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## **The Politics of Participation of the Philippine COVID-19 Vaccination Program: A Critical Political Economy Approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*One of the most politicized aspects of the global pandemic response is the issue of vaccination. Vaccinating billions of individuals around the world does not only involve scientists, medical experts, and healthcare workers but also require sound governance and policy implementation. Congruent with the assertion that the pandemic is not only a public health but also a political issue, this paper examines the Philippine COVID-19 vaccination program by analyzing the legislation and implementation of Republic Act No. 11525 or the COVID-19 Vaccination Program Act of 2021. With the pandemic and shortage of global vaccine supply being used as justifications to impose stricter regulations and consolidate political power to the national government, RA 11525's restrictive provisions in vaccine procurement serves as a good manifestation of increasing authoritarian tendencies observed among Southeast Asian states during the pandemic. In relation, this paper argues that mainstream theories such as neo-institutionalism and society-based approaches are insufficient to explain the legislation of RA 11525 and its constraining impact to Philippine stakeholders interested to purchase their own vaccines due to each approach's theoretical blindspots. As an alternative, this paper introduces the critical assumptions of the Murdoch School of Political Economy and Modes of Participation (MoP) framework to explain the very restrictive nature of RA 11525. Specifically, RA 11525 prescribed who are the permitted actors to procure, and what are the processes these actors need to comply with because of two fundamental reasons, namely, the global shortage of vaccine supply and the emergency approval of available COVID-19 vaccines.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, vaccine, Murdoch School, MoP framework, political economy, Philippines

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## INTRODUCTION

Sharing similar views from multiple commentators, Herrera, Konradt, Ordonez, & Trebesch (2020) noted that COVID-19 is not only a public health issue but also a political issue. Affecting not only the healthcare sector, the political dimension of the pandemic is present particularly on its impact to the global economy and government responses such as border and mobility restrictions, and vaccination efforts (Greer, King, da Fonseca, & Peralta-Santos, 2020).

With the aim of ending the pandemic, the Philippines commenced the vaccination of its citizens during its inoculation of healthcare workers (HCWs) on March 2021 (Venzon, 2021). The priority vaccinations in the succeeding months included senior citizens and persons with co-morbidities until the government permitted to include the so-called “economic front liners” on June 2021 which covered workers both from the public and private sectors required to report on-site in their respective workplaces (Tomacruz, 2020a). At present, the Philippine government has finally opened the inoculation for minors (12-17 years old) and to the general adult population (Patag, 2021; Reuters, 2021). As of writing, the Philippine government has recently approved the

administration of booster shots to healthcare workers (Galvez, 2021) and persons with co-morbidities (Sarao, 2021).

In this regard, this paper aimed to explore the politics of participation of COVID-19 vaccination in the Philippines particularly from a critical political economy angle. Focusing on the aspect of vaccine procurement, this paper looked at the institutional arrangements prescribed by the Republic Act No. 11525 or the *COVID-19 Vaccination Program Act of 2021* in order for the public and private sectors to procure their own COVID-19 vaccines.

However, compared to available studies on the political processes of policy formulation in the Philippines, this essay argues that existing approaches, especially what Pilapil (2006) regarded as “institutionalist” (p.91) and so-called “society-based approaches,” (p.99) are insufficient to explain the policy of COVID-19 vaccination program due to the restrictive channels and selected permitted participants allowed by RA 11525 in procuring COVID-19 vaccines. As an alternative proposal, the paper invoked the explanatory power of a social conflict approach in political participation called the Murdoch School of political economy. Referred herein as

the *Murdoch School*, the theory is a critical political economy approach since it views institutions as sites of contestation of various interests, agendas, and objectives of state actors and social groups (Hameiri & Jones, 2020). In addition, building on the assumptions of the Murdoch School, this paper also employed the Modes of Participation (MoP) framework to explain the rationale behind the restrictive nature and process of vaccine procurement prescribed by RA 11525 (Rodan & Baker, 2020). Applying these assumptions, this paper looked at the conflicting material interests of the following sectors behind the formation of RA 11525, namely, the national government, local government units (LGUs), private sector bodies, and vaccine manufacturers. In addition, this paper also enumerated the existing mechanisms of political participation for vaccine procurement permitted by RA 11525 based on the typologies of the MoP framework's *sites of contestation* and *ideologies of representation*.

