

Duterte and the prospects for struggle in the Philippines - Historical background, theoretical framework, the Left forces

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The election of President Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Philippines in 2016 has drawn considerable international attention. The worldwide media has heavily featured his blunt public remarks and the widespread deaths associated with his “drug war”. Some have also drawn parallels between his government and Donald Trump’s election in the US as both reflecting a shift towards authoritarian “alt-right” leaders. Both mainstream and left wing observers pondered if his election represented a shift in the Philippines away from its traditional main ally, the US, towards China and Russia. Others pondered how important forces on the Philippine left could offer support for his regime.

Contents

- [Combined and uneven developmen](#)
- [The EDSA republic](#)
- [Duterte’s authoritarian \(...\)](#)
- [Duterte and the left](#)
- [Uneven development, authoritar](#)

Two years into Duterte’s regime, it is becoming clear that his rule represents both continuity with and a worsening of the political and social conditions that have predominated since the emergence of the so-called “EDSA republic” in 1986.[1] The mass protests that defeated Ferdinand Marcos’ dictatorship became a paradigm of so-called “peaceful” and democratic revolutions across the world. Duterte, however, embodies almost all the worst features of the subsequent EDSA presidential regimes and few of their (limited) virtues. There is, moreover, a drift to increased authoritarianism, with the Philippines now preparing to renounce the authority of the International Criminal Court.

The Philippines continues to occupy an important and unique place in Asian politics. It is, on the one hand, a marginal player in politics and economics, having been long overtaken by more dynamic neighbouring capitalist economies and countries. The Philippines has largely experienced lower economic and income growth and high rates of poverty.[2] Its political traditions, on the other hand, have some unique features that reflect its history as a Spanish and later US colony. There have been various characterisations made of the country’s political culture.[3] While notionally a republican democracy modelled on the US, quasi-dynastic families or clans overtly dominate its political intuitions. Duterte is a variant of these processes, with the main difference being that his foremost base of support is located on the marginalised southern island of Mindanao. Inasmuch as Duterte resembles Trump, it’s because the latter is more like a regular self-aggrandising Philippine politician/oligarch.

These political conditions, combined with the related weaknesses of Philippine capitalism, mean the

country has repeatedly been the site of pronounced social conflicts. No section of the ruling class has the power or ability to steer the country's economic development in a direction like the rapid economic growth experienced by other capitalist states in east Asia. They instead remain subordinate to the dictates of multilateral lending bodies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Overseas contract labour remains one of its largest sources of export income. The same ruling class historically relied on the US to be its guarantor of security.

However, the Philippines is also different from many other countries in south-east Asia in that a substantial left wing mass movement with roots among the country's working class and small farmers also exists. While sections of this left have struggled to find an orientation to Duterte, it may create the conditions for significant political struggles to emerge.

The historical and contemporary experience of the Philippines has broader implications. The combined and uneven development of capitalism continues to mean many countries have a potential to experience volatile political struggles. Formulating a clear, class-based politics in the context of high levels of poverty and political authoritarianism remains challenging. Understanding why requires a three-fold focus. I first discuss some of the theoretical issues posed by the development of capitalism in the Philippines. The combined and uneven development of capitalism internationally and in the Philippines poses the question of working class power as the solution to democracy in the country.[4] Second and accordingly, the EDSA republic was never able to resolve the acute set of social, political and economic contradictions that beset Philippine capitalism and the class struggle. Third, Duterte's regime is, therefore, an outcome of and an intensification of these contradictions. It concludes by making the case that while Duterte is not a fascist – as some have argued – his brand of authoritarian populism makes the left's task of posing a feasible alternative to the current elite-driven "democracy" more important than ever.[5]

Combined and uneven development in the Philippines

The historical development of capitalism and the state in the Philippines are strong expressions of what Leon Trotsky called "combined and uneven development" (CUD).[6] The authoritarianism of a figure like Duterte arguably reflects a deepening of longstanding relationships of unresolved poverty and deepening political crises. The combined character of capitalism in the Philippines means a notional republican democracy exists in tandem with enduring class relationships and forms of political authoritarianism that originated in the colonial period.[7]

Trotsky formulated the notion of CUD in opposition to evolutionary and stageist conceptions of historical development that predominated in the second socialist international. The working class could lead a revolutionary challenge to capitalism without repeating the stages of historical development that more advanced Western countries had experienced. While there was considerable debate between Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, his and Lenin's concept of the worker-peasant alliance eventually converged at the time of the 1917 revolution.

Understandably, Trotsky emphasised how existing technology and culture were transplanted into less developed societies and cultures. Many post-war Marxist theorists, however, consistently stressed the opposite: why capitalism promoted stagnation and great divergence in incomes and development across the world. Debates between approaches such as dependency theory, Robert Brenner and the resultant school of "political Marxism", and Althusserian Marxism ("articulation" of modes of production) waged back and forth over many decades. More recent contributions have attempted to bridge the divide between these approaches using CUD. Anievas and Nişancioğlu developed a persuasive synthesis on the historical development of the state and capitalism.[8] The

conditions that generated capitalist development are an outcome of a combination of “internal” and “external” political conditions. Agrarian class relationships can, indeed, either retard or promote the development of commodity-based production. External factors such as international military competition or the sudden emergence of plundered resources from colonial possessions played a role.

