

# TIMEK TI UMILI

*(Selected stories from March 2020 - August 2020)*

## **When the New Normal Doesn't Work**

*by Nicole Falcasantos*

It was business as usual for metropolitan centers and industrial hubs when news of the first COVID case in the country broke in January. The government didn't recognize COVID-19 as a valid threat back then; two months passed without any precautionary measures set whatsoever. In fear of straining our economic ties with China, the administration denounced all calls from groups for a nationwide lockdown which would have restricted international travel within the country.

It was only on March 15 when COVID-19 cases in Metro Manila spiked that the entire island of Luzon was placed on a lockdown to impede the steady increase of COVID-19 cases—millions of Filipino workers will now pay the price for the incompetency and the lack of foresight of those in power. The lockdown was implemented through an enhanced community quarantine (ECQ); albeit two months late, the lockdown was strict and was felt by all reaches of working-class Filipinos.

Public transportation was gradually lessened then banned altogether, leaving frontliner workers to come up with their own ways to travel to their jobs. The Department of Transport (DOTr) later launched a fleet of modernized jeepneys and buses that would provide transit for Filipinos in Metro Manila, but it came at the cost of depriving the drivers of traditional jeepney models their livelihoods. Only 6,002 out of 74,000 traditional jeepney drivers (8 out of 100) nationwide were allowed to operate again with the condition that they operate at 50% capacity and they install physical barriers inside.

After ECQ was declared, many small businesses have suffered due to the decline of customers. Department of Trade and Industry reported that an estimate of 3,000 businesses have temporarily shut-down while 200 have permanently closed; these shut-downs have affected an estimate of 100,000 Filipino workers.

The effect of the pandemic was felt by our Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as well. Last July, OFWs in Saudi

Arabia who have been fired from their jobs due to the pandemic resorted to selling their blood and scavenging the trash for food just so they could sustain themselves. Instead of acknowledging their strife and providing immediate relief, Department of Labor and Employment Secretary Silvestre Bello III invalidated their struggles and even went as far to suggest that they were only doing it for alcohol and vices. The Department of Foreign Affairs report that, as of August 8, there have been 9,725 confirmed COVID-19 cases of Filipino citizens residing outside the Philippines with 708 deaths

Most importantly, our medical health workers, our last lines of defense in this pandemic, are still being given mediocre support by this administration. Four months into the pandemic and there is still no piece of legislature that would guarantee mass testing and personal protective equipment (PPE) for all medical workers in the country. There have been reported cases of state-subsidized COVID-19 Hazard Pay for medical workers being deducted or reduced; some public hospitals have now started to rely on donations from private entities for equipment that should have been subsidized by the State.

Even before the pandemic hit, the welfare of workers has never really been a top priority for the national government. The Security of Tenure Bill or the "Anti-Endo Bill" which would have ended contractualization and ensured benefits for workers in the country was marked urgent by President Duterte but vetoed it as well last year because business groups deemed it unsustainable could lead to loss of profits.

Compassion and concern for the ordinary Filipino worker has always been an afterthought for the leaders of our country. They have since re-opened up cities to relieve the economic toll the pandemic has taken; however, by failing to address and solve the COVID-19 in a systematic and productive manner, they have indirectly doomed the very backbone of our economy—our workers.

This cycle of strife and strain thrust upon Filipino workers, and aggravated by the pandemic, can only be ended by the people themselves. We must unite together with our workers and hold accountable, to the highest degree, the powers that have exploited lives, labor, and lands for profit. This is the "new normal" we should strive for, one free from oppression and greed—towards progress and development for all.###

# An Invitation to Accept the Philippine Debt

by *Reginald Flores*

Debt. Something that is owed to someone else.

A common misconception about it is that it's a bad concept, something to be avoided—even too much “utang na loob” can be dangerous. Although, this isn't always the case in economics as debts can have positive impacts too. In a socio-economic context, money obtained at a sustainable rate through debts actually has the potential to increase the country's net worth or jumpstart its economy.

Money borrowed from debts can be used to build infrastructure, to invest in education or social services, and in the context of COVID-19, for disaster and emergency response. If that is the case, with the Philippines' ₱9 trillion worth of debt, why are millions of Filipinos still suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic?

To understand the implications of our humongous debt, let us first break it down to digestible chunks. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in January, the national debt already stood at ₱8.4 trillion, since then the gov't has acquired multiple loans both locally and internationally to address COVID-19. As of July 30, the national debt stood at ₱9.5 trillion.

