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Full Length Article

COVID-19 pandemic and competitive authoritarian regimes: Human rights and democracy in the Philippines and Nicaragua

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ABSTRACT

How do competitive authoritarian regimes in the Global South respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? How do these policy responses facilitate human rights deterioration in societies that are already facing democratic regression during the pre-pandemic period? Examining evidence from the Philippines and Nicaragua during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article demonstrates that competitive authoritarian regimes have reinforced the deterioration of democratic processes and disregard for their human rights commitments amidst the global pandemic. First, such regimes weaponize the legal system to consolidate the powers of the chief executive and their allies. Second, such regimes systematically disregard transparency and accountability when executing state leaders' public actions and responsibilities. Third, such regimes increasingly empower military personnel and intensify state violence at the expense of science-based approaches to crisis policies, thereby embracing militarism as an overarching orientation.

1. Introduction

How do competitive authoritarian regimes in the Global South respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? How do these policy responses facilitate human rights and democratic deterioration in societies that are already facing democratic regression during the pre-pandemic period? We address this puzzle by comparing the responses to the pandemic of two competitive authoritarian regimes in Latin America and Southeast Asia. In the late 2000s, numerous countries in Latin America faced significant political upheaval, as evidenced by the coups d'état in Honduras (2009) and Paraguay (2012), the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (2016), and the widespread protests in Chile (2019), Ecuador, and Colombia (2020). The rise of authoritarianism in Venezuela under Nicolas Maduro and Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega is a stark example of democratic decline. Additionally, Southeast Asia has not been immune to recent political turmoil. In Myanmar, a military junta took power following a coup (2021), while a pro-military coalition held power in Thailand after a flawed election in 2019. Cambodia's opposition has been suppressed, and human rights have deteriorated under Widodo's government in Indonesia (Kurlantzick, 2022). The Philippines also fits this regional pattern, as President Duterte's competitive authoritarian regime reflects the trend of democratic regression in Southeast Asia (Regilme 2021a&b). We highlight two specific cases in these two world regions: Nicaragua and the Philippines, both of which have seen further COVID19-era deterioration in their

democratic systems and human rights commitments (see Table 1 below).

The study of the deterioration of democratic principles and the intensification of state-sponsored oppression in competitive authoritarian systems during a severe public health crisis is an emerging and dynamic area of inquiry in several fields of inquiry in the social sciences, law, and the humanities. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic has perhaps been the most severe global health crisis since the 1918 flu pandemic. While the 1918 pandemic influenza killed at least 50 million people, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the deaths of at least 6.85 million people worldwide, from January 2020 to March 2023 (Center for Disease Control, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated national and transnational policy decisions by various national and intergovernmental authorities that, in many ways, appear to have restricted fundamental freedoms, such as mobility and restrictions in expression in the interest of public health, in addition to other severe consequences, such as food insecurity and loss of livelihood (Forman & Jillian, 2020; Lundgren et al., 2021; May and Daly, 2020; Passos & Acácio, 2021; Regilme, 2020a; Spadaro, 2020; Thomson & Eric, 2020; Wong & Wong, 2020; Regilme, 2023a). National governments implemented various COVID-19 regulations within the broader context of official declarations of 'states of emergency' or exceptional circumstances that render some justificatory clout for temporary and partial suspension of constitutional and democratic guarantees (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2020; Edgell et al., 2021; Han et al., 2021; Hirst & Rosedale, 2021; Jones & Hameiri, 2021; Kuhlmann et al., 2021; Lundgren et al., 2021; Tanyag, 2022; Thomson &

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Table 1
Macro-social processes Covid-19 management strategies.

	Philippines	Nicaragua
Weaponized legal system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bayanihan to Heal as one Act (march 2020)• Anti-Terrorist Law (June 2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Law 1040 on foreign agents (15 October 2020);• Law 1042 on cybercrime (27 October 2020);• Law 1055 on sovereignty (21 December 2020);• Law 1060 strengthening the measures of the code of criminal procedures (5 February 2021);• Law 1070 reforming and extending electoral law (4 May 2021)
Manipulation and control of public sphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Media shutdowns (ABS-CBN)• Harassments and killings• Misinformation• Cybercriminality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shutdowns and shortages• Harassments• Misinformation• Cybercriminality
Militarization and state coercion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appointees of military officials• ‘Red-tagging’• Strict lockdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Control and surveillance by police forces• Pression by para-military groups

Eric, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic provides a good opportunity to analyze the degree of commitment of government leaders to their constitutional obligations. This is because, “crises provide leaders with extraordinary opportunities to demonstrate their capacity to lead and fulfill aims that would be impossible to achieve under normal circumstances” considering that “when a sense of shock, vulnerability, loss, and outrage pervades a community, crisis can produce strong criticism of the existing institutional order and of the policy processes that underpin it” (Boin et al., 2017, p. 4). We operationalize the commitment of governments by assessing how the recent pre-pandemic authoritarian and illiberal track records of a government transformed or remained the same during a global health crisis. These crisis conditions serve as a crucial test for constitutionally elected government leaders to show their faithfulness to democratic governance and human rights guarantees: either a crisis reinforces the *old ways* of governance or it opens a critical juncture to a *new and transformative* path (Barnett, 2020; Cárdenas-García, Mesa, and Castro, 2021; Lipsky, 2020; Moon et al., 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Regilme, 2020a, 2020b; 2023; San et al., 2020; Tewari, 2021).

