Strong-Arming, Weak Steering: Central-Local Relations in the Philippines in the Era of the Pandemic

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Abstract

This article examines central-local dynamics in the Philippines in the era of the pandemic, demonstrating that the national government has not provided the type of “central steering” necessary to confront a foe as tenacious as COVID-19. Instead, there is another type of power that emanates from the center – namely the strong-arming of local politicians by President Rodrigo Duterte. While this form of power may help conceal the government’s “weak steering,” and make the president appear to be in control, it does not produce the quality of national-subnational coordination required for effective pandemic response. It is an escalation of Duterte’s earlier approaches, from 2016 to 2019, albeit no longer accompanied with rhetoric supporting local autonomy. Through examination of key elements of the government’s pandemic response, we advance our core argument: strong-arming is no substitute for effective central steering – whether in responding to this crisis or to other crises that may emerge in the future.

Keywords

central-local relations – territorial politics – pandemic politics – central steering – infrastructural power – despotic power

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It is the national government that should call the shots.... There is only one republic here, the Republic of the Philippines, and therefore, you should abide by the directives of the national government when it sets ... the directives ... for the good of the country.

President Rodrigo Duterte, March 20, 2020

Across the world, as the COVID-19 pandemic is now in its third year, it continues to reshape perspectives on the scope and proper role of government. “Given the importance of strong state action to slow the pandemic” as well as the lack of substitutes “for a competent state during a national emergency,” Francis Fukuyama observed in mid-2020, the global crisis has “revealed government’s ability to provide solutions, drawing on collective resources in the process.” Sadly, as Fukuyama readily acknowledged at that early point, many states were failing the test: “The pandemic has shone a bright light on existing institutions everywhere, revealing their inadequacies and weaknesses” (2020: 30). As the coronavirus has since mutated into new variants, all governments have been deeply challenged as they try to formulate appropriate responses on the basis of incomplete information. Some, however, have managed relatively less disastrous outcomes than others.

A critical element of government effectiveness involves the capacity of national and local governments to coordinate in support of an effective pandemic response. The “highly asymmetric” territorial impact of the pandemic across subnational units of developed countries, as highlighted by the OECD (2020: 4), is likely all the more pronounced in many developing countries. As a basic heuristic, we can conceive of three broad patterns of interaction and place them along a continuum. At the most positive end are polities where the national and subnational levels of government each have substantial levels of capacity and collaborate effectively. In the middle are those that can be termed compensatory: “local strengths offset weakness at the centre or vice-versa.” At the other extreme come the least sanguine outcomes, where neither the central government nor the local government display the capacity to respond effectively to the pandemic, and/or there is substantial conflict over goals and means (building on Weiss et al., 2021: 2–3).

1 Tomacruz 2020b.
As this analysis examines the dynamics of central-local relations in the Philippines in the era of COVID-19, we begin with a basic assertion: it is imperative that the central government play a leading role in coordinating an effective response to the national crisis brought on by the pandemic. It is, after all, central relative to all other entities of government throughout the archipelago. And the crisis is, after all, national rather than regional or local in character. As the epigraph above highlights, this indeed was the forceful message of President Duterte after he decided to take the virus seriously and project a strong role for the Inter-Agency Task Force for Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID). This body had been re-activated to manage the COVID-19 situation and serve as the coordinating body and set national guidelines. Duterte was now putting the task force in charge, and warning local officials to listen to orders or face the risk of administrative charges: “I am ordering all [local government units]... to stand down and to abide by the directives of the IATF ... and those issued by the Office of the President” (Tomacruz 2020b).

Unfortunately, it soon became apparent that the Philippine national government was not up to the tasks at hand. As much as the pandemic demands strong and effective central coordination from Manila, the critical agencies—led by the Department of Health (DOH)—have repeatedly proven themselves unable to deliver. This lack of capacity at the center “[led] eventually to IATF ceding much of its decision-making powers to local governments” (Espia et al., 2021: 54). Many local governments then stepped into the void, working in highly innovative ways to compensate for the often sluggish and ineffective response of the central government (see e.g., Alvarez et al. 2022; NTRC 2020; Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) n.d.; and Abad 2021). As Atienza (2021) explains, the notably “pro-active” Local Government Units (LGUs) have tended to be those with “relatively large incomes and resources” as well as other key advantages including “good coordination with national agencies,” better administrative capacity, and partnerships with civil society including business.

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2 The task force, referred to most commonly as the IATF, was re-activated through an inter-agency resolution coordinated by the Department of Health (Resolution No. 1, 28 January 2020), at https://doh.gov.ph/sites/default/files/basic-page/IATF%20Resolution.pdf. On Duterte’s initial inclination to dismiss the severity of the coronavirus, see Holmes and Hutchcroft 2020.

3 Local officials often complained of the national government’s failure to provide clear direction, with confusing and contradictory policy pronouncements forcing them to manage the pandemic on their own devices. In April 2020, as interventions by Local Government Units (LGUs) became more visible, the IATF issued a directive to adopt a “national-government-enabled, local government-led, and people-centered response” (Rappler 2020a). Even so, they did not provide for any formal LGU representation in the IATF.
Within a polity that already accords substantial autonomy to subnational politicians, this might encourage some to herald the virtues of relying on subnational initiatives. One simple fact, however, quickly reveals the limitations of such an approach: while some local governments in the Philippines have the inclination and capacity to begin to compensate at least marginally for the deficiencies of the central government, and enhance the pandemic response within their respective jurisdictions, many do not. Citizens who happen to live in LGUs that fail in the task of pandemic response should not be left behind. Too often, however, subnational responses to public health imperatives are hampered by major structural deficiencies. Aside from there sometimes being an “absence of clear instructions from the national government,” Atienza (2021) highlights how “some LGUs failed to meet the challenges of COVID-19 and the responsibilities during the crisis because of limited resources, lack of good management skills, the dominance of patronage politics, corruption, and other problems.” From the perspective of a leading global firm in the business of financial risk analysis, the lack of guidance from the national government has led to a great deal of inconsistency across the country:

A contributor to the Philippines’ inability to control local infections in the earlier months came from the healthcare system being decentralized. City and town leaders are responsible for the health system, rather than the central government. As a result, there were not consistent policies and rigorousness around contact tracing, funding, and quarantine measures for those infected and their close contacts.

Moody’s Analytics in De Vera 2021

This is not surprising. In the absence of a strong and capable central state able to enforce the rules by which authority is being devolved to the subnational level, we should expect substantial variation in outcomes from one locale to the next.

To return to the continuum introduced above, some parts of the Philippines are in the middle of the continuum (where subnational entities compensate for deficiencies of the national government) while others are relegated to its deleterious extreme (where no tier of government is responding effectively to the pandemic). It would seemingly be difficult to place any part of the Philippines too far out on the positive side of the continuum (i.e., where the

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4 The foundation of contemporary de jure decentralization is the 1991 Local Government Code, which brought further devolution to a polity with a long history of de facto decentralization. See Hutchcroft 2014.
national and subnational levels of government each have substantial levels of capacity and collaborate effectively). Below, we will note one case where the national and subnational levels of government did at least collaborate effectively. Even in this instance, however, shortfalls in state capacity continued to hamper pandemic response.

Then there is the issue of national leadership. Fukuyama identifies three critical elements of an effective response to the pandemic: competent states – discussed above – as well as skillful leadership and “a government that citizens trust and listen to.”5 As he further emphasizes, the type of regime – whether democratic or authoritarian – is not determinative (2020: 26). The Philippines has, most unfortunately, experienced the pandemic under a populist president6 that not only lacks an appreciation of the virtues of an effective bureaucracy7 but is also oriented toward reliance on a range of coercive maneuvers. Duterte’s first impulse – once it became clear that the coronavirus could not be wished or joked away – was a highly securitized approach drawing on some of the same schemes and rhetoric as his signature (and so-called) “war on drugs” (see Hall and Dumpit 2022). Kusaka refers to Duterte’s “disciplinary quarantine,” within which a favorite scapegoat are the pasaway, or “undisciplined ‘evil others,’” who fail to abide with the strict lockdown regulations (2020: 424). Hapal (2021) similarly argues that these pasaway constitute the oppositional archetype deliberately produced to validate the securitization of the pandemic.

We propose two friendly amendments to Fukuyama’s schema. First, we would make explicit the fact that a competent state presumes a system of effective territorial coordination, from national to subnational levels. Second, we would add a fourth factor, and that is the need for sound policies. His three factors, therefore, should be viewed as necessary but not sufficient conditions. In other words, even with the full presence of “state capacity, social trust, and leadership” (p. 26), the pursuit of misguided policies will undermine the overall success of a pandemic response.

