

The left currents in the Philippines and the Duterte presidency

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The election to the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte revealed and amplified the crisis of the political system in the Philippines, opening a period of uncertainty which is still far from over. Before and after the elections of May 9, 2016, the various forces of the left had to take a position regarding a marginal candidate whose victory seemed for a long time inconceivable, but who received massive popular support, to the point of completely transforming the electoral contest. In fact, the future of the left is to a large extent being determined today.

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The new president has a discourse (crudely) marking a cleavage and he cultivates political ambivalence. For some currents (especially the Communist Party of the Philippines, CPP, Mao-Stalinist) Duterte may “fall to the left.” For others, he is already falling to the right by resorting to extrajudicial executions in his “war on drugs” and brandishing the spectre of martial law. All of them, however, are trying to advance their causes by taking advantage of the campaign promises of the elected candidate, of a chaotic domestic situation and of real opportunities such as the commitment to the peace negotiations in a country marked by armed conflicts that have lasted for fifty years.

Having been elected on May 9, 2016, Rodrigo Duterte officially took office on June 30. He was, however, the least presidential of all the candidates. His campaign started as a joke and ended in triumph, accumulating records and “firsts”: an exceptionally high turnout in a presidential election (81 per cent); the largest number of votes ever obtained in such a ballot (15 or 16 million); the first victorious candidate from Mindanao, the large island in the south of the archipelago; a rapid conquest of power by a local figure not belonging to any of those traditional “big families” which determine national politics; a support rating exceeding 90 per cent [[1](#)]). He is also the oldest president ever elected in the country (he is 71 years old).

Starting from nothing, he won the prize by getting massive support among the popular layers, but also, it must be emphasized, among the middle classes and even among those elites that he loves to insult.

Kick out those in power: the crisis of the regime

Since the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, minor candidates or outsiders have several times won the presidential election. This time however, Duterte was carried by a huge wave of protest, an “electoral uprising”, to such an extent that the mainstream parties had to give up the idea of rigging the results to bar the way to a dangerously unpredictable man. “Let’s kick out those in power!” We have seen the strength of this rejection in many countries. It reached the Philippines with a force rarely equalled.

Duterte’s victory reveals the extent of the bankruptcy of the outgoing administration and President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III, who had become the embodiment of clientelism and the reign of family dynasties, institutionalized corruption, the indifference of the elites with regard to the fate of the people [2], gross incompetence and lack of political courage [3]. The time of the Aquinos had (re-) opened with the murder of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr. in 1983 under the dictatorship and the election of his widow Corazon (“Cory”) three years later. It is closing - after many vicissitudes - with the downfall of the son.

Power struggles within the Philippine bourgeoisie are settled between the great families of Luzon (in the north of the archipelago) and part of the central Visayas (the islands of Negros, Cebu...). Politics is a financial investment and the positions acquired are a way to fructify it. Alliances of circumstance and convenience are made and broken between regional dynasties in the election process, then in the construction of presidential majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Changes in the party political affiliation of elected representatives are common, because joining a party is not done on the basis of a programme.

This political system has run out of steam.

Mindanao is the second largest island in the Philippine archipelago in terms of area and population. It is also very rich in natural and mineral resources, thus political and economic elites have exploited it and even foreign countries like Malaysia, China, US are interested in it. Yet it has been kept out of national politics, serving as an electoral reserve: parties come there to buy votes that they lack in national elections. Although himself from a local dynasty of the Visayas in Cebu [4], Rodrigo Duterte, the mayor of Davao (in the east of Mindanao) was in this sense well and truly an outsider. Throughout his campaign, he did not miss an occasion to denounce “imperial Manila” and regularly called members of the administration “arseholes”. More than anyone else, he was able to crystallize the visceral rejection of the establishment.

A caricature of a populist, Duterte has earned a worldwide reputation for the “Trump-style” brutality of his remarks, boasting of having coldly executed offenders in the city of which he is mayor, or regretting not having been the first to “have a go at” an Australian nun raped and killed by criminals on the run (whom he liquidated) [5]. His crude macho postures have reinforced his image as a man of action.

Dutertism in power

Rodrigo Duterte ran the risk of being faced with a House of Representatives and a Senate largely dominated by the opposition; but the Filipino elites being what they are, yesterday’s enemies have rallied massively to the winner by forming a presidential “grand coalition”. Since then, he has been conducting his policies with very few institutional barriers. We briefly present here some particularly important aspects, in order to understand the positions adopted by the left. [6]

Ministers chosen by the PCP, peace negotiations

Rodrigo Duterte relies on a small team of close collaborators in whom he has confidence personally, including Leoncio “Jun” Evasco Badilla Jr., Secretary of the Cabinet.

