Nepal Reconstruction Authority, around 15,000 households have yet to construct their houses and it could be further delayed due to the pandemic. Single women, elderly, disabled, and landless people who do not have citizenship certificates are facing difficulties building their houses.

COVID-19 is also very likely to cause mental health problems. Rising poverty and unemployment may further impact on people's mental health. Marginalized groups, people with disabilities, and the extremely poor are most vulnerable and likely to face severe mental health problems.

There could be political ramifications too. Nepal has just adopted a federal structure of government. The provincial and local governments rely on the federal government for resources, and so they are likely to be more dependent and weakened in the coming days. Already, the federal government is maintaining undue control over provincial and local governments by centralizing resources. Such control is likely to increase even if the pandemic is over. At the same time, many external actors and donor agencies (which are already directly approaching local governments for financial assistance) are likely to increase their influence in the days to come. In such a scenario, there are high chances that local bodies would fall into a dependency trap.

Similarly, there are already criticisms of the government for failing to meet the expectations of the people. Due to resource constraints, the government will not be able to meet the demands of the people, which is likely to result in more public frustration. There



Image: thewire.in

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As thousands of Nepali migrant-workers are now returning from India, the Gulf region and other countries, a sector that may be able to absorb this labor is agriculture.

are already voices inside the ruling party that the current government has failed to deliver, in the post-corona, and such voices are likely to become even stronger, which may threaten the country's instability.

Finally, if the government fails to create jobs for unemployed youth and address the domestic need for development, it risks creating a population vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. In 1996, when the Maoists began an armed insurgency, they recruited large numbers of unemployed youth from rural areas. The Maoist splinter group led by Netra Bikram Chand has already launched an armed insurgency which is likely to lure unemployed youth.

At the same time, COVID-19 has provided some opportunities too. For instance, the government will invest more resources for the health sector in the coming days. As thousands of Nepali migrant-workers are now returning from India, the Gulf region and other countries, a sector that may be able to absorb this labor is agriculture. Partially, as a result of young people seeking employment abroad over the course of the last two decades, rural villages were left empty and fertile land made barren. Thus, returning migrant workers, particularly the youth, could seek domestic employment in farming and it is an opportunity for government to revive the agriculture sector in order to reduce the country's dependency on other countries.

⁸ Bhattarai, Kamal Dev (2020). "Vulnerable Groups Still Out in the Open Five Years After Nepal Earthquake. *The Annapurna Express*. April 27. Retrieved from: <https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/vulnerable-groups-still-out-in-the-open-five-years-after-nepal-earthquake-2441>.

By: Martin Manurung

Indonesia and the COVID-19 Pandemic

By this time, we already know that the current COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health issue since it has huge social and economic consequences for the entire world. In Indonesia alone, more than 2 million people have lost their jobs. This is only for open unemployment. If we see the number of disguised unemployment, it is around 45 million. Never before in history has Indonesia have this number of unemployment as high as the current state.

We also see decreased revenues for more than 163,000 small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Because SMEs are under my parliamentary commission, it has been a daily concern on how to bridge SMEs and the banking system because of credit problems, and because they need support for their operations to survive under the pandemic. At the end of April 2020, more than 800,000 people submitted proposals under the Debt Restructuring Program. This is more than the number during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.

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The current COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health issue since it has huge social and economic consequences for the entire world.

Image: theconversation.com



Government Response

The government has already declared a healthcare emergency through Presidential Decree Number 11. Since then, the government has assigned the national body for disaster management to head the task force to deal with all COVID-19 related issues.

The central government has also given authority to local governments, provinces and municipalities, to implement social distancing policies under the *Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar* (PSBB) or Large-

Scale Social Restrictions. Under this policy, people are not allowed to travel between cities and are prohibited from conducting meetings or gatherings of more than 20 people. It also orders the closure of markets in identified red zones or places with high infections. In addition, PSBB imposes limits on public transportation, permitting taxis and other public utility vehicles to operate at only 50% of their seat capacity.