This article contributes to bridging the gap between political geography, public health governance scholarship, studies on authoritarianism and human rights in the Global South. Our analysis allows us to go beyond the scholarly literature that has focused its attention on the dysfunctions of the national health institutions of the so-called “Global South” states (Greer Scott, & KingFonsecaPeralta-Santos, 2021). The use of this label (Brun, 2023a,b) in debates about the hierarchies structuring the global order leads to the association of Global South states with a systematically passive, wait-and-see, and peripheral international position (Braveboy-Wagner, 2009; Regilme, 2021c; Wolvers et al., 2015). In this article, we challenge the notion that governments have passively responded to the pandemic’s public health consequences. Instead, we show that certain governmental regimes have actively and strategically taken advantage of the pandemic to achieve various ends, such as reinforcing anti-democratic features of their rule. Our research emphasizes the significant influence of geographic space and the socio-political dynamics within it in determining how political power is utilized, as well as the tactical employment of various strategies by competitive authoritarian governments in a range of spatial settings.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, this article reviews the theoretical literature on authoritarian practices during a health crisis. In the second part, we conducted a comparative empirical analysis of the pre-pandemic context. The third part explores the ways in

which the regimes of Duterte in the Philippines and Ortega in Nicaragua strategically used the pandemic in three ways: weaponization of the legal system, manipulation and control of the public sphere, reliance on militarism, and state coercion. The article concludes by outlining the key similarities and differences between Nicaragua and the Philippines, and discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our analysis.

2. Theorizing authoritarian practices amid health crises

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the consequences of global health crises on the stability of political systems, with a focus on those exhibiting anti-democratic and illiberal characteristics. In the current social science literature, scholars have used a wide variety of terms to describe the contemporary challenges faced by democracy and rights advocates: “illiberal democracies” (Zakaria, 1997); “democratic deconsolidation” (Foa and Mounk, 2017); “democratic recession” (Diamond, 2015); “de-democratization” (Tomini, 2017); “autocratization” (Luhmann and Lindberg, 2019); “illiberal and authoritarian politics” (Regilme, 2021b). Therefore, we raise two key questions that constitute the puzzle of illiberal and authoritarian politics during a public health crisis: How do competitive authoritarian regimes respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? How do these policy responses facilitate human rights and democratic deterioration in societies that are already facing democratic regression during the pre-pandemic period?

Competitive authoritarian regimes, such as those in the Philippines (Iglesias, 2022) and Nicaragua (Levitsky & Way, 2010), possess characteristics of both democracy and authoritarianism, according to Levitsky and Way (2010, p. 5). Unlike full authoritarianism, these regimes allow oppositionist groups to contest incumbent executive power through constitutional channels. However, they differ from democracies in that they systematically undermine at least one of the three well-accepted features of democracy defined by Levitsky and Way (2010): a free electoral system, broad respect for civil liberties, and a sufficiently open playing field. In such regimes, the chief government executive may be popularly elected, but the government’s overall orientation is towards weakening both democratic processes and fundamental human rights obligations (see also Glasius, 2018; Regilme, 2021b). The puzzle about the global health crisis’s impact on democratic and human rights deterioration arises from the hypothesis that external shocks, such as the COVID-19 crisis, may provide an opportunity to bypass political and institutional constraints and permanently change institutions (Hajnal et al., 2021, p. 612).

Competitive authoritarian regimes, like other states, depend on external and societal factors for their emergence, stability, and collapse. Migdal’s (1988; 2004) state in society framework highlights the unique challenges these regimes face in managing public health crises such as pandemics while maintaining political control. They use their societal embeddedness to consolidate power and shape their response to the crisis by controlling vital institutions like the media and civil society organizations to manipulate information and shape public perceptions (Regilme, 2018). This helps them downplay the severity of the crisis, suppress dissent, divert attention from policy failures, and maintain or even reinforce public support for their rule. Additionally, informal power networks and patronage systems play a crucial role in the resilience of competitive authoritarian regimes during crises. Rulers use these networks to distribute resources, such as food aid and healthcare services, to their supporters, thereby strengthening their political base and reinforcing loyalty. In the long run, the promise of receiving patronage-generated benefits from the regime could turn oppositionists into at least antipathy towards opposition. Thus, it is essential to investigate the interactions between central executive powers, state institutions, societal groups, and external actors when examining the resilience of such regimes during times of crisis. This allows us to understand how these regimes navigate crises, consolidate power, and shape state-society relations in response to unprecedented challenges.

Our core argument states that competitive authoritarian regimes

have reinforced the deterioration of democratic processes and disregarded their human rights commitments amidst the global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated socioeconomic disparities, resulting in widespread social and economic hardship, which far-right movements exploit by promoting nationalist and authoritarian ideologies (Gostin et al., 2023; Moyer et al., 2022). Economic crises have eroded public confidence in democratic institutions, consequently creating an opportune environment for far-right leaders and social movements to offer simplistic authoritarian solutions (Gradstein, 2024; Jay et al., 2019; Regilme, 2014; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). These leaders capitalize on crises by implementing emergency measures that restrict civil liberties and centralize power, often under the pretext of safeguarding public health. The interplay between economic instability, dwindling public trust in democratic governance, and the emergence of authoritarian social movements has notably hastened the erosion of democracy during the pandemic, highlighting the susceptibility of democratic institutions in times of crisis (Tansel, 2017; Ward & Ward, 2021). Amidst a global pandemic, this crisis of democracy and human rights has manifested in several areas, including the projection of governmental powers in the state apparatus and societal spaces. More concretely, competitive authoritarian regimes deploy three key mechanisms of state power to consolidate its rule during a pandemic or a similar crisis: 1) the weaponization of the legal system; 2) manipulation and control of the public sphere; and 3) the increased militarization and state coercion.

