

Abolitionism against pandemic policing in the Philippines

**The demand for abolition becomes urgent in the face of a highly militarized response to
the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines.**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has truly brought out the worst in the Philippine government. Instead of treating the pandemic as a public health crisis, the state is treating it as a security issue and has responded by deploying its extremely violent security apparatus.

Demands for mass testing remain unfulfilled, while more and more police and soldiers flood the streets, arresting thousands of people and subjecting them to arbitrary punishments. The police killed several people, including an unarmed veteran suffering from PTSD, an unidentified man at a checkpoint and even four soldiers. Did these people need to die in order to stem the tide of the pandemic? Did the incarceration of thousands of people make our communities more resilient to disease? No, it did not. COVID-19 testing kits remain scarce, yet bullets are in full supply.

And how effective is it to treat the pandemic as a security, rather than a public health issue? The quarantine in the Philippines is the longest and harshest in Asia, yet the Philippine government has categorically failed to contain the pandemic; the country currently counts over 226,000 infections with nearly 4,000 deaths and no sign of the curve being flattened.

The Philippine government refuses to implement mass testing and competent contact tracing, two policies that have proven to be effective in other countries. Instead, the government prioritized increasing policing powers, surveillance and warrantless arrests with an “anti-terror” law that critics quickly labeled the “Terror Law.” The militarized nature of the quarantine in the Philippines is already a martial law in fact, which has only been further entrenched with the passing of the Terror Law.

Against the state treating the pandemic as a security issue, the popular demands thunder:

Ayuda, hindi bala! — Aid, not bullets!

Tulong, hindi kulong — Help, not incarceration!

Medikal solusyon, hindi militar! — Medical solutions, not military intervention!

It is in response to the militarization and securitization of the quarantine that the demands for abolishing the police and prisons are being voiced. Now, more than ever, we need medical solutions rather than more militarized police violence and incarceration.

The Logic of Policing and Incarceration

It is becoming increasingly clear that a securitized response is not alleviating the pandemic. No matter how much President Rodrigo Duterte wishes to strong-man the issue, no matter how much more police violence is authorized, or how much more people are threatened with violence and incarceration, the logic of policing and incarceration provides no solutions to the current public health crisis.

This logic shapes the minds of those in power to think and act with only these blunt tools. The “law of the instrument” suggests that when your only tool is a hammer, you treat everything as if it were a nail. The violent and coercive institutions of police and incarceration is that tool; it is that hammer that sees the pandemic as simply another nail or, rather, as another security threat in need of controlling.

Thus, when the pandemic is framed in terms of security and control, there must naturally be an antagonist that is in need of securing and controlling. We see this when state agents frame so-called “quarantine violators” as *pasaway*, a Tagalog word connoting stubbornness and disobedience. By framing people as *pasaway* and disobedient, the nuance of *why* individuals are out of their homes or not wearing a mask is lost. It matters not if these individuals are in need of food or medicine, or if they are employed on a no-work-no-pay basis, or whether they simply did not have a mask. They are *pasaway*, disobedient, and are quarantine violators who are subjected to warrantless arrests or arbitrary punishment.

The state implements rules and the police enforces them, with no regard to actual public needs. We see this when the government recently required the wearing of face shields in addition to face masks on public transportation, yet it made no effort to distribute these. In another case, the police harassed and arrested a homeless old woman for “

disobedience” simply because she did not have a home to return to. How easy it would have been to just give her a bed to sleep in! Needs are not considered, only compliance.

When you follow this logic though — framing the pandemic in terms of security and control — you will end up with President Duterte and other state officials threatening to implement a “shoot-to-kill” policy for so-called quarantine violators. As if (non-)compliance was the biggest problem during the pandemic. Under the logic of control, a needs-based nuance is soon lost. You simply obey or are disobedient.

However, even if we frame the Filipino public as *pasaway*, it would be an inaccurate characterization. A study shows that 91 percent of Filipinos wear face masks when they go out. Compliance then is not the problem, yet agents of the state continue to use this characterization *because it allows them to justify their policing*.