Moreover, political authoritarianism proved to be endemic in much of the former colonial world after 1945. The anti-colonial struggle did not result in the emergence of many consolidated bourgeois democracies. The uneven development of capitalism on a world scale meant the new nation-states often occupied the lowest rungs in the international division of labour. A variety of factors meant the “backward” facets of these societies were often even strengthened. As in tsarist Russia, the bourgeoisie proved distinctly unrevolutionary.

The empirical reality that the Russian revolutionaries grasped – the bourgeoisie was not revolutionary, and it was the worker-peasant masses that must act – turned out to be the norm rather than the exception of historical development. While capitalism required stable territory, property rights and markets, it was often more conducive to authoritarian and hierarchical state power. The European and neo-European “social-democratic” trajectory of class collaboration in the framework of democratic capitalism was the exception rather than the rule. For most of the world, the question of simple democracy becomes the question of socialism and which class rules.

These processes have strong reflections in the Philippines. The archipelago was originally colonised by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, as part of an initial “mercantile” phase of European colonialism. Spanish colonisation cemented the hold of Catholicism (except in the Muslim south and remote areas) and established a “*hacienda*”-based agrarian economy. An *ilustrado* social class of landowners emerged holding considerable political and economic power. The outbreak of an independence struggle against Spain in the 1890s, however, conflicted with the emergence of the US as an expanding capitalist and imperialist power. Sections of the Philippine elite, therefore, actively collaborated with a US-led military intervention and occupation after 1898, giving rise to a new colonial state.

Under US sponsorship, the Philippine colonial state eventually became the “oldest republic in Asia” in 1946. While nominally a democratic republic, in practice the small landowning-class monopolised much political and economic power. The transplanting of republican and democratic forms of rule by colonial powers often only concealed the control of the state by reactionary forces. It ruled using a variety of mechanisms – such as control of the main two political parties (the *Nationalistas* and later the Liberal Party), local clientelism, and vote manipulation – as well as more overt repression. The security of ruling economic and political classes (there was little formal separation) also relied on an ongoing geopolitical alliance with the US. The left – after leading an armed insurgency in the 1930s and 1940s – was repressed in the aftermath of the 1948 elections. The US exercised power through a series of parity agreements and treaties after formal independence.

While capitalist relations of production emerged, many aspects of earlier colonial-based relationships of power also continued to exist. The US supported the country’s elite in return for strategic and economic advantages. Despite a period of higher economic growth and industrialisation in the 1950s, the Philippine economy eventually began to stagnate. The predominance of landowning interests among the ruling class meant there was considerable hostility to any approach of encouraging industrialisation through state intervention and protection.[9]

By the late 1960s, the revolutionary left had regained substantial influence after decades on the margins. The largest group was the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). It formed an underground National Democratic Front (NDF) and launched the New People’s Army (NPA). The

CPP was a late addition to the wave of Maoist parties that emerged in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet rift.

The CPP belongs to the often predominant politics of Stalinism and Maoism that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century. These commonly repeated the “stageist” formulations of early twentieth century social-democratic theory. Later-developing countries required a “people’s democratic” (bourgeois) revolution which would one day give way to a socialist stage. The main trend amongst the Moscow-line parties, on the one hand, was political subordination to bourgeois-nationalist forces and a de facto focus on parliamentary reformism. The Maoist variant of these approaches, on the other hand, promoted peasant-based guerrilla warfare. These parties, however, were unable to break with the strictures of Stalinism. The goal remained a “national-democratic” revolution. They also often shifted almost entirely away from any immersion in urban working class struggles. “Proletarian” leadership of struggle tended to become reduced to the party’s leadership of the peasant-based guerrilla armies.

Heavily influenced by the experiences of the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (failure of reformism followed by an attempted relaunch on a guerrilla warfare basis), the CPP’s programmatic documents emphasised strict adherence to the strategy of “protracted people’s war”. The “semi-feudal” and “semi-colonial” character of the Philippines meant the CPP must lead a “national-democratic” revolution.[10]

These elements of CPP’s program contained both elementary truths and serious limitations. The descriptive categories of semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism, on the one hand, had an enduring appeal to many activists confronting the power of US-backed autocracies. Their analytical and strategic consequences, on the other hand, imposed significant limits on the CPP’s political practice. Unlike CUD, the Maoist concept of a semi-feudal mode of production entailed that capitalism had not yet emerged in the Philippines and that the working class was too marginal to play a decisive role in the struggle. While the development of Philippine capitalism was *retarded* by the enduring presence of an agrarian-based landlord class, many circuits of capital established themselves in different spheres of production. Capital accumulation, private ownership and commodity production expanded, leading to the emergence of a significant working class.

Nevertheless, when President Ferdinand Marcos responded to mounting economic and political crises by declaring martial law in 1972, the CPP grew in popularity. The existence of even nominal political liberty eventually gave way to a period of overt authoritarianism. While Marcos claimed to be undermining the power of established elites, in practice his regime’s social and economic reforms consolidated his and closely related allies’ power and wealth. The US fully supported the regime and granted it favourable access to international lending bodies such as the World Bank, which Marcos used to fund highly visible but unproductive infrastructure projects. The Philippines, as a result, again experienced a severe economic crisis in the early 1980s. Like many other developing economies at the time, the sudden appreciation of the dollar and increase in interest rates resulted in severe debt and balance of payments problems. Both growing opposition protests and armed revolutionary movements also emerged.