Apart from this series of immediate actions, the Indonesian government has also begun a more strategic approach to the pandemic by

allocating Rp75 trillion (US\$5 billion) for healthcare. In addition, Rp70.1 trillion (US\$4.8 billion) has been earmarked to support local industries, while the government's Additional Social Safety Net Program has received Rp110 trillion (USD 7.8 billion) in funds. In addition, Rp150 trillion (US\$10 billion) has been allotted for economic recovery, with an additional Rp405.1 trillion (US\$27 billion) to cover the Pandemic Budget.

Economic Stimulus Programs – Maintaining the Demand Side

In Indonesia it is very important to maintain the demand side to avoid the economy from getting hard-hit. Among the economic stimulus program responses are the already mentioned Debt Restructuring Program, the Additional Social Safety Net Program through staple food aid, the Unemployed Incentives Program (*Kartu Pra Kerja*), and direct cash transfers (*Bantuan Langsung Tunai*). Another program is the Tax Incentive Program which enables people to receive discounts for their income tax. We also have subsidies for electricity bills because people have to work from home which then affects their electricity bills.

In a nutshell, the government is trying to prevent the health crisis from becoming a severe economic crisis. We don't want a dual crisis, and in that sense, health and the economy must go together. I think this is now the concern of most nations of the world.

But we also have problems that are different from other countries. In Indonesia, there are concerns regarding people's adherence to safety procedures. In Jakarta for example, only 50% of the people on the streets use masks. So, this is a challenge for us as we avoid rising infections. There's also the problem of weak enforcement from the government. In some municipalities outside of Jakarta, there are confrontations between the public and the police when the latter try to enforce health procedures.

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The government is trying to prevent the health crisis from becoming a severe economic crisis.

Image: www.business-times.com.sg



We also face political competition between leaders and officials who come from different political parties. For example, the Governor of Jakarta does not come from the same party as the President and many people often pit these two officials against each other. For us in NasDem Party, we've expressed strong support for both the President and the Governor even though we did not endorse the latter in the previous gubernatorial election. But now is not the time to have a political competition between the Governor of Jakarta and the President. We want both the President and the Governor to work together to fight the pandemic.

We have also seen problems in the initial slow response to the pandemic. While other countries were anticipating the pandemic, the Indonesian government was opening borders and inviting more tourists. While many of the countries were procuring basic supplies for health such as masks and hand sanitizers, Indonesia was massively exporting these medical paraphernalia.

We also have food security problems. Indonesia is highly dependent on the importation of goods, and the pandemic clearly showed that the market does not provide the only solution. We also need to improve our production capacity and have security in our basic sectors including food, health, and energy.

Key Lessons

One of the key lessons Indonesia has learned from the pandemic is the fact that, apart from social support and direct cash transfers, we need to create jobs. At present, we cannot depend on industries and businesses because of the problems they face. Hence, the government has to create jobs through public works and social work initiatives that the unemployed can take part in.

Another lesson we learned is that the market is not enough. Government is trying to produce health supplies and is now successful in producing its own face masks.



Image: www.ilo.org

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One of the key lessons Indonesia has learned from the pandemic is the fact that, apart from social support and direct cash transfers, we need to create jobs.

We've also learned in this pandemic that when democracy and government's effectivity is in crisis, we have to revisit our system of democracy. It is not effective for government to have paralyzing competition between and among the different levels of government and the political parties. At the same time, we need to build greater public trust in government.

We also learned that Indonesia does not have a strong foundation in the health, food, and energy sectors. In these sectors, Indonesia is very dependent on imports and international trade. For Indonesia, it must have self-sufficiency in these to be able to confront future crises.

We also need to undertake far-reaching reforms in our health and social response. To do so, we have to ensure that people have health

insurance coverage. This is, in fact, an ongoing project and we have to make sure that it is on the right path.

We also have to make sure that stability is maintained. When we have health and economic crises, we don't want to have a political crisis as well and we must look on working on this in the near future.

I would also like to add that as a network, we have important things to do as social democrats. We need to campaign more to ensure that international cooperation is not solely about the economy. Cooperation in this time of pandemic means cultivating social cooperation, health cooperation, and promoting dialogue and exchanges between countries. In times of crises, we have to emphasize that we cannot face our problems alone.

