

Philippines: Duterte's last gamble: 'Give up, get land, house'

Monday 28 March 2022, by [OCAMPO Satur](#) (Date first published: 26 March 2022).

Going into his final three months in office, President Duterte apparently realized he was far from achieving another one of his 2016 campaign promises: to achieve peace and end the 50-years-plus armed conflict with the underground Left revolutionary movement. Much earlier, he had conceded failing to fulfill two other promises - to end the festering problems of illegal drugs and corruption.

In two instances this month, he called on members of the New People's Army (NPA) to surrender, dangling as reward land to till and a house for each surrenderer.

Last Tuesday, Duterte said in his video-taped regular address to the nation:

"Sabi ko sa mga komunista, lumabas na kayo, kung may panahon pa, basta malista kayo o kasali sa land reform, ito may sarili kayong bahay, may sariling lupa. (I tell the communists, come out now while there's still time, once you are listed or included in land reform, you can have your own houses, your own lands)."

However, he hastened to qualify that statement, explaining: "We cannot afford to be giving lands to everyone because it's for the communists (to induce them) to go back to the folds of the law."

In effect, his vow early in his term to fully implement the now-defunct Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) has turned into a downright counterinsurgency ploy. Duterte aborted the final signing of a common draft agreement on agrarian reform and rural development between the two panels in the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations in June 2018.

It was essentially a repeat of his earlier message, on March 17, to a gathering of supposed New People's Army (NPA) members who had allegedly surrendered to the government in Leyte. He was quoted in a news report as saying then:

"Tell those crazy people, those who are still fighting the government. Tell them that Mayor [referring to himself] is urging you to surrender...before I step down..."

Also, in his recorded address on Tuesday, Duterte appealed to the public not to join the communist rebels, whom he accused of conspiring with members of opposition political parties that he didn't specifically name. He said:

"Inuudyok ko lahat na, 'wag kayo sumali diyan sa mga rebelde na kasabwat yung mga myembro ng political parties sa kabila."

"I am not ready to mention the names, or name, may mga partido na headed by someone running for the presidency, and yes, they are also playing into the hands of the communists. I think they have been infiltrated," Duterte added.

Was Duterte feigning discreetness, whereas on March 13, the NTF-ELCAC (National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict), which he heads as chairperson, had viciously attacked Vice President Leni Robredo?

In an official statement, signed by spokesperson Lorraine Badoy and posted on the NTF-ELCAC Facebook page, the task force blatantly accused Robredo, the opposition's presidential candidate, of "pretending they have not made a pact with the devil, the communist terrorist CPP-NPA-NDF" and of forming a "tactical alliance" with the latter.

Three separate complaints were filed before the ombudsman last Wednesday against Badoy, for violating the anti-graft law and the code of conduct for public officials. She recklessly red-tagged Robredo, the Makabayan Coalition and the progressive party-lists supporting the Leni-Kiko tandem, said the 26 individual complainants, who were represented by Antonio La Viña and Rico Domingo as legal counsels.

Yesterday, leaders of Makabayan Coalition and its party-list representatives in the House, citing electioneering and violations of the Omnibus Election Code, also filed a complaint-affidavit before the Commission on Elections against Badoy and nine NTF-ELCAC officials.

The complaint was likewise based on the March 13 NTF-ELCAC official statement earlier mentioned. Its issuance, "in the nature of fake news," the complainants stated, was intended to campaign against the various candidates mentioned, and "to intimidate the general public to refrain or desist from participating in the campaign rallies of the targeted candidates" or casting their votes for them.

Using equipment and other resources owned by the government, the complaint-affidavit said, the respondent officials - without citing any basis - accused the complainants of direct links to alleged terrorists and to a supposed revolutionary overthrow of the government.

Besides the Omnibus Election Code, the complainants pointed out, Badoy and her fellow NTF-ELCAC officials, through their published statement, "primarily" violated the 1987 Constitution. They cited Article IX (B), which states: "No officer or employee in the civil service shall engage, directly or indirectly, in any electioneering or partisan political campaign."

Despite the widespread criticisms and the demand to abolish the NTF-ELCAC, President Duterte is digging in his heels. On Tuesday, he expressed hope that the next administration would continue what he had started through the task force.

Coincidentally, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana spoke on Tuesday about the NTF-ELCAC at the celebration of the 125th founding anniversary of the Philippine Army.

"I still remember ... maybe four years ago when President Duterte told us to finish off [the communist-led insurgency] and not to let the next administration inherit it," Lorenzana recalled. "So we worked hard."

He credited himself, together with Interior Secretary Eduardo Año and National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr. (both former AFP chiefs), for having crafted Executive Order No. 70 in December 2018, which created the NTF-ELCAC. Lorenzana boasted, "(It's) actually the best campaign plan or method that we have devised in a long time."

Because of the task force, he claimed, "we are closer [to ending the insurgency]." He admitted though that the Department of National Defense had expected "to finish the job" by the beginning of 2022. But it turned out to be a "tall order," the defense chief conceded.

Reason: "The enemy is deeply embedded in all the sectors of society and it takes a little bit more time to neutralize them." That realization of the actual situation tells us how wrongful, narrow-minded, socially divisive and hugely costly in human lives has been the NTF-ELCAC's highly militaristic approach to the prolonged armed conflict.

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