However, the latter and above all the CPP were unable to play a decisive role in these struggles. First, the CPP (with its focus on protracted people’s war) repeatedly became rudderless when it confronted the emergence of urban-based mass movements of the middle and working classes. Second, while notionally committed to an alliance with a “national bourgeoisie”, the visible absence of such a force meant the CPP retreated into ultra-left abstention and militarism. When bourgeois forces did emerge as part of the democratic struggle, the CPP vacillated between opportunism and abstention, being unable to formulate a coherent united front approach.

The eventual outcome was the 1986 EDSA “revolution” that resulted in the restoration of nominal democracy. The CPP’s sectarian abstentionism helped to ensure that the revolt was led by elite sections of the military, the police and the church that had lost confidence in Marcos. Mass protests erupted in response to calls from the Catholic Bishops Conference and the formal opposition leadership around Corazon Aquino to defend a group of coup plotters. Protesters eventually occupied the Malacanang presidential palace, and Marcos was forced to flee the country.

Political struggle in the Philippines reflected many facets of undeveloped capitalism. Republican democracy concealed the dominance of the state by elites with origins in the colonial period. A significant urban working class, nevertheless, had emerged. The CPP, however, with its semi-feudal analysis and focus on people’s war was unable to challenge the leadership of elite elements in the anti-dictatorship movement.

The EDSA republic

These political and economic trends largely continued during the subsequent “EDSA republic”. Although the anti-dictatorship movement won important reforms and some democratic openings, it did not break the hold of traditional political clans over the state. A series of presidential regimes used populist rhetoric around social reforms to obscure the continued power of their elites and consolidate the hegemony of neoliberal development policies. Duterte arguably represents both a continuation and acceleration of these trends.

The optimism surrounding the restoration of constitutional democracy under Cory Aquino in 1987 dissipated quickly. Aquino was Benigno Aquino’s widow – Marcos’ main rival political leader in the 1970s – and belonged to a traditional political and landowning elite family. While the new 1987 constitution contained limited measures to entrench civil liberties and national sovereignty, it overwhelmingly restored the dominance of elite political clans.

An “all in the family” pattern of political and electoral dominance re-emerged whereby local based political clans dominated electoral contests through clientelism and violence.[11] The limited attempts by the left and mass movements to utilise electoral space largely failed, and these renewed elites rendered social reform initiatives – such as the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program – as ineffectual as possible. A truce with the CPP/NDF/NPA was quickly abandoned and military repression escalated after 1987.

Moreover, the Aquino regime pursued an “honest debtor” approach to international creditors, refusing to repudiate the Marcos regime’s onerous foreign debts. In the 1980s, the hard power of direct colonialism and neocolonialism evolved into the more subtle hegemony of neoliberalism and multilateral development agencies. These changes no less severely curtailed the capacity of formal “democratisation” to resolve deeper problems of economic impoverishment and inequality, as waves of economic crises and associated structural adjustment plans in the 1980s and 1990s forced millions into destitution.

Aquino hung on to power, despite numerous coup attempts, fluctuating levels of economic growth and mass opposition *welgang bayan* (people’s strikes) against unpopular austerity measures. While the regime remained committed to the US alliance and military presence, an eruption of the Mount Pinatubo volcano in 1992 and resulting evacuation rendered attempts to renew a military bases agreement null.

Meanwhile, the CPP began to fragment, undergoing major splits in 1992-3. Under the influence of the collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and the consolidation of elite democracy in the

Philippines, a section of the CPP leadership around its main historical leader José María Sison launched a “second great rectification movement”. Its main factional document called for a “reaffirmation” of the orthodox Maoist strategy of protracted people’s war. It aimed to harden the tendency of the CPP to alternate between militarist abstentionism and unprincipled alliances.

Some sections of the party had engaged in tactical experimentation under the influence of the mass urban movements in the 1980s. This led to the formation of open mass organisations such as the *Bayan* federation of “people’s movements”, the *Kilusung Mayo Uno* (KMU) trade union centre and *Gabriela* (a “nationalist-feminist” organisation). As noted above, the CPP’s primary focus on rural-based protracted people’s war meant it eventually marginalised itself from the anti-Marcos mass movement.

These experiences and the increasing dictates of the reaffirmists meant significant “rejectionist” units broke away from the CPP Central Committee in Metro-Manila, Mindanao and other regions. Large legal organisations associated with these party units seceded from *Bayan* and the KMU. Other sections of the left began to engage more with local elections and a new “party-list” system after 1998 that enabled representation of smaller organisations in the Congress.

As the CUD framework suggests, the hegemony of the traditional ruling elites in the anti-dictatorship movement meant the post-Marcos state was easily captured by these interests. On the one hand, the existence of formal institutions of democracy concealed the ongoing dominance of these elites over the state and exploitative social and economic relations. They were, moreover, committed to collaboration with the main international institutions of capitalism.