### **The Pandemic in the Philippines**

The deadly COVID-19 virus, first discovered in Wuhan, China, entered the Philippines on 21 January 2020. The Department of Health (DOH) confirmed that the Philippines' first case of COVID-19 infection was a 39-year old Chinese traveler from Wuhan, China who transited from Hong Kong before

arriving in the country (Gregorio, 2021a). While other adjacent countries to China have immediately closed their borders, the Philippines downplayed the threat in the first quarter of 2020 as flights coming from China, especially from Wuhan, continued to arrive in the country's international airport in Metro Manila (Peralta, 2020).

As early as February 2020, senators have been calling to implement a work-from-home arrangement in order to prevent the possible transmission of the virus in jam-packed areas of Metro Manila (CNN Philippines Staff, 2020). In March 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte declared that all classes in Metro Manila will be cancelled from March 10 to 14 (Tomacruz, 2020b). Days after, Duterte declared that the entire island of Luzon will be under mobility restrictions named as "community quarantine" which was renamed on 15 March 2020 as "enhanced community quarantine" (Tomacruz, 2020c). As of writing, since the imposition of quarantine classifications last 2020, the Philippines never lifted mobility measures despite relaxation of categories (See, 2021). A new category of restrictions called "alert level systems" was introduced on 20 October 2021 due to the influence of increasing vaccination coverage in Metro Manila. This new category also lobbies to finally open several economic sectors (Gregorio, 2021b).

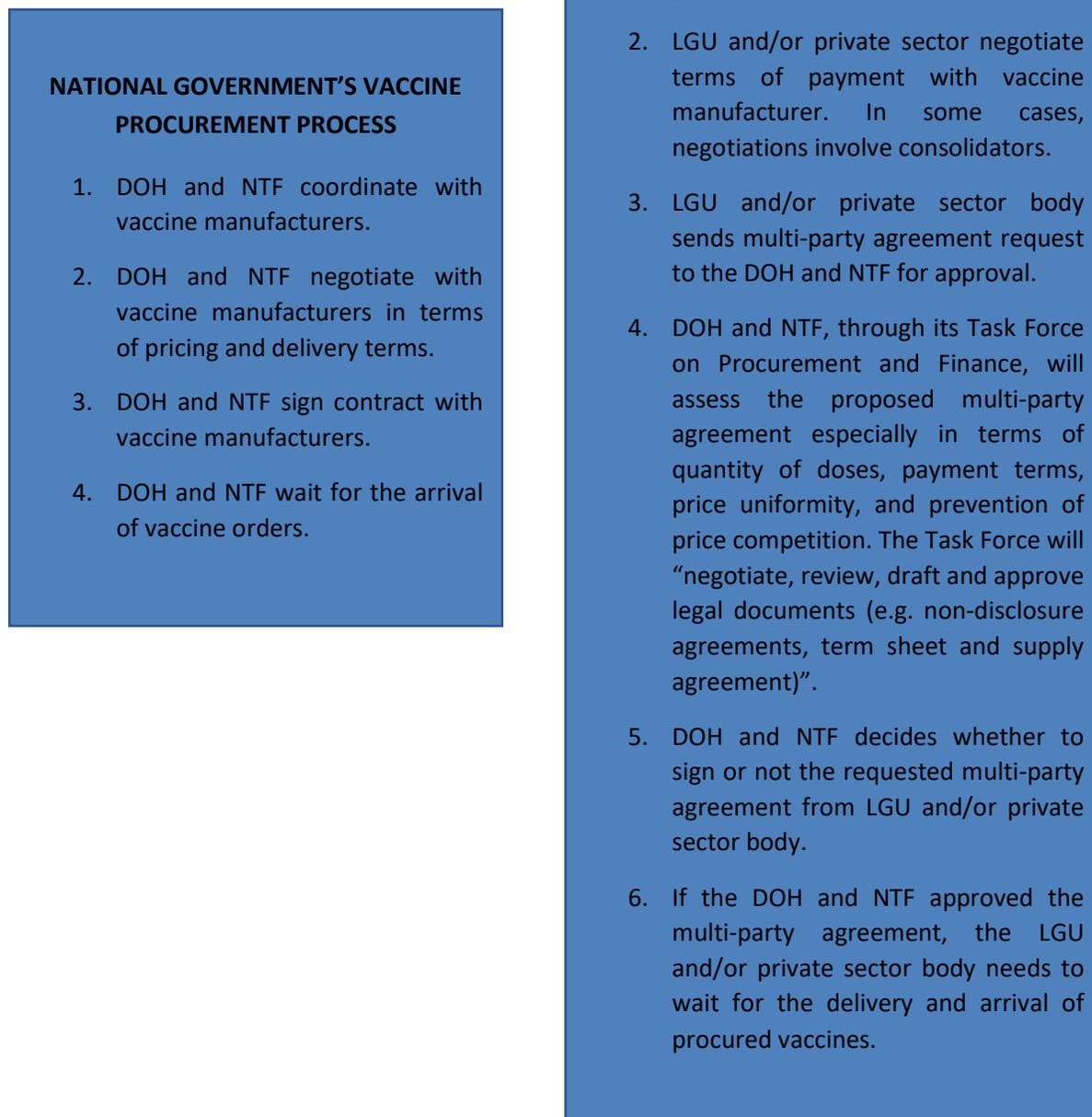
While other countries like Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand were able to achieve a zero COVID (McLaughlin, 2021), the Philippines only achieved a “downward trajectory” interrupted by periodic surges as the country is forced to reopen the economy and rely on the arrival of vaccines (Jiao, 2020).