By: Cecilia Lero

Authoritarian Populist Presidents and COVID-19

Comparing Trump, Bolsonaro, and Duterte

Introduction

The United States under Donald Trump, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, and the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte represent three of the most emblematic cases of the current global wave of authoritarian populism. This article argues that the respective leaderships of these three countries have taken divergent approaches to reacting to COVID-19. The US and Brazil have followed the denialism track, in which the leaders downplayed the negative effects of the virus in an effort to keep markets open. Through denialism, they have also sought to benefit politically from a contrived culture war based on a false dichotomy that pits those looking to mitigate the risk of contracting and spreading the virus against those who scoff at social distancing and mask-wearing. This has resulted in the highest rates of COVID mortality in the world. The Philippines, on the other hand, has followed the authoritarian-repressive track. The Duterte government used the COVID crisis to exacerbate authoritarian control over the everyday lives of citizens, pass

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All three countries have exhibited a remarkable lack of national government leadership, consistency, and coordination. To varying degrees, they failed to adequately ameliorate the pandemic's devastating effects on vulnerable populations, especially the poor.

Image: blogdopedlowski.com



legislation and executive orders that closed democratic space, and extend the violent state-sponsored “war on drugs” to state-sponsored or -encouraged violence targeting political activists. At the same time, all three countries have exhibited a

remarkable lack of national government leadership, consistency, and coordination. To varying degrees, they failed to adequately ameliorate the pandemic's devastating effects on vulnerable populations, especially the poor.

Background

On January 21, 2020, the United States confirmed its first COVID-19 case. The Philippines was not far behind, confirming its first case on January 30. It took some time for the virus to reach South America. The first confirmed case was in São Paulo, Brazil and was confirmed on February 26, 2020, although many

speculate that the government delayed confirming the case until after *carnaval* celebrations, a major income-generator for the City of São Paulo as well as the country as a whole. The Philippines was the site of the first COVID death outside China. As of March 23, 2021, the Philippines has reported 677,653 confirmed cases and 12,992 deaths. The United States and Brazil, however, are the

world leaders in terms of both cases and deaths, reporting nearly 29.8 million and 12.1 million cases and nearly 543 million and 296 million deaths, respectively.¹ Out of the 190 countries for which the Our World in Data project at Oxford University reports data, the United States, Brazil, and the Philippines rank 9th, 37th, and 119th in total cases per capita, respectively.²

Figure 1. Cumulative confirmed Covid-19 cases per million people

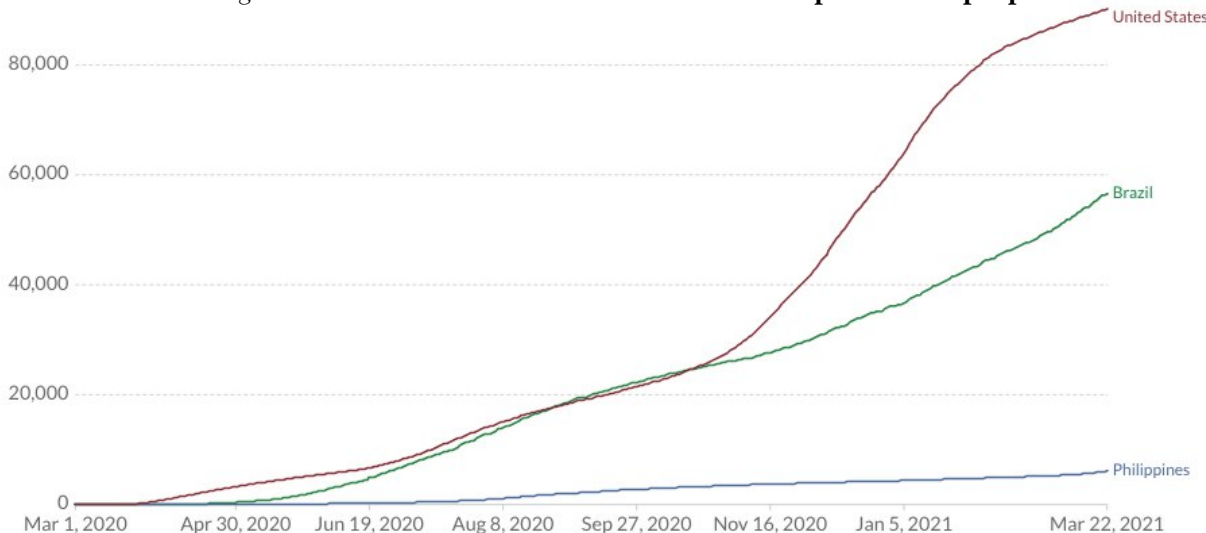


Figure 2. Daily new confirmed Covid-19 cases per million people³



¹ Dong Ensheng, Hongru Du and Lauren Gardner (2020). "An Interactive Web-Based Dashboard to Track COVID-19 in Real Time." *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*. Published online Feb 19.