The post-Aquino EDSA regimes were all quite similar in this regard. There was a further subordination of Philippine capitalism to multilateral development organisations and neoliberalism during the Ramos government (1992-98). While a brief period of higher economic growth resulted, the regional currency and trade crisis of 1997-8 undermined many of its benefits. Ramos also replaced the permanent US military bases with the Visiting Forces Agreement in 1998. He also implemented a “peace agreement” with one section of the Bangsamoro independence movement in the south. Both a formal and mass protest-based opposition rebuffed a last-minute attempt at Charter Change (“Cha-Cha”) to extend the government’s life.

Moreover, the gap between raised expectations and the failure of the Ramos reforms to bring tangible improvements to many people’s lives contributed to the election of Joseph Estrada as President in 1998. In many ways, Estrada’s campaign prefigured some of Duterte’s themes and both marketed themselves as “outsider” candidates. A former movie star, Estrada emphasised his role as standing up for the “little” people against governments and corruption.

He seemed to forget that he was part of the latter.

Claiming to be “pro-poor”, he made a wave of “cross-over” appointments of both current and ex-leftists to various government agencies. Some currents on the left and non-government organisations (NGOs) obliged themselves of Estrada’s offers of paid positions. Their rationale was that although Estrada was part of the governing elite, it would be possible to form a bloc with him to enable some reforms. Individuals from the “popular democrats” who had broken with the CPP in the late 1980s were notable examples.

However, any illusions in his regime’s capacity to deliver reforms quickly dissipated. A “midnight cabinet” largely excluded reformers from crucial decisions. There was an escalation of repression against Bangsamoro secessionists in the south. When evidence emerged that Estrada had received funds from illegal lottery syndicates, public outrage culminated in a mass uprising in February 2001

and what became known as the so-called second “EDSA revolution”.^[12] Estrada’s cabinet quickly collapsed, and army and police forces declared they were in favour of him leaving office.

“Cross-overs” notwithstanding, most of the left supported the second EDSA revolt. The mainstream CPP-aligned “mass” organisations supported the opposition and were a major part of the protest movement. They allied with Vice-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and even suggested that a “people’s coalition government” could emerge. Another heterogeneous grouping from the non-CPP left formed the Anti-Trapo Movement.^[13] Its members aimed to link the issue of Estrada’s corruption to the need to remove all the political elites from power. The rejectionist organisation Sanlakas, for instance, promoted a slogan of “Resign Erap; Resign All!”. The Socialist Party of Labour called for a “government of the poor”, tapping into failures of Estrada’s rhetoric being a pro-poor government and presenting the need for the worker-peasant masses themselves to lead a government vis-à-vis supporting just another section of the elite gaining power.

Indeed, when Arroyo emerged as the new president, Philippine political culture took an even graver turn for the worse. The CPP reaffirmists/Maoists – now with a considerable number of congressional seats – quickly broke with Arroyo. Arroyo – along with most of the political elite – was as enmeshed in corruption as Estrada. Most of the NGO sector reformists eventually ceased to support Arroyo after revelations of widespread cheating in the 2004 election emerged. She maintained rule by adopting a “calibrated” response strategy of mounting repression. There was a rapid escalation of violence against journalists and political activists.

Moreover, while relationships with US power remained largely unchanged, Arroyo cultivated stronger relations with China. While Arroyo and the Philippine military quietly supported the Iraq invasion in 2003, they withdrew from any troop commitments after the abduction of a Philippine truck driver (over one million vulnerable Philippine overseas contract workers reside in the Gulf States). China’s “peaceful rise” strategy catapulted it from being the Philippines’ tenth to third largest trade partner between 1995 and 2005. Arroyo also tried to use China as a source of financial support for infrastructure projects. These deals, however, largely floundered due to mismanagement and dubious legality. It did lead to a temporary thaw in territorial disputes over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

Therefore, disenchantment with the outcome of EDSA 2 meant much of the population subsequently supported Benigno Aquino III’s (son of Corazon Aquino) candidacy in 2009. Aquino remained popular through a policy of not doing much. Some sections of the left, such as the *Akbayan* party (an alliance of some rejectionists with the social democratic *Pandayan* and the socialist BISIG (*Bukluran sa Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa*) currents, even joined the government. The veteran leftist and *Akbayan* representative Walden Bello, however, eventually resigned over the *Mamasapano* massacre. An ambush and massacre of Philippine troops occurred after they violated a territorial agreement with local *Bangsamoro* insurgents in 2015.

The experience of the EDSA republic demonstrated that formal democratisation was largely unable to resolve deep social and political problems. The main trend was for the restoration of the power of pre-martial law elites and political clans. Throughout most of the period, Philippine capitalism remained largely mired in political and economic stagnation. The main forces of the left alternated between militarism and opportunist alliances with elite groups. Others groped towards formulating a strategic approach of replacing the entire political class with rule by the worker-peasant masses. The scene was set though for a more overt authoritarian populist to exploit the widespread political disenchantment.

Indeed, Rodrigo Duterte’s election as president in 2016 was both a continuation and amplification of the negative processes that dogged the EDSA republic. This did not, however, stop sections of the

left and social movements from claiming that it represented a “progressive break” with previous regimes or even supporting the Duterte government.[14] They have been sorely disappointed. It was an entirely predictable outcome. While some mass mobilisations did occur around his campaign and he appealed to popular issues, his background and history were strong indicators of what his probable path would be as president.

