

Philippines: Social Democracy or “Dutertismo”?

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Josua Mata on the Philippine workers’ movement before and after President Duterte

Although the official vote count only began today, the results of the 2022 Philippine presidential election are already more or less clear: Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., the son of long-time dictator Ferdinand Marcos, appears to have won a landslide victory and will become the next President of the Philippines.

Although he failed to articulate much of a platform prior to the election, Marcos is widely perceived as a right-wing authoritarian whose career has been dogged by controversies and accusations of corruption. Politically, he is expected to continue many of the policies pursued by the current president, Rodrigo Duterte, including his lethal “war on drugs” that has already cost thousands of lives. Critics fear that the rule of law will continue to deteriorate under his presidency — a concern that was reinforced by the many accusations of voting irregularities on election day.

For those who hoped the elections would shift Philippine politics to the left, the results are a disappointment, to say the least. After all, the country has a number of influential left-wing parties and a long history of popular struggle against oppression and for democracy — but divided among a number of rival camps, the Left struggles to articulate a political programme compelling enough to win over a majority. This election was no different.

Where can the country’s progressive social movements go from here, and what will another Marcos in office mean for the embattled Philippine Left? Josua Mata, one of the Philippine’s leading trade unionists and a powerful voice for democracy and social justice in the country, spoke with Liliane Danso-Dahmen, director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation’s Southeast Asia Office in Manila, about socialism, sectarianism, and the struggle for social justice in the Philippines before and after Duterte’s administration.

Based on exit polling, it appears almost certain that the duo of Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., son of the former dictator, and Sara Duterte, the daughter of the current president, are set to win the Philippine presidential election. What will this mean for the trade union movement, and for democracy in your country more generally?

In the event that another Marcos recaptures Malacañang [the official residence of the Philippine president], it would mean another six years of hardship for the working class. In the first place, no one knows what programme Bongbong Marcos will pursue as soon as he gets to power. The most that people have heard from him is that he will continue the “good things” that Mr. Duterte has been doing.

But what are those good things? At the minimum, it will be another six years – or more – of “Dutertismo”. Bongbong Marcos could extend his rule to more than six years if he succeeds in finally altering the constitution to institutionalize the authoritarian type of government they really want to

implement. This is exactly what Duterte attempted to do, and if Bongbong Marcos is intent on continuing that trajectory, then it's logical that they will also try to revisit that — and this time around, they might just be able to do it.

So what would be the attitude of the labour movement, particularly for SENTRO and the social movements that we work with under Kalipunan? [1] It is very clear to us that there won't be a honeymoon period with Marcos. We are preparing everyone to hit the ground running and protest for the people's rights and welfare from day one of his administration.

How has the Philippines changed under Duterte? How did the six years of his presidency impact society and the political climate?

The past six years have been a disaster for human rights and the labour movement in the Philippines, particularly trade union rights and workers' rights.

For example, since 2017 the Philippines has been among the top ten worst countries in the world for workers according to the International Trade Union Confederation's Global Rights Index, and rightly so. Duterte's bloody war on drugs created a climate of impunity, leading to the killing of more than 50 trade union leaders since 2016. Only one of these murders went to the courts and is still under litigation. Many more cases of trade union killings and what we call "extrajudicial killings" remain to be investigated.

That's the most devastating result of Duterte's war on drugs, but it's the other problem that I think will take more time to resolve: it's not just the human rights crisis, it's also the fact that our institutions are now very weakened, because Duterte effectively removed almost all the guardrails against an authoritarian leader. He has created a far-more powerful presidency, which will now be inherited by his successor. I think we will continue to feel the impacts of this further weakening of an already weak democratic tradition in the Philippines long after Mr. Duterte steps down.

On the other hand, despite the fact that he spent so much energy attacking trade unions, harassing us and other movements, the fact of the matter is his term was also a period in which we passed some significant policy reforms. These include ratification of ILO Convention 151, which was very good for public sector workers, expanded maternity leave, and also legislated the Safe Spaces Act. I don't think it would be fair for history to credit these to him. The credit should go to the trade union movement and all the other progressive movements and legislators who managed to get things going, despite Duterte's attacks.