This parallels Fukuyama’s lament about the United States as he was writing in the final months of the presidency of Donald Trump: “It was the country’s singular misfortune to have the most incompetent and divisive leader in its modern history when the crisis hit” (2020: 32). While cross-national comparisons of pandemic responses are beyond the scope of this article, it is important to emphasize that Duterte is not the only populist leader to perform poorly in pandemic response. Lasco (2020) analyzes the political constructions and styles of different populist leaders, highlighting their tendency for simplification and spectacle-ization of the crisis as well as their mobilization of familiar patterns of action and rhetoric when confronted with a health crisis. In the final analysis, Duterte may well be given credit for overseeing relatively less disastrous outcomes than those associated with such populist counterparts as Trump, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, and India’s Narendra Modi.

Arguably the only post-1986 administration that did have such an appreciation was that of President Fidel V. Ramos (see Hutchcroft 2011).
Enhanced policing can then be justified as the protection of the virtuous from those perceived to derail government efforts to win the war against COVID-19.

As this played out in central-local relations, the Duterte government charged forth with “strong-arming” tactics that had already been favored prior to the pandemic. But whereas earlier there had been at least some modicum of rhetorical support for local autonomy – albeit contradicted in practice – President Duterte now tended to favor tougher statements focusing unapologetically on national directives (as illustrated in the epigraph above). In the glaring absence of an effective central state apparatus, as explained further below, this should not be viewed as the centralization of the territorial infrastructure of the Philippines. Rather, we argue, a key advantage of strong-arming (from the standpoint of the strongman) is how it helps to conceal the basic deficiencies of the national agencies – and the central state’s weak capacity for steering the polity as a whole. While this makes the supremo appear supreme, it does not nurture state capacity at the center, and nor does it lead to the quality of national-subnational coordination that is required for an effective response to the pandemic. Strong-arming may achieve a certain level of success in the short term (e.g., by keeping residents from circulating in the community, out of fear of arbitrary, on-the-spot punishment by security forces), but in the long term it is no substitute for effective central steering.

The first section of this article lays out our theoretical framework, elucidating the concepts of central steering and “strong-arming” and explaining how they push traditional analysis of central-local relations in more productive directions. Second, we provide background on the first half of the Duterte administration (2016–2019), i.e., prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, highlighting the marked gap between Duterte’s rhetorical support for local autonomy and the reality of his tightening grip. The third section examines major elements of pandemic response since early 2020, where the national government managed a particular combination of intimidation, indecision, and general incompetence in its dealings with subnational tiers. Particular attention is given to the two major pandemic response and service delivery programs: the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) and the vaccination procurement and rollout in the country. In the concluding section, we summarize our argument and then propose three long-term reform measures to help nurture more effective national-subnational coordination – if not in time to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, at least to help the country prepare for other major challenges (e.g., adaptation to the likely massive impact of climate change, already a clear and present danger to the Philippines).
Central Steering Versus Strong-Arming: Conceptual Foundations

As the COVID-19 crisis demands attention from governments throughout the world, it is also leading to major reappraisals of the character of central-local relations in specific settings; see, e.g., analysis of Japan (Ueda 2020), Ireland (Shannon and O’Leary 2021), and the United Kingdom (e.g. Clyne 2021, Ward 2020). The OECD, meanwhile, observes a process by which “COVID-19 is shaping the future of multi-level governance…. leading countries to re-evaluate their multi-level governance systems and regional policy instruments in an effort to make them more ‘fit for purpose’, more flexible, and better able to respond to the differentiated needs of regions” (2020: 71–72).

As this reappraisal proceeds in individual countries as well as in comparative analysis, it is important to refurbish conceptual foundations by taking a fresh look at old assumptions. As a first step, analysis must move beyond the standard dichotomous separation of central versus local, and highlight instead the degree to which expansion in the role of states has led local government to become “more and more intertwined with the domain of the central government.” Here we draw on the framework of Francesco Kjellberg, who argues that the “autonomous model of local government” has become increasingly obsolete and needs to be replaced with what he calls an “integrational model” better suited to “the intricacies of central-local relations in a contemporary context.” The autonomous model conceptualizes a clear separation between the national and local “spheres of government … where the actions of the local authorities are as far as possible unimpeded by the central organs.” The integrational model, on the other hand, “accentuates the integration between the two spheres of government” and underscores the need for “close cooperation” among different levels of government (1995: 43, 48–49, emphasis added).

Although Kjellberg bases his prescriptions on the realities of the welfare state in postwar Europe, his basic point about the expansion of state functions could not be more appropriate to our times – as states must take on a range of new roles if they are to respond effectively to the extraordinary public health crisis of COVID-19. At one level, Kjellberg’s critique of the “autonomous model of local government” may seem entirely obvious: it is of course essential that different levels of government be viewed as part of an integrated whole, and cooperate with each other as much as possible. In the Philippine context, however, the model that Kjellberg treats as obsolete is in fact alive and well. “Full devolution” is now the watchword of the government, particularly since it began preparing for the 2022 implementation of an even more generous national revenue sharing scheme (described further below). In June 2021, the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) heralded an Executive Order
(EO 138) that will begin “the full devolution of basic services and facilities from the national government to local government units..., including the increased share of LGUs in all national taxes and revenues” (DILG 2021c). In a similar vein, one senator proposed a few months later that the IATF should be abolished in favor of “empowering” the LGUs such that they would instead assume the tasks of pandemic response (Ramos 2021b). Savvy political scientists have long recognized that the polar extremes of the centralization-decentralization continuum do not in fact exist in real life. As James Fesler explained more than half a century ago (1968, 371), “Total decentralization would require the withering away of the state, whereas total centralization would imperil the state’s capacity to perform its functions.” As the flawed notion of “full devolution” is now bandied about freely in the Philippines, the integrational model of Kjellberg is arguably more relevant than ever to discussions of how the country is to structure the relationship between the center and localities.

Kjellberg’s analysis of “The Changing Values of Local Government,” it must be emphasized, does not negate the traditional ideals of self-government: liberty/autonomy for local communities to establish their own priorities, democratic participation, and the efficiency that comes from attention to the needs of specific communities. Even as these ideals emerged in the early nineteenth century, however, “there was never a question, even remotely, of abolishing the control of central authorities.” Amidst the twentieth-century expansion in the scope of state functions, it became increasingly clear that there were a set of national goals that could not be ignored. These goals are fourfold: safeguarding the rule of law and citizens’ rights against abusive local authorities, ensuring that public funds are efficiently utilized, promoting equity across regions (amidst uneven endowments, differing demographic and geographic conditions, etc.), and maintaining macroeconomic stability (i.e., guarding against profligate local governments) (1995: 42–49).

After emphasizing that local governments need to be conceived as “part of a larger, more encompassing political and administrative body,” Kjellberg highlights the virtues of advancing national goals through what he calls “central steering.” These are to be balanced against local ideals, which remain the foundation of subnational governance. In essence, this approach seeks to ensure that “[w]hile the general goals of public activity will remain the realm of national government, the definition of the means to be adopted would more explicitly become the function of local authorities.” This leads him to posit what he calls the “local government paradox,” namely that “the more extended the domain of local government, the more delimited its autonomous sphere of action” (1995: 44–45, 50, 43). Far from making local government mere adjuncts of the center, however, Kjellberg’s analysis highlights how local governments
occupy a very distinctive and invaluable role at the base of the state. Whereas
the modern central state is characterized by a high degree of functional differ-
entiation (Huntington 1968: 109), the modern local government is for Kjellberg
“a multipurpose unit [that] has a greater potential for connecting the differ-
et salient issues in a community than do specialized organs.” Through local
democratic political processes, local communities can “counter the sectoriza-
tion of public policy” and fine-tune the “adaption in the localities of national

Kjellberg’s notion of “central steering” echoes a much earlier observation of
James Fesler on the critical role of the national government – even, and again
paradoxically, for the basic tasks of establishing and maintaining mechanisms of
decentralization:

One of the most curious aspects of decentralization is the responsibil-
ity that national government must assume to assure realization of the
goals that decentralization, as doctrinally advocated, is supposed to
serve. National legislation, overriding local objections and implemented
by national administrative action, is often required to democratize the
selection of local officials, to establish viable units of local government
with the size, resources, and diversity of interests that are preconditions
of effective local self-government, to recruit and train skilled staff for
local administration, to minimize corruption and regularize fiscal prac-
tices, and to provide grants from national revenue to help finance the
more impoverished communities.8