First, such regimes weaponize the legal system to consolidate the powers of the chief executive and their allies. This can be seen through the blatant formulation of laws, executive orders, and other types of regulations that seek to confer more discretionary powers on the chief executive, while consequently subverting human rights and democratic processes (Regilme 2020; 2023b). In authoritarian systems, the legal system is often used to consolidate power during public health crises in ways that undermine any form of political opposition. The government and state organs formulate policies and laws that expand the chief executive's discretionary powers, thereby bypassing traditional checks and balances. Emergency decrees, meanwhile, centralize decision-making powers, consequently enabling the chief executive to act unilaterally. Public health laws may contain vague provisions, thereby empowering the chief executive to impose restrictions with minimal legislative input. Moreover, laws on surveillance and data collection also extend the regime's capacity for monitoring and controlling dissidents (Zuboff, 2018). Authoritarian regimes strategically manipulate or reframe interpretations of legal principles and constitutional discourses to consolidate power and undermine human rights, particularly targeting minoritized populations and political opposition. These regimes use constitutional amendments and emergency powers to create a veneer of legality through normative justifications such as legitimizing their actions under the guise of national security or public health (Regilme 2020; 2023; Kanchoochat, 2016; Cole, 2019; Kuhonta, 2008). Laws, far from being neutral tools, are wielded to achieve political objectives and are selectively applied to suppress dissent and control marginalized groups (Bob, 2002; 2019; Liu, 2023; Saam et al., 2022; Hoxhaj & Zhilla, 2021). Legal measures, such as anti-terrorism laws and public health regulations, are often misused to entrench executive power and repress minoritized populations (Braithwaite et al., 2022; Grasse et al., 2021; Hoxhaj & Zhilla, 2021; Lundgren et al., 2021; Tamburini, 2021). These blatantly politicized practices, which include exploiting emergency decrees and surveillance regulations, are usually justified under the guise of managing crises. Consequently, democratic norms are eroded and human rights are systematically violated. For instance, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán passed an emergency law that allowed him to rule by decree indefinitely, suspending elections and bypassing the legislature (Ádám and Csaba 2022; Hajnal, Jeziorska, and Kovács 2021). Similarly, in Egypt, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi expanded his authority through emergency decrees that increased government surveillance and restricted the media. Additionally, in India,

the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government used public health regulations to arrest activists and dissidents under the pretext of enforcing lockdown measures (Yasir & Schultz, 2020).

Second, such regimes systematically disregard transparency and accountability in the execution of state leaders' public actions and responsibilities, as demonstrated by corruption scandals involving the use of public funds, public toleration or even perpetration of misinformation and 'fake news,' repression of independent media outlets, and publicly discrediting the independence of public health and scientific authorities (Fleming, 2020; Forman & Jillian, 2020; Hossain et al., 2023; Linden et al., 2020; Schuetz et al., 2021). Competitive authoritarian regimes operate in a gray zone between full-fledged democracies and outright authoritarian states, maintaining a veneer of democratic processes while eroding political pluralism and civil liberties. Manipulating public fear and trust, they justify otherwise unacceptable actions through the use of state-controlled or sympathetic media to frame the crisis narrative and garner public support (Garrett & Arthur, 2022; Vowles, 2022). This includes corruption scandals involving the misuse of public funds, where the lack of oversight facilitates the enrichment of state leaders and their allies. To control the narrative, regimes engage in misinformation campaigns, spreading false information about the crisis to maintain public support and justify their actions, while downplaying the severity of the crisis or blaming external actors. Independent media, which might expose government failures or corruption, are repressed through strict censorship, intimidation of journalists, and shutdowns of media organizations. Competitive authoritarian regimes often discredit independent public health and scientific authorities to assert control over the crisis response, which leads to reduced public trust in independent assessments. Actions such as corruption, misinformation, media suppression, and the undermining of scientific and technical expertise contribute to the strengthening of authoritarian practices. Public trust in institutions is eroded, democratic norms are weakened, and authoritarian practices are entrenched, consequently making it challenging to maintain domestic governance and international human rights standards during public health crises.

Third, such regimes increasingly empower military personnel and intensify state violence at the expense of science-based and democratic approaches in crisis policies, thereby embracing militarism as an overarching orientation. Militarism, as the dominant modality of state power, has been demonstrated in instances such as the appointment of retired or active military officers on influential public health and crisis management boards, the increase in state repression of civil society activists, police intimidation of journalists, and the blatant glorification of state violence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, competitive authoritarian regimes have not only taken advantage of the crisis to strengthen their grip on power but have also increasingly embraced a militaristic approach, consequently sidelining science-based and democratic approaches in crisis management. This trend towards militarism is exemplified by specific instances, such as the appointment of military officers, both active and retired, to influential positions on public health and crisis management boards while sidelining and repressing scientific experts and key stakeholder groups from minoritized populations. In Brazil, for instance, President Jair Bolsonaro appointed military officials to key roles within the health ministry, thereby diminishing the role of public health experts and scientific recommendations in policymaking (Pfrimer & Barbosa, 2020; Razafindrakoto et al., 2024). Moreover, these regimes have intensified and expanded the reach of state violence, with widespread repression of civil society activists and police intimidation of journalists. In Russia, independent journalists faced intimidation and arrests for reporting on the government's inadequate handling of the pandemic (King & Dudina, 2021; Litvinenko et al., 2022). Furthermore, the pandemic has been utilized as a pretext for the blatant glorification of state violence, with regimes showcasing military strength as a symbol of authority and control rather than public health approaches and comprehensive socio-economic welfare assistance to the most vulnerable populations. In China, the government staged elaborate displays of

military prowess during pandemic-related events, reinforcing the image of state power and authority (Gao & Zhang, 2021; Lai, 2023; Zeng, 2024). These examples collectively highlight how competitive authoritarian regimes exploit crises such as COVID-19 to entrench militaristic approaches, erode democratic norms, and suppress dissent, thereby posing significant challenges to governance and human rights.

To address the theoretical puzzle, our analysis investigates the crisis management strategies of Nicaragua (under President Daniel Ortega) and the Philippines (under President Rodrigo Duterte) from 2020 to 2021. COVID-19 responses include policy coordination—or the lack thereof—at the domestic, regional, and international levels. Although the countries are located in two different world-regions, both of them are illiberal-authoritarian regimes, even before the pandemic (Parthenay, 2020; Regilme 2020; 2021). To be precise, however, Nicaragua is historically more authoritarian than illiberal, although the pandemic has increasingly facilitated the country's backsliding to illiberalism; in the case of the Philippines, pre-pandemic conditions under Duterte are both illiberal and authoritarian. Both Nicaragua and the Philippines are presidential republics within a constitutionally guaranteed multiparty system. Located in two different Global South regions yet belonging to the lower middle-income classification, both countries experienced regression in terms of their democratic features during the preceding five years before the COVID-19 pandemic. The case selection strategy here is analytically useful because both countries demonstrate a lot of structural similarities and diversities in policy strategies concerning the pandemic to the extent that they can be meaningfully compared and analyzed with each other (Diamond & Robinson, 2010; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003).