Of the ₱1.1 trillion difference borrowed during the last 7 months, ₱380 billion or 35% was allocated to address the COVID-19 outbreak. This is further broken down into ₱270B for social amelioration packages (SAP) and social programs, ₱73B for medical programs and a ₱37B Bayanihan grant for local government units.

As of today, only 68% of the funds for SAP have been handed out to families. Regardless of livelihood or lack thereof, 14 million families have yet to receive their first tranche of SAP. Even then, numerous cases of names being dubiously duplicated and excluded by Local Government Units during SAP distribution have been reported across the country.

Four months into the pandemic and only ₱13B or 18% of the ₱73B health budget has been spent so far. On top of that, there have been recent cases of medical health care

workers having their state-subsidized COVID-19 Hazard Pay deducted (from the declared 500/day to 150/day) and consistently delayed. Despite this sizable allocation, no part of the budget has been set aside for the mass testing of medical workers.

The issue of our large outstanding financial debts is valid. In fact, our country has just entered an economic recession brought on by the quarantine with a record 16.5 GDP drop. However, we must also pay attention to how the borrowed money is being used, not just ask for full transparency from the Bureau of Treasury and other culpable government offices, but vehemently demand to see the money put to good use.

Debt may not be an exact indicator of a weak economy, but in our case, taking on additional debt is not sustainable under an economic recession, add the fact that government expenditure is sluggish and murky.

They can still be repaid, of course, but not easily nor through traditional ways. Raising taxes to generate income is an anti-poor maneuver especially with millions of unemployed Filipinos struggling to make ends meet because of mass lay-offs brought about by the quarantine. Cutting government spending is also a no-go since the problem with the government isn't overspending but underspending, money which is supposed to be spent to handle the COVID-19 isn't being utilized efficiently and as recent developments suggest, pocketed by government officials.

The only way left to repay our debt is the third way: uproot corruption and incompetence in the administration responsible for the anomalies and delays in government spending. They could also reclaim the billions of pesos stolen by known politicians and political families. It is crystal clear that the money is there, contrary to what any loon who broadcasts at wee hours of the evening says.

Now we see where the problem truly lies, not in our overflowing debts, but in the mishandling of money and sluggish spending of powerful officials. Because of their incompetence of handling the pandemic, 8 million Filipinos are projected to be unemployed (highest rate in SEA), 148 million are infected with COVID-19 (highest number in SEA), and the education of more than 30 million students is compromised.

This is an open invitation for President Rodrigo Duterte and the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) to accept what you owe the Filipino people, it's time to face the music and pay your debts. You owe Filipinos five months of their lives,

livelihood, income, peace, and development; no discernable amount could ever compensate for the time and peace of mind you deprived from Filipinos.

This pandemic has proven that you are no longer fit to rule the country, let alone protect it from global threats. The sooner you swallow your pride, step-down, and pass the responsibility to someone more capable, the sooner we can really begin to start solving the COVID-19 crisis.###

(Data from Covid Budget Tracker (covidbudget.ph), an initiative started by volunteer individuals to help track the government's effort in solving the COVID-19 crisis.)

## Here are 5 Books on the Indigenous Peoples of the Cordillera You Should Read

*By Nedlloyd Yang-ed Tuguinay*

Writings on Cordillera history are arguably dominated by American and Spanish scholars, friars, and missionaries. The past few decades however have produced a corpus of alternative historical papers from indigenous activists and scholars themselves. As these efforts progress, take some time to read some of the published works:

1. *The Discovery of the Igorots: Spanish Contacts with the Pagans of Northern Luzon (1974)* by William Henry Scott

Start with the basics! Considered as a seminal work on Cordillera History, William Henry Scott's "The Discovery of the Igorots" is an account of the Spanish occupation in the Cordillera. Scott utilized Spanish documents to put into light the so-called "discovery," and while we may find some contentions with such term, Scott was still able to provide significant insights that help and compel us to understand and re-interrogate our written Cordillera history. Plus, Scott was a notable individual who contributed to the indigenous peoples' movement in the Cordillera through his scholarly works (also read "Of Igorots and Independence," published 1993)

2. *A History of the Mountain Province (1983)* by Howard Fry

"A History of the Mountain Province" is an account of British scholar Howard Fry about the Cordillera during the American regime.