And what of the people who are incarcerated because they allegedly violated the quarantine? The spectacle of arresting scores of people on the street, forcing them to congregate and then mete out arbitrary punishments or to lecture them are but another convenient avenue for the virus to spread. Incarcerating so-called quarantine violators risks killing them instead.

What of the people who were already incarcerated? The Philippines has the tenth largest prison population in the world with 215,000 people behind bars as of November 2019, and at 463.6 percent it has the second-highest prison occupancy rate in the world, nearly five times above full capacity. The vast majority — around 75 percent — of the prison population in the Philippines are pre-trial detainees who have not yet been found guilty of any crime.

During the pandemic, detainment is at risk of becoming a death sentence because there is no quarantine inside the prisons. The state dragged its feet to release prisoners and now the virus is ripping through inmate populations with scores dying. The degradation the state inflicts on certain bodies over others justifies the devaluation of their lives.

Let us also remember the state’s policing and incarceration has always been selective and consistently targets dispossessed classes. Imelda Marcos — the widow of the former dictator Ferdinand Marcos — remains a free woman despite being convicted of plunder, with her age cited as the reason she is not incarcerated. People were quick to juxtapose how the police do not apply this logic to elderly poor.

In another example, while scores of people were arrested for supposedly violating quarantine rules, sitting senator Koko Pimentel repeatedly and publicly broke quarantine protocols by not quarantining himself while waiting for his COVID-19 test results — which, in fact, came back positive. He remains a free man whose only “punishment” was to face public outrage while thousands of so-called “quarantine violators” are harassed by the police for the most basal reasons.

The same double standards were on display when a mere public apology was enough for a Manila police chief to get away with throwing a lavish birthday party that flouted quarantine regulations, while just one month earlier a group of less than two dozen people from a poor urban community were collectively arrested when they were allegedly looking for food.

It is not just that policing and incarceration is selectively implemented, it also upholds a fundamentally unjust system which protects capital and the state. We see this in the violent breaking up of strikes and pickets and the warrantless arrests of picketers like the Cosmic 10, who defended their picket from police aggression, and in innumerable other cases where police attacked workers.

The police do not protect people, much less protect people from the pandemic. The track record of police violence shows a consistent targeting of the dispossessed and working classes and a clear double standard in policing. The function of the police is to protect capital and the state; these are not socially useful functions.

At this historical moment, when the Philippine police killed almost ten times more people in its anti-drug operations alone than the racist police in the United States did last year, the cry for abolition becomes a matter of life and death. The logic of policing and incarceration that frames problems in terms of security and control has already killed so many in the bloody anti-drug operations and continues to kill people today by overwhelming force and the over-investment in policing over public health.

Just as drug use ought to be seen as a health issue rather than a security issue, so does the current pandemic. Because the Philippine state — embodied by the demagogue-in-chief Duterte — values its security apparatus above all other social functions, it uses these as the main tool for a plethora of social and public health issues, like illegal drugs and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The only solution the agents of the state can conceive of is more and more policing. Instead of mass testing and expanding contact tracing, the Philippine government suggested house-to-house searches for anyone who might be sick. This is reminiscent of *tokhang*, or the policy of police going door-to-door to arrest or shoot drug users, a policy that is responsible for the deaths of thousands. Thankfully, the public outcry against a “COVID *tokhang*” and the obvious potential vector of transmission by the police going door-to-door prevented the implementation of this policy.

The logic of policing and incarceration offers no solution to the pandemic but is used instead to manage and control the dispossessed classes. In a way, the pandemic has given force and validity to demands for police and prison abolition and to replace the logic of policing and incarceration with the logic of care and accountability.

A Pandemic Response Without Police and Prisons

The popular demand “*Solusyon medikal, hindi militar!*” fits neatly with demands for the abolition of police and prisons. Now, more than ever, we need medical solutions and not securitization and military intervention. Abolitionist demands and practices aim to remove coercion from the toolkit of the state because it is clearly not working. Police and prison abolition is the seed of a better society founded on consent and collaboration rather than coercion and compliance.