3. Pre-pandemic background: a comparison

3.1. Philippines

In 1986, a large Southeast Asian country, the Philippines, restored its constitutional democracy through the People's Power Revolution that toppled the two decades-old dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Duterte and his allied politicians were notorious for their misogynistic, racist, and anti-democratic discourse (Macaraeg, 2019; Ranada, 2017; Regilme 2020; 2021; Tanyag, 2022). Since then, six presidential administrations have taken office, including Rodrigo Duterte's presidency (2016–2022), which is known for its misogynistic, racist, and anti-democratic discourse (Kaul, 2021). Duterte undermined democratic principles by systematically targeting the opposition and independent judicial figures. A critic of Duterte's war on drugs, Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, was targeted for impeachment, while Opposition Senator Leila de Lima was imprisoned after her investigations revealed Duterte's widespread extrajudicial killings. Vice-President Leni Robredo, the leader of the opposition coalition, also denied her office's legally mandated budget despite delivering effective social welfare programs and receiving high ratings for transparency (Antonio, 2022).

The Duterte regime systematically repressed any form of criticism and peaceful dissent from independent government bodies, including the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), the Commission on Audit (COA), and the Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG). Reminiscent of the Marcos regime's abuses, Duterte's 'war on drugs' aimed to curb the proliferation and use of narcotic drugs; yet, that policy agenda generated widespread extrajudicial killings, with at least 12,000 civilians who died due to state violence since 2016 until 2021 (Human

Rights Watch, 2021; Regilme 2021a, 2021b). Notably, the V-DEM Data (2020) ranked the Philippines 110th out of 179 countries, and the 'liberal democracy index' of the country¹ slipped from nearly 0.45 (2010–2015) to approximately 0.26 (2016–2020), thereby suggesting a pattern of remarkable democratic and human rights recession under the Duterte regime.

The Duterte administration triggered an unprecedented trajectory of democratic decline in the country in 2016. Whereas the previous administration of President Benigno Aquino III (2010–2016) is widely considered the golden age for human rights and democratic development, at least since the start of the new millennium, Duterte blatantly discarded the democratic and human rights improvements gained during the time of Aquino III. In terms of democratic processes, Duterte sought to consolidate his power by blatantly removing or undermining non-allies in the judiciary (e.g., Chief Justice Sereno) and imprisoning high-profile politicians and journalists (for example, Nobel Peace Prize Winner Maria Ressa and Opposition Senator Leila De Lima) persistently curse high-ranking Catholic bishops and leaders who publicly opposed the war on drugs, and numerous appointments of incompetent but loyal individuals to various high-profile and civil servant positions. With regard to physical integrity rights abuses, Duterte's brutal 'war on drugs' became a national strategy for extrajudicially killing many suspected drug addicts and traffickers, together with some civil society activists, human rights workers, and government critics. According to investigations emerging from the pending case in the International Criminal Court, Duterte's state agents killed between July 2016 and March 2019, nearly 12,000 to 30,000 civilians—a statistic that appears to be much greater than the number of people killed during the two decade-long dictatorships of Marcos (Regilme 2021 a&b; The Economist, 2021).

The ideology of Duterte is distinguished by a strongman leadership approach, emphasizing law and order, illiberal populism, and anti-elitist discourse (but anti-poor in practice). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Rodrigo Duterte's leadership style was characterized by an authoritarian approach to crisis management, marked by strict and unjustified lockdowns, robust enforcement of the law when it is favorable to his government, policies that disproportionately affected the poor, and the militarization of the response, often at the expense of health experts' input (Kaul, 2021). Furthermore, his administration used pandemic measures to suppress dissent, as evidenced by the arrests of critics and activists under the guise of enforcing quarantine protocols. Duterte's ideology is a blend of authoritarianism, populism, and misogyny, as demonstrated by his history of making derogatory and demeaning comments about women, which he and his spokespeople dismiss as jokes, thereby normalizing misogyny while claiming to support women's rights (Kaul, 2021). This misogyny is also evident in his behavior, such as wolf-whistling at female reporters and making inappropriate comments about women, as well as his militarized, masculinist approach to policy, which is used to silence critics, particularly those from feminist and human rights movements.

3.2. Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, democratic degradation was ongoing before the pandemic. Since the election of Daniel Ortega in 2007 for a second term (his first mandate assumed in the late 1980s), the quality of democracy in Nicaragua has been undermined. From the moment he came to power, the foremost objective was to remain in power, using all possible regulatory, legal, and constitutional strategies to achieve this (Parthenay,

¹ To check the patterns of declines and improvements for both the Philippines and Nicaragua, country-based information over time can be found here: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/. In the case of the Philippines, the democratic improvements under the Aquino administration (2010–2016) significantly declined under Duterte.

2020). Since then, the question of “third termism” has arisen and weakens the democratic order as a whole. Indeed, after the 2011 re-election, a look at the indicators of the quality of democracy in Nicaragua shows a drop in a wide range of factors in the last decade: electoral democracy, equality, participation, media freedom, etc. In 2020, the V-DEM report places Nicaragua in 170th position in a ranking of 179 countries on democratic freedom (V-DEM, 2020). Electoral irregularities, increasing poverty, and the rise of neo-patrimonialism and corruption contributed to this gradual democratic collapse in Nicaragua.

Beyond this gradual decline, the political crisis in April 2018 constituted a break from the hardening of authoritarianism. On April 18th, popular protests were bloodily repressed, with police firing on the demonstrators, sending the country into a month-long civil war that left more than 360 people dead, a large number wounded, denunciations of human rights violations by the Nicaraguan authorities, and a large wave of exiles. This gradual democratic degradation has been accompanied by an undermining of the protection of human rights, as targeted by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The 2018 report indicates the use of torture and documents a series of enforced disappearances and extra-judicial executions (OHCHR, 2018). A large number of arbitrary and illegal arrests have also been reported (approximately 2200 according to non-governmental information), with violations of private property (breaking into homes) (UNHCR, 2019, No. A/HCR/42/18).