3. *Cordillera Heroes (2014)*, published by Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)

"Cordillera Heroes" tells the story of 23 lives who fought for the rights of indigenous peoples in the Cordillera. AIPP states very well why we need such book that serves as a tribute to our indigenous martyrs:

" Their stories are continuing narratives of a people's movement that has not diminished in strength nor capacity to persist despite changes in regimes. Their life stories and heroism are portraits of the Filipino people who refuse to be cowed by repression. Their deeds are seeds that continue to grow and are nurtured by the continuing struggle of new generation of activists who will pursue the just options for genuine social change."

4. *Ti Daga ket Biag (Land is Life): Selected Papers from Three Cordillera Multi-Sectoral Land Congresses (2009)*, edited by Jessica Cariño, Lulu A. Gimenez, Manuel A. Loste, and Pio Verzola Jr.

This is a collection of relevant papers on land issues in the Cordillera. Written mostly by indigenous scholars themselves and published by Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA), this work highlights how indigenous peoples respond to challenges posed by development aggression, imperialist plunder, and climate change.

Indigenous methods of natural resource management, historical roots of land problems, assertion of ancestral lands are some of the topics covered.

5. *Dap-ay Discourse Uno: Activist Perspective of Cordillera History and Social Change (2017)* by Benedict P. Solang

As you can deduce from the title, "Dap-ay Discourse Uno" is Cordillera history in the unapologetic language of activist Benedict P. Solang. The book is comprised of personal accounts and academic papers that exhibit Cordillera history in light of a national- democratic framework.

Where to get a copy?

You can find copies at Mt. Cloud Bookshop and order it online. Some of the books are also found in university libraries (University of the Philippines- Baguio and Saint Louis University). You can also try to visit and contact the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) office as soon as the conditions permit. Googling them won't hurt.

*What else do I need to know?*

There is still a long way to go when it comes to publishing these kinds of works. Indigenous activists who wrote about their experiences and insights on the indigenous peoples' movement are yet to be acknowledged or recognized. It thus remains a challenge for us to unearth writings left unpublished or abandoned in poorly-managed archives. It is also a challenge for us to rewrite our history through our continuing struggle for the right to self-determination and ancestral land.

Daga, Biag, Kinabaknang, Salakniban!###

## Soaring as one

*By Abel Christopher Munoz*

Education. The social practice of formal learning imposed upon the youth as soon as their physicality allows it. Like birds who are nurtured until they eventually leave the nest to soar above the clouds, students are supported and provided for by their families until they finally graduate and mark their place in the world.

However, not everyone gets a fair shot at aiming for the clouds—let alone leaving the nest. That is because the immense social inequality present in our country has clipped millions of wings, and will continue to do so if we don't address the correlation of poverty, capitalism, and globalization in our framework of education.

A featherless flight

The current state education is far off from the most ideal state of accessibility. There are a lot of Filipino students from all levels face who face challenges in complying with society's expectation of them to finish their studies; some, given the right tools and resources, rise to the occasion and succeed, and some, neglected by the State or their families, get left behind.

According to a study by the National Union of Students of the Philippines, as of February 2020, out of every 100 Grade 1 enrollees, 64 will finish elementary. 56 of which will enroll in Junior High School (JHS), with only 24 of them finishing the program. 22 students who graduated JHS will enroll in Senior High School (SHS) and only 18 will get to finish.

In the Cordillera Administrative Region, only 8 out of 43 Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) are public. Only 3 out of 10 tertiary students will get to receive free education

through R.A. 10931 (Universal Access to Tertiary Education), while the rest will enroll in private HEIs and face yearly Tuition and Other School Fees Increases (TOSFIs).

For primary and secondary education alone, DepEd data reveals that around 6 million students are projected to drop out of school (with at least 27.5% dropout rate in CAR) this coming term as educational institutions pursue class resumption in August. Applying this data in the context of the current pandemic, what reality will students face in the new normal? What is to be gained and lost in this inconsiderate resumption of classes?

Out of the nest, into the world

Our State departments which oversee education have failed to acknowledge the socio-economic toll the pandemic has taken on Filipino households. By isolating education apart from social realities, the already flawed and inaccessible education system is further withheld from a significant population of Filipino students.

The new normal for many students has been hiking hills and mountains to find network signals to comply with online classes, doing risky and unpleasant work to come up with money for tuition, and coping alone with mental health issues brought on by the quarantine. This issue of the inaccessibility of education is a manifestation of the State's disregard for education as a basic human right, and the COVID-19 pandemic only confirmed this notion.