Imagine a pandemic response without police and prisons, a pandemic response predicated on care instead of coercion. Without its hammer of coercion, the state would have to rely on other avenues to address the pandemic. Without committing a bloated amount of resources for maintaining a country-wide military occupation, we would have resources for mass testing and free personal protective equipment for all. Instead of spending resources to police, surveil and incarcerate, we can instead spend it on proven pandemic policies and then some.

An abolitionist pandemic response would fulfill peoples’ needs instead of simply mandating policy after policy. Instead of mandating that people *must* wear masks and face shields or else face the violence of the state, we can instead invest in providing masks and face shields to the public. Arresting people who do not wear masks does not help stem the tide of the pandemic and turns prisons into vectors of transmission. It would be easier and simpler to simply hand out masks, a strategy that has very much worked in other countries.

Instead of implementing a curfew and arresting everyone who is breaking the quarantine for one reason or another, we can instead deliver groceries to all homes and mitigate the need to leave homes. In several countries, necessities were simply provided to people under quarantine to prevent them from leaving their houses. Instead of harassing and arresting the unhoused for breaking quarantine as the police did, we can instead give unhoused individuals homes and a bed to sleep in.

An abolitionist pandemic response would be a solution that treats people with dignity and respect and addresses needs rather than simply using a brute tool like coercion. Whatever positive work is done by the police during the quarantine could be done instead by unarmed frontline medics.

Instead of leaving the incarcerated to die horrible deaths in prison during the pandemic, we can just free them. Punishment as a paradigm is deeply flawed. So many so-called criminals commit crimes out of poverty. Incarceration does nothing to solve poverty and instead exacerbates it. By imprisoning people who could potentially be breadwinners, the state deprives families out of incomes and exacerbates their poverty. Other crimes are committed because these individuals have mental illness or personality disorders. Incarceration does nothing to help such people in their condition nor does it allow them space to improve themselves.

We have to face the fact that incarceration is used disproportionately against the poor and dispossessed classes. Incarceration is not for criminals in power like Imelda Marcos and to advocate for doing so does little to actually break the power of the plunderers while reproducing the harmful logic of coercion and violence.

In cases of drug addiction and violence related to drugs, the caging of drug users does little to help them overcome addiction and get clean. So many thousands were needlessly incarcerated or executed by the police and vigilantes due to Duterte’s bloody anti-drug operations. Those incarcerated risk dying of COVID-19 now that the pandemic has spread inside the prison walls. Those suffering drug addiction do not deserve to die, neither by extrajudicial

police killings or a slow and painful death by COVID-19 in prisons. It would be less harmful to help those with drug addiction with care instead of inflicting violence.

If real harms are committed by individuals, it would be better if such harms were dealt with using the principles of restorative justice and transformative justice, undoing what harms can be undone and working on correcting violent tendencies.

Before colonization, the people of the archipelago did not have police and prisons and security was the responsibility of the community. In this regard, abolition is decolonization, especially in the context where policing and incarceration were instituted by the Spanish and later American colonial governments and retained by the post-colonial state. Through concepts such as restorative justice and transformative justice, we can bring back security as the responsibility of the community instead of the state. Harms can be addressed in communal manner and perpetrators can be reformed instead of simply caged.

It is in this context that in lieu of abolishing, defunding the police becomes an urgent first demand in the pandemic. Defunding police and prisons and redirecting funds towards public health policies that have proven to stem the spread of the virus, along with restorative and transformative justice initiatives are some important concrete steps towards abolition and eroding the institutions of the police and prisons.

Defunding should not be the end goal as that risks only entrenching the logic of coercion in a mitigated form. Abolition works by thinking outside the logic of coercion and in building consent and collaboration instead.

The defunding of the police as a popular demand in the Philippines is just beginning to grow. Committed abolitionists must seize upon this opportunity to nurture that demand for defunding towards the complete abolition of policing and incarceration and in investing in care.

To add to the thunderous demands of “aid, not bullets,” “help, not detention,” and “medical solutions, not military intervention,” perhaps we can also demand:

Buwagin ang Kapulisan! — Abolish the police!

Gibain ang mga kulungan! — Tear down the prisons!

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