The approval and commencement of inoculations in Israel and Western countries at the start of 2021 provided optimism for the world to escape the crisis. With vaccine manufacturers applying for emergency use authorization (EUA) in the Philippines, as required by the Food and Drug Administration, the Philippine Congress was tasked to legislate a law to regulate vaccine procurements and administration as well as for the government to provide an indemnity fund to compensate for individuals who might suffer adverse reactions from the vaccines (Ranada, 2021b). Such step was necessary as vaccine manufacturers are wary of possible politicization and litigation due to the previous Dengvaxia controversy of Sanofi’s dengue vaccines.

Since 25 July 2021, the Philippines had granted eight COVID-19 vaccine brands with EUA, namely, AstraZeneca, Covaxin (Bharat Biotech), Coronavac (Sinovac), Janssen, Moderna, Pfizer, Sputnik V/Light, and Sinopharm (Food and Drug Administration, 2021).

As of writing, all mentioned vaccine brands are already included in the World Health Organization’s emergency use list (EUL) (World Health Organization, 2021).

The passage of Republic Act No. 11525 or the COVID-19 vaccination program outlined the process of how the Philippines can procure COVID-19 vaccines. First, national government bodies are allowed to directly procure from vaccine manufacturers (Section 3). Second, the law also permits local government units (LGUs) and private sector bodies to procure their own vaccines as long as they will enter into a multiparty agreement (MPA) with the Department of Health, National Task Force (NTF) for COVID-19, and vaccine manufacturers (Sections 3,4 and 5). Lastly, the only vaccines that can be purchased are those with emergency use authorization (EUA) from the FDA except those vaccine brands assessed and recommended by the Health Technology Assessment Council (HTAC) upon examination of preliminary results from Phase III or Phase IV trials or as recommended by the World Health Organization (Section 7).



*Figure 1. Step-by-step description of COVID-19 vaccine procurement based on RA 11525 and its Implementing Rules and Regulations. (Note: the diagram does not involve the arrangements for ancillary services needed for the delivery and storage of vaccines since those services are beyond the scope of this paper.)*

The Philippine vaccination program presents a peculiar picture due to the legislation of a specialized law to procure vaccines and allocation of indemnity fund. While other Southeast Asian states such as Vietnam and Thailand have been already implementing a “no-fault-vaccine-injury compensation programs” (Mungwira, et al., 2020), institutionalizing a specific procurement law for COVID-19 vaccines positions the Philippine case as unique compared to other states in the region. Consider the case of Malaysia where vaccine distribution is under the authority of the federal government through the agency of the COVID-19 Immunization Task Force. The central role of the Task Force in vaccine allocation resulted to political controversies as the federal government is viewed to deliver more doses to states that are politically aligned with the national administration (FMT Reporters, 2021). This situation is different from the scenario created by RA 11525 in the Philippines which pluralized the agency of vaccine procurement from national government to include local governments and private sector bodies.