Daniel Ortega’s ideology has moved a long way from the historical Sandinism, a revolutionary left-wing current he led in the 1980s, and whose name his party (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, FSLN) still bears. Now detached from the principles of social development, inclusion and participation formerly shared by the leaders of the Latin American left in the early 2000s (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011), Daniel Ortega, together with his wife Rosario Murillo and his family clan, has locked himself into a sultanistic political regime, characterized by a personal rulership, inter-personal rewards and authoritarian practices that instill fear in the population and lock them into a constrained loyalty (Chehabi & Linz, 1998). Paradoxically, Ortega’s regime ended up taking on the clothes of the Somoza regime (1936–1979), which he himself had fought in the 1970s and which had led to the Sandinista Revolution of July 1979. Today, the tough international criticism against Ortega’s regime has gradually placed the country, and its leader, in the camp of states that systematically contest the international order (Brun & Parthenay, 2020). Alongside Venezuela, Syria and Russia, Daniel Ortega’s Nicaragua is systematically rejecting anything that might come from Western countries, and it is critical of the way international law and institutions operate.

4. Comparing the COVID-19 management strategies

This section addresses the processes of regime consolidation during the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent deviation from the state’s constitutional guarantees on human rights and democratic processes.

4.1. Philippines

4.1.1. Duterte’s weaponization of the legal system

The Duterte presidency sought to instrumentalize laws and executive regulations in ways that intensified state coercion and repression of all forms of peaceful political dissent, while accumulating more executive powers towards Duterte himself and his close allies. Populated by a large majority of Duterte allies, the Philippine Congress initiated and enacted on March 2020 the “*Bayanihan* to Heal as One Act.” This Act provided Duterte emergency executive powers, which included the power to reposition 275 billion PHP (4.9 billion Euros) from the regular 2020 national budget to the executive branch’s pandemic strategy. In 2021, however, the Senate blue ribbon committee initiated an investigation on how the Duterte administration spent the pandemic budget, only to find out that at least 10 billion PHP (177.2 million Euros) was spent on

questionable business deals — the corruption scheme that is now popularly known as the ‘Pharmally scandal’ (Cepeda, 2021). Based on an independent media investigation, 10 billion PHP worth of government contracts were given to Pharmally, which was a very small, newly established organization that did not have the initial capital, performance record, and reputation for effectively delivering massive government projects (Lagman, 2022). Several loyal political allies directly linked to Duterte have been implicated in the scandal, including Senator Bong Go, former Budget Undersecretary Lloyd Lao, and Chinese business person Michael Yang.

In June 2020, the Duterte government vigorously pushed for the ratification of the Anti-Terrorism Law (ATL) amidst the national lockdown, unprecedented near-collapse of health facilities, and thousands of deaths due to COVID-19 infections. The ATL renders an ambiguous definition of terrorism in a bid to provide Duterte regime-wide administrative discretion to identify any individual or organization as a threat to national security, thereby endangering civilian lives without proper due process. Consequently, human rights activists and legal experts argue that the ATL undermines the fundamental rights guaranteed by the 1987 Philippine Constitution and creates a highly politicized legal environment that is prone to abuse by high-ranking elected officials, especially those allied with the administration (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Reuters, 2020). Particularly, the ATL legalizes extended periods of warrantless arrests of up to 24 days, authorizes life imprisonment without parole for providing material support to an arbitrarily defined ‘terrorist,’ and permits children to be subjected to legal charges under the ATL. Melencio Sta. Maria, a notable legal expert and Dean of the Far Eastern University Law School, contends that the ATL “combines the clear threshold of mere suspicion with the extremely vague and overly broad definition of the various offenses for which a person can be arrested on the basis of that suspicion, government and law enforcers shall have a heyday, using their own boundless imagination in arresting any person ... arbitrariness and capriciousness will be the order of the day, the rule of law, eroded” (Oxales, 2020, p. 10). Another high-profile legal scholar, Soledad Deriquito-Mawis of the Lyceum of the Philippines University Law School, worries that the ATL “becomes the potential vehicle for vindictiveness and selective retribution” (Oxales, 2020, p. 12). Indeed, the ATL generated legal cover for the arrest and imprisonment of at least 76,000 people between March and July 2020, while nearly a thousand official complaints of torture and other physical integrity rights abuses have been filed with the CHR (Santolan, 2020).

4.1.2. Duterte’s manipulation and control of the public sphere

Since the end of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, the most notable act of state repression of the media pertains to the Duterte government’s forced shutdown on March 29, 2020, of ABS-CBN Broadcasting Corporation, which is the country’s largest media conglomerate consisting of a national TV channel, a network of regional TV and radio channels, and a news and current affairs division, together with a cable network with the widest global reach to the Filipino diaspora. After Duterte’s repeated personal ranting against the owners of ABS-CBN, who accused him of bias, the National Telecommunications Commission and Solicitor-General Jose Calida ordered the termination of all TV and radio broadcasting operations of the media giant, particularly by weaponizing obscure legal tools, without a fair and transparent process for the company to respond to the unfounded claims of the government. Enabled by the absence of legislative franchises, the shutdown occurred as Congress was dominated by the majority of Duterte allies. The absence of ABS-CBN in the Philippine domestic and transnational public spheres systematically undermined the accessibility of evidence-based, independent, and accountable journalism and news dissemination. Consequently, the proliferation of allegedly state-funded trolls and ‘fake news’ accounts dramatically increased during this time, with the aim of delegitimizing opposition figures, critics, and established media outlets. The absence of ABS-CBN signaled to other smaller independent media outlets to avoid the coverage of any government-related action that

could be perceived as damaging to the authority of the Duterte administration. In the midst of Senate-led investigations of high-ranking officials in Duterte's cabinet administration, particularly the Pharmscandal, which involved nearly 189 million euros of unaccounted funds supposedly used for health equipment, the shutdown of the ABS-CBN enabled the Duterte government to repress the coverage of the scandal.