Duterte has appointed to government posts men of the right and direct representatives of the ruling classes; but he also asked the Communist Party of the Philippines/National Democratic Front (CPP-NDF) to choose four potential ministers: Joel Maglunsod has been appointed undersecretary of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Judy Taguiwalo is Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and Rafael Mariano of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR). As for Liza Maza, she finds herself heading the National Anti-Poverty Commission.

Duterte announced during the campaign that he would open peace negotiations with the CPP and its guerrilla New People’s Army (NPA). He took the initiative of a unilateral cease-fire, which looked uncertain until a cease-fire, this time bilateral, went into force on 27 August. He released 22 jailed party cadres so that they could participate in the discussions that began at the end of August in Oslo (Norway) [7].

The participation of the CPP in the government obviously creates a completely unprecedented situation in the Philippines. Its judgment of the Duterte presidency is vigorously opposed on the left [8].

Peace negotiations in Mindanao

The South of the Philippines has been the scene of numerous armed conflicts; the Muslim population lives there.

The Aquino regime had presented a peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), currently considered to be the main Muslim armed organization; but its ratification by Congress did not take place. Rodrigo Duterte wants to revive the process by integrating this time the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Lumad (mountain communities) and Christians (the “majority population” of the archipelago).

The establishment of this wider process of negotiation and representation is one of the major challenges of the present period in the Philippine south.

From the “war on drugs” to the threat of martial law

Duterte can play the fool and strike a strong-arm pose, but he is not making it up. He really did “clean up” Davao City by allowing police to operate with impunity, summarily liquidating offenders, drug dealers, street children ... Known as the “Mayor of the death squads,” he was imitated in other provinces. He is now applying this summary policy nationally. He has repeated loudly that he covers with his authority all those who liquidate addicts and dealers. These people are “no longer human beings,” why would their human rights be protected?

The number of killings is increasing. Let us say that in round figures 3,500 people have been summarily shot - between a third or two third by the police, others by the “vigilantes” (paramilitaries) and by neighbours, gangs, etc. Rodrigo Duterte bears the political and moral responsibility for this killing spree, as he has repeatedly given the go-ahead for extrajudicial executions.

Officials, judges and personalities have been denounced by the president, who has threatened to execute them, but for now only the poor are falling victim to the death squads. More than 600,000

suspects surrendered to the police for fear of being liquidated - to the point that the administration does not know where to put them.

After an attack committed in Davao by the Abu Sayyaf group of kidnappers, Duterte introduced a state of emergency throughout the country. He brandished the threat of establishing martial law. In this poisonous atmosphere, cadres of popular organizations (peasants, urban poor, unions) are also being killed by a procedure similar to that of the “vigilantes”. [9] This happened in particular in Cebu to a member of the Workers’ Party (PM) [10] and in Luzon to a cadre of Kilusan [11].

Under the Marcos dictatorship, many activists were abducted, tortured and executed. Since then, especially landowners, but also bosses have had too troublesome “elements” killed. However, this is the first time in the Philippines that these extreme violations of human rights have been openly claimed and assumed by the highest authority of the country - at least as concerns the war on drugs. Duterte has also threatened to kill workers who “sabotage” the country’s economic development.

Extractivism and the precarious nature of work contracts

Overall, Duterte’s socio-economic programme is (ultra-) liberal; but on two issues in particular, it opens a window of action to the popular movements: coal mining and the policy of precarious work contracts (contractualization). Numerous local struggles are taking place against the coal industry; one of the principal campaigns of the left unions specifically targets the use of a precarious workforce.

Foreign policy

In recent weeks, responding to international criticism of the non-respect of human rights, Rodrigo Duterte has been threatening ever more openly to open the country to the Chinese and the Russians. He does it with his usual macho rudeness.

So, he called the US ambassador a “poof” and a “son of a whore” - then he used the latter expression about Obama himself. He said the special forces of the United States should withdraw from Mindanao. He responded to the European Parliament “ ‘F**k you,’ ”, illustrating his words with the appropriate action. He told Western investors worried about the deteriorating political climate “get the hell out of here!,” he would invite Chinese and Russian capital to take their place.

He is increasingly making overtures towards Beijing. He refuses for now to use the judgment of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague recognizing Philippine sovereignty over the Scarborough Reef, occupied by China. He invites China to invest massively in his country and never has a word to say against it...