Duterte’s authoritarian populism

Although he posed as an “outsider” to the Manila “elite”, Duterte was a member of a traditional political clan. His family background and origins were as an elite Christian settler in the previously predominantly Muslim area of Mindanao. The Duterte clan was already a “political family” on the island of Cebu and Rodrigo’s father Vincent was a mayor before settling in Davao in 1949. Vincent later became its provincial governor between 1959 and 1965.[15] Despite being raised in Mindanao, Rodrigo maintained his roots as a Cebuano speaker and his links to the island.

Rodrigo Duterte continued the tradition of leading an elite-based political clan. Before becoming president, his political career centred on his tenure as mayor of Davao. Elected in 1986 in the aftermath of the first EDSA revolt and holding office until 1998, he rapidly developed a unique reputation for consolidating Davao’s economic and political status in the post-dictatorship period. He personified the combination of minimal reforms and political violence that characterised local political machines within the Aquino camp.

Indeed, his regime centred on promoting security and economic development. As one adherent argued: “as long as there is peace and order, development follows”.[16] A very direct and “hands-on” approach (such as direct discussions with the NPA or criminal syndicates) was combined with authoritarianism and explicit threats of violence (“you will disappear”). These threats were, moreover, often delivered. Human rights organisations estimated that Davao-based death squads conducted over 1000 extra-judicial killings during his term as mayor. Duterte even teasingly admitted connections to these crimes during his presidential campaign. Although Davao emerged with a reputation as a “safe place to do business”, the homicide rate remained one of the highest in the country.

Therefore, Duterte’s regime in Davao combined an image of technocratic reforms with “gun-toting” violence. His style of directness, threats of violence and programmatic approach to promoting business investment in Davao underpinned his “branding” in the 2016 election campaign and his subsequent regime.

Five main characteristics, subsequently emerged during Duterte’s campaign and presidential regime. First, it remained committed to a neoliberal approach to economic development: so-called “Dutertenomics”. As the Ibon Foundation surmised, “Dutertenomics is aimed at completing the neoliberalisation of the Philippine economy”.[17] Although the regime’s “Build, Build, Build” program of infrastructure development moved away from reliance public-private partnerships, it mostly focused on “big-ticket centralised infrastructure that was not really what the country’s majority poor will use or need”. The associated Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) reform program mostly entailed regressive changes. A focus remained on implementing trade liberalisation, with the regime foreshadowing a range of so-called “bilateral free trade agreements”.

Second, in contrast to his “business as usual” approach to development, Duterte’s main reform focus was on constitutional change to promote federalism and decentralisation. It is widely perceived that both the pre-Marcos and EDSA republics over-centralised power and were too Manila-centred. While five scales of government exist – national, regional, provincial, municipal and *barangay* (village) – in

practice power is concentrated at the national level. There were elements of both truth and falseness in these debates. More remote areas like Mindanao or the Cordillera in Northern Luzon have felt marginalised. Both experienced regionally based armed insurgencies demanding more autonomy or independence.

However, congressional districts and elections remained largely dominated by locally based family clans and their political machines. Calls for decentralisation, therefore, tended to mean granting more autonomy to these local political and economic regimes. Attempts to implement reform measures at the municipal scale repeatedly succumbed to local manipulation. These facilitated local control in return for collaboration with whichever presidential regime was in power.

Duterte's commitments to decentralisation focus on a mix of both formal and informal measures. On the one hand, he has held occasional cabinet meetings away from Manila in Davao. His institutional approach, on the other hand, entails constitutional reform through so-called Charter-Change ("Cha-Cha"). He has proposed a plebiscite on replacing the unitary state and political system with a federal one. Negotiations are currently bogged down on competing proposals, mostly aimed at complementing the existing Congress with a regionally based representative chamber.

The most contentious aspect of the negotiations centres on proposals for "no-el" (no elections) for 2019. The "no-el" initiatives appear aimed at reassuring existing representatives that they will not face any immediate threats from any changes to the electoral system. The extension of "no-el" proposals to include Duterte has generated considerable suspicion and increasing opposition.

Moreover, the "forestalling" of elections has occurred in the context of the third major facet of Duterte's regime: a considerable escalation in political violence. He moved quickly in 2017 to replicate his local policy of vigilante-style violence on a national scale. The centrepiece was a so-called "drug war", mostly against "shabu" (methamphetamine) dealers and users. While estimates of fatalities vary, the administration's own 2017 "year-end" report claimed there had been 3,967 deaths of drug "personalities" and a further 16,335 homicides were under investigation. 1,308,078 drug addicts surrendered for rehabilitation, with arrests of 118,287 individuals occurring during 79,193 anti-drug operations.

As noted above, political violence had accelerated during the Estrada and Arroyo regimes. However the sheer number and deliberate targeting of impoverished community members under Duterte effectively constitutes a "pogrom against the poor". The existing trend towards targeting political activists and journalists has also continued. International institutions like the United Nations Commission on Human and Rights and the International Criminal Court have also intervened. The latter began an "initial investigation" into serious human rights abuses. Duterte's response was mostly to antagonise his international critics further.