Government educational departments have now left educational institutions to fend for themselves and scramble to resume classes through different modes; they are doubling down with their disorganized and unapologetically inconsiderate memos and resolutions towards class resumption. We cannot simply resume "learning as one" because we never were "learning as one" to begin with; a deeply flawed education system cannot move forward amidst a national crisis as if all is well—but it certainly can try.

A broad yet unified horizon

Implementing remote learning for the entire country is an impossible and unfeasible goal for due to the current state of poverty, joblessness, lack of basic services and connectivity in the country; therefore, like birds who flock in trees to create harmonious melodies, we must come together to demand fair and sustainable educational policies for inclusive education and resound a unified call for the safe resumption of physical classes through [#LigtasBalikEskwela](#).



By primarily addressing and solving the health emergency we are facing, we come to terms with the reality that our 'new normal' is a toxic notion which passes the burden of responsibility from our leaders to the Filipino people.

The Filipino youth and their education shouldn't pay the price for the lack of foresight from our government leaders which lead us here, but instead we must assert our rights together with our teachers, parents, classmates, and schools, towards a nationalist, scientific, and mass-oriented education as bright as the horizon.###

## **WALKING ON EGGSHELLS: The ABS-CBN Shutdown Avenue**

*By Doeden Kate Sarmiento*

It has always been the 'dilawan' argument against ABS-CBN. But, for the first half of 2020, critics have stepped up the game with accusations of being a biased media network, an oligarch, and a tax evader.

Come May 5, 2020, ABS-CBN, Philippine's largest media network, was forced to go off-air once again since its 1972 shutdown under former President Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship.

As its employees shed tears and netizens express rage on social media, the government couldn't care any less. The shutdown of ABS-CBN is just part of the road which the Duterte administration has been plotting for 4 years now—it's a road filled with eggshells. And at the end of a road, it's a country void of basic human rights, freedom of expression, and economic stability.

### Shutdown Avenue

The National Telecommunications Commission sounded the alarm for the shutdown, the day itself when a Cease-and-Desist Order was issued against ABS-CBN's 'expired' franchise. This is despite the company's acquired franchise provisional authority last February 2020.

Immediately after the shutdown, ABS-CBN filed for a franchise renewal application to be tackled first in the Congress. House Speaker Alan Peter Cayetano then dismissed the urgent application for a new franchise bid,

saying other pressing national concerns should be prioritized.

However, when the deliberations came, the Congress discussed insignificant --some petty-- issues with regards to the ABS-CBN's new franchise bid. Someone with a sane mind would clearly see that most issues laid before the lawmakers were all debunked & justified. Some of the concerns were also referred to another department's hearing.

Lawmakers questioned ABS-CBN's 100% Filipino ownership despite the Justice Department's assurance that Gabby Lopez is a 100% Filipino citizen since birth. ABS-CBN's alleged tax violations were also dismissed by the Bureau of Internal Revenue. As for the company's labor issues, those aren't something to be neglected. But, during a House hearing, a lawmaker had asserted that the issue be laid before the Labor and Employment department instead.

For the country, it felt like the weekly ABS-CBN House hearings took forever to end. Yet, it also seemed like it ended in just a blink of an eye.

Think, and Stop Over

The impacts of the media network's shutdown weren't just seen in their stocks, or the livelihood of its owners --the shutdown took a toll on the Filipinos' viewership, the employees' livelihoods, and the existence of press freedom in the country.

In 2019, the ABS-CBN Network accumulated the highest viewership as it strongly reaches out to most remote areas in the country, unlike other media networks. Now, as it goes off-air, and along with the termination of ABS-CBN's Digibox and Sky Cable, how much information can people learn from the television?

Eleven thousand. More than 11,000 employees are all walking in a tightrope right now. Days after the denial of the network's franchise bid, ABS-CBN has announced retrenchment of thousands of its employees starting August 31. Several employees have been with the Kapamilya network for decades. Some pertain to their job in ABS-CBN as their first and last job. These employees greatly depend on their salaries to make both ends meet for their loved ones, to make a proper living. Now that they are at the brink of losing their jobs, where will they go? Would looking for another job be good and simple enough for them? Would there be a job awaiting for thousands of retrenched workers amid a pandemic?