For the moment it is just talk. No concrete steps have been taken to revise military agreements with the United States that allow the US Seventh Fleet to use Philippine ports and its special forces to establish listening centres. In economic terms, the constitutional review announced by Duterte in fact proposes to lift restrictions limiting the freedom of foreign investment - too bad for nationalism.

Is Rodrigo Duterte simply engaged in a game of poker, waving the Chinese scarecrow to get maximum concessions from the US, the tutelary power; or does he really intend to put in question the strategic alignments in this part of the world - and in the first place does he really know what he wants or is navigating without a compass in increasingly agitated Asian waters? The question should not have to be asked, given the importance of the regional and national issues.

Where is Duterte going?

If there is nevertheless room for doubt, it is because the new Philippine president is a man in a hurry and, so it is said, “pragmatic”. He got himself triumphantly elected by promising to radically change things in three to six months.

The “war on drugs” was launched as soon as his election was confirmed.

However, Duterte has announced that he needs to extend it for six more months. It risks getting bogged down, becoming a very deadly “endless war”.

Peace negotiations are underway with the CPP and have been announced in Mindanao - but no one can expect a solution that is both favourable and quick.

However, Duterte cannot afford inaction, which would provide an opportunity to some of his current “friends” to turn against him. He does not have a power base of his own; to survive, he conducts a permanent war of movement.

A massive influx of Chinese capital would allow Duterte to take the initiative on a new front: investment, major public works, employment ... The idea is tempting, but risky. Barack Obama has already clearly expressed his exasperation by cancelling a meeting with the Philippine president. The Philippine elite has close historical ties with the United States, the former colonial power; so has the army. For the United States, south-west of Japan, no country can replace the Philippines. Duterte is playing a game of tension, but in a region that is already subject to a high degree of geopolitical tension. This is a high-risk game.

Positions on the left

The panorama of the Philippine left is being transformed and new developments are underway. Let us try to get an idea of what is going on, without being exhaustive.

Akbayan

This party was formed in 1998 from the regroupment of currents coming from the Christian left, the CPP and the NDF, the “old” Communist Party (PKP), Marxist personalities and independent socialists... Despite its links to the social movement, from the moment in 2009 that Akbayan decided to stop being an opposition force represented in the Lower House, but to join in a presidential coalition, the electoral terrain has quickly established its law. Allied in 2010 with Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III, it joined the government. Despite the proliferation of scandals, it never broke ranks. Among Akbayan representatives in the Lower House, Walden Bello was the only one to resign in protest from his position (but not from his party) [[12](#)]

In 2016, for the first time, Akbayan managed to get Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel elected to the Senate (but only one MP in the Lower house). This could be a Pyrrhic victory. This party is now politically identified with the disaster of the outgoing administration. Its leadership grouped itself around Bisig, becoming an electoral machinery; it no longer represents the arc of currents that participated in its foundation. However, the evolution of the currents in the trade-union and social movement which are or have been linked to Akbayan remains a question to monitor closely.

The Communist Party of the Philippines

When the CPP realized that Rodrigo Duterte could win the election, it supported him, although it had first rather campaigned for Grace Poe. For years, the guerrilla forces of the party have

concluded a kind of agreement of non-interference with the “Mayor of the death squads” in the province of Davao.

Jose Maria Sison - tutelary figure of the party living in Utrecht (Netherlands) - particularly welcomed the man who was once his student, thinking he would perhaps be the first leftist president in the Philippines [13]. Dissensions arose within the party after the elections of May 9, Sison responding favorably to the offer of dialogue launched by Duterte, others denouncing the elitist character of the new presidency. A (temporary?) agreement seems to have been made to participate in government and open a new round of negotiations.

The CPP has supported the policy of “war on drugs”, even offering to contribute to it. [14] In a recent statement, Sison mentions the criticisms on the violation of human rights, but without himself supporting them. In the next paragraph he denounces the use Obama has made of this issue. From that starting point, he casts suspicion on all those who attack Duterte on these grounds. [15]

The couple Benito and Wilma Tiamzon embody the leadership “of the interior” of the CPP. Arrested in 2014 and now released to participate in the Oslo negotiations, they bring their support to the presidency in an interview (“the overall trajectory is clear”), simply hoping that Duterte will take practical steps to implement his policy of independence vis-à-vis the United States [16].

It is not clear that in the social domain Duterte will give much grist to the mill of ministers who are close to or members of the CPP. However, it is probably the issue of the Oslo talks that will be decisive. The new president must convince the army that he knows what he is doing in beginning them. He needs results. He thinks perhaps that in some regions at least, the guerrillas, declining, are seeking a way out after more than fifty years of fighting; and he must be following with interest what is happening in Colombia (the agreement with the FARC). For now, of course, the delegation of the CPP in Oslo is camped on classic positions, namely a policy of political negotiation without ends.