² Hasell, Joe et al. (2020). "A Cross-Country Database of COVID-19 Testing." *Scientific Data*; 7 (345); 1-7.

³ Source for Figures 1 and 2: Dong, Du and Gardner (2020).

Other researchers have investigated the relationship between regime type and COVID-19 response with most agreeing that it is not necessarily whether a country is categorized as democratic or authoritarian that affects COVID response. Rather, it is a range of factors related to government perception and performance that matter, including perceived legitimacy, government effectiveness, corruption, executive approach, and the openness of government communication/media.⁴ While the United States, Brazil and the Philippines are all formally considered democracies, the authoritarian populist presidencies⁵ of Trump, Bolsonaro, and Duterte saw

the increased concentration of power in the executive and eschewing of institutional controls and norms.⁶ How the three countries dealt with the COVID crisis is a direct reflection of their presidents' governing styles, ideologies, and international positioning. Trump and Bolsonaro pursued denialism tracks that downplayed the severity of the virus in favor of keeping the market functioning. While the potential damage of Trump's preferences were mitigated by US government institutions and other high government officials, the Brazilian federal government has generally acted in accordance with Bolsonaro's

preferences. Duterte, on the other hand, took the COVID crisis as an opportunity to further close the already tightening democratic space. The unnecessarily punitive character of lockdowns combined with a rush to open businesses before medically advisable reflect Duterte's desire to both use COVID to close democratic space and appease neoliberal capitalist forces. Despite these divergent response tracks, we can also observe strong similarities in all three countries in their approaches to social amelioration programs characterized by inadequate government action.

Figure 3. **Covid-19 Stringency Index**⁷



How the three countries dealt with the COVID crisis is a direct reflection of their presidents' governing styles, ideologies, and international positioning.

⁴ Alon, Ilan, Matthew Farrell and Shaomin Li (2020). "Regime Type and COVID-19 Response." *FIIB Business Review*, 9 (3); 152-160. See also Poowin Bunyavejchewin and Ketsarin Sirichuanjun (2021). "How Regime Type and Governance Quality Affect Policy Responses to COVID-19: A Preliminary Analysis." *Heliyon*, 7 (2). Scott Greer et al. (2020). "The Comparative Politics of COVID-19: The Need to Understand Government Responses." *Global Public Health*, 15 (9); 1413-1416. Kelly Senters Piazza and Kylie Stronko (2020). "Democrats, Authoritarians, and the Coronavirus: Who is Winning at Policy Efficacy?" *Global Policy*, June.

⁵ For a definition and discussion of authoritarian populism, see Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019). *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt (2018), *How Democracies Die*. New York: Penguin.

⁷ The Stringency index is a composite measure based on nine response indicators include school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans. 100 = strictest. Thomas Hale et al. (2021). "A Global Panel Database of Pandemic Policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker)." *Nature Human Behaviour*. Visualization by the Our World in Data Project. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/covid-stringency-index>.

Trump

The way the Trump administration handled the COVID crisis can be characterized by an internal tension between those advocating for a science-based response and those advocating for a response based on a mix of conspiracy theories and Trump's personal beliefs stemming from dubious and unknown sources. While the former won out as the dominant strategy taken by the government overall, Trump used the expansive power of the presidential bully pulpit to downplay the severity of the virus and cast doubt on scientific recommendations and science-based mitigation strategies.⁸ On one hand, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) was able to issue science-based recommendations and directives, the US government invested heavily in vaccine research, and the federal government actively pre-purchased vaccines. The federal government under Trump also actively worked with states to roll-out the vaccine, although its approach was widely criticized for not providing enough federal support and clarity of information to the states, especially in comparison to the approach that was undertaken by President Biden after the end of Trump's term.⁹