In sum, what Kjellberg describes as the “autonomous model of local govern-
ment” proves entirely insufficient in describing the reality – and imperatives –
of central-local relations in the modern era.9 As such, it needs to be replaced

8 Fesler accompanies this with sardonic – and, sadly, still relevant – advice to our discipline:
“decentralization is not so absolute, so unmixed, a good that one’s responsibility as a political
scientist can be discharged by operating from the premise that ‘the more decentralization
the better’” (1965: 549). For further cautionary analysis of devolution, including its negative
consequences in settings with strong local bosses, see Hutchcroft 2001: 42.
9 Another major problem with this dichotomous model, not discussed by Kjellberg, is its tend-
dency to generate simplistic discourses of national versus local – and, in the process, down-
play the myriad other cross-cutting cleavages (based on political faction or party, dynastic
ties, religion, ethnicity, and much more) that are so important in real-world politics. These
include alliances linking like-minded cohorts of national and local politicians as well as rival-
ries dividing politicians at either level – national or local – into distinct camps.
with an “integrational” model that emphasizes the need for effective collaboration between the national government and the localities. Central steering is essential, whether in the process of promoting effective structures of local governance or – as per the focus of this analysis – the fight to contain a pandemic.

Our conceptualization of “strong-arming” draws inspiration from Michael Mann’s critical distinction between two types of power. The first is the despotic power that state elites exercise over civil society groups, not as part of routine or institutionalized procedures but rather at the mere “whim” of the leader. It is, he explains, “power by the state elite itself over civil society” (1984: 188–190).

As shall be clear in the empirical analysis below, this is an entirely apt description of how Duterte wields coercive power over segments of Philippine society – local politicians included. The historian Alfred W. McCoy views Duterte as part of “a lineage of Filipino strongmen,” including Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., who use “performative violence” to “[project] domestic strength.” A consistent motivation is to exert control over “provincial peripheries,” as they “[deputize] a panoply of parastatal elements” who engage in “recurring incidents of spectacular abuse” (McCoy 2017: 44, 12–13). As he analyzes “the making of a tyrant,” sociologist Randy David (2021) explains how Duterte “has never hesitated to bare the naked force behind the veneer of presidential power,” even when it involves “deploying the official mechanisms of the state to avenge a deeply personal grudge, or to repay a private debt.” Duterte is indeed a master of despotic power, exercised on a whim, to exert control over societal actors. As he catapulted from city mayor to national president, Duterte brought along patterns of bossism most commonly found in local politics.10 Following the previous example of Marcos, who succeeded in putting the entire archipelago under “national-level boss rule” (Sidel 2009: 144), Duterte’s “war on drugs” ... played the key role in bringing back national boss rule” (Quimpo 2017: 157).

Mann contrasts despotic power with infrastructural power, which he defines as “the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement political decisions throughout the realm.” It is, in a nutshell, power through rather than power over, with a focus on the state rather than the “state elite.” Armed with this more sophisticated kind of power, the state can “centrally co-ordinate the activities of civil society through its own infrastructure” (1984: 189–190, emphasis added).

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10 As defined by John Sidel, bosses are “predatory power brokers who achieve monopolistic control over both coercive and economic resources within given territorial jurisdictions or bailiwicks” (1999: 19).
While infrastructural power (involving civil society) is clearly distinct from Kjellberg’s notion of central steering (involving coordination between national and subnational elements of the state), they do display an elective affinity. For Mann, the “most important ... precondition of state power” is its territoriality (1984: 198); a defining characteristic of the modern state, then, is how “political relations radiate to and from a center” across a “territorially demarcated area” (1993: 55). Building on Mann’s analysis, we can say that if infrastructural power is to be extended “throughout the realm,” there must be an institutional structure that connects the center with its subnational units. This brings us back to Kjellberg’s integrational model, with its focus on how the national government is “intertwined” with – and can work in “close cooperation” with – local governments throughout the country. Through the integrational model, and more specifically the process of central steering, we can better understand how infrastructural power is extended territorially from the capital to the periphery.

These theoretical foundations allow us to be more explicit in drawing the contrast between the two concepts that are central to our analysis, namely strong-arming and central steering. As noted above, the former cannot be viewed as a substitute for the latter – even if, we acknowledge, there may be ways in which the decisiveness of strong-arming can have a certain short-term effectiveness in accomplishing particular tasks. Strong-arming may also be a way of bringing a certain type of makeshift centralization to the polity, oriented toward short-term regime goals rather than toward the long-term strengthening of state structures – as evidenced by prevailing patterns under the Duterte administration (Gera and Hutchcroft 2021). There is, however, a qualitative difference between the two concepts, as strong-arming is a manifestation of despotic power and central steering is related to infrastructural power. The former puts the focus on expedient, work-around solutions, and the often brutal and arbitrary exercise of power. As can safely be inferred from Kjellberg’s analysis, central steering is very different: it is grounded in procedural clarity, the consistent application of the rules, strong institutions, and – most fundamentally – the systematic integration of national and local governments. As Kjellberg makes clear, moreover, central steering is not synonymous with centralization. Rather, it involves respect for local ideals albeit within a model of national integration.

So how do these theoretical foundations play out in the real world? As part of the process of central steering, it is worth recalling, the national government sets the “general goals” while local authorities then focus on defining “the means to be adopted.” This is broadly consonant with the World Health Organization’s guidelines for “pandemic preparedness and response,” which put the onus of leadership responsibility at the national level:
Central governments should define, oversee, and coordinate key preparedness actions.... [and] advise local governments on best practices in pandemic preparedness planning and implement a quality control system to regularly monitor and evaluate the operability and quality of local and regional plans.

WHO 2009: 11

A more recent OECD report, similarly, asserts that “[l]eadership and coordination by national government is critical.” It further argues that “policy responses are more likely to be fragmented” where “subnational governments operate with high degrees of autonomy.” At the same time, because it is the subnational entities that “are at the frontline of the crisis management and recovery,” there needs to be flexibility, and opportunities for experimentation, in the midst of the uncertainties of the pandemic. This necessitates “making room for ‘bottom-up’, innovative approaches ... that can be applied elsewhere, if successful and appropriately adapted.” Their central recommendation is the universal need for “[e]ffective coordination between national and subnational governments, and across jurisdictions ... for all dimensions of the crisis – health, economic, social and fiscal” (2020: 33, 66, 2, 73, 65).

As valuable as it is to set forth these first principles, we must also emphasize a major caveat: neither effective central steering nor infrastructural power can be built overnight. They emerge over long, complex, and contingent processes of state formation, and cannot be willed into existence. This is in contrast to despotic power, which is not without its own structural moorings but is nonetheless exercised according to the will (and whim) of the ruler. In the case of the Philippines, the historical cards are unfortunately stacked against contemporary success – going back, most critically, to the emergence of the modern Philippine state under American colonial rule. The bureaucracy historically exhibits weak capacity, and is furthermore imbued with strong patrimonial characteristics. In addition, the historical sequencing of the emergence of representative institutions relative to development of the bureaucracy tilts the political system very decidedly – from the national level to local levels – toward a strong focus on patronage (see Hutchcroft and Rocamora 2012; Hicken et al. 2019; Teehankee and Calimbahin 2022). The historical weakness of another set of core institutions, political parties, is reinforced by particular features of the current electoral system (as discussed further below).

The Philippine national government does indeed provide central steering in many spheres, but these mechanisms are often thoroughly infused with political and/or electoral considerations. In a weakly institutionalized and highly personalistic polity, it is often difficult to discern which elements of central
steering reflect broader policy goals versus which are oriented to boosting the prospects of politicians allied to the presidential palace or weakening those who are considered rivals. In sum, the logic of a patrimonial and patronage-oriented polity frequently undermines the integrity of the bureaucracy. This is exacerbated by the presence of a charismatic populist leader oriented to strong-arm tactics against those who have crossed his path (see Teehankee 2016; Curato 2017; Thompson 2020; Kenny and Holmes 2020).

While the structural deficiencies surveyed above are a product of historical processes of state formation and political development, the past need not be prologue to the future. With appropriate measures of both bureaucratic and political reform, the Philippines will be able to begin to nurture stronger political institutions—and thus be in a better position to react to other crises on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutional reform is a long-haul proposition, but it is at the same time an imperative that cannot wait. The current pandemic, for all the human devastation it has produced, should at the same time be viewed as a call to action. Out of crisis, after all, comes opportunity as well. Our specific reform proposals will be outlined in Section Four.