Seen from the left, the dynamics of the negotiations certainly constitute one of the main concrete questions of the situation opened up by the victory of Rodrigo Duterte.

In the opposition: human rights and democracy

All the left currents are aware that with the present crisis of the regime windows of opportunity have opened in various fields. [17] They are all trying to take the opportunity of winning real gains for workers (against precarious contracts...), local people (against the mining companies...), farmers (a revival of agrarian reform...), the poor (social protections...), the Lumad (rights over their ancestral domains...), etc. This requires a combination of firmness, flexibility and political independence.

However, a cleavage runs through the non-CP left (NGOs, POs and political) on the issue of human rights and democracy. For some, in the name of social objectives, we must not condemn the government on human rights issues (the war on drugs) and democracy (the spectre of martial law). For others, on the contrary, such questions are far too serious to keep silent about. Very quickly, on the initiative of Walden Bello in particular [18], a range of organizations declared themselves in opposition to the new government, while seeking to mobilize to obtain concrete victories as long as the situation remains fluid.

Many forces are also coming together to denounce Duterte’s decision to bury the remains of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the National Hero’s Cemetery. [19]

iDEFEND

Since then, the democratic protest movement has continued to grow. A coalition named iDEFEND, constituted on August 12, has conducted a frontal battle on the issue of human rights. It is becoming broader and hardening its position as and when the situation deteriorates. In its last statement, it says in particular:

"Democracy is under threat today. In Sept. 4, the President has put the whole country under a State of Emergency (...), indefinitely. Recently, we witnessed the most vivid manifestation of the failure of democracy being the Malacanang-directed ouster of Senator de Lima as head of the Justice Committee. This is the latest move of the Executive to gain total control of Congress. (...) [T]he whole country witnessed how he angrily threatened to declare martial law when the Court asserted its authority in the investigation of judges that Malacanang had linked to drugs. Forty four years ago today, Marcos declared martial law. Today, we face a similar if not a greater threat to our lives, liberties, and democratic rights". [20]

Stop the War Coalition

The "Stop the war" coalition is intervening on a much broader range of themes than its name indicates. It has published one of the first critical analyses of the Duterte regime. [21] It denounces the debt inherited from the Marcos dictatorship (a debt that Duterte has not put in question) and fights against climate change (which Duterte does not want to hear about). It does not want US domination to be replaced by that of China, the new world power.

Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM)

PLM (Party of the Strength of the Masses) in a statement dated September 7, "calls for a stop to the mass killings of suspected drug users and pushers in the urban poor communities. The campaign against drugs could simply be an intensified police operation, targeting the biggest drug lords and their protectors." [22]

Partido Manggagawa (PM)

The leaders of the PM (Workers Party) stated on September 21: "On the 44th anniversary of martial law, the struggle for human rights and democracy for all remains as relevant and critical as ever. (...), civil liberties and democratic freedoms are under clear and present danger (...)The extra-judicial killings done in the name of the war on drugs have now spilled onto slayings of human rights defenders." [23]

Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa - Mindanao (RPM-M)

On June 12, the RPM-M (Revolutionary Workers Party - Mindanao) stated " We declare a unilateral ceasefire to CPP-NPA as an organization and to its members, if this development means victory for the democratic forces in the country and a push for a more dynamic and renewed revolutionary movement in the Philippines.". [24] The Mao-Stalinist Communist Party has in fact attacked the cadres of other revolutionary organizations such as the RPM-M, which hopes that the present situation may help to bring an end a conflict that it considers fratricidal.

In a text published on September 4 after the attack by Abu Sayyef in Davao, the RPM-M and the People's Revolutionary Army (RPA) express "We stand of the same rage against terrorism and illegal drugs, but we have reservations on the formal declaration of State of National Emergency. As experienced in the country, massive deployment and mobilization of military and police personnel have resulted to massive curtailment of civilian civil liberties. This can be used also by the militarist group within the Duterte's government and imperialist interests of foreign powers in the name of

anti-terrorism campaign and nip in the bud the nationalist initiatives within the ruling power of the new government.(...)”

“The war against drugs, criminalities and terroristic activities shall not be a threat to peoples’ and communities’ civil liberties instead, it must encourage more spaces for comprehensive and proactive efforts involving the peoples’ and communities themselves.” [25]

Third way

The debates within the Philippine left sometimes take an ultimatum and binary turn. Either you are behind Duterte, or you find yourself in the “yellow” camp (yellow being the colour of the Aquinos).