These measures stood in stark contrast to Trump's own words and actions. Early in the pandemic, Trump repeatedly insisted that the virus was nothing to worry about and that it would go away by the summer like a "miracle." As the pandemic progressed, Trump conceded that it was a national emergency but insisted that the US, under his leadership, was doing remarkably well, he ridiculed mask wearing, and praised local governments that relaxed lockdown and social distancing requirements in favor of opening up businesses. Indeed, he presented opening up the market as the only



Image: edition.cnn.com

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Trump used the expansive power of the presidential bully pulpit to downplay the severity of the virus and cast doubt on scientific recommendations and science-based mitigation strategies.

remedy for pandemic-related economic hardship and attacked calls for further federal economic assistance beyond the initial relief package as a call for a bail-out coming from opposition governors that had mismanaged their states. Perhaps most alarmingly, however, were the ways in which Trump raised false hopes about non-proven treatments such as the drug hydroxychloroquine and injecting bleach or light into one's body, as well as how he organized and encouraged large public gatherings such as his campaign rallies, demonstrations protesting lockdown orders, and the January 6, 2021 rally that ended in Trump supporters storming the US Capitol.

The Trump government was rather quick to release initial social amelioration and business stimulus payments, aided in no small part by the fact that the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives was eager to enact a relief package. The US CARES Act provided individual tax rebates and higher unemployment insurance rates for approximately three months. The Act's implementation was largely criticized for enabling large corporations to benefit from federal loans that should have gone to small businesses. Trump and the Republican Party balked at calls for a second aid and stimulus package, pushing instead to aggressively reopen the economy.

⁸ Magalhães, David and Guilherme Casarões (2021). "Medical Populists and the Pandemic." Presentation at the *Populism in Latin America and Beyond Conference*. King's College London, March 19.

⁹ Sherman, Amy (2021). "Trump Vaccine Left Logistics to States, But It Did Exist." *PolitiFact*, January 27. Retrieved from: <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2021/jan/27/ron-klain/trump-vaccine-plan-left-logistics-states-it-did-ex/>.

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The Bolsonaro administration can be characterized
as one where the president's denialism clearly
dominated government action.

Image: www.aljazeera.com



Bolsonaro

Whereas in the Trump administration, the pro-science faction won out on most important decisions regarding the pandemic, the Bolsonaro administration can be characterized as one where the president's denialism clearly dominated government action.¹⁰ Bolsonaro has consistently belittled the COVID-19 threat, famously declaring on television that the virus should be treated as no more than “a little flu” and that Brazil's climate would protect its people from illness. Whereas Trump limited the media exposure of high government officials that might disagree with him, such as National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director, Anthony Fauci,¹¹ as of this writing, Bolsonaro is on his fourth Minister of Health since the pandemic's onset. The first two ministers were fired for disagreeing with Bolsonaro over the President's attempt to dismantle state-imposed social distancing directives as well as his support for the use of hydroxychloroquine.¹² The third Health Minister was a military general who admitted to having no prior knowledge about health, and who was appointed under the pretense that he would follow the President's directives without question. He was fired earlier this month, although there are reports that he asked to be dismissed.¹³ His replacement comes at a time when COVID deaths in the country have spiked to an alarming level of over 3,000 per day and the overwhelming majority of the states' health systems are at critical capacity levels. The current minister is expected to take a more science-based approach to containing COVID and managing vaccination.