2 Duterte’s Tightening Grip, 2016–2019: Local Autonomy in Rhetoric Versus Reality

The major trend in central-local relations under the regime of President Rodrigo Duterte has been the capacity of the executive to exert a very tight grip over local politicians—arguably the tightest since the martial law dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. (1972–1986).11 Throughout the first three years of his term, from 2016 to 2019, there was a major chasm between Duterte’s strong-arming grip from the center and his continuing rhetorical support for federalism and local autonomy. Even as he did strikingly little to advance the reforms that many local politicians have been keen to champion, it is remarkable how local politicians continued to rally behind their president.12 To use the terminology of Michael Mann, it is Duterte’s despotic power that very much seems to have helped keep them in line.

11 Recognizing, as well, the extraordinary special powers assumed by the national government under Corazon Aquino’s post-Marcos “Freedom Constitution” in 1986–87, including the power to appoint governors and mayors. This was also a period, however, that witnessed a clear resurgence of local power throughout the country. See Kerkvliet and Mojares 1991.

12 This section draws on Gera and Hutchcroft 2021, which provides considerably more detail on the dynamics of this period.
A proposed shift from a unitary to a federal system was a major theme of Duterte in the lead-up to his 2016 presidential campaign (Rood 2019), and it attracted eager support from local government coalitions. But as he moved into the second half of his term, the idea had effectively been shelved (Teehankee 2019). When subsequently asked if he was still pushing for the shift, he replied in the affirmative but proceeded into a rather disjointed statement that revealed a great deal about his views on presidential power and local autonomy:

Federalism is good but there are certain things that you have to be very clear [about]... [It] devolves a lot of authority to the local government's region.... But it has to have a strong president to put together the country [because] federal is a very loose structure already. One has a lot of power locally.... So the President will have to..., until such time that we have perfected it, there has to be a strong president with the same powers now. [But as for me] I'm out of it because I think it will pass beyond my time.

Valente 2019

As the first president in Philippine history to ascend directly from local office to the presidential palace, many expected Duterte to actively support the causes of local politicians. One of their favorite causes, not surprisingly, is more money from the national government. But in response to a landmark 2019 Supreme Court ruling on the primary national revenue sharing program, the president backpedalled. This decision, known as the Mandanas-Garcia Ruling, is to deliver a financial windfall to local governments – and is the only major win for local politicians under the Duterte administration. Notably, however, after the Supreme Court's initial ruling in 2018, Duterte's economic managers promptly warned that its implementation could create “a possible challenge to effective public finance management” (De Vera 2018). In the end, the administration was conveniently saved by the high court's decision to delay its implementation to the very end of Duterte's term.

As federalism was abandoned and the financial windfall for local governments postponed, the Duterte administration simultaneously employed a combination of old and new schemes to ensure that it had an effective grip on local structures throughout the archipelago. After his election in 2016, Duterte positioned himself as a powerful patriarchal boss who proved decisive and unapologetic in shielding and vindicating those loyal to him, including those allegedly involved in high-level scandals. In addition, he vilified those who

13 See Hutchcroft 2017 for a contrarian perspective on the basic logic of a shift to federalism.
opposed him, including former allies who have fallen out of favor. The guarantee of political protection, along with the dispensing of material benefits, created a potent incentive for local politicians to curry favor with the president and seek to be included within his broad political coalition. As local politicians were enfeebled, they generally toed the line in support of Duterte’s broader agenda of political consolidation and centralization; in other words, many subnational politicians seemed to acquiesce to their own subjugation. Again drawing on Gera and Hutchcroft (2021), and emphasizing the divergence between the rhetoric and reality, we will survey the combination of old and new schemes employed by the Duterte administration to ensure his effective grip on local politicians throughout the archipelago. These strategies highlight Duterte’s predilection for authoritarian rule and successful consolidation of political power at the center – which, as we will see in the next section, was amplified during the pandemic.

2.1 **Utilizing Old Schemes: Presidential Pork**

One of Duterte’s mechanisms for exerting control over local politicians was the longstanding practice of dispensing large quantities of presidential pork to localities (Holmes 2019); as in earlier years, these patronage resources were handed out with high levels of executive discretion (Buan 2017; Yap 2019). Aside from being a grandmaster in this well-established practice, Duterte also employed three other key means of exerting control over local politicians. These techniques were largely unprecedented in scope and character.

2.2 **Killings of Mayors and Other Local Politicians as Part of His So-Called “War on Drugs”**

Duterte’s tight grip on local political structures was dramatically advanced by his effective deployment of intimidation. The centerpiece of his presidency was known as the “war on drugs” campaign, which involved the killing of thousands of people, mostly urban poor (Human Rights Watch 2019, 2021). More than two dozen local officials were assassinated after 2016, many of whom had been put on the president’s ‘narco-list’ (Talabong 2019). The climate of fear under Duterte’s regime reshaped power dynamics between the center and localities, with far less room for maneuver at the subnational

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14 Soon after the 2016 release of a so-called “drug matrix,” accusing prominent officials of links to the narcotics trade, President Duterte apologized for how it had incorrectly implicated some local politicians. At the same time, he tried to excuse himself by saying “I cannot be perfect, and sometimes you are correct when you say that life is never fair” (Adel 2016). One provincial official named in the matrix had labelled it “nothing but a big and horrible joke” (Rappler 2016).
level. After Duterte came to office in 2016, local politicians had to confront fearsome examples of what happens to those who fall out of favor with the presidential palace.

2.3 Active Intervention in Local Electoral Politics, Targeting Those Who Dared Oppose Him

As a rule, Duterte’s enduring popularity meant that those running for gubernatorial or mayoral office in the May 2019 midterm elections frequently scrambled to obtain his political endorsement. This proved to be the most critical currency for winning, and most of his endorsed local candidates emerged victorious. There is, however, at least one major exception to this rule. In Cebu City, Mayor Tomas Osmeña had earned the ire of the president. Given the strength of the mayor’s local electoral machine, it was likely doubtful that Duterte’s personal endorsement of his local allies would be sufficient to topple Osmeña. Extra measures were needed. There were well-documented reports of police harassment of Cebu City local candidates not aligned with the president, including checkpoints placed outside the mayor’s home and operations in the city’s upland areas seeking to undercut support for Osmeña. According to insiders, this police intervention may have played a critical role in the electoral outcome, and – after three decades in which he was frequently the dominant figure in Cebu politics – Osmeña was ousted by Duterte’s ally. While Osmeña appears to have been the most prominent focus of palace attacks in the 2019 mid-term election, targeted verbal attacks and public shaming tactics were not uncommon elsewhere. As explained by investigative journalist Miriam Grace Go, “the pattern ... of local officials getting killed weeks or months after being cited in the drug list or cursed by the President in his speech” could exert a

15 Before 2016, when Duterte was mayor of Davao and Osmeña mayor of Cebu, the two politicians had a relationship of mutual admiration grounded in part on the tough stances they were each taking on drugs. But Osmeña supported Manuel “Mar” Roxas II in the 2016 presidential elections, and only belatedly shifted over to Duterte with his “Let’s DO [Duterte-Osmeña] It!” campaign slogan. After Osmeña withdrew his support for the national government’s campaign against illegal drugs, the National Police Commission removed his operational supervision authority over the police (Leysen 2016). Osmeña later found himself at odds with Royina Garma, a trusted ally of Duterte whom the president put in charge of the city’s police force in July 2018. Osmeña accused the police of being behind the killings that included his most trusted cop – gunned down in an anti-drug operation (Talabong 2018a and 2018b). Duterte then lashed out at Osmeña for not cooperating with his administration in the way it was conducting the drug war in Cebu City. For further background on different patterns of support among governors and mayors for “Duterte’s Deadly War on Drugs,” see Kreuzer 2020.
strong influence on electoral dynamics. “If the President doesn’t like you, it’s like the death sentence to your candidacy” (Rappler 2019).

2.4 Enhanced Issuance of ‘Show Cause Orders’ against Subnational Units

Under the Duterte regime, particularly after retired Philippine Army General Eduardo Año took the helm of DILG in 2018, one could observe the enhanced use of “Show Cause Orders” (SCO’s) against local officials facing accusations or complaints of having acted improperly or illegally. Within a given deadline, they were forced to explain why no administrative cases should be filed against them. Failure to do so could lead to the filing not only of such cases but also potentially to criminal charges.

