

THE DAILY SCEPTIC

QUESTION EVERYTHING. STAY SANE. LIVE FREE.

Another Postcard From Manila

24 August 2021

by Kyle Helke



My wife and I are employed in Manila, the capital of the Philippines. This summer we took some time off to visit family back in the U.S. and Italy, where my wife is from, and enjoyed breathing fresh air, taking our young son to the playground, going out for ice cream – you know, all the normal things that humans do that we haven't been able to do over the past year because of the draconian restrictions imposed by the Philippine Government. It certainly was a breath of fresh air. Despite all of the madness going on in both the U.S. and Italy right now, I am still green with envy at the freedoms enjoyed by the people living in those places. It jarred my brain to meet people this summer who have never had to submit to (multiple) PCR tests.

You can imagine our morale as we returned to Manila a few weeks ago (we are contractually bound by our job). Here in the Philippines, it's as if time stopped in April of last year. Still, you must wear both a face mask and shield when you leave your house. Still, children under 18 and senior citizens are technically not allowed to leave their houses (although this summer that

loosened up a bit, but after two weeks the ‘Delta’ variant put an end to that). Still, schools are closed. Still, you must have a negative PCR/antigen test to travel to the next province, book a flight, or stay a night in a hotel. Still, gyms, theaters, cultural institutions, and outdoor sites (such as the American Memorial Cemetery – a cemetery!) are closed. Still, upon entering every shop or workplace one is subjected to a temperature check and a contact tracing form. Still, most restaurants are take-out or are reduced to 50% capacity (only on the lowest-level lockdown). Still, people think that if everyone ‘just gets the vaccine’, Covid will just go away and all of this will be over. Still, what is considered the longest lockdown in the world continues. Indeed, what is happening in places like France and Australia is very alarming, but it is frustrating to see that the Philippines is never acknowledged for its continued brutish restrictions that have been imposed as a result of the de facto martial law that has reigned over this country since all of this began. At least in other places, people are beginning to question the narrative; there isn’t even a shred of that here, people are too scared of the Government (and of catching Covid).

Upon return to Manila, we finished our two-week hotel quarantine and went right into a hard lockdown, the third here since all this began in March 2020. Once again, due to the so-called ‘Delta’ variant, citizens are expected to remain at home for two weeks (a tired trope by now) and may only exit their residences for essential items with a quarantine pass (one per household). Outdoor exercise was allowed until yesterday, but the authorities probably got spooked into banning it when they saw people still outside enjoying themselves (or trying to be healthy) and not cowering in fear at home. Naturally, only ‘essential’ workers are allowed to leave their homes to go to work, and because our work is somehow included in that category we consider ourselves lucky to be able to leave the house; our four year-old son, however, isn’t so lucky. Most likely, the current round of hard lockdown will carry on until at least October: they always start out with two weeks but then extend it by a month or more. The Government changes the lockdown classification but keeps all the restrictions the same. It’s always one step forward, five steps back here. I’m sure we’ll get two weeks of loosened restrictions in November before the Government panics about people wanting to be human for Christmas and then walks everything back.

I suppose what is particularly frustrating about this round of house arrest is that the Government didn’t even try to justify it with rising ‘cases’. Instead, it was just: “We could have over 10,000 cases a day because we have ‘Delta’ now, and we don’t want the hospitals to be overrun.” Reading the local news, the screeching about rising ‘cases’ and the daily death toll that characterised previous stay-at-home lockdowns is conspicuously absent. Instead, the headlines praise the improved vaccine roll-out, which until recently has been mostly farcical (and is one of the activities that has been allowed to continue during the lockdown). On the eve of the current lockdown, over 10,000 people in Manila city panicked about rumors that one wouldn’t be able to leave their house without being vaccinated, and overran a local vaccination center, scrambling over each other to get the ‘jab’. The Government blamed ‘fake news’ for sparking the stampede, but I’m sure they were secretly tickled by public enthusiasm for vaccination when threatened with the stick.