To understand the reasons behind these arrangements in the vaccination governance of the Philippines, this article forwards the proposal to rethink our assumptions towards institutions and accept the reality that political participation in

Southeast Asia is usually outlined by state apparatuses. In addition, despite being a democracy, the case of Philippine vaccination program further proves that the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled political leaders in the region to pursue authoritarian approaches and consolidate more political power justified by the present national emergency (Gomez, 2020; Marston, 2021).

### **Murdoch School and Other Institutional Approaches in Philippine Policymaking**

In an article accounting the merits of employing institutional approaches in studying Philippine politics, Pilapil (2006) appraised the dominant “society-based approaches” in studying policymaking in the country. Among the frameworks included in his list of society-based approaches include the Marxist class-based understanding, Joel Migdal’s strong society-weak state model, Weberian neo-patrimonial state, and the hybrid approaches derived from the three (Pilapil, 2006).

For Pilapil (2006), these approaches possess a blindside as these frameworks assume a one-way causal mechanism where governance and policies are treated as outcomes of the politics of these social actors. To remedy this loophole, he advocated the use of an institutional approach. Rooted from the structure-agency logic of the new

institutionalism, Pilapil (2006) saw opportunities to introduce institutions in the study of Philippine policymaking as political institutions constrain the freedom and possible avenues a political actor will pursue. Specifically, Pilapil (2006) outlined that accounting political institutions in the equation will further cast light in policymaking since these institutions provide rewards and hindrances to both state and social actors, and also perform mediating functions in the interactions between the public and private sectors.

However, while the guidelines prescribed by RA 11525 prove the power of institutions to limit the freedom and choices of actors in vaccine procurements, the institutional approach as applied in this case is also guilty of blindsides. How? First, the institutional approach failed to account the genesis of RA 11525 as a constraining factor for state and societal entities interested in procuring COVID-19 vaccines. Second, the institutional approach assumes that the policy regime and guidelines in vaccine procurement, especially on the step of entering MPAs, are neutral, legal processes only needed for compliance and paperwork. However, as presented in the latter part of the paper, the process of entering an MPA is not without political ramifications. Third, the institutional approach also posits that actors are already existing in pre-

determined environment or context regardless of situation; thus, treating the governance of COVID-19 vaccination as an ahistorical case. Despite that the institutional approach has a variant called *historical institutionalism*, this approach is concerned on the stability and required critical juncture to disturb the inertia that maintains the existence of an institution (Hameiri & Jones, 2020). One good example of a study employing the historical institutionalist approach in the Philippine setting is Teehankee and Calimbahin's (2019) article entitled *Mapping the Philippines' Defective Democracy* which charted the evolution and intersection of the structures and institutions of Philippine state, economy, and society from 1947-2019. Following the logic of Murdoch School, the variant is incapable of explaining the precedents and roots behind the emergence of a political institution especially on the fact that political institutions enshrine material interests that subsequently define which avenues and actors are permitted for political participation.

Given the limitations of both "society-based" approaches and new institutionalism, there is a need to introduce new approaches that are compatible with the institutional arrangements and processes prescribed by RA 11525 in order to enable state actors and social groups to purchase their own COVID-19 vaccines. Thus, the

Murdoch School and the MoP framework are better alternatives to understand the politics of COVID-19 vaccine procurement because of the very restrictive vaccine procurement protocols and the ongoing conflict between the national and local government units, vaccine manufacturers, and private sector entities.

The Murdoch School is a critical political economy approach that originated from scholars based in the Asia Research Centre of Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia. Contrary to the assumptions of new institutionalism, the Murdoch School views institutions as sites of socio-political conflicts of both state actors and social groups. The assumptions of the Murdoch School is premised on the failure of the modernization thesis and the contestation among social actors brought by capitalistic development (Hameiri & Jones, 2020). Southeast Asia, a region known for its colonial history, is also an area viewed and tested with the assumptions of modernization thesis. Among these are the expectations that the region's states will become more democratic, and the democratic regime will further usher the region into economic development. However, disillusioned from the varying developments among Southeast Asian states and observed increasing reversal to authoritarian regimes,

Murdoch School proponents forwarded an alternative perspective by looking at the societal conflict created by capitalistic development to Southeast Asian states. This social conflict between state actors and social groups resulted to the formation of political institutions that are un-aligned towards the expectations and configuration of ideal Western democracy arrangements (Hameiri & Jones, 2020; Rodan & Baker, 2020). Applying these fundamental assumptions of the Murdoch School, this article viewed Philippine political institutions as outcomes of conflicting material interests of the Philippine government agencies and civil society actors.