The DILG, acting on behalf of the Executive, is mandated by the 1991 Local Government Code to conduct general supervision and strengthen the capability of local governments in the promotion of local autonomy. When done correctly, according to the logic of central steering, the DILG has helped both to capacitate local innovations and to monitor abuses of local politicians (a longstanding problem, given the prevalence of local dynasties and bossism throughout the archipelago).

But the DILG also has the capacity to assist presidents in keeping tabs on localities; as we shall see in the next section, the DILG has been accused of politicizing some of its SCO’s in ways viewed as favorable to the administration. The sheer quantity of SCO’s has also brought criticism. Ahead of the pandemic, one well-connected ally of the president, himself a congressperson, complained about how LGU’s are being “dictated and ordered around” by the DILG on how to exercise their powers. This, he argued, is a violation of the constitutional grant of local autonomy. “LGU’s are partners in implementing national policy,” said the congressman, “not miscreants one threatens with punishment at every turn.” Because governors and mayors fear raising these questions, he further explained, it is important for members of Congress to speak out in support of local autonomy (Fernandez 2020).

3 Pandemic Response, 2020–Present: Intimidation Amidst Incompetence

After the onset of the pandemic, the president who had praised federalism as a candidate now expressed even stronger underlying concerns about federal structures (beyond those already noted above). Compared to the United States, he explained, the Philippines is better placed to fight COVID-19 because
of its unitary form of government (and, as an odd addendum, the relative ease of arresting people):

The only thing that’s going our way, in our favor, is that we are a unitary type of government. The hold of the central government is different from the United States. They have more freedom there .... Dito sa Pilipinas pag sinabing whatever department, pag sinabi niyang ganoon, ganoon talaga [Here in the Philippines, when whatever department says one thing, that’s really how it goes]. And you can enforce .... Otherwise, [local officials] will be guilty of simple gross negligence ... then you can be suspended and as a matter of fact, you can be terminated.... Iba kasi, ayaw [Other local officials tend to disagree]. That doesn’t take place in the Philippines because everybody is [bound] by the national policy. Itong atin naman [What we have is], for the good of the people, for all. We do not have any qualms in arresting people.

CNN Philippines 2020b

As President Duterte already exerted substantial control over local power structures, the terrain of COVID-19 created potent opportunities and justification for him to ramp up his politics of fear. The deployment of strong-arming tactics, moreover, proved convenient in concealing deficiencies not only in the administration’s strategy of pandemic response but also in central state capacity and mechanisms of intergovernmental coordination. In such an environment, many local politicians acquiesced even further to the President’s will and bidding.

3.1 Weak Steering: Central Largesse but Major Flaws in Resource Distribution

Even prior to the pandemic, the Office of the President already controlled sizeable quantities of discretionary funds including contingency, special purpose, confidential, and intelligence funds (see Holmes 2019). These extraordinary resources, regarded as presidential pork and patronage resources due to the high degree of discretion enjoyed by the executive, have been considerably enhanced during the pandemic. Among the special powers granted to the president by the “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act” was the authority and discretion to realign, reprogram, and reallocate funds from savings and unobligated funds under the General Appropriations Act for Fiscal Years 2019 and 2020.16 It also

16 A prominent lawyers’ group assailed these provisions as unconstitutional, noting that they encroach on congressional powers to allocate public funds (CNN, 25 March 2020).
granted the president the special power to collect unutilized and unreleased funds held by any government corporation and national government agency, and to re-allocate them for pandemic response. In addition, the Palace took effective control of funds for social relief and vaccination. After the executive successfully brought all of this largesse under its control, however, subsequent efforts to distribute assistance to poor households were severely mismanaged.

3.1.1 Social Amelioration Program (SAP)
The Social Amelioration Program (SAP) – a P200 billion emergency subsidy under the ‘Bayanihan to Heal as One Act’ – was designed to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for 18 million low-income households.\footnote{This section draws on Gera 2020.} Even before the first tranches of household relief had been disbursed on 28 March 2020, the DILG raised the alarm that some barangay (village and urban ward) officials were injecting politics into relief distribution (DILG 2020a). This gave Duterte the justification to task the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) with distributing relief assistance,\footnote{DSWD was to work with the National Task Force Against COVID-19 (NTF-COVID-19); incidentally, both units were headed by retired military generals.} ostensibly “to prevent local officials from using the program for political ends.” It was then decided that LGU involvement in SAP would be limited to “assisting” in the distribution of cash subsidies (Lopez 2020).

Amid widespread complaints of delays in the release of the funds, the central government delegated the task back to the LGUs, albeit under the monitoring of the DILG as well as the police and the armed forces – who were instructed to “probe and arrest corrupt local officials” involved in wrongful distribution (DILG 2020c). LGUs protested as they struggled to meet the deadlines due to problems in the list of beneficiaries and fragmented guidelines, among other constraints (CNN Philippines 2020a; Aceron 2020; Chiu 2020). While DSWD admitted shortcomings in the process of emergency aid distribution, it deflected blame to the LGUs’ unfamiliarity with their constituent profiles (Abad 2020; Remitio 2020). A subsequent probe conducted by the House of Representatives pinned the bulk of the blame for SAP distribution delays on the DSWD, highlighting a number of issues including bureaucratic delays, difficulties in identifying beneficiaries (with the problem of faulty master lists compounded by poor coordination between DSWD and LGUs as well as between LGUs and barangays), alleged corruption, and DSWD’s insensitivity to
vulnerable sectors (Dela Cruz 2020). President Duterte nonetheless defended the DSWD, blaming delays on LGU demands (Romero 2020).

The DSWD was supposed to inject impersonal, bureaucratic criteria into the distribution of social amelioration benefits, and thus ward off the deleterious intervention of patronage-hungry local politicians. But there were clearly major problems with the central agencies’ processes, including constraints in their autonomy from central political structures, particularly to the Palace to which they directly reported. In fact, patronage considerations are by no means absent from central responses. This was demonstrated when President Duterte signed a directive designating the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) as the main coordinating body for donations of pandemic-related medical supplies and equipment to the government. The presidential office had to defend Senator Christopher “Bong” Go – Duterte’s former special assistant and trusted ally – against allegations that he was involved in the operations of the OCD (De Guzman 2020), and was manipulating the release of donations to take credit and build his reputation ahead of the 2022 presidential elections. Go also had to deny accusations that medical goods were distributed in the Malasakit Centers – one-stop shops located in health facilities, providing medical and financial assistance to indigent patients – that are his pet initiative (Magsino 2020). More questions were raised when the Palace announced that provinces would receive a special “Bayanihan” (pandemic-related) grant equivalent to half of their respective one-month national revenue sharing allotments (Ramos 2020). This ad hoc initiative – advanced by Go – was seen as a strategy to capture the loyalties of provincial governors (see Gera 2020).

To view this in a larger perspective, the SAP is the story of a national government that is reliant on local governments to distribute funds but at the same time unable to offer support by way of providing accurate lists of beneficiaries. Nevertheless, the LGUs end up getting much of the blame for the problems. Along the way, they are closely monitored out of legitimate concerns that some of them might divert some of the funds for political ends. But, as it turns out, similar charges are being leveled against national-level officials who are perceived to be using funds from the pandemic response for their own political goals.

Quite clearly, politicization at both local and national levels is undermining the creation of a social welfare system based on more technical, universalistic criteria. One can thus observe a major contradiction in the behavior of central

19 Despite these findings, legislators stopped short of exacting accountability from DSWD, emphasizing that the objective of the probe was mainly to “come up with solutions and ensure the integrity of the SAP” (DSWD 2020).
bureaucratic agencies, as they denounce patronage politics when practiced by local politicians but have nothing to say about similar – and indeed larger-scale – practices by national-level politicians close to the administration.

3.1.2 Vaccination Procurement and Rollout

Similar dynamics can be found in the process of vaccination procurement and rollout. The national government wanted to centralize the procurement, as is the norm in much of the world, but when it was not up to the task it began to allow LGUs to make their own procurements. The central government then reasserted itself by assigning the police to monitor LGUs’ vaccination performance and calling out those lagging behind; ultimately, it shilly-shallied on the question of whether LGUs could make their own procurements.

