

Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte's peace plans with CPP are in tatters

Monday 13 February 2017, by [HEYDARIAN Richard Javad](#) (Date first published: 12 February 2017).

The Philippines president ended peace negotiations with communist rebels, raising the possibility of renewed conflict.

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"These communists, I don't like [them] - they are spoiled brats. You'd think they were in government, the way they make demands," exclaimed the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte shortly before effectively ending high-stakes peace negotiations between the government and communist rebels.

The tough-talking president then proceeded to categorise the New People's Army, the armed wing of the communist movement, as a "terrorist" group. Both sides withdrew from a tenuous ceasefire agreement, raising the spectre of renewed armed conflict across Philippine peripheries, where the communist movement is still alive and kicking.

Philippines Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana declared "an all-out war" against the group, with one general warning that his men "will hit them in all sides of their bases". The rebels, not short of braggadocio, simply told their counterparts to bring it on, nonchalantly boasting that the government's "all-out-war order is nothing new to us".

And just like that, months of intense anticipation and unprecedented optimism over the prospect of lasting peace were reduced to ashes.

One of Duterte's key election promises was to bring back law and order to the impoverished and conflict-ridden nation. That vow now hangs in the balance as antagonists lurch back to the all-too-familiar battlefield.

Genesis of conflict

The Philippines is notorious for having one of the highest rates of inequality, poverty and land tenancy in the world.

Abusive landlords, greedy middlemen and opportunistic politicians routinely victimise millions of ordinary farmers, who are yet to benefit from any genuine land reform programme.

The upshot of this oppressive dynamic is widespread grievance in the rural Philippines. And it is

precisely this ecosystem of collective human suffering that has fuelled insurgencies, most tinged with communist ideology based on principles of social justice and wealth redistribution.

After reaching their peak in the early 1980s, particularly during the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship, the communist movement has gradually lost its ideological momentum [1], support base, and military muscle in recent years.

Today, larger insurgent groups eclipse it, particularly the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which has been facing stalled negotiations with the government since 2015.

Yet Duterte, who, as a mayor, was legendary for brokering peace among warring factions in his home city of Davao, was eager to bring lasting peace between the government and the communist rebels.

As a self-described “socialist” with a long history of relatively cordial ties with communist rebels, Duterte was seen by many as the Philippines’ best hope to end a decades-long insurgency.

Breaking with tradition

The Philippines’ leader even offered four presidential cabinet positions, namely the departments of labour, social welfare, agrarian reform, and the antipoverty commission, to figures associated with the communist movement.

This stands in clear contrast to almost all other Filipino presidents, who were staunch “cold warriors” that didn’t shun military campaigns against and/or brutal crackdown on the leftist group.

In fact, Duterte was the student, a particularly attentive one, of Jose Maria Sison, the founder and chief ideologue of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Over the years, the two maintained friendly relations.

“It is likely that the Filipino leader is just trying to draw the line in the sand, cautioning the other party from exploiting the peace negotiations for short-term tactical gains.”

Until recently, there were even hopes of a reunion between the pupil and teacher, a political exile based in the Netherlands, back in the Philippines. This would have required the Duterte administration to go the extra mile, seeking Washington to remove the communist movement founder from its terrorist list.

Meanwhile, two rounds of high-stakes negotiations were held, one in Oslo and the other in Rome, raising hopes of a swift, mutually acceptable deal that would put an end to Asia’s longest communist insurgency.

“Once more, I am grateful to President Duterte for his acts of goodwill to move forward the peace negotiations,” shared a gleeful Sison, showing utmost gratitude to his former student, now the Philippines’ most powerful man.

Chimera of peace

Amid the euphoria of a potential breakthrough in peace negotiations, some observers quipped half-jokingly that Duterte could soon become a contender for the Nobel Peace Prize.

After all, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, who ended a similar communist insurgency after years of sincere and trust-based negotiations, won the prestigious award last year. Two factors, however, undermined the whole gambit.

First and foremost, Duterte was enraged by how the rebels constantly demanded concessions before the conclusion of a framework agreement and implementation of confidence-building measures.

After the government released top communist leaders, they faced another series of demands, which rankled the military and those who fought a bitter war with communists for decades. In response, Duterte explicitly warned them not to be too pushy - to no avail.

The bigger concern, however, was the ability of the communist leadership to exercise full control over their rank and file.

The situation reached a tipping point after a series of attacks by local communist groups against luxury resorts (Pico de Loro Resort in Batangas) and Filipino soldiers (in Davao del Sur) amid ceasefire and seemingly successful peace negotiations [2].

In response, Duterte began to wonder if there was any point to negotiating if the other party wasn't in full control of its own ranks.

It is likely that the Filipino leader is just trying to draw the line in the sand, cautioning the other party from exploiting the peace negotiations for short-term tactical gains.

Many still fervently hope that the peace talks will resume in the near future. After all, there is no alternative to peace.

Following decades of bloody conflict, peace has become an evermore-precious commodity, yet seemingly still a mirage, in the Philippines.

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/02/rodrigo-duterte-peace-communists-170210092002198.html>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/149?highlight=abu+bakr>

+al-baghdadi

[2] ESSF (article 40257), [Peace Talks in the Philippines: Communist negotiators have no control of the NPA. So what for the peace talks?](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40257):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40257>