On that note, what about the left wing of the labour movement? Didn't some parts of the Philippine Left initially express support for Duterte?

That's a very important question, and I think any discussion about the political situation in the Philippines must address it, controversial as it is. First, let me respond to the first part of your question. If there is a crisis — that is to say, if globalization and neoliberalism are in crisis — then, theoretically, it should present a good opportunity for the Left to put forward its ideas. But the problem is that the Philippine Left itself has been in crisis for quite some time now.

Our crisis has to do a lot with the fact that people tend to go for traditional elite politicians, simply because the Left has not been able to put forward a convincing political alternative to the kind of crisis-driven system that we've always had. I've always believed that socialism has a far-better vision that it can present, but we're not able to translate this vision into workable programmes that resonate among the people.

But there's another symptom of the crisis, namely that it's so difficult for the Left to come together and put up a unified front against the traditional politicians. To my mind, the biggest stumbling block is the fact that large sections of the Left are still very sectarian.

If you trace the history of the Left in the Philippines, it has been steeped in Stalinist thinking, whether the original Philippine Communist Party in the 1930s, or the new Communist Party of the Philippines in 1969. That is a big barrier to a unified Left. I have been in many efforts to build unity for decades, and it has always been very difficult because somewhere along the way unification efforts are undermined by sectarian attitudes.

One of the biggest indicators of the kinds of problems created by Stalinist thinking among the Left is the fact that huge sections of the Left actually supported and enabled Duterte. The National Democrats in particular, because they were promised peace talks in 2016, jumped onto the bandwagon, practically campaigned for him and even joined his administration for more than two years. Of course, it is important to find a peaceful resolution to one of the world's longest-running armed insurgencies, so I understand it from a tactical perspective. But if you put your faith in someone who has shown dictatorial tendencies long before he came to Malacañang, that's a huge problem.

What makes it even more difficult is the fact that even though he launched a bloody war on drugs that led to the killing of 20,000 to 30,000 people, many of the National Democrats' adherents actually continued to cling to the Duterte government. Worse, they continued to be part of Duterte's bloody regime despite the fact that many of the human rights defenders who were killed were actually their members. The truth is they never left the Duterte government willingly. They practically had to be booted out even after the collapse of the peace talks. That's something I really cannot understand.

I think the entire labour movement's problem is rooted in the fact that we really don't have a deep sense of democracy. The movement is afflicted with what I call "amoeba syndrome": you form one organization and in a few years you have two, and later on it will have turned into four organizations. There are many explanations for this, ranging from ideological differences to personal differences among the leaders — some would even say that it's because of the labour code or the economic structure of the country. I think all of these are just excuses. The real reason is the fact that the labour movement has yet to build a strong democratic culture within its ranks. It has always been leadership-oriented.

Many union members tend to believe whoever their leader is, which also makes it easy for unions to split whenever there are differences between leaders. Apart from that, even among workers there is still a very strong belief in the myth of the "strong man". Many believe that because the Filipinos are so undisciplined and rowdy, they need a leader with an iron fist. This is something that we need to exorcise from the minds of workers.

You mentioned that the Philippine Left, or at least its Communist wing, is involved in one of the world's longest-running armed insurgencies, but yet the Left is also very present in elections. What drove the forces of the Left to participate in the electoral system?

You have to understand that during the Marcos dictatorship, many on the Left, including myself, were raised thinking that elections were a farce. Elections were the exclusive playground of the elites. That may have been true during the Marcos years, but it changed during the snap elections in 1986 that led to the ouster of Marcos. Still, it took many several years to change that mindset.

I'd like to think that my organization, my part of the movement, made a big contribution to weaning

workers away from this debilitating kind of thinking. After the Marcos dictatorship, in 1986, we established the Education Institute of the Labour Education Research Network (LEARN), and one of the things we discussed was what the proper strategy should be now that the Marcos dictatorship was out.