The results have not been impressive, as the Philippines was the last country in Southeast Asia to receive COVID-19 vaccines (Cook 2021). It was deemed “the worst place to be in Covid” by Bloomberg’s Covid Resilience Ranking, due to its dismal vaccine coverage of only 26 percent of its population as of October 2021, with particular challenges of vaccine distribution in areas outside of the big cities (Calonzo 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) raised concerns over the Philippines’ “inequitable situation with regard to access to vaccines” (Clapano and Crisostomo 2021). With the emergence of the Omicron variant, the government launched an ambitious campaign to vaccinate nine million people in three days (Aljazeera 2021), bringing the national average vaccination rate up to 53 percent by mid-December. But this figure conceals major differentials in coverage, with only about 13 percent of eligible residents fully vaccinated in the deeply impoverished Muslim-majority autonomous region of the southern Philippines (Reuters 2021).

With the growing anxiety and demand for vaccine access, along with continued delays in national procurement purportedly due to hitches in ironing out indemnity agreements (Ramos 2021a), LGUs were urging the national government to allow them to directly procure vaccines from manufacturers. This call was supported by some lawmakers criticizing the national government’s supposed monopoly over purchase deals. Health professionals, however, raised strong objections, warning that “an unintended effect of direct procurement is loss of health technology expertise in deciding which vaccines to procure.” Concerns were also raised regarding equity and potential “maldistribution” of vaccines whereby richer LGUs could get priority access, leaving poorer communities behind. It was also argued that patchwork procurement, as compared to centralized and bulk procurement, would not be cost-effective (Tomacruz 2021b).
The DOH, the NTF-COVID-19 and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also stressed that LGUs cannot procure and roll out COVID-19 vaccines on their own, but must rather coordinate with the national government (through the National Task Force Against COVID-19 (NTF-COVID-19) and DOH) in a tripartite agreement with pharmaceutical companies. This was meant to “align the efforts of LGUs with the vaccine initiative of the National Government which integrates and consolidates all resources and initiatives.” The FDA also forbade manufacturers from selling directly to LGUs except as part of “the vaccine initiative of the National Government” (Cruz and Casas 2021).

Yet as more local officials sought clearance to procure their own vaccines, President Duterte gave LGUs blanket approval to choose their own suppliers and enter into tripartite deals (Tomacruz 2021a). As a strategy to hasten vaccine acquisition, he then signed Memorandum Order 51 (18 February 2021) granting LGUs authority to arrange for the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines, provided they are authorized by the NTF-COVID-19 and DOH (DILG 2021b). Following the president’s memo, the DILG directed the PNP and the Bureau of Fire Protection to closely monitor the vaccination performance of each LGU, requiring them to submit daily reports to ensure they were meeting their targets. With the exception of the City of Manila, which was first to initiate the purchase of its own vaccines through tripartite deals (Sarao 2021), all of the country’s vaccine supplies have subsequently come through contracts made by – and donations given to – the national government. Amid renewed demands, the NTF-COVID-19 chief announced in September 2021 that LGUs and the private sector would after all be allowed to purchase vaccines directly without a need for multi-party agreements (CNN Philippines 2021b). As of early 2022, however, procurement has remained essentially dominated by the national government. Health experts were correct to push for a centralized process, in part to promote regional equity, but in the end the distribution of vaccines has nonetheless been deeply flawed in how it has favored some regions over others, either due to uneven capabilities (CNN Philippines 2021a), or over alleged preferential treatment and lack of scientific method (Mercado 2021). These twists and turns of policy formulation do not, to say the least, reflect a sound process of central steering.20

20 As another indication of the weakness of central steering, a prominent city mayor complained in July 2021 that the government had yet to follow through on plans to issue standardized proof of vaccination certificates – four months after the initiation of the national inoculation program. “Ideally even before the national government implemented it, the vaccination program should have been centralized, but it did not happen,” explained Makati Mayor Abby Binay (Cabalza 2021, emphasis added). The launch of the vaccination certification came in September, but was plagued with many problems (Baclig 2021).
3.2 Strong Arming: Intimidation and Coercive Regulation of Local Governments

Among the special powers granted to the president under the March 2020 “Bayanihan To Heal as One Act” was the specific provision to “[e]nsure that all LGUs are acting within the letter and spirit of all the rules, regulations and directives issued by the National Government ... while allowing LGUs to continue exercising their autonomy in matters undefined by the National Government or are within the parameters it has set ...” (Sec 4, g, RA 11469, emphasis added). The President may also impose corresponding penalties against “LGU officials disobeying national government policies or directives in imposing quarantines” (Sec. 6, a).

While central steering is critical to forging a disciplined and unified whole-of-government response, these provisions also provided ripe opportunities for Duterte to escalate the coercive strategies against local politicians that were already evident before the pandemic. Shortly before the Congress approved the declaration of a state of national emergency in March 2020, Duterte had already ordered the DILG and the Department of Justice to closely monitor LGUs and be ready to file cases, as appropriate, against “wayward” officials. His threats were also expressed directly to local politicians: speaking to a March 2020 assembly of the country’s municipal mayors, he declared that, “It is my job to scare people, to intimidate people, and to kill people” (Tomacruz 2020a).

3.2.1 Show Cause Orders Weaponized

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, there has been intensified issuance by the DILG, upon order by the President, of SCOs to various local government officials demanding explanations for alleged violations of IATF and other national pandemic guidelines and programs. DILG Secretary Año explained, “As directed by the President himself, we will not go easy on local government officials who violate the prescribed directives ... Therefore, we have no choice but to issue show cause orders and file the necessary charges against them, when necessary” (DILG 2020b).

The SCOs were used pervasively in exacting accountability of LGUs over SAP. While the House probe identified DSWD’s failures as the main cause of delays in the distribution of the emergency cash subsidy, the SCOs effectively shift the blame onto the LGUs. In May, DILG issued SCOs to 43 local chief executives to explain their “poor performance” in the deployment of the SAP aid (DILG 2020c).

Even at year’s end, DILG acknowledged that the program was not yet “fully operational” (DILG 2021d).
In June, 663 local government officials were also issued SCO s, including 267 elected barangay and local officials; 397 were charged with criminal offenses for alleged anomalies in the distribution of the cash aid (Rita 2020). In September, the DILG reported some 89 village chiefs across the country were placed on six-month preventive suspension for alleged irregularities in the implementation of the first tranche of the SAP (DILG 2020f).

The weaponization of the SCO s against local politicians deemed potential threats to the president became especially blatant with the DILG’s July 2021 SCO against Manila City Mayor Francisco “Isko Moreno” Domagoso over an issue that predated his 2019 election to office (namely his predecessor’s insufficiently vigorous anti-drug campaign). Many observers thought Moreno was a target because of his criticisms of Duterte, and because he was viewed as a likely candidate for top office in 2022 (Ranada 2021b). In the face of criticism, the DILG withdrew the SCO, calling it an “inadvertent re-issuance” (Gonzales 2021).

3.2.2 Securitization of the Pandemic

Duterte’s political machinery is bolstered by his oversight of the country’s security forces, both the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police (PNP) (Ranada 2018). These coercive forces were central to the enforcement of lockdown measures, and three former military generals were given posts in the NTF-COVID-19: the Department of National Defense Secretary as chair and commander; the DILG Secretary as vice chair; and the Peace Process Secretary as chief implementer (Gotinga 2020a).

Major controversy erupted on April 2020, when some 2,500 military troops were deployed by the truckload in the National Capital Region. As they wore fatigues and took over major arteries, some viewed it as a “martial law-like” deployment (Gotinga 2020b). Two months later, in Cebu City, soldiers and elite Special Action Force (SAF) police troopers were deployed to assist local Cebu police in implementing an “extreme lockdown” after a large spike in the city’s cases (Ranada 2020). Another former military general, the Environment Secretary, was tasked with overseeing Cebu’s pandemic response (Macasero 2020).

Duterte linked the spread of the virus to public disorder, “necessitating preemptive use of the military and police” (Hall and Dumpit 2022). Using the language of war, he publicly ordered police and soldiers to “shoot” residents who are “causing trouble” during the government’s lockdown. In early April 2020, he issued violent threats against alleged quarantine violators after unrest erupted in an urban poor community in Quezon City. When protesters demanded government assistance after weeks of being unable to work and earn, 21 residents
were arrested for “protesting without permit.” He also called out and warned leftist groups, whom he accused of instigating the protest:

I will not hesitate. My orders are sa pulis pati military, pati mga barangay na pagka ginulo at nagkaroon ng okasyon na lumaban at ang buhay ninyo ay nalagay sa alanganin, shoot them dead. Naintindihan ninyo? Patay. Eh kay sa mag-gulo kayo diyan, eh ‘di ilibing ko na kayo. (I will not hesitate. My orders are to the police and military, also the barangay, that if there is trouble or the situation arises that people fight and your lives are on the line, shoot them dead. Do you understand? Dead. Instead of causing trouble, I’ll send you to the grave).