Notably, journalists were consistent targets of harassment and killings during the pandemic, perhaps as part of the government's efforts to prevent unfavorable coverage of Duterte's regime. For example, with the push of Duterte's allies, a Manila court issued a guilty verdict against Maria Ressa (founder of investigative journalism outlet *Rappler* and 2021 Nobel Peace Prize Winner) and her former researcher Reynaldo Santos Jr. for charges of cyberlibel, while national and local politicians have weaponized the cyberlibel laws since June 2020 to harass critical journalists based on reports from the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (Ellao et al., 2020). Several other journalists have been legally charged for baseless allegations of violating the quarantine restrictions, while police officers confiscated hardcopies of the progressive, left-wing magazine *Pinoy Weekly* for allegations that it is propagating "subversive material" and as a "matter of national security". (Ellao et al., 2020). Even worse, during the first year of the pandemic, state agents allegedly killed at least three Filipino journalists on the line of duty, while many others have been subjected to persistent bullying and death threats (Subingsubing, 2020). In 2022, *Reporters without Borders* (2022, 1 & 7) ranked the Philippines 147th out of 180 countries for press freedom, while confirming that the country's "media are extremely vibrant despite the government's targeted attacks and constant harassment, since 2016, of journalists and media outlets that are too critical" and the Philippines has remained "one of the world's deadliest countries for journalists" during this pandemic.

4.1.3. Duterte's reliance on militarism and state coercion

The Duterte administration relied heavily on militarization and intensified state violence as an overarching principle of its anti-pandemic response. This reliance on militarism amidst an unprecedented global health crisis includes the appointment of military officers in influential government posts responsible for the national pandemic response, extensive repression of government critics, and the intimidation and harassment of journalists and unarmed activists. In his bid to militarize his government's pandemic response, Duterte on his July 27, 2020, State of the Nation Address drew inspiration from his deadly war on drugs: "Together, we shall fight this pandemic with the same fervor as our campaign against illegal drugs, criminality, insurgency, and corruption in high places and entrenched parochial interests" (Cabato, 2020, p. 5). The absence of scientific experts in key government health agencies has reinforced the emerging pattern of delegitimization of scientific knowledge and democratic governance, while glorifying militaristic state responses to non-militaristic governance challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, the Duterte administration appointed retired high-ranking military officials on the highly influential public health board responsible for curbing the pandemic (Lalu, 2020). Supported by Duterte's allies in Congress, Republic Act 11469 – also known as "*Bayanihan* (United Efforts) to Heal As One Act" – provided the Duterte administration emergency powers to designate former high-ranking military officials in the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF). The IATF is the central government council responsible for the formulation and implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP), which refers to the state's overarching policy strategies to combat the pandemic. Sidelining scientific experts and key pandemic stakeholders, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana took the chair role of the IATF, while Interior and Local Government Secretary Eduardo Año assumed the deputy chair position. Both Lorenzana and Año retired from the military as high-ranking officials before assuming their influential roles in the Duterte regime. The three other IATF members used to hold important roles in the state security establishment

included the following: retired Army General and Social Welfare Secretary Rolando Bautista and Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) incumbent chief Gen. Felimon Santos Jr., and the Philippine National Police (PNP) incumbent chief Gen. Archie Gamboa. Meanwhile, Duterte designated his official Peace Adviser and former AFP chief Carlito Galvez as another IATF member and chief executive of the NAP (Lalu, 2020).

Second, the Philippine government expanded the deployment of state violence and control against activists, political opposition members, journalists, and government critics. This increased state violence against any form of peaceful political dissidence "have intersected with and been reinforced through COVID-19 health measures to curtail grassroots efforts to social and environmental safeguards" (Dressler, 2021, p. 1). While being used for decades by the Philippine military and political elites to delegitimize certain actors by branding the latter as members of the armed communist rebel group (Regilme, 2021c), "red-tagging has become deadlier since Rodrigo Duterte became president in 2016" (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In 2018, President Duterte established the National Task Force on Ending Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), with at least 10 billion php (194 million euros) of budget for 2022, and was responsible for branding student activists, key opposition members, investigative journalists, labor rights advocates, human rights researchers, socially oriented Catholic priests, among others, as linked to the New People's Army — the country's long-standing communist armed rebel group (Nepomuceno, 2021). NTF-ELCAC conducts its red-tagging practices using its social media channels, press conferences, and official statements. Red tagging, especially during the pandemic, has generated lethal consequences for those being branded as armed communists, despite the absence of compelling evidence supporting the government's accusation (Human Rights Watch, 2022). For example, Cristina Palabay, the Secretary-General of *Karapatan* (Rights) (the country's largest human rights network), reported that she had been subjected to persistent harassment and public threats of rape and state-initiated killings as direct consequences of red tagging. Advocating for the rights of call center and business process outsourcing agents, Mylene Cabalona, the labor leader of the country's largest union of business process outsourcing employees, has suffered from state-initiated accusations of links to armed communist groups. Notably, Cong Corrales, editor of one of the leading daily newspapers in the southern part of the country, claimed that he has been "subjected to numerous red-taggings on social media, and in anti-communist propaganda materials circulated in the city" (Gomez, 2021, p. 1).

Moreover, the Duterte government imposed one of the world's longest and strictest lockdown measures in any country during the first year of the COVID19 pandemic, through widespread military and police security checkpoints (Hapal, 2021). Amidst the government mandate for Filipinos not to go out of their homes, thereby depriving many of their sources of income and livelihood, the Duterte administration did not provide adequate welfare state benefits, including income subsidies, to support those who need them the most. In demonstrating his government's cruelty and resolve, Duterte made a 'shoot-to-kill' order to police and military officers who were empowered by the country's chief executive to kill extrajudicially anyone who will be caught violating the quarantine and lockdown measures. This measure goes against the state's constitution, which prohibits any form of the death penalty. From March to May 2020, the PNP arrested at least 57,177 individuals, charged 23,377 with monetary penalties, and detained 2875 suspects in state prisons, thereby totaling 188,348 Filipinos penalized by state authorities, many of whom suffered from physical and mental forms of harassment in ways that are not proportional to the alleged crime committed (Buan, 2020). As such, the IATF and Duterte ignored the public advice of many leading medical experts, opposition legislators, and social activists regarding a comprehensive socio-medical solution to the health crisis.