Decades later, after we built Akbayan, one of the first progressive parties, many others joined the electoral fray including the National Democrats, who were very critical about what we were doing then. The way I see it, many of them actually play the electoral game the way traditional politicians would, which is also sad. Other progressive parties are also guilty of using such tactics as well, but the National Democrats proved to be the most adept at playing the *trapo*, or “traditional politician”, game. Which makes one ask, after more than two decades of electoral work, what exactly have we accomplished as a movement?

Having said that, what motivated unions to intervene in elections? For us, electoral participation is in line with our strategy of social movement unionism that calls on workers to participate in various arenas of the struggle for social transformation. By developing the labour vote, workers should be able to capture state power that we can then use to hasten social transformation.

Unfortunately, there are those that joined the electoral fray in order to advance the interests of their leaders. They are not necessarily coming from a well-thought-out class objective, but are largely based on the parochial interests of the leaders or at best the organization. That explains why the biggest union, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), joined the campaign of Bongbong Marcos, the son of the former dictator. Can you imagine?

The Communist Party’s armed insurgency has come up several times already in our conversation. What impact does that ongoing conflict have on politics in the country?

That’s a very sensitive issue. There are certain areas, particularly some remote areas, where the armed Left has a very strong influence. In some of these areas, other political groups — including progressive groups — are prevented from campaigning. That’s very undemocratic.

I find it quite ironic that the guerrilla war is waged under the slogan of “protracted people’s war”, and they claim that it’s a democratic war because they have the people with them. But if it is being waged in the name of democracy, why can’t they allow those who don’t subscribe to their ideas to campaign in the areas they control?

Do trade unions in the Philippines explicitly endorse candidates or support a political party?

Some small trade unions tried to form their own Labour Party years ago, but that didn’t pan out. There’s been talk about it, but I’ve always believed that unless the labour movement is able to build substantial unity among itself, it will be really difficult to build a Labour Party.

Because there’s no viable Labour Party yet, most trade unions just end up endorsing candidates. And as I said, many do this in different ways. In SENTRO, we have been trying to introduce this practice to all of the coalitions that we work with. Our starting point has always been to be very clear about what labour’s agenda is. Based on that agenda, we evaluate who among the candidates is best-suited to deliver on this agenda. Obviously, the candidate should fully endorse labour’s agenda. Secondly, she or he should have a clean track record in terms of human rights violations. Third, the candidate should have a clean track record on corruption.

After going through this process at the leadership level, the council level, and even at the territorial

level, a decision is made, and we ask the candidate that we are endorsing to sign a covenant with us. We have never endorsed a candidate who won't sign a memorandum of understanding. That's why we never endorsed [former president] Benigno Aquino, even though our own party, Akbayan, embraced him.

What about the broader public debate? Is there a place for the Left in mainstream politics? Are socialist ideas seen as credible?

I think that's the biggest challenge for the Left in general and for the broader progressive movement, even if they don't consider themselves as part of the Left. How do we translate our socialist, feminist ideals into a practical and viable political programme? That, unfortunately, is something that we still need to do.

There are, however, some ideas that came from the Left that are slowly leaching into the national discourse, like the idea of having a robust public employment programme, or of imposing a wealth tax. They're not necessarily left-wing, they're not exclusively socialist, but these ideas were incubated inside the progressive movement and are starting to develop traction among ordinary people. That tells us that there is space for radical policies to develop.

Now the main challenge is, how do we scale up? How do we make people understand that there is an alternative to capitalism, that we can build a better society that's not steeped in misogyny? If the question is, "is there space for it?", then yes. But I don't think elections are the only space for it. I think building the constituency for an alternative society, for a socialist, feminist future, is not something that we can do during elections. It has to be done on a day-to-day basis, and it has to be done as we struggle side-by-side with the people.

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Liliane Danso-Dahmen

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P.S.

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<https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/46495/social-democracy-or-dutertismo>

Footnotes

[1] Kalipunan ng Kilusang Masa is a coalition of mass-movement organizations representing indigenous peoples, women, workers, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, farmers, youth, fisherfolk, and the urban poor.