The Philippine left as a whole is weakened today, although it remains one of the most vibrant in South-East Asia. Since the 1980s, it has not been able to regain the political initiative in a durable way and it finds itself periodically hostage to the conflicts within the ruling classes.

The present regime crisis may favour a recomposition of the left, providing an impulse for a new radical and unitary dynamism. This will not happen by it aligning itself on the Duterte presidency (nor, of course, on the ruins of the former administration). The situation is complex and opportunities must be seized - but the new presidency is legitimising in the eyes of the population arbitrary power and the use of death squads. A deadly poison.

Pierre Rousset, September 25, 2016,

P.S.

* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4741>

* Few precisions and notes have been added October 31, 2016 (thanks to Maris comments).

Footnotes

[1] and still 65% or more a hundred days later. *Philippine Star* gives a 76% percent satisfaction rate October 6, 2016 and *Rappler* 86% October 12.

[2] Especially after the devastating passage of super typhoon Haiyan.

[3] See Walden Bello, ESSF (article 34543), “Philippines - Resignation speech of Walden Bello as Akbayan party-list Rep. : Aquino can ‘scratch me off his list of allies’”: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article34543>

[4] See Alex de Jong, ESSF (article 38075), “Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines’ New Strongman”: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38075>

[5] “I was mad she was raped but she was so beautiful. I thought the mayor [Duterte himself] should have been first.”, ESSF (article 37944), [Rape culture: Filipino presidential candidate \[and](#)

[later elected\] Duterte condemned after rape joke.](#)

[6] Other issues, such as federalism, are not addressed in this article.

[7] But judicial charges have not been lifted.

[8] See C.J. Chanco, ESSF (article 38128), "Philippines - Duterte, the Filipino Elite, the CPP, and the Missing Piece: an Independent Labour Movement":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38128> ; Herbert Docena, ESSF (item 38357), "On the new Philippine President: Why Duterte is not - and is unlikely to be - a socialist":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38357>

[9] See on ESSF (article39051), "NAGKAISA denounces liquidation of labour leaders, organizers in the Philippines": <http://www.europesolidaire.org/spip.php?article39051> ;
and ESSF (article 39037), "Philippines: 7th labour killing this September, result of culture of violence":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39037>

[10] See ESSF (article 38988), "Philippines: Orlando Abangan, community leader of PM-Cebu, victim of vigilante-style killing":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38988>

[11] ESSF (article 38447), "Philippines: Ate Gloria Capitan, environmentalist and anti-coal activist, shot and killed":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38447>

[12] For a history of Akbayan from the point of view of Walden Bello, see on ESSF (article 37231), "Philippine Left: Akbayan and the conscience of a progressive - The corridors of power and our ethic":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article37231>

[13] ESSF (article 37926), "The Communist Party of the Philippines welcomes Rodrigo Duterte's vow to be the first left president in the history of the Philippines":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article37926>

[14] ESSF (article 38399), "Philippines: Response to President Duterte's call for anti-drug cooperation":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38399>

[15] ESSF (article 39007), "Views from the CPP-NDF on clashing trends in the Philippines around President Duterte":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39007>

[16] ESSF (article 39028), "CPP-NDF on Philippine Presidency - Declaration of independence, Red leaders Tiamzons say of Duterte tough talk to US":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39028>

[17] See for example Carmel V. Abao, ESSF (article 38829), "Philippines: Engaging Duterte, engaging Ourselves":
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38829>

[18] ESSF (article 38458), "Philippines - The Left and Duterte: An administration in search of an opposition":

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38458>

[19] ESSF (article 38778), "Philippines: Martial Law victims call dictator Ferdinand Marcos burial at the National Hero's Cemetery a 'supreme injustice'"

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38778>

[20] ESSF (article 39021) "Statement (Philippines): End the Killings. Uphold Human Rights. Defend Democracy":

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39021>

[21] See in particular Ric Reyes in his newsletter, ESSF (article38745), "Philippines presidential election: deciphering Duterte's victory:

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38745>

[22] ESSF (article 38947), "Philippines: Statement on 'state of lawlessness' - Stop the killings! Stop the bombings! For peace, not a war strategy!":

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38947>

[23] ESSF (article 38023), "Philippines: Partido Manggagawa joined the mobilization of iDefend coalition; calls for justice for slain leader, victims of extra-judicial killings on anniversary of martial law": <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38023>

[24] ESSF (article 38187), "Philippine Left: Response to Jose Ma Sison's call for dialogue:

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38187>

[25] ESSF (article 38928), "Philippines: On the Davao bombing and the war against illegal drug syndicates by the Duterte government: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org.php?article38928>