4.2. Nicaragua

4.2.1. Weaponization of the legal system to consolidate the regime

As the pandemic spreads globally, Nicaragua, which for many months denied its existence, is tightening the legal system to increase its control over society and consolidate the authoritarian turn. A series of laws passed by the National Assembly in the hands of the executive has orchestrated this trend: Law 1040 on foreign agents (October 15, 2020); Law 1042 on cybercrime (October 27, 2020); Law 1055 on sovereignty (December 21, 2020); Law 1060 strengthening the measures of the code of criminal procedures (February 5, 2021); and Law 1070 reforming and extending electoral law (May 4, 2021).

The regime's first action to strengthen its control is the so-called "Foreign Agents Law". This law implies that any individual or organization receiving funds from international cooperation or having a link with external actors must be registered as "foreign agents". This obligation implies being "registered with the Ministry of Interior (Migob) and subject to financial control by the Financial Analysis Unit (UAF)".² As pointed out by the European Parliament and the IACHR/OAS, the introduction of this law favors a close surveillance of non-governmental organizations, especially those related to human rights and the opposition. It constitutes a lever for the repression and restriction of civil society. As the IACHR/OAS stated in a report presented in October 2021, "the new law seeks to silence individuals and organizations considered to be opposed to the Nicaraguan government and to prevent the exercise of civil liberties, including freedom of expression and association, freedom to be involved in the definition of public affairs, the right to protest and the right to defend rights" (IACHR, 2021).

The control and surveillance exercised by the regime has been accentuated by another law relating to cybercrimes (the so-called "Gag Law"). This law of October 27th 2020 allows "to prevent, investigate, prosecute, and punish crimes committed by natural or legal persons using information and communications technologies, and the integral protection of systems that use those technologies, their content, and any of their components, and to establish prison sentences and fines for various behaviors related to the use of digital media, among them, publishing or disseminating" (IAHCR, 2021: 60) "false and/or misrepresented information that causes alarm, fear, or anxiety in the population".³ The vagueness concerning the "false and/or misrepresented information" allows the regime in practice to prosecute and imprison anyone in the opposition or who speaks publicly against the regime. Although the opposition denounced this intention to muzzle all opposition during the vote, the law has in fact allowed the prosecution and arrest of several opposition leaders since its promulgation, particularly in the run-up to the 2021 electoral campaign, which will be Ortega's fourth election victory.

In the same perspective of exacerbating control by the authorities, Law 1055 of December 21st 2020 – "on the defence of the people's rights to independence, sovereignty and self-determination for peace" – allows the prosecution of any political opponent who maintains relations with foreign actors. Article 1 of this law states defined "Traitors to the Patria": Nicaraguans who direct or finance a coup d'état, disrupt the constitutional order, promote or encourage terrorist acts, carry out acts that undermine independence, sovereignty and self-determination, incite foreign influence in internal affairs, call for military interventions, [organizations] organized with funds from foreign powers to carry out terrorist and destabilization acts, which propose and manage economic, commercial and financial blockades against the country and its institutions, which request, recommend and applaud sanctions imposed on the State of Nicaragua and its citizens, and all those who undermine

the superior interests of the nation as set forth in the law".⁴

In addition to the political lockdown, the regime enacted laws to consolidate its repressive capacity. In this regard, Law 1060 of February 5, 2021, provides for the extension of the legal duration of preventive detention from 48 h to a period of 15–90 days. Strongly criticized by international organizations, this measure has been considered as constituting a *de facto* category of "political prisoner".⁵ The latest repressive instrument implemented by the Ortega regime was Law 1070 of May 4, 2021, which introduced reform of the electoral law. The new legislation limits participation by increasing the grounds for suspension and revocation of the legal status of political parties, which the current administration has used to arbitrarily and illegally criminalize people identified as dissidents in the context of the political crisis of April 2018 (OAS, 2021).

4.2.2. Manipulation and control of public sphere

Ortega's regime has orchestrated a systemic disregard of transparency and accountability in public service. This has materialized through media repression and the massive manipulation of public health statistics.

Regarding media repression, the organization Reporters without Borders has reported in 2021 of "censorship, intimidation and threats ... Journalists are constantly stigmatised and subjected to harassment campaigns, arbitrary arrest and death threats".⁶ Many media outlets were victims of a state-orchestrated shortage of newsprint and other raw materials between 2019 and 2020. More recently, media outlets have been subjected to abusive judicial proceedings in which they were forced to pay enormous fines (Reporters without Borders, 2021). During the COVID-19 crisis, the Nicaraguan government tightened its control over freedom of expression. The government used the pandemic as an excuse to implement laws that restrict the free flow of information. In this context, during an electoral campaign, journalists have been the target of "harassment and fear" (IPI, 2021). According to Nicaraguan journalist Julio Lopez, journalists have suffered "persecution, espionage, physical aggression, theft of equipment, confiscation of equipment, and the seizing of media houses' property" (IPI, 2021). Moreover, the Nicaraguan press was a direct victim of the laws enforced on cyber criminality and foreign agents, which in turn precipitated the closing of some national media outlets (*El Nuevo Diario*) or the compulsion to go into exile for some journalists, such as Carlos F. Chamorro (*Confidencial*).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Nicaraguan authorities have underreported the number of deaths and infections, restricted public health information, and criminalized citizen-led public health efforts (Jarquin, 2022). For instance, "the government has not only dismissed the recommendations of world health authorities to take precautions but has flouted them by organizing large-scale public events" (Pearson et al., 2020: parag.1), such as the 15th March 2020 public event called "Love in the Times of COVID-19" (Salazar et al., 2020). In comparison with other countries, the data published in Nicaragua have been mainly manipulated, as Jarquin observes "the strikingly low number of reported infections compared with Central American neighbors" (Jarquin, 2022:9). The PAHO also charged Nicaragua with not providing accurate data.⁷ Moreover, the founder and president of the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences denounced the lack of "credible public data to understand the

⁴ Law No. 1055. On Defense of the Rights of the People to Independence, Sovereignty, and Self-Determination for Peace. Published in La Gaceta, Diario Oficial No. 237, of December 22, 2020.