Moreover, the regime also further militarised the conflict in Mindanao. Fierce fighting broke out between government forces and Islamist rebels in Marawi - the capital of Lanao del Sur province in Mindanao - in May 2017. The Philippine military and police engaged in a pitched battle with Islamic State-affiliated fighters from the *Maute* (or the Islamic State of Lanao) and *Abu Sayyaf* groups. The fighting destroyed large parts of the city. More than 600 insurgents, 140 government troops and 80 civilians were killed, with many more wounded and displaced. Duterte used the crisis as a pretext to declare martial law across the whole of Mindanao. Its 20 million inhabitants face increasing repression. The pattern of increasing violence has largely eclipsed any focus on any of Duterte's social reform initiatives.

This is hardly surprising as Duterte's social reforms - the fourth main feature of the regime - have proven to be largely rhetorical. All Philippine governments since Ramos adopted "social reform

agendas". Duterte's has largely continued Aquino's programs without any large increase in funding. While notionally committed to accelerated agrarian reform, his government became bogged down in "competing frameworks and interests pushed by the different agencies", meaning that "the trajectory of this government is about continuing past policies and programs proven detrimental to farmers".[18]

The most contentious area of Duterte's promised reforms surrounded ending labour contractualisation practices. This was one of Duterte's major campaign promises, and he predictably largely failed to deliver. Labour contractualisation emerged as a major issue after the 1990s. While more recognition of elementary labour and trade union rights occurred in the aftermath of EDSA 1, these reforms conflicted with demands of trade liberalisation and intense labour market competition that resulted from mass unemployment. The Republic Act 6715 of 1989 (the "Herrera Law") was the first major revision of the Labor Code since 1974 and ostensibly aimed to secure better entitlements for workers.

Instead, a proliferation of "labour-only contracting" and "endo" or "end of contract" arrangements occurred. Workers were increasingly hired and fired on an indefinite five-month contract basis with little chance of ever securing tenure. A 2014 Philippine Statistics Authority survey of companies employing 20 or more workers found that 1.96 million, or 39 percent, of a total 5.06 million workers were non-regulars. There was a significant deterioration in working conditions. Endo workers were paid very low wages, often below the prevailing minimum wage rates, and were often compelled to work for long hours. They were often not paid overtime and only received minimum mandatory benefits.

The dispute between Philippine Airlines and the Philippine Airline Employees Association (PALEA) that commenced in 2011 had previously been a flashpoint in the trade union struggle against endo. Endo and outsourcing were used to replace over 2,000 workers in a lockout. PALEA staged a protest camp for two years, eventually winning nominal reinstatement of 600 workers in November 2013. These workers, however, were never properly reinstated and a series of subsequent disputes initiated by Philippine Airlines further weakened the union.

Duterte made "End Endo" a central component of his campaign, appealing to and winning considerable support from some trade union federations and organisations. One of the most significant is the Nagkaisa! (United!) umbrella alliance that grouped the official Trade Union Congress of the Philippines with a range of other organisations.[19] It continued to lobby via the "presidential dialogue with labour" for the implementation of endo.

Predictably though, Duterte only introduced the most minimal version of "End Endo". Secretary for Labor Silvestre Bello adopted two departmental orders in late 2016 and 2017 that provided limited strengthening of legal provisions to prevent the abuse of contractualisation. By March 2018 it had increasingly become clear that labour groups could expect no further or immediate action. After inviting labour groups to compile a draft executive order in 2017, Duterte promised to implement planned measures by 15 March, 2018. On 8 February, however, he reneged on his promises and insisted that he needed "more time". Most of the trade union groups reacted with outrage. It has become increasingly clear that any conciliatory approach to Duterte is untenable, despite some leaders in Nagkaisa! coalition being open backers of the president.

The fifth and final major facet of the Duterte regime was an alleged "pivot" towards alliances with China and Russia and away from the US. As outlined earlier, the US was historically the main guarantor of the Philippine elite's security. There was, however, a marginal decline in the importance of the US since the 1980s. The expiration of trade and bases agreements, combined with an increasing focus on regional export markets and cooperation, meant that Japan and later China

emerged as major partners. The biggest expansion in cooperation with China had already occurred during the Arroyo administration. Duterte, of course, has occasionally played on anti-American sentiments with undiplomatic remarks and proposals for limiting the presence of US military units.

Once again though, events such as the Marawi crisis demonstrated the Philippines' ongoing reliance on US military power. In September 2017, the Armed Forces of the Philippines confirmed that US Special Forces had "been moved to help [Philippine] ground forces in Marawi", after a months-long battle with an Islamist militia. Other traditional military allies were also involved in the fighting: the US and Indonesia increased local maritime patrols while Australia and Singapore provided surveillance and intelligence services.

In contrast, China played a limited role. The sum total of their contribution was a package of small arms assistance worth \$11.7 million. While the emergence of China as a significant military and economic force is undeniable, the willingness or ability of either Duterte or the apparatus of the Philippine state to shift its alliances has so far been limited. The main institutional agreements and processes of the US alliance remain in place. While Duterte also sometimes draws a comparison with Vladimir Putin with his frank talk, he has only developed rudimentary ties with the Russian leader.