As Arguelles aptly explains: “While failing to arrest the public health crisis, the government’s response also managed to produce a human rights crisis.” In the official narrative, “good citizens” have “no other choice ... but to support the disciplining of ... bad citizens” (2021: 263, 269).

Meanwhile, the police were deployed to assist with contact-tracing efforts, escorting community health workers during their door-to-door visits and in the transfer of any COVID-19 positive patients to isolation facilities. In Cebu City, the military were also at one point called upon to work alongside the police (Sun Star 2020). The IATF and the Department of Health (DOH) argued that this was a necessary mechanism to ensure compliance in case of resistance against isolation. This received widespread criticism, however, as these door-to-door visits with police presence echoed the method used by police in Duterte’s “war on drugs.” In “Project Tokhang” (a neologism from “toktok-hangyo” or the combination of knock and plead), police would knock on the doors of suspected drug users and ask them to quit and turn to rehabilitation instead. With thousands of extrajudicial killings associated with this method, similar measures of despotic power during the pandemic triggered a wave of fear across the country. Opposition Senator Risa Hontiveros noted in a statement that, “It’s like Tokhang but for COVID. This may actually discourage more people from reporting their status” (Santos 2020). Hapal (2021) argued that the securitization of COVID-19 is a continuation of Duterte’s populist brand of politics that creates the existential threat of an enemy to vanquish – a construct parallel to the drug addict in the context of the so-called war on drugs. This justifies the need to pursue actions with brute force in the name of human security and public safety. Arguelles, similarly, observes that, “the primary role uniformed personnel played in enforcing Duterte’s lockdowns reflect the continuing pattern ... of relying on the military for civilian tasks,” as with the
3.2.3 Withholding Funds from Barangays in Support of a Reinvigorated Anti-Communist Counterinsurgency Campaign

During the pandemic, the Duterte administration also expanded on earlier patterns of according special privileges to the police and military. The National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), created by the president in 2018, assumed a more prominent role as it started exercising greater sway over barangay officials. Duterte allocated a staggering eleven-fold increase in the task force’s budget in 2021, to ₱9.1 billion, with over ₱6 billion packaged as support to the “Barangay Development Program” (BDP) lodged under the Local Government Support Fund (LGSF). Others, however, viewed it more simply as “pork for the generals” (Fonbuena 2020). As the NTF-ELCAC took charge of the LGSF, barangays deemed infiltrated were only able to access the fund once the task force certified that their jurisdictions are cleared of insurgency. With this level of direct intervention in barangay affairs, the fund was seen as a tool not only to try to end the insurgency but also to control barangay leaders. Duterte proposed a further major budget increase for the task force to ₱28 billion for 2022, which was approved by the House of Representatives, dominated by the President’s allies. This was initially slashed by the Senate to ₱10.8 billion, but both houses finally agreed to set the budget for the anti-insurgency task force at ₱17.1 billion for 2022, with ₱16.1 billion allocated for the BDP (Ramos 2021c). The DILG publicly criticized the cuts imposed by the Senate.

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21 The DILG would nonetheless credit extensive and aggressive contact tracing as a “game-changer” for the reduction of cases, citing the experience of Cebu City (DILG 2020e). In fact, it can more accurately be characterized as an abysmal failure. Over time, responsibility for contact tracing shifted from DILG to PNP and eventually to local governments (Philippine News Agency 2020). Central guidance across the country’s roughly 1700 LGUs was woefully inadequate.

22 Interestingly, Duterte’s home region (Davao City and surrounding provinces) reportedly received the bulk of the billions going to barangays that the NTF-ELCAC deemed ‘NPA-free’ (Bolledo 2021). Additional questions have been raised by an opposition senator about the timing of BDP budget disbursements, with ₱10.6 billion (56 percent) expended within a span of just one month (24 March–29 April 2021) – and without transparent reporting of how exactly the money had been spent (Senate of the Philippines 2021).
3.2.4 Continued Killings of Mayors and Local Politicians amidst the Pandemic

The killings of mayors and other local politicians continued during the pandemic. In 2020, three more mayors tagged by Duterte as narco-politicians were killed. The mayor of Talitay town of Maguindanao province was gunned down in February (Navales 2020). In July, the mayor of Sto. Niño, South Cotabato was killed by gunmen riding-in-tandem on a motorcycle (a common modus operandi in the drug war) (Rappler 2020b). In December, the death of Caesar Perez, the long-serving and well-loved mayor of Los Baños, a university town south of Manila, made national headlines and triggered public condemnation. Three more local politicians, supposedly included in Duterte’s narco-list, were killed in early 2021 by gunmen in shoot-outs (Ropero 2021; New York Times 2021). Human Rights Watch reported an increase in drug war killings during the pandemic, as the government “appeared to take advantage” of lockdown regulations to expand the “gruesome and bloody” war on drugs – and to do so “with almost total impunity” (Gavilan 2021).

3.3 Bureaucratic Versus Political Logics: Exploring the Distinctive Case of Cebu City

A key characteristic of central-local relations in the Philippines is that central bureaucratic agencies have to rely on LGUs, which are highly politicized structures, to deliver supposedly depoliticized programs. In addition, local governments are often operating with quite rudimentary administrative capacity. The national government, meanwhile, is stretched in its capacity to provide guidance, such that its “enabling” role often degenerates into a crude form of “policing” – which, naturally, is viewed by local officials as a derogation of their autonomy. When central agencies are used for political purposes, it becomes all the more difficult for the national government to present itself as an impartial arbiter among patronage-seeking local politicians. Ultimately, then, tensions between bureaucratic and political logics are apparent not just at the local but at the national level as well.

Under Duterte, strong-arming has been an effective means of trying to conceal the absence of effective capacity at the center. The LGUs commonly get the blame for failures, even when the national government itself has also performed poorly. We do, however, know of at least one case of effective national-subnational coordination commended by the DILG for its “best practices” in pandemic response (DILG 2021a): in Cebu City, between the Duterte administration and the mayoral administration that it helped to bring to power in the 2019 elections. Upon directive of the President, the IATF Visayas, as an instrumentality of the central bureaucracy, has enabled the capacitation of local
response by setting up an operational framework for its emergency operations, providing technical guidance, and facilitating avenues and mechanisms of coordination among concerned agencies across levels of government. But what has to be underscored is that the capacity of the IATF-Visayas to effect a workable intervention hinged fundamentally on the full political acquiescence of Cebu City government to the presidential palace. Such acquiescence is defined primarily by the active and very distinctive role that the Office of the Presidential Assistant for the Visayas (OPAV) plays in Cebu City’s local governance. The OPAV chief, often regarded as the de facto mayor for his considerable influence over city leadership, is a close ally of the president.23

Because of this strong political affiliation, the IATF was able to facilitate effective linkages through its regional office – upward to Manila, downward to the city’s emergency operations center, and horizontally to the other regional offices of the national government located in Cebu City. Notably, it is through the same presidential directive, based on a strong representation by OPAV and IATF Visayas, that resources could be channeled to Cebu City, including a prioritization in vaccine distribution. This played a critical role in managing the pandemic, even as new variants still present huge additional challenges (as they have worldwide).

Digging deeper, we would note a degree of central intrusion that exceeds Kjellberg’s notion of central steering – in that it leaves little scope for local adaptation or creativity, and effectively makes local government a mere adjunct of the center. The close political affiliation of national and city officials allowed for a very unusual politico-administrative arrangement whereby an elected city official – a city councilor who heads the emergency operation center – reports directly not to the mayor but to an appointed central bureaucrat (IATF-Visayas Chief). This highlights the duality of this distinctive example of central government intervention. On one hand, it involves a national bureaucratic task force that is in principle depoliticized; on the other hand, the task force’s deep reach into local structures is dependent on the imprimatur that comes from the simultaneous central political intervention of the president and those who represent him on the local scene. Because all of this was anchored on the particularly close political ties linking the city with the President (i.e., via the highly distinctive post of OPAV), it is not something that we would expect to be widely replicated (Gera 2022).

23 Seares (2019) provides background on how Duterte’s OPAV played the role of “kingmaker” in the 2019 mayoral elections, helping to engineer the victory of the president’s candidate and the removal of former mayor Tomas Osmeña from power.
Conclusion: Institutional Reform toward More Effective Crisis Response

“It takes a state,” explains Francis Fukuyama in his reflections on key factors that lead to successful responses to the pandemic. And a critical attribute of that state, we would further emphasize, is its capacity to ensure effective territorial coordination from the capital outward to the subnational units of the polity. This is Kjellberg’s notion of central steering, in which the national state takes the lead in formulating the “general goals” while local governments are given broad scope to implement them in innovative ways. If successful, these innovations can then be emulated by other subnational units.