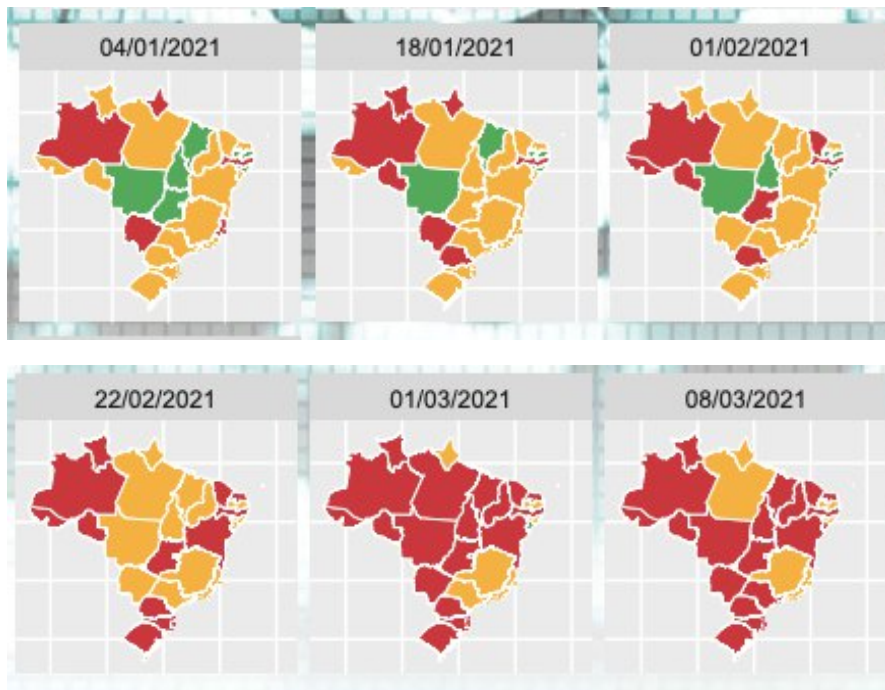
¹⁰ Magalhães and Casarões (2021).

¹¹ It should be noted that a former Assistant Secretary at the Department of Health alleges that he was removed because of his opposition to recommending hydroxychloroquine. See Michael Shear and Maggie Haberman (2020). “Health Dept. Official Says Doubts on Hydroxychloroquine Led to His Ouster.” *New York Times*, April 14. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/rick-bright-trump-hydroxychloroquine-coronavirus.html>.

¹² Andrade, Fabiano (2020). “Teich deixa o Ministério da Saúde antes de completar um mês no cargo e após divergir de Bolsonaro” *Globo*, May 15. Retrieved from: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/05/15/teich-deixa-o-ministerio-da-saude-antes-de-completar-um-mes-no-cargo.ghtml>. See also Andre Shalders (2020), “Mandetta é demitido do Ministério da Saúde após um mês de conflito com Bolsonaro: relembre os principais choques.” *BBC News-Brasil*, April 16. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-52316728>.

¹³ Araújo, Carla et al. (2021). “Pazuello pede demissão da Saúde, e Bolsonaro se reúne com cardiologista,” *UOL*, March 14. Retrieved from: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2021/03/14/bolsonaro-se-reune-com-medica-cotada-para-ministerio-da-saude.htm>.

Figure 4. **Capacity of Intensive Care Units for Covid Treatment for Adults**¹⁴



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Bolsonaro has actively mocked the COVID vaccine, joking that those who took it would turn into alligators.

Bolsonaro has also actively mocked the COVID vaccine, joking that those who took it would turn into alligators, and the federal government under his leadership has made feeble attempts to procure vaccines and get them approved. This has led to state governments exploring vaccination procurement themselves independent from the national government. The Butantan Research Institute, based in the State of São Paulo, was able to procure several million doses of the Sinovac vaccine

and is producing a locally-manufactured version. While the federal government initially dismissed the vaccine, when the Butantan Institute-manufactured vaccine was approved for use, the Health Minister promptly iterated that all the vaccines belonged to the federal ministry.¹⁵ The federal government under Bolsonaro has also attempted to stop reporting COVID infection and death rates, an attempt that was thwarted by state-level health secretaries and researchers willing to do the

aggregation. While there are reports that Trump also attempted to obscure COVID reporting data, opposition to this move came from within the federal government itself.

Finally, similarly to Trump, Bolsonaro has actively encouraged his followers to reject mask-wearing and social distancing, often directly contradicting state and local directives.¹⁶ Bolsonaro has repeatedly ventured into crowds to shake hands and greet supporters with kisses. He has performatively not used a mask for the majority of the pandemic, until earlier this month when former president and his biggest competition in next year's election, Lula da Silva, was exonerated of corruption charges. For Trump and Bolsonaro, the performative rejection of masks and distancing enabled them to exacerbate a false culture war based on their personally cultivated images of strong, macho characters.