Overall then, Duterte has continued and intensified many of the negative aspects of the EDSA republic. A member of a traditional political clan – albeit using his status as an outsider from Visayas/Mindanao – his government has followed a predictable pattern of broken promises around labour rights and social reform. His worst actions have been to facilitate increased violence and provide an avenue for deepening authoritarianism under the guise of charter change.

Duterte and the left

Why then did sections of the left support Duterte and even go as far as accepting posts in his government?

The reaffirmists of the CPP were the most prominent current to support Duterte. The position was quite a big departure from past policy. Although they had previously toyed with alliances – such as with Arroyo – they never entered a government. In a statement marking 100 days of Duterte's government they stated that they were "forging...a patriotic alliance between his anti-US regime and the revolutionary and patriotic forces".[20] The CPP's collaboration with Duterte appears to have first originated at the local level in Davao. Movement cadres are said to have campaigned for him in past elections. The policy extended to the national scale through promoting extensive negotiations with the NDF/NPA; the appointment of movement leaders to executive posts, and through the "Makabayan bloc" of various NDF aligned party-list sitting members joining the pro-Duterte majority in Congress.

However, any illusions of meaningful inclusion quickly evaporated. The Duterte regime withdrew from negotiations with the NDF as early as February 2017 and threatened a return to "all-out war". It was, nevertheless, not until 30 June 2017 that the CPP finally issued a statement admitting that:

The Duterte regime's key economic, social, security and foreign relations policies are basically a continuation of past measures which perpetuate the oppressive and exploitative semi-colonial and semi-feudal system. The US imperialists and the ruling big bourgeois compradors, big landlord class and bureaucrat capitalists remain the dominant forces in his government.[21]

Quite a turnaround.

The CPP now refers to the Duterte regime with the same formulations it has used for various previous governments. The main legal organisations associated with the CPP's political positions initiated the "Movement Against Tyranny" coalition with other forces in August 2017.

The non-CPP left has taken a variety of positions. A leading figure from *Akbayan*, Senator Risa Hontiveros (from the social-democratic *Pandayan* current) and other activists initiated the *#TindigPilipinas* (Stand up Filipinos) coalition. It united a range of organisations with various opposition "trapo" politicians in September.[22] Their goal, however, was limited to "calling out the excesses of government". Hontiveros was elected as part of the *Koalisyon ng Daang Matuwid* (Straight Road Coalition) formed by former president Ninoy Aquino.

On the other hand, Walden Bello (still formally part of *Akbayan*) brought together most of the groups that supported his (unsuccessful) independent 2016 Senate campaign to revive the anti-Arroyo era *Laban ng Masa* (resistance of the masses) coalition that united much of the rejectionist left. The new *Laban ng Masa* is a coalition of groups like the *Partido Lakas ng Masa*, Alliance of TriPeople for the Achievement of Human Rights, National Federation of Labor, *Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino* and *Alab Katipunan*. While there were disagreements within the coalition around the precise character of the Duterte regime (fascist, authoritarian populist or de facto dictatorial rule), it is united around not just opposing Duterte but posing the question of how to replace the entire political system. As Bello has argued:

The only response that we can make to this swift movement towards absolute rule is resistance. However, it cannot be resistance in the name of restoring what I have called the EDSA system of elite democracy, for one of the chief reasons why Duterte is in power is because of the failure of that 30-year-old system to deliver on its promise of bringing about genuine democracy and the redistribution of wealth. Instead, what it gave us was a system dominated by traditional political elites, the continuing concentration of economic power in an oligarchy, and neoliberal economic policies that have resulted in some 25 percent of our population living in poverty and in a Gini coefficient of 50, which represents the worst inequality ever in the distribution of wealth and income in our history...

The need for a genuine and credible opposition to authoritarian rule is one reason we have come together in Laban ng Masa. But there is another reason. That other reason is that we offer the only alternative that our people can take to break from the repression, poverty, and inequality that engulf them. That alternative is system change. This is change oriented in a socialist direction.[23]

Much of the rejectionist left has focused on forming coalitions by not just defending the status quo but advancing an alternative to the broken EDSA system of elite control.

However, not all rejectionist groups joined *Laban ng Masa*. Most notably, the *Partido Manggagawa* (PM) (Labour Party), *Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa* (SENTRO) and other groups formed a separate *Kalipunan ng Kilusang Masa* [federation of mass movements] (KALIPUNAN). Its statements are similar to the other coalitions, pledging to "resist authoritarianism and expose his [Duterte's] anti-poor policies".[24] The differences with *Laban ng Masa* reflect strong personal antagonisms between both PM and SENTRO leaders and Bello and other key leaders in *Laban ng Masa*. It also does not explicitly commit itself to presenting a socialist alternative.

PM originated as a split from the BMP/*Sanlakas/Lakas ng Masa* bloc over tactical political issues. PM's leaders differed over the amount of emphasis placed on the need for a revolutionary successor to the EDSA republic. They emphasised gradual rebuilding of the strength of the labour movement instead. In the short run, this enabled them to play a crucial role in the PALEA dispute and avoid lingering too long in dubious coalitions with ex-military rebels from the Arroyo years that were

shifting to the right. Under the guise that they are “exposing” the fake populism of Duterte, however, they opted to stay part of the Nagkaisa! coalition and the “labour dialogue” with the president. The labour groups in *Laban ng Masa* did not. In any event, Duterte’s recent failure to end contractualisation may pave the way for united action between the groups.