### **Why the Modes of Participation Framework?**

Building on the premises of the Murdoch School, the Modes of Participation (MoP) framework is an attempt to explain state-society relations in regimes that do not fully subscribe and comply to the expectations of Western democracies. Rejecting the "hybrid regimes (Way & Levitsky, 2010)" approach in comparative politics where political regimes are compared to a certain bar of democratic standards, the MoP framework seeks to understand political participation based on two criteria of analysis, namely, sites of participation and ideologies of

representation (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007).

As explained by Rodan (2018), locating the *sites of participation* is an attempt to identify how states permit political participation of social actors ranging from social groups and individuals. On the other hand, determining the ideologies of representation is concerned with the question regarding the political actor's guiding principle serving as the rationale behind their political participatory activities.

There are four mechanisms under sites of participation, namely, individualized political expression, civil society expression, societal incorporation, and administrative incorporation. These four structures are based on the individual and collective agencies performing political participation inside or outside the state-endorsed avenues for participation. First, individual political expression is a mode of participation performed by individuals to express their views, opinions, and grievances about policy and governance issues outside the state-endorsed space or agency. Second, administrative incorporation is a state-sponsored mode of meeting individual concerns granted that these individuals subscribe to the concerned government agency's services and functions. Third, civil society expression is an avenue for

collective entities to mobilize their respective sectors to express interests and demands to the government outside the state-endorsed political apparatus. Lastly, societal incorporation is a mode of participation where the state creates specific government agencies to meet and respond to social groups intending to engage the government about their preferred objectives and agenda (Rodan & Baker, 2020).

Meanwhile, Rodan (2012; 2018) enumerated four ideologies of representation, namely, democratic, populist, consultative/consensual, and particularist/localist ideologies. Democratic ideology acknowledges the agency of the electorate to demand accountability via direct or indirect means from their elected or appointed leaders expected to embody their agendas, concerns, and interests. In contrast, populist ideology emphasizes the ability of the people to resist and challenge the elite without the intermediary function of social organizations. Meanwhile, consultative ideology privileges the involvement of stakeholders and insertion of experts in policy deliberations and governance issues to ensure efficient and sound policy outcomes while particularist/localist ideology provides a platform on the right to participation of communities defined by their geography, gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, and the like.

Through the MoP framework, Philippine political institutions are approached based on two avenues: (1) how the government provided individual and collective spaces for non-state actors to engage and participate on vaccine procurement, and (2) the legitimizing ideologies behind the formation of institutions that regulate the interaction between state actors and social groups concerning COVID-19 procurement and vaccination.

In addition, compared to institutionalist and society-based approaches (Pilapil, 2006), the Murdoch School and MoP framework provide the following advantages. First, as mentioned on the discussion of the institutionalist approach's blindsides, the Murdoch School and MoP framework are not a historical approaches. Both consider the historical development of political and economic contexts responsible for the formation of institutions. Second, since institutions are considered as sites of contestation between the interests of state actors and social groups, the Murdoch School and MoPs present a more comprehensive account of formation of political institutions. Why? Based on the logic of institutionalist approach, policies are products of the incentives and constraints given by an existing institutional structure to political agents. On the other hand, society-based approaches assume that policies are

outcomes of inputs from social actors outside the government sphere. In contrast, the MSPE and MoP treats the agency, interaction, and contestation of state actors and social entities as simultaneously occurring. In short, the Murdoch School and the MoP framework disfavor the one-way assumption posited by new institutionalism and society-based approaches.

### **RA 11525: An Outcome of Conflicting Interests?**

Before enumerating the concerned state agencies and social actors involved in the legislation of RA 11525, it is necessary to provide the political and economic contexts of the pandemic and Philippine vaccination strategy.

As mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health issue, but also inherently political and economic. The current pandemic is the first pandemic that affected the Philippines in the more than 100-year existence of the modern republic. The last pandemic that disturbed humanity was the Spanish influenza in 1918. During this period, the Philippines was still under the American colonization (Gealogo, 2009). While the 2003 SARS is also considered as a pandemic, the Philippines was able to successfully evade the onslaught of these deadly diseases during the administration of

Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-2010)  
(Saludo, 2020)

With the WHO categorizing COVID-19 as a pandemic, the world relied on the development of vaccines to address the global health crisis. While there are already available vaccines approved by the WHO, countries from the developing world are trapped in a situation defined by the scarcity of vaccine supply as rich nations were prioritized by vaccine manufacturers in terms of delivery (Khan, 2021). In addition, the hoarding of rich nations of vaccine supplies further aggravated the situation (Bhutto, 2021). As a developing country, the Philippines is a victim of this unfortunate scenario.

By reading the provisions of the RA 11525, one will obtain the idea regarding the primary state actors and social groups involved in the formation of the policy. Concerned state actors include the national government and the local government units (LGUs). Meanwhile, for social actors, they consist of vaccine manufacturers and private sector bodies. Each actor is distinguished by their respective material interests, agendas, and objectives.

Referring to the national government, RA 11525 pertains to the two leading state actors mandated to facilitate vaccine procurement, namely, the Department of Health (DOH) and

the National Task Force against COVID-19 (NTF). Initially, the primary agenda of the national government is to vaccinate 70% of the Filipino population; however, due to the Delta variant, the threshold was adjusted to 80%-90% (Ku & Atienza, 2021). This interest that authorizes the national government to purchase vaccines and its needed ancillary services for storage, administration, and deployment is enshrined in Section 3 of RA 11525.

On the other hand, LGUs are also considered as stakeholders in the policy deliberation of RA 11525. The Local Government Code of 1991, known as the internal revenue allotment, grants LGUs with considerable autonomy and a share in the national budget. Given these privileges, LGUs have their own budget that can be allocated to purchase their own vaccines outside the national government's procurements. This capability is instrumental since LGUs are answerable to their local constituents who are already suffering from the threat of the disease and the negative economic impacts to their livelihoods brought by the lockdowns. Section 4 of RA 11525 institutionalized such interest permitting LGUs to purchase their own vaccines including the needed ancillary services for storage, administration, and deployment.

Meanwhile, private sector bodies are also permitted to purchase their own

vaccines as specified in Section 5 of RA 11525. Private sector bodies, usually coming from the business sector, are already adamant to vaccinate their employees and personnel to protect them from the virus in order for their business operations to finally resume to their pre-pandemic status. Among the private sector bodies are San Miguel Corporation, Grab, and the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Inc. (San Miguel Corporation, 2021; Grab Philippines, 2021; Mercene, 2021)

On a separate note, RA 11525's permission for LGUs and private sector entities to procure their own vaccines are also tangential to the interests of the national government because additional vaccine supply in local constituencies and firms mean that vaccination to reach herd immunity will be expedited. In fact, during the early days of vaccination, Astra Zeneca required the procuring private sector bodies to donate a portion of their purchased doses to the government due to the scarcity of COVAX donations reaching the Philippines (Ranada, 2021a).

However, while the legislation of RA 11525 was ratified as "urgent", the passage of RA 11525 is not without hurdles as the national government faced two stages of conflict: (1) the disagreement between the national government and vaccine manufacturers

on the indemnity fund and its policy institutionalization, and (2) national government versus the LGUs and private sector battle for the approval of the latter's submitted multi-party agreements.

The first conflict emerged due to the alleged reluctance of the national government to grant blanket immunity to COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers in case of possible adverse effects to their recipients. This requirement was noted as the reason why the Philippines lost the opportunity to get the first batch of Pfizer doses from the United States on January 2021 and the delay of the vaccine deliveries from the COVAX facility. Specifically, the COVAX facility requires country recipients including the Philippines to exempt vaccine manufacturers from possible lawsuit from adverse reactions since the COVID-19 vaccines are still in the trial stage (Vera Files, 2021).