Then there is press freedom. Time and time again, lawmakers have argued that the termination of the former media giant is not an issue of press freedom. But several points have been made during the deliberations. Gabby Lopez is a 100% Filipino citizen according to the Justice department; ABS-CBN did not violate any tax rules, says the BIR, and so on. Those points have proven that ABS-CBN has what it takes to remain and go back on-air. It always has. Unfortunately, 70 lawmakers have chosen to be at the wrong side of history and voted against the network's franchise renewal. With this, the Filipino people lost one of the shoulders they could depend on right now --when they need it the most.

#### Back at the Road

All it took was just three months. Just three months to lay all the pieces --ABS-CBN shutdown, Anti-Terror Law, COVID-19 pandemic.

Yes, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the government's fault. Their fault lies on their apparent negligence to the worsening health crisis in the country. Almost 4 months since the Luzon-wide lockdown, the Philippines has over 100,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases --and that's without proper mass-testing yet. Some hospitals in Metro Manila have now announced their inability to accommodate for COVID-19 cases due to insufficient number of beds and testing equipment.

How can people survive a pandemic? Pass an anti-terror law. The Philippines' health crisis at the moment is the most pressing issue in the country, I must say. However, the government prioritizes its 'confident fight against terrorists.' That's why the Duterte administration has railroaded the Anti-Terror Law. This recently-passed law replaces the Human Security Act of 2007 and is deemed to suppress dissent.

#### Tune-up

The country is in shambles. We have a pandemic going on, a media giant has been terminated, thousands are about to be unemployed, yet the government categorized an anti-terror law that endangers peoples' lives as urgent. Dark times, indeed.

The ABS-CBN shutdown is not a manifestation of how Duterte toppled the oligarchs. Instead, it is a declaration of war against its people. The government has waged war against the Filipinos by repressing the country's press

freedom and freedom of expression and by taking away the livelihood of thousands of employees.

Now more than ever, we, the masses, must face this war head on. We will not wait for history to do its thing. We will take back what's ours right now --not just on social media, but in the streets.###

## **The Demands of the Health Worker Will Not Be Televised**

*by Diego Pascua*

On August 3, the President lashed out at frontline workers for supposedly calling a revolution against the administration and urged them to "do soul-searching for they do nothing but complain." This is one of the latest and most disgusting examples of the Duterte administration's negligence of their responsibility as a government. It has been four months since the pandemic, and up to now, this regime is still in its planning phase while continuously ignoring the pleas of the masses.

The President has criticized the health workers for levelling their demands publicly instead of writing a letter to them. Spokesperson Harry Roque also criticized them for presenting their demands too late, asking why it is that the President was the last to know about these demands. Certainly, he would have noticed by now the 7 Public Health Demands that many progressive organizations were upholding for the past months. If he hadn't, there wouldn't be any reason for the seemingly arbitrary arrests of individuals who have criticized the administration online. These demands were brought up for months, and because the government hasn't provided any real programs, how can anyone wonder why the medical workers were pushed to publicly present their demands? If Roque has a question on its "lateness," it's more apt for him to ask it to the administration.

In addition to this, this regime has amassed a P275 billion loan from various banks yet up to now, there's no concrete breakdown nor analysis on what and how these funds will be used. There is a deafening silence on how the administration can help the health sector, whether it be a higher allocation of a budget to their field, any blueprint of infrastructure, or anything. There is no engagement with the demands that workers and organizations have brought up, as well as a lack of discussion on the needs of the

masses under this pandemic. All that is given in every address are platitudes that veil their incompetence regarding the COVID-19 situation, along with threats and jokes that soothes no one except him and his cronies.

It's also worth noting the rise of harassment of the masses, many of which include workers (be it from the health sector or not), progressive organizations, peasant leaders, or anyone who's slightly critical at the ineptitude of the present administration. While the pandemic is ongoing, thousands -- if not millions -- of them are killed or violently detained for any demonstrations simply for a recognition of their needs. The government quickly points to how this can spread the virus, even if they properly enact health protocols. They also never seem to look at their own cases of stuffing in curfew "violators" in tiny cages, thereby increasing the risk of getting the virus. The rise of violence and the government's defense is incredibly telling on what they really focus and to where the budget is allocated.

The President was quick to condemn the frontline workers for doing nothing even if they're literally the ones who are saving those stricken with COVID-19 in the frontlines. The gall of the administration to performatively express their gratitude to the frontline workers through shallow commercials, with the simultaneous -- and perhaps intentional -- ignorance of their pleas, shows about what they care and for whom they serve. If this fascist regime continues with these actions, then perhaps there's credence to the President's mishearing of the health workers' demand.###