In Philippine tradition, these groups and coalitions tended to organise separately, and hence they held rival mass protests during the Bonifacio day holiday on 30 November 2017. While Duterte remains popular, the escalating drift to authoritarianism may lead to a more sustained mass political movement emerging within which more productive cooperation among the left can emerge.

Uneven development, authoritarianism and Duterte

The emergence of an authoritarian leader such as Duterte is the product of both longer and medium term international and national-scale processes. His rule reflects an intensification of the worsening crisis impacting on the EDSA republic and many other notional democracies in the ex-colonial world.

The combined and uneven development of capitalism meant that while a small layer of capitalist economies could adopt technology and geostrategic factors to enable rapid economic growth, most did not. In either case, few of either these rapidly industrialising or undeveloped capitalist states replicated the experience of Western social democracy whereby class conflict was channelled into representative democratic institutions. Various forms of fascism, “Bonapartism” and authoritarianism have been far more the norm in many of these less-developed countries. Of course, the ability of the system in the West to contain struggles within liberal democratic norms is increasingly fraying, as evidenced by the growth of right wing populism.

These processes have long been evident in the Philippines and it is one of the less successful capitalist economies in east Asia. Its history of Spanish and later US colonisation ensured a robust set of institutions emerged. Landlord-based capitalism and alliance with US interests meant its notionally democratic and republican institutions concealed a highly exclusionary political system. The build-up of social and political contradictions meant Marcos was able to shift to overt authoritarianism between 1972 and 1986. The restoration of formal democracy after 1986 resulted in a series of presidential regimes largely unable to improve the status of much of the country’s poorer population.

These two processes had important consequences. First, the main political implication was the eventual emergence of Duterte’s authoritarian regime. It is a continuity with and an intensification of existing trends that emerged during the EDSA period and presidential regimes. It has entailed a combination of Estrada’s populism, Ramos’ technocratic reforms and Arroyo’s political violence and increased relationships with China. Even the limited political openings and freedoms offered by the EDSA republic are now under threat.

Second and accordingly, there is a prospect for the re-emergence of a mass-based opposition to these reactionary political trends. Duterte’s rhetorical promises of social reforms – above all around contractualisation – disoriented some of the left. His regime’s inability to deliver on even the most minimal reforms, however, has largely brought this ill-considered collaboration to a close. The prospect of “Cha-Cha”, attacks on the media and increased political violence raise significant challenges for the struggle. The challenge for the left is how to advance the struggle in a way that moves beyond the defence of the status quo towards presenting a feasible alternative to the limited democracy of the EDSA republic. A key role is likely to be played by mass movements centred on the urban working class.

In responding to all this it will be crucial to develop a left that can break with the semi-feudal perspective of the CPP and integrate the insights produced by the concept of combined and uneven development. The CPP's marginalisation of the working class in its politics has meant it is unable to steer a path that related to the potential of the urban working class to lead decisive social and political struggles. This is a big problem for the left, especially now where it should be undeniable that a mass movement of the working class will be central to any revolutionary movement. What's more, it is clear that in the Philippines, like in so much of the world, the democratic and socialist struggles are intrinsically linked as the bourgeoisie has shown itself incapable of creating conditions for the development of a democratic and humane society.

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Notes

[1] The Epifanio de los Santos Avenue in Metro-Manila: location of the 1986 uprising that brought down the Marcos dictatorship.

[2] United Nations Development Program 2018.

[3] See various chapters in Thompson and Batalla 2018.

[4] Löwy 2010.

[5] For some of the different positions of the Philippine left: Manggagawa 2017 and Bello 2017a.

[6] Trotsky 1934.

[7] This section largely summarises Reid 2000 and Abinales and Amoroso 2005.

[8] Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015.

[9] Rivera 1994.

[10] Guerrero 2006.

[11] McCoy 2010.

[12] Reid 2001.

[13] Trapo is an abbreviation for “traditional politician”. It also means cleaning rag in Tagalog.

[14] For an odd example of the former, see Anton C. Unjieng, “One-Sided Analysis of the Philippines”, *Red Flag*, 31 May 2016, <https://redflag.org.au/node/5317>.

[15] Figueroa 2015.

[16] Laya and Marquez 2012.

[17] Ibon Economic and Political Briefing 2018.

[18] Manahan 2017.

[19] The TUCP originated in the martial law period as a government-sponsored trade union federation. There are various other federations and trade union centres, such as the KMU, the Federation of Free Workers and many more. Organised labour, however, comprises less than 5 percent of the labour force.

[20] Communist Party of the Philippines 2016.

[21] Communist Party of the Philippines 2017.

[22] Nikko Dizon, “‘Yellow’ groups form protest coalition”, 19 September 2017, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/931642/war-on-drugs-drug-killings-extrajudicial-killings-yellows-rodrido-duterte-tindigpilipinas-francis-pangilinan-risa-hontiveros-antonio-trillanes-iv-teddy-baguilat-tom-villarin-gary-alejano>.

[23] Bello 2017a.

[24] ESSF (article 45663), “[Philippines: Kalipunan calls on the government to end impunity](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article45663)”, 5 December 2018
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