Realizing the importance of the need for blanket immunity and government-sponsored indemnity fund, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte asked the Congress to legislate a law on vaccine procurement and indemnity fund. As mentioned, the policy outcome of this deliberation, RA 11525, enabled the national government, LGUs, and private sector bodies to directly procure COVID-19 vaccines under certain conditions. In addition, the law also

required the national government to allocate PHP 500 million to be used as compensation for individual exhibiting adverse reactions from COVID-19 jabs (Reuters Staff, 2021).

In addition, the request for immunity and indemnification fund by vaccine manufacturers are rooted from a historical precedent. In February 2018, the Dengvaxia controversy erupted and became a “national scandal” as accusations that the dengue vaccine developed by Sanofi led to the death of a 10-year-old girl (Lo, 2019). As of writing, the accusation is still not proven; however, the controversy led to implications such as increased vaccine hesitancy among Filipinos (Alfonso, Dayrit, Mendoza, & Ong, 2021) and reported demands of compensation from affected families (Tan, 2018).

The second conflict occurred during the deliberations in the Congress. Initially, the national government was reported prohibiting local governments and private companies to directly procure their vaccines. The reason behind this decision is derived from the autonomous agency of LGUs to use their own funding (also known as the “internal revenue allotment”) and the independent purchasing capability of private businesses to compete with the national government efforts (Tomacruz, 2021d). In fact, a sub-conflict emerged

during the early days of vaccination as reports stated that a percentage of procured vaccines by the private sector are required to be donated to the government (Cinco, 2021). While the issue was settled since it was clarified that this is not a government requirement but that of Astra Zeneca (Ranada, 2021c), the LGUs and private sector were permitted to procure their own vaccines on the condition that they will enter into a multi-party agreement with the NTF, DOH, and vaccine manufacturers to ensure price uniformity and prevent price competition. Based on these arrangements, at the end of the day, it is still the national government which has the final say whether an LGU or a business can conduct its own vaccine procurement.

### **The MoPs inside the Multiparty Arrangements for Vaccine Procurements**

Due to the unknown possible effects of COVID-19 vaccines to the human body, vaccine procurements in the Philippines are restricted by the state through RA 11525. According to Sections 4 and 5 of the said law, LGUs and private entities are allowed to purchase vaccines as long as they will enter into a multi-party agreement with the DOH-NTF and the vaccine manufacturer. Since RA 11525 provided the legitimate channels of interaction

between the state and social actors in terms of vaccine purchase, it is possible to analyze the institutionalization of multiparty agreements from the lens of MoP framework.

In terms of *sites of participation*, the MPA is considered as an example of societal cooperation since LGUs (a sub-state actor) and private sector bodies (social groups) are required to course through their intention to purchase vaccines into specified channels prescribed by the government: the DOH and the NTF. The MPA is the state-prescribed institution serving as the prescribed mode of participation by RA 11525 in order for the national government to restrict and monitor the quantity of vaccine procurements of local governments and private businesses.

On the other hand, three ideologies of representation are observed to be present. First, the MPA may be considered as a manifestation of consultative representation. While Section 3 of RA 11525 specified that the involvement of DOH and the NTF is to ensure “price uniformity” and “prevention of price competition,” the creation of the said law is rooted on the novelty of the virus and its corresponding vaccines. Section 2 (c) of the said law proves the premise as the law “recognize(s) the experimental nature of COVID-19 vaccines available

in the market...” Given the novelty of COVID-19 vaccines, RA 11525 privileged medical and scientific experts in terms of which vaccines LGUs and the private sector can procure. This is apparent in two areas, namely, the authority of the Food and Drug Administration to issue emergency use authorization (EUA) to vaccine companies intending to supply doses to the Philippines (Section 6), and the authority of the Health Technology Assessment Council (HTAC) to assess and recommend vaccine brands with EUA but with incomplete Phase III or Phase IV clinical trials or those vaccine brands endorsed by the World Health Organization (Section 7). The ideology of consultative representation in RA 11525 paved the way for the MPA to serve as an instrument to restrict the participation of LGUs and private sector bodies in terms of vaccine procurements. Aside from the permitted site of participation by RA 11525, the emphasis towards the epistemic authority of the HTAC provides another constraint establishing the very restrictive nature of COVID-19 vaccine procurement in the Philippines.