The Brazilian Congress passed a social amelioration program that provided cash benefits equivalent to half the minimum wage to indigent, unemployed, and self-employed people for three months in the second half of 2020. As of this writing, there are talks that a second round of payments will commence in April, this time with 50% less beneficiaries and rates ranging from 1/10 the minimum wage to 1/4 the minimum wage. More than half of the country's governors as well as opposition politicians and labor unions are clamoring for higher payments. Throughout the pandemic, Bolsonaro has consistently emphasized that he wants markets to reopen to full activity no matter the cost and his declarations have caused confusion as well as encouraged businesses and individuals to defy quarantine orders.

¹⁴ Green = low, yellow = medium, red = critical. Source: “Boletim Observatório Covid-19” (2021). Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, March 9. Retrieved from: https://portal.fiocruz.br/sites/portal.fiocruz.br/files/documentos/boletim_extraordinario_2021-marco-09.pdf.

¹⁵ Alencar, Caique (2021). “Pazuello: exclusividade de 100% das doses do Butantan é do Ministério da Saúde.” iG, January 17. Retrieved from: <https://saude.ig.com.br/2021-01-17/pazuello-exclusividade-de-100-das-doses-do-butantan-e-do-ministerio-da-saude.html>.

¹⁶ CEPEDISA and Conectas (2021). *Direitos na Pandemia (Boletim N. 10)*, January 20. Retrieved from: https://www.conectas.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Boletim_Direitos-na-Pandemia_ed_10.pdf.

Duterte

In contrast to Trump and Bolsonaro, Duterte has taken a punitive approach to dealing with COVID-19. His government has instituted some of the world's strictest lockdowns and used the COVID pandemic as an excuse to further crack down on an already shrinking democratic space and further exacerbate the climate of fear. In the early days of the pandemic, nonessential movement was banned and public transportation suspended. Private groups and NGOs gathered their own resources to provide public transport for healthcare workers who did not have access to private vehicles. The president openly encouraged local law enforcement to "shoot them dead," referring to quarantine violators. This clearly mirrored the rhetoric Duterte has used for his so-called "war on drugs" wherein the President encouraged and incentivized police officers and vigilante groups to summarily murder anyone suspected of involvement with illegal substances. At least two people have been killed by police as a result of quarantine rule violations. It was determined upon investigation that the police planted a gun on one of them in an attempt to justify the murder.¹⁷ By September 2020, over 100,000 people were arrested for violating quarantine, with the majority detained in police stations where maintaining social distancing cannot be expected. Some of those arrested for violating quarantine or COVID-related curfews have been subject to inhumane treatment such as detention in dog cages or being forced to sit in the midday sun which can reach over 40 degrees centigrade, and there is at least one reported case of a 15-year-old girl who filed a complaint against a police officer for



Image: www.ft.com

Duterte has taken a punitive approach to dealing with COVID-19.

molesting her while she was in custody for violating quarantine. The girl was subsequently murdered.¹⁸ There are also reports of indigent people suspected of having COVID - 19 being forcibly removed from their homes and placed in quarantine facilities.

The COVID-19 crisis has impeded the ability of the political opposition and civil society to mobilize and gain national attention, an opportunity the

Duterte government has used to directly attack civil liberties. In May 2020, Duterte's congressional allies voted to shut down the largest independent news agency in the country. In July, expanded anti-terrorism legislation was rammed through Congress which, among other provisions, permits the detention of suspects for up to 24 days without any warrant. Since then, there have been a number of targeted killings of activists.¹⁹

¹⁷ Buan, Lian (2020), "NBI: Cops Murdered Winston Ragos, Planted Evidence." *Rappler*, June 4. Retrieved from: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/nbi-conclusion-cop-murdered-winston-ragos-evidence-planted> > See also Al Jazeera (2020). "Man Shot Dead in Philippines for Flouting Coronavirus Rules." (2020), *Al Jazeera*, April 5. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/5/man-shot-dead-in-philippines-for-flouting-coronavirus-rules>.

¹⁸ UNICEF (2020). "UNICEF Statement on the Killing of Fabel Pineda." July 7. Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/press-releases/unicef-statement-killing-fabel-pineda>.