In a certain sense, there is some serenity to be found in the assurance that nothing will change here in the future, that lockdown will be on the horizon here indefinitely: at least you know where you are at. On the other hand, that can swing the other way too, and with it comes feelings of desperation and hopelessness. Additionally, the Government makes decisions so quickly and capriciously that the small pleasures of life that can be squeezed out of the current situation can be snatched away at any moment, like outdoor exercise, or whether the policeman patrolling the local park will stop turning a blind eye to you taking your kid out to get some sunshine because of a new top-down order he received. All of this takes a heavy toll on the soul. Thank goodness that we have been spared the divide-and-conquer rhetoric regarding vaccines, at least so far.

When will this ever end? No one knows, and there is no clear objective. It appears that the Philippine Government's goal is to get every single person in the country vaccinated, even though they've only managed to get to 15% thus far. The fact that the vaccines don't appear to be very effective, which at least is being mentioned in the media in other countries and discussed among the public, is barely being mentioned in the public discussion. 'Vaccine passports' aren't here yet, but I'm sure they're in the works, as there has been some talk of banning unvaccinated people from public transport once 50% of the population has been double jabbed. However, I don't know how the Government will manage that given that they can't even institute a unified track-and-trace program, let alone get everyone in the country a basic ID card. Sometimes the best defense against tyranny is bureaucratic incompetence. Presidential elections are coming up in early 2022, and most likely rolling lockdowns will persist until then. I'm of the opinion that, at the very least, there were certainly some high shenanigans carried out under the shadow of the Covid crisis during the U.S. presidential election in November, and I suspect the Philippine Government is taking a page from the American playbook with the goal of installing the current president's daughter as the next President, since his term is up in early 2022 and he cannot run again. I can't imagine how the public would willingly vote for more of what has run this country's economy into the dirt, but then again, I never would have imagined any of this two years ago, so nothing is beyond imagination.

One ray of hope is that the official will towards indefinite lockdowns is cracking. When the Government announced the most recent hard lockdown, they were asked if stimulus payments, or, *ayuda* would be provided for those forced out of work, and they gave a noncommittal answer: "We'll have to look into that." This was a tacit admission that Government coffers are running dry, and that eventually they will have to take a more relaxed approach because the situation is becoming economically unsustainable. Public opinion is also shifting marginally, as it was recently discovered by an audit commission that billions of pesos budgeted to the Department of Health (DoH) for the Covid crisis went unused. This is especially shocking considering how many Manila residents were dependent on volunteer food pantries during the last hard lockdown in March, and the present one. The DoH has also appeared to be, until recently, in denial about the presence of the 'Delta' variant; although several returning overseas

workers were found to have the variant, the DoH over the past weeks has consistently refused to recognise that there has been community transmission of the variant.

Naturally, as much as the Government would like to inflate the threat of the virus by pointing to ever-increasing case numbers, I'd be willing to bet that this virus is largely endemic in Philippine society at this point. Given the high poverty rate of the Philippines, if Government policy is to take those who test positive for Covid and subject them – and their families and close contacts – to a mandatory 14-day quarantine (sometimes in a Government facility), who in their right mind would volunteer to a PCR/antigen test if it might mean you will be locked up without an income to support your family for two weeks? This leads me to believe that, like every country throughout this crisis, the numbers are much higher than the headlines lead on. The coming months here in Manila are only going to get livelier. What the Western countries that have vaccinated a large percentage of their populations are going through right now is certainly on the horizon for this country. Because the Philippines is so far behind other countries in its vaccine campaign, and vaccine adverse reactions and the efficacy of the vaccine itself is barely being mentioned by the media, it will be interesting to see how the strained medical system here manages another Covid 'surge', or large number of adverse reactions to the vaccine, or a combination of the two. This, of course, is the same system that could barely manage a Covid 'surge' even with the hardest of lockdowns, and now that the Government is waking up to the fact that indefinite lockdowns are unsustainable, the worst may still be in store for this country. As they like to say here, rather fatalistically, *bahala na* – whatever happens, happens. That seems to be the best approach for all of us to take at this point.


The piece originally appeared on the email newsletter from the radio talkshow host Tom Woods. You can sign up to his newsletter [here](#). Read Kyle Helke's first "Postcard From the Manila" for Lockdown Sceptics [here](#).



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Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, one by one.

– Charles Mackay

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