Second, in August 2021, another issue erupted due to the pending MPA requests of several LGUs and private companies languishing in the desks of the NTF aiming to bring orders of Sinovac and Covaxin to the Philippines. However, the NTF argued that the

country has already enough supply of vaccines and additional doses procured outside the national government efforts will cause oversupply and will merit corruption probes in the future. Consequently, the issue caught the attention of the two houses of the Philippine Congress that resulted into a series of separate hearings (Ramos, 2021; OPAPP, 2021).

During these hearings, the MPA as an institution was observed to also exhibit two additional ideologies of representation according to the MoP framework. One is the particularist/localist ideology as local government leaders outside the National Capital Region attended, appealed, and rallied support from legislative officials to further pressure the NTF to finally approve their MPA requests since their localities are in dire need of vaccines to fight the surge caused by the Delta variant during the third quarter of 2021. Among the LGUs present during these hearings are cities and municipalities in the Region I and MIMAROPA (Senate Press Release, 2021). On the other hand, democratic ideology of representation was also evident in this event due to the presence of coalition of individuals and private entities continuously calling for the approval of MPA requests during the congressional hearings that will enable the entrance of additional Sinovac and Covaxin doses procured by LGUs and

private sector to enter the country. An example of an individual intermediary is a medical doctor named Tony Leachon who was allowed to present his case about the so-called “Indian model” and the potential of Covaxin to deal with the infection surge caused by the Delta variant in September 2021 (Sadongdong, 2021). On the other hand, for the collective intermediaries, these include private sector groups which are present during the congressional hearings. However, it is important to note that these social groups are also simultaneously the private stakeholders who have pending MPAs with the NTF for vaccine procurement. As enumerated by a House representative, these are the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines, SM Foundation, PASEI Inc. (an agency handling outbound overseas Filipino workers), Sakay (a cooperative of motorcycle and delivery riders), and *Go Negosyo* business platform (Gomez H. , 2021). While these groups are acting on a dual purpose, they are also representing the interests of both the business and labor sectors. As representatives of these economic sectors, these groups function as intermediaries to sound alarm to the national government that the administration is liable and accountable to the delayed vaccination of the Filipino people as the pandemic continues to ravage individual lives, businesses, and livelihoods.

## CONCLUSION

The availability and arrival of COVID-19 vaccines in the first quarter of 2021 provided a glimpse of hope to the Philippines as it constantly endures the impact of the pandemic towards its healthcare sector and economy. However, since purchasing COVID-19 vaccines will tap public funds, a legislation that will allow the government to procure these doses under emergency cases and allocate an indemnity fund was needed and fulfilled by the legislature. In addition, because of the novelty of vaccines and the restrictive provisions of RA 11525 regarding which actors can procure these vaccines, this paper argued that in understanding the politics of the COVID-19 Vaccination Program Act one should depart from the mainstream institutionalist and society-based approaches prevalent in Philippine political science discourse. This paper argued that institutionalist and society-centric perspectives also possess loopholes in their assumptions as they tend to view political institutions and related processes as one-way events of causal mechanism. To address this gap, this paper employed the Murdoch School of Political Economy – an approach that treats the formation of institutions as a product of simultaneous socio-political struggles between state actors and social groups. In addition, the Modes of Participation

framework was also introduced to further understand the interactions of state actors and social groups as prescribed by the arrangements in RA 11525. Hence, from the perspective of Murdoch School, RA 11525 is an outcome of the confluence and contestation of interests coming from the DOH, NTF, LGUs, private sector bodies, and vaccine manufacturers. On the other hand, analyzing RA 11525 based on its outlined procedure of vaccine procurements, this paper noted that the institutionalization of MPAs is considered as a form of societal incorporation and is rooted from the ideologies of consultative, particularist/localist, and democratic representations. These arrangements are understandable since they are rooted from the reality that these vaccines are permitted at present under the EUA scheme. By being regulated under the EUA category, these vaccine brands are not yet permitted to engage in commercial promotion and transactions. However, with the new developments such as the possibility of COVID-19 becoming endemic as well as new COVID-19 vaccine brands and pills entering the global market that will significantly alter the pricing of existing treatments, these global changes are expected to alter, replace, and add additional modes of participation in the vaccine procurement processes in the Philippines.

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