⁵ <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2021-03-11/nicaragua-amendment-to-code-of-criminal-procedure-extends-pretrial-preventive-detention-period/>.

⁶ Reporters Without Borders (RWB), Nicaragua, <https://rsf.org/en/country/nicaragua> (2021).

⁷ <https://newsinamerica.com/en/othernews/2020/paho-nicaragua-is-the-only-c-a-country-with-no-COVID-19-test-reports/>.

² https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0259_EN.html.

³ Law No. 1042. Special Cybercrimes Act. Published in La Gaceta, Diario Oficial No. 201, of October 30, 2020.

degree to which COVID-19 had spread in the country” (Huete-Pérez, 2020). This data instrumentalization gave birth to the mobilization of self-organized citizen groups (Citizen Observatory for COVID-19) as well as professional ones (Nicaraguan Medical Union), as they uncover irregularities in the health system and gaps between official data and the national reality. As demonstrated by Miranda and Salazar (2021), many deceased Nicaraguans who tested positive for COVID-19 were listed as having died of other causes.

In addition, the regime criminalized its efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Joe Parkin Daniels shows that many doctors have reported “being targeted by the Government of Daniel Ortega” (Parkin Daniels, 2021), with sanctions for speaking publicly about the virus or pressures to misreport. Authorities also “took actions to censor citizens calling for quarantines and mask-wearing, accusing some of deliberately attempting to sow panic in the population (Parkin Daniels, 2021, quoted in Jarquín, 2022: 9).

4.2.3. Militarization and intensified state violence

During the pandemic, the regime manipulated, controlled and diverted the functions of the National Police, the Army, as well as the creation of apparatuses of control and surveillance of the citizenry, most especially the political opposition (IACHR, 2021, pp. 31–32). Beyond, the “disproportionate use of force by the police” that have been underlined by several international organizations, the Nicaraguan government empowered parastatal groups, which are mainly “collectives characterised by taking on repressive functions and acting in coordination with the National Police or the army” (IAHCR, 2021). Those groups, commonly known as “*turbas sandinistas*,” have largely participated in the repression of Nicaraguans and the surveillance and control of the public space. In 2020 and in the pre-election context of 2021, the UNHCHR pointed out that the police were mobilized to control the movements of some individuals, including preventing them from leaving their homes to prevent any public demonstrations (UNHCHR, 2021:5). In the end, the UNHCHR continued to observe cases of arbitrary detentions, especially against persons perceived to be against persons perceived to be opponents of the Government (UNHCHR, 2021:9).

5. Conclusion

How and under what conditions did the COVID-19 health crisis impact global South states’ democratic processes and human rights commitments? Competitive authoritarian regimes have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by severely limiting spaces for political dissent and scientific expertise in the political system. The COVID-19 crisis produced a structural opportunity to bypass political and institutional constraints and accelerate the trajectory of regimes towards competitive authoritarianism. The Philippines and Nicaragua actively took advantage of the pandemic through public health management strategies that have contributed to democratic breakdown while consolidating the strength of the regimes and their political leaders, particularly Duterte and Ortega.

Although there are differences between the Philippines and Nicaragua, such as ideological positions and the degree of regime militarization, our analysis reveals a similar pattern in health crisis management and political strategies. This pattern includes the weaponization of emergency powers to further constrain individual freedoms, use of disinformation to conceal policy failures, and intensified use of state coercion. Both Duterte and Ortega undermined the democratic principle of separation of powers, legalized extended periods of warrantless arrests, authorized life imprisonment, and undermined independent media outlets while manipulating public health statistics during the pandemic. They have also expanded the deployment of state violence and control against activists, political opposition members, and journalists through military or para-military forces or by militarizing civilian state bureaucracy. By examining these repression mechanisms during a health crisis, we can explore their potential use in other

contexts and under different conditions.

In Nicaragua, the pandemic has increasingly facilitated the country’s drift from competitive authoritarianism to full-fledged authoritarianism, downgrading the constitutional channels through which oppositionist groups can contest executive power, which is why we observe a more blatant use of the “weaponization of the legal system” strategy in comparison to the Philippines. Another difference is the process of state coercion. In the Philippines, the regime uses the army for both the use of state coercion and the exercise of government (e.g., implementation of public health protocols and other traditional non-militaristic tasks), whereas in Nicaragua, the army plays only a marginal role in the use of force (and the exercise of government), which is often deployed by paramilitary forces (*tumbas*). Finally, Nicaragua did not use a containment strategy, calling instead for large popular gatherings in the midst of the pandemic, whereas in the Philippines, containment was a key tool for state coercion and control of the population. Beyond these slight differences, it comes out effectively from this article that the impacts of global health crises have been to accelerate and intensify anti-democratic features and detrimental state practices to human rights.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about the erosion of human rights and democratic processes were widespread. Our study on the Philippines and Nicaragua offers valuable insights for scholars and practitioners. We stress the importance of progressive civil society organizations challenging government actions that undermine checks and balances. Additionally, forming alliances with international activists can help pressure governments to uphold constitutional commitments. In the future, research should explore how transnational actors and inter-governmental organizations can promote democracy and human rights domestically in cooperation with domestic actors.

This article has examined two countries that are currently categorized as part of the “Global South.” However, it is important to acknowledge that numerous other nations experienced a decline in democratic practices in the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. In Latin America, one could point to President Bukele’s El Salvador or President Bolsonaro’s Brazil as examples. Similarly, Southeast Asia has experienced a trend of de-democratization, particularly in Thailand and Burma. This phenomenon can also be observed in various sub-regions of the African continent. Consequently, it is necessary to conduct more systematic research into pandemic management and emergency contexts in authoritarian and illiberal settings, as the cases selected have limitations. It is crucial to investigate how the three mechanisms of pandemic management, as presented by the framework in this article, can be applied to understanding the growing authoritarian tendencies exhibited by other allegedly stable liberal democracies in the global North, such as Hungary under Viktor Orban or the United States under Donald Trump.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Salvador Santino Regilme: Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Kevin Parthenay:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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