

OPINION

Philippines: Mr. President, the issue is competence; the solution is resignation

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Contents

- [Roque, spinner of fairy tales](#)
- [Desperate troll machine](#)
- [My weathervane](#)
- [The grassroots take command](#)
- [The way out](#)

No one expects Rodrigo Duterte to be another Winston Churchill, rallying the country in the face of a savage pandemic that, like the bombs falling on London during the Second World War, has dealt a terrible, swift death to unsuspecting friends and loved ones.

But the country certainly expects a president who does not project the image of a deer – eyes frozen by the headlights of an oncoming car – in the brief addresses he gives the nation. And over the last week, the nation has been deprived even of the chance to hear that paralyzed deer of a president, as he seems to have gone into hiding.



'When ordinary people...start to register serious doubts about the performance of the administration, that is a sign that it may not be light that is at the end of the tunnel that awaits it, but a crash'

Roque, spinner of fairy tales

What leadership is provided by Malacañang comes from the presidential spokesperson, Harry Roque, a figure that, no matter how hard he tries, elicits disdain and distrust, with his answers coming across like those of glib salesman selling miracle cures. How can anyone believe a guy that, just a few weeks ago, was defending the administration's record in dealing with COVID-19 as "excellent?" Bereft of any guidance from Duterte or anybody else in the cabinet, Roque has been left free to concoct lies and fairy tales in press briefings that now border on the surreal.

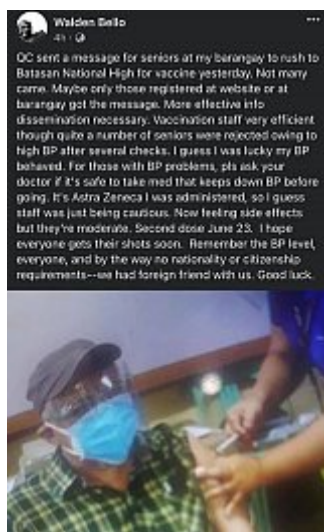
While it is true that throughout Southeast Asia, COVID-19 cases are surging, the Philippines has, by far, had the worst performance in containing the disease since the latest surge began in the first

week of March, eclipsing former leader Indonesia. Since the beginning of the pandemic early in 2020, the Philippines has registered 14,744 deaths, Myanmar 3,206, Malaysia 1,321, Thailand 97, Vietnam 35, Singapore 30, Cambodia 39, and Brunei 3.

With the national vaccine program in tatters, trust in the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) for the "NCR Plus" bubble eroded by conflicting voices within the administration, and surges in infections and deaths reaching record levels by the day, the country has been left with the cold truth that as, Vice President Leni Robredo has put it, "Walang tumitimon," or "Nobody's steering the ship." Robredo, in fact, has tried to step into the vacuum, providing a leadership that is rich in terms of emotional empathy but extremely limited in terms of what resources her office can muster. Not surprisingly, the Malacanang troll machine has gone after her with increasingly desperate insults that are recycled within an echo chamber that is rapidly getting smaller.

Desperate troll machine

I had a personal experience with how desperate Duterte's propagandists are getting. This was when the Director General of the government's Philippine Information Agency used my Facebook post with a photo of me being inoculated with the AstraZeneca vaccine to show how, as they put it, "DUTERTE SERVES EVERYONE, NOT ONLY ONE...As you all know, Ex-Partylist Congressman Walden Bello is one of the staunchest critics of this administration...THIS IS PROOF THAT PRESIDENT DUTERTE KNOWS NO POLITICAL COLORS."



A year ago, the administration might have gotten away with such shenanigans, but not today, when the virus is rolling through the population in such a devastating manner that more and more people not only know individuals who've been infected but friends and dear ones whose lives have been prematurely snuffed out. COVID-19-caused death is no longer a stranger to many of us, and nothing can remove the scales from one's eyes more effectively than death caused in great part by government incompetence.

My weathervane

My weathervane to determine where the wind is blowing is not the surveys but Diego, whom I occasionally hire when I am too tired to drive. Diego is a decent, hardworking man. He has a strong moral compass, which is the reason his tricycle association elected him to be its treasurer since he

was the only person everyone could trust. He's independent-minded and doesn't let class or status sway him. He was a Duterte supporter early on, believing that only a tough guy like the man from Davao could get rid of corruption and do away with the crime and drugs that were plaguing his barangay.

I used to argue with him that it was wrong to just extrajudicially kill people, but he sidestepped this and said that as far as he was concerned, the toughs who used to pick on people and propositioned fearful young women walking home at night were no longer around. Today, Diego is critical of the lack of leadership at the very top and the way this has resulted in a disorganized national response to the pandemic. He blames Health Secretary Francisco Duque and Food and Drug Administrator Eric Domingo for the mess, and he can't figure out why his now tarnished idol doesn't fire them.

When ordinary people like Diego, who typifies the silent but common-sense majority of our country, start to register serious doubts about the performance of the administration, that is a sign that it may not be light that is at the end of the tunnel that awaits it, but a crash.

The grassroots take command

In the absence of national leadership, people have taken matters in their own hands. LGU heads like Mayor Vico Sotto of Pasig have organized relatively orderly testing and vaccination procedures with the participation of civil society organizations. Health workers in Cebu have volunteered to come to Manila to assist their comrades in NCR that are suffering from combat fatigue. Barangay workers in Quezon City have worked themselves to the bone to assist seniors, people with disabilities, and people with co-morbidities being vaccinated with courtesy and empathy, though they may be short in crowd-management skills. Civil society groups are spontaneously organizing economic relief efforts for urban poor communities.

These initiatives and energy from below are highlighting the fact that the national leadership - and this includes many of the "pa-pogi" leaders vying to succeed Duterte with idiotic slogans like "Sara cares" - is not only useless, but is an incubus that sucks the life of the body politic while giving nothing useful in return.

The way out

In 2020, there were calls for the resignation of President Duterte when he dared health workers to stage a revolution against him because they had criticized the government's militarized response to the COVID-19 crisis. Had Duterte heeded those calls, so many of the over 14,700 people who have died so far would still be with us today. Before thousands more people die, the best thing that this paralyzed deer of a president and his incompetent gang can do for our suffering people is to resign and let more competent people take over the helm.

Walden Bello

P.S.

- Rappler.com. Apr 12, 2021 5:01 PM PHT:

<https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-mr-president-the-issue-is-competence-the-solution-is-resignation>

- Rappler commentator Walden Bello has been denounced as one of the Duterte administration's "staunchest critics" by the government's Philippine Information Agency. The National Chair of the coalition Laban ng Masa, he also serves as the Adjunct Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York at Binghamton and is the author of 25 books, the most recent of which are Paper Dragons: China and the Next Crash (2019) and Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right (2019).