Unfortunately for the Philippines, the national government has not displayed the necessary capacity for mounting an effective response to the pandemic. Many LGUs have displayed a high degree of creativity in compensating for the weakness of the central state, but such measures are inherently inadequate. They are mere “work-around” solutions, as there is simply no alternative to effective steerage from the center. Along the continuum introduced at the outset of our analysis, there is no part of the country that can be placed at the most positive end: where the national and subnational levels of government each have substantial levels of capacity and collaborate effectively. (We do in the previous section note an example of effective collaboration, facilitated by close political ties between the Office of the President – including its “kingmaking” outpost of presidential assistant for the Visayas – and leading Cebu City politicians. This collaboration fostered the subsequent empowerment of a regional outpost of the IATF, but did not entail strong state capacity at any level.) As explained in Section 3, above, the national government has floundered in the nation-wide implementation of its two major elements of pandemic response: distributing SAP funds as well as vaccination procurement and rollout.

Although Manila is not able to provide the type of central steering that is imperative for dealing with foes as tenacious as COVID-19, there is another type of power that emanates from the center – and, more specifically, the presidential palace. Ever since taking the helm in 2016, Duterte’s primary approach to central-local relations was to strong-arm local politicians. This continued after the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020, with perhaps one major difference: unlike in the initial three years of his term, Duterte no longer raised the “false flag” of federalism, whereby he so cleverly gave rhetorical support to local autonomy while undermining it in practice. While the supremo’s

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24 To borrow the apt wording of one of our anonymous reviewers.
strong-arming has proven to be a good way of bringing local politicians to heel, it is most certainly not an effective means of responding to the pandemic. To draw further on the insights of Michael Mann, the despotic “power over” cannot rival the infrastructural “power through” when it comes to ensuring that a central state has the logistical capacity to implement its decisions across the territorial realm (1984: 189). Duterte’s strong-arming may enable him to conceal the basic deficiencies of his government’s response, and make him appear to be in control, but it does not produce the quality of national-subnational coordination that is required for an effective response to the pandemic. To reiterate our core argument, strong-arming is no substitute for effective central steering.

How, then, might such capacity emerge? The weight of history does not favor the Philippines, as the heritage of its American colonial past has produced a weak bureaucracy that is not only imbued with strong patrimonial elements but also overwhelmed by the “depredations of patronage-seeking politicians” (Shefter 1994: 28). Political parties are also weakly institutionalized, generally lacking in programmatic coherence and commonly “not much more than convenient vehicles of patronage” (Quimpo 2005: 4–5). While this weak institutional legacy severely hampers the country’s capacity to confront major crises, the onset of crisis at the same time underscores the imperative of building stronger institutions. This must inevitably be a long-term process, stretching well into the future, but it is nonetheless an imperative that demands immediate attention. After all, if the human devastation of the COVID-19 crisis is not a call to action, what is? There will be additional severe crises in the future, most predictably in the realm of climate change, and it is important to begin the process of building stronger institutions now.

There will be numerous perspectives on what needs to be done, and our purpose here is simply to advance the discussion with some initial ideas. As reform measures are considered, there will be much value in insights from other countries that are, similarly, conducting a thorough reappraisal of “their multi-level governance systems and regional policy instruments” (OECD 2020: 71). As important as it is to consider pandemic-inspired innovations in internal processes across the public sector (see Tabuga et al. 2020), we propose a deeper level of reform that begins with attention to basic structures and underlying systems. Three institutional reforms deserve particular attention, in our view. While none of them should be viewed as a magic solution, they would each represent a significant step forward.

First, the goal of building more effective units of local government depends critically on changing the incentive structure faced by the politicians that run them. The electoral system presently used at subnational levels has two major flaws, both of which lead to candidate-centric (rather than party-centric)
outcomes. One is the separate election of the two top local executive posts, i.e., governors/vice-governors and mayors/vice-mayors (see Hicken 2019: 39). The other is the use of the multi-member plurality system for the roughly 14,000 posts on local councils; this has many dysfunctional consequences, explains Nico Ravanilla, including the promotion of intra-party competition. As he concludes, “electoral system reform is a critical first step” in shifting local governance from a personalistic to a programmatic orientation (2019: 170, 187).

Second, it is important to strengthen the national government bureaucracy at the regional level. Most of the major national government agencies maintain offices across the country’s regions (with the exception of the autonomous region of Muslim Mindanao, which has its own distinct structure). Each of the sixteen administrative regions has a Regional Development Council (RDC), the purpose of which is to provide policy oversight and encourage effective coordination both upwards to Manila as well as among each region’s respective provinces, cities, and municipalities. Unfortunately, half a century after their creation, these deconcentrated structures of the Philippine state have in many cases been left to languish. They receive very inconsistent levels of support and attention from the center, and the RDCs plod along with no regular budgetary allotment. But because the regions sit at the most critical nexus between the national government and the local governments, they are the logical place to start in moving toward the goal of promoting an effective system of central steering in the Philippines. In effect, the deconcentrated agencies of the national government that sit at the regional level can play a critical role in supporting local governments throughout the archipelago. As mechanisms of decentralization require the active support of the national government (necessarily albeit paradoxically, as Fesler explains), its offices in the regions can and should be on the front line.

Third, building up stronger administrative capacity at the local level is an absolute – and too often ignored – requirement for ensuring the success of devolution. Contrary to much of the prevailing rhetoric, the promotion of local governance means much more than simply giving more money to LGUs (see Hutchcroft 2012). Obstacles to local capacity building are well known, as they include not only the prevalence of local patronage (noted at the outset, and traceable in considerable measure to the institutional flaws of the electoral system explained above) but also the very brief three-year terms for local elected officials. Alongside electoral system reform and the strengthening of the regions, therefore, we propose incremental steps to build “pockets of efficiency” (Evans 1995: 61, 73) across the country’s roughly 1700 LGUs. This is no easy task in a strongly patronage-oriented polity, but a good place to start might be with the posts of provincial/city/municipal development officers.
(PDOs, CDOS, and MDOS), linked upward to the RDCs mentioned above. By professionalizing these positions, demanding higher meritocratic qualifications and enhanced levels of responsibility as part of a commensurate package of higher salaries and stature, it might be possible to develop a strong cohort of development officers throughout the archipelago. Over time, one might hope for the emergence of a more coherent network, bound together with its own distinctive *esprit de corps* (the virtues of which are discussed in Rauch and Evans 1999: 752).

As if the flawed response to the pandemic was not inducement enough, there is another major recent development that provides a further imperative for institutional reform. Thanks to the Supreme Court’s Mandanas-Garcia Ruling on the country’s major revenue sharing scheme, discussed above, the local governments are to receive 38 percent more funds in 2022 than they did in 2021, such that the new “National Tax Allotment” (NTA) will constitute nearly 20 percent of the total budget (Sicat and Palomar 2021). This windfall of resources directly contradicts a basic rule of public financial management, namely that finance should follow function (see Capuno 2017).25 With the substantial reallocation of the national budget, function will scramble to keep up with finance. Under orders of the Duterte administration, local governments were “to craft their Capacity Development Agenda which is supposed to help them map out how they will boost their capacity to take on the additional functions” (Ranada 2021a). This is, needless to say, a huge task given the wide array of specialized government services to be shifted to the local level. Even with the present functions allotted to local governments, of course, many fall short – and, as they do, the national government similarly falls short in its capacity to provide them with effective central steering. All the greater will be the challenges of building adequate state capacity in the post-Mandanas-Garcia Philippines.26

On top of the dangers of externally generated crises, therefore, comes another potential crisis generated entirely by internal forces. The imperatives of institutional reform, toward the goal of effective central steering, have never been stronger.

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25 On the long history of “localist strategies of political reform,” with their failure to “address the pathologies of the patronage system as they exist and interact at both the national and the local levels of the Philippine polity” (p. 108), see Hutchcroft 2014.

26 Duterte’s own Finance Secretary further warned that the NTA will negatively affect economic growth, based on his estimate that LGU spending is only half as efficient as that of the national government (De Vera et al., 2021). One World Bank economist estimated that LGU underspending will amount to 0.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), or more than two-thirds of their additional allotment (De Vera 2021).
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