

Philippines - The Duterte presidency, the US and the Left

Sunday 18 September 2016, by [REID Ben](#) (Date first published: 11 September 2016).

Newly elected Philippine president Rodrigo R. Duterte has entered into a very public tiff with US president Barack Obama. The controversy stems from Obama's mild criticisms of the widely reported wave of killings of suspected drug traffickers in the Philippines, which has occurred since Duterte's administration took office in July.

Duterte - well known for public outbursts - appeared to label Obama "a son of a whore" at a press conference before leaving for the recent Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Laos. While Duterte was actually referring to a journalist, Obama cancelled a meeting with the Philippine leader on 6 September.

Duterte followed up his remarks, departing from a prepared speech at an informal "East Asia group" (which includes the US) meeting on 8 September. Displaying photographs from the period after the US invasion and occupation of the Philippines from 1898, he drew attention to the atrocities committed by the former colonial power.

The roots of the conflict were some mild criticisms that Obama made of the wave of recent killings that have claimed more than 2,400 lives in just over two months. Obama said, "What is certainly true is that the issue of how we approach fighting crime and drug trafficking is a serious one for all of us, and we've got to do it the right way".

Around 900 of those killed died in police operations, thus being given a veneer of "legality"; human rights activists have labelled the rest vigilante and extrajudicial killings.

Despite claiming to be from the political left and governing in favour of the country's impoverished majority, Duterte uses dubious rhetoric and has a questionable policy-making record. Responding to human rights critics in late August, for instance, he declared, "I said, 'What crime against humanity?' In the first place, I'd like to be frank with you, are they [drug users] humans? What is your definition of a human being? Tell me".

Some 700,000 people have reportedly turned themselves in for rehabilitation, prompting Duterte to call on the military to open its many camps and similar facilities for use. This was despite previously claiming that continued use of "*shabu*" (methamphetamine hydrochloride) "shrinks the brain", making users unable to be rehabilitated.

It is unclear if these criticisms have impacted on Duterte's popularity. A Pulse Asia survey in July showed 91 percent of the population trusted the new administration, while only 0.2 percent did not. His approval ratings were similar across all income groups.

His high ratings and incendiary rhetoric have also impacted sections of the left, especially the Communist Party of the Philippines-aligned "national democratic" movement. The CPP has led an insurgency since 1968 via the New People's Army and the National Democratic Front.

The NDF lauded Duterte's criticisms of Obama and called on his government to "junk colonial agreements ... abrogate the Mutual Defense Treaty and junk the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement - policies that continue to position the Philippines as a willing pawn for US imperialism's wars of aggression".

It is unlikely that his government will undertake any of these measures. The Philippine elite has long entrusted its defence to inherited agreement with the US. The Visiting Forces Agreement of 1999 re-established a direct US military presence in the Philippines after the US bases agreements expired in 1992.

While democracy was nominally restored in 1996 after the Marcos dictatorship, in practice the country's electoral system remains dominated by dynastic clans with origins in the landowning class established by Spanish colonialism.

While being the first president elected from Mindanao, in the country's south, Duterte is clearly a member of the old elite. This did not stop the CPP claiming in June: "Duterte's show of readiness to continue cooperation and friendship with the national democratic movement is the basis of possibilities for a fruitful alliance with his government".

The NDF, in addition, agreed to a cease-fire and resumption of negotiations at a meeting in Oslo on 26 August. The cease-fire paves the way for further negotiations and the convening of "reciprocal working committees on Social and Economic Reforms, Political and Constitutional Reforms and on End of Hostilities and Disposition of Forces".

While the questions are complex surrounding how relevant armed insurgency is in the Philippines, the friendliness between the CPP and Duterte occurs at a time when the new government is committing widespread atrocities. Vigilantism may be popular in the context of pervasive crime, but its negative consequences have already impacted disproportionately the poor and the working class. Most of those killed have been low-level dealers and users.

While Duterte's anti-US rhetoric may appear combative, it is unlikely his government will introduce the changes in foreign and domestic policies that the NDF calls for.

The Stalinist-Maoist leadership of the CPP has a long record of alienating factions and regional leaderships that begin to question its authority. The contradiction between the CPP and NDF's stance and the reality of Duterte's regime could well lead to another round of revolutionary groups breaking away from the CPP, joining those from the 1990s.

Yet some of these groups have also had to respond to Duterte's more populist measures. He pledged to end widespread labour "contractualisation", winning the support of some militant unionists.

While Duterte appointed progressive Silvestre Bello as secretary of the Department of Labor and Employment, he pledged only to end the illegal forms of subcontracting called "*endo*" or end of contract agreements. Workers are often unlawfully hired for five months to avoid regularising their status and allowing them benefits.

There have been no commitments to regularising workers who have been on contracts for more than six months or revoking the DOLE's Order No. 18-A Series of 2011, which in effect legalised contractualisation.

Even the implementation of anti-*endo* measures has been limited. In a statement issued on 18 August, Rene Magtubo from the left wing Partido Manggagawa (PM) (Labor Party) attacked the DOLE's claims that it had no mechanisms to detect illegal contracting.

DOLE's existing visitor and enforcement powers already allow for investigating violations and imposing compliance. "What is lacking are not the means to detect red flags but the will to enforce existing rules and laws against prohibited contracting", Magtubo said.

BEN REID

P.S.

* "Duterte and Obama tiff: temper tantrum or real?". RED FLAG. 11 SEPTEMBER 2016:
<https://redflag.org.au/node/5477>