¹⁹ It must not be overlooked that Trump and Bolsonaro have also used the COVID crisis to attack political opponents, albeit with arguably less attention to systematically dismantling democratic institutions when compared to Duterte.

The Duterte government also instituted a social amelioration program that included cash benefits equivalent to half to 80% of the minimum wage of poor households. However, the distribution of these benefits, from identifying beneficiaries to physically handing out cash, was largely left to local governments, often resulting in corruption, favoritism, and overlooked residents. Despite initially stringent quarantine rules, the government classified malls (an industry with a particularly influential lobby) as an essential service and allowed their gradual reopening beginning in May 2020, despite increasing case rates and extremely limited access to testing. The government has since then generally pursued a stand of allowing businesses to operate, granted they regulate social distancing and sanitation while occasionally experimenting with strict policing decrees, such as the recent ban on holding hands in public (which appeared to quickly fade away as it was impossible to enforce). The Philippines' 2021 budget actually sees decreased spending on health but increased spending on big-ticket infrastructure contracts and the military's "anti-insurgency" campaign.²⁰ Vaccination in the Philippines is haphazard with no reliable timeline for national vaccination and local governments and the private sector procuring their own vaccines in response to the national government's disorganization. Thus, while the Duterte government initially pursued strict social control measures, it quickly caved-in to pressures from big business to open the economy. Furthermore, it has not exhibited similar efficiency, urgency or desire to manage implementation regarding economic relief or the procurement and rollout of vaccinations.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Trump, Bolsonaro, and Duterte took divergent tracks in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Trump and Bolsonaro denied the severity of the crisis in an effort to keep economic activity normal, even at the cost of lives. Duterte, on the other hand, used the threat of the pandemic to justify further closing democratic

space and instilling a climate of fear and government repression before pushing for a premature reopening of the economy, albeit without actively denying the COVID threat or encouraging people to hold mass gatherings. While all three presidents oversaw cash assistance programs to provide relief for economically struggling households, these programs have been woefully inadequate.

“While all three presidents oversaw cash assistance programs to provide relief for economically struggling households, these programs have been woefully inadequate.”

Image: businessmirror.com.ph



²⁰ Punongbayan, JC (2020), "5 Ways Duterte is Derailing PH Economy's Recovery." *Rappler*, October 23. Retrieved from: <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/analysis-ways-duterte-derailing-philippine-economy-recovery>.



Image: www.usnews.com

Specific recommendations:

- Implement national-level procurement of vaccines and other vital health equipment, especially if international loans have already been taken out for this purpose.
- Ensure the transparency of health data at disaggregated as well as national levels.
- Enact bold and sweeping spending programs to stimulate the economy, in particular those that provide direct benefits to the most vulnerable populations at rates at least equal to the minimum wage as well as small businesses. Consider implementing a wealth tax as well as a tax on industries and corporations that are benefitting from the pandemic in order to finance this spending.
- Make COVID-19 testing and vaccination free and available to all.
- Help coordinate and mobilize with local governments creative solutions to problems faced by the most vulnerable populations, including:
 - Mobilizing schools when there are no classes to act as community kitchens and feeding centers;
 - Community markets so that residents do not have to travel to big markets and be exposed to more people;
 - Assisting with supply chain and transport problems between food producers and communities in need of food;
 - Subsidizing internet for children being schooled from home and workers to have the option to work from home;
 - Providing personal hygiene materials such as soap, clean water, alcohol, and masks.
- Do not take a punitive or violent approach to quarantine violators. Do not detain them in quarters that pose larger health risks than the violation itself. Do not subject them to torture, sexual abuse, or murder.
- Make decisions on permissible economic activity based on scientific evaluations of the health risks, placing the value of lives above the value of the market.
- Allow people to be on the street if they maintain social distancing, especially in high-density urban areas where homes are extremely small and tend to house multiple people. Open unused open private spaces, such as mall parking lots, stadiums, golf courses, so that people have a place to go for safe recreation while maintaining social distancing.
- Base all official statements on verifiable science and not conspiracy theories or pseudoscience. Ensure consistency in official statements and recommendations.
- Implement eviction moratoriums and subsidize rent forgiveness.
- Invest in science and research for future outbreaks.

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