

In Duterte's Philippines, War Against the Poor

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The Philippines are going through a double, mutually reinforcing crisis. President Rodrigo Roa Duterte is responsible for a so-called “war on drugs” that is costing thousands of lives and is increasingly concentrating power in his own hands.

Meanwhile, in the south of the country Islamic fundamentalist violence has taken on a qualitative new dimension. The attack on Marawi City provided Duterte with the opportunity to declare martial law, while the violence of the government army creates new breeding grounds for fundamentalist groups.

Campaigning for the elections that made him president, Rodrigo Roa Duterte promised to eradicate crime. He promised to be ruthless and kept his promise. One year into his presidency, thousands have been killed in his “war on drugs.” The victims of this war are either killed “resisting arrest” or are murdered by unknown assassins.

Local journalists and human rights activists report how police execute people in their homes and plant evidence. According to reports, the anonymous assassins are mostly cops or are paid by them. The budget for cash rewards to cops who have “rendered extraordinary service” ballooned.

In his speeches, Duterte encourages cops to plant evidence and kill suspects, and promises to protect cops from prosecution.

Nobody knows how many have been killed. Based on news reports, activists estimate that the number of dead could exceed 10,000. The victims are almost always the poor: pedicab drivers, street peddlers, scavengers. Economically and socially marginalized, they are killed with impunity.

But Duterte retains support. He owes much of his popularity to widespread disillusionment with the political establishment. Political activist and sociologist Walden Bello describes support for Duterte as motivated by dissatisfaction with what he calls “the EDSA republic.”

In 1986, dictator Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown by mass protests concentrated on EDSA avenue, the main thoroughfare in the capital Manila. The so-called “People’s Power Revolution” produced high hopes for the restoration of democratic rights as well as for social progress and development of the country.

Since then, every administration tried to claim the mantle of 1986. They were all disappointments. According to government standards, over a quarter of the population of over 100 million lives in poverty. The Philippines is one of the most unequal societies in the region; recent economic high growth rates benefited only a small part of the population.

“A Crisis of Hegemony”

Herbert Docena is a socialist activist who teaches at the University of the Philippines. Asked for the reasons for the support for Duterte, he argues that “we need to consider why his rhetoric fell on receptive ears. There was massive disillusionment with the liberal, or semi-liberal, institutions. I think what we experienced was really a crisis of ruling-class hegemony as the different factions of the ruling class failed to overcome their differences. At the same time, the Left was weak.”

In this context, Duterte seemed to offer an alternative: strong leadership and harsh measures to teach the people “discipline,” end crime and corruption and develop the country. He emphasizes his differences from the political class that previously ruled the country, cracking jokes, rolling up his sleeves and cursing the rich as out-of-touch coños [a slang term meaning “cunts” — ed.] Duterte profits from a sense of crisis that his campaign and government helped to create.

Kar Calderon is an activist in Manila with Block Marcos, a group that mobilizes against the growing authoritarianism of the government. Says Calderon: “Duterte managed to create a discourse that the root of all problems in the country is drugs. It’s always drugs, drugs, drugs.”

Tin Alvarez, also an activist in the Block Marcos group: “Duterte has been skillful in how he succeeded in constructing a problem. To me, the main problem of the Philippines is poverty, and impoverishment, how people are made to be poor. But when Duterte ran for power, we were suddenly told that the really pressing problem was crime.”

Duterte presents himself as the strong leader who can save the country. Those who oppose him in his crusade are, he suggests, in the pay of the druglords.

Although Duterte has support across social classes, he would not have been able to become president without building alliances with fractions of the bourgeoisie. Key parts of the coalition supporting Duterte are members of the bourgeoisie that, like himself, come from the peripheral provinces. Such provincial fractions compete with those in control of the national government in Manila for access to power and wealth.

Another important ally of Duterte is the wealthy Marcos family, which for two decades has been rebuilding its political influence.

The coalition that supports Duterte, a relative outsider to the political establishment of the capital before his election, is not static. Mark Batac of Block Marcos: “Over the last year, Duterte prioritized the support of the military. At first, Duterte tried to get the support of often clashing constituencies, including parts of the Left.”

“In his first year in office, he realized which parties are critical for his hold on power and the army is one of those. Some of Duterte’s policies, such as his rapprochement with China, sit uneasy with the army which is fundamentally pro-U.S. Of all presidents, he has been visiting military camps most and he has appointed several military commanders to his government. He wants to secure himself the support of the army.”

One way in which his administration retains support is the intense use by its supporters of social media, where his supporters attack critics with slander and threats, and praise real and imagined achievements of Duterte’s government.

Permanently in campaigning mode, touring around the country, Duterte has gathered dedicated supporters. The strong faith many of them have in Duterte is symbolized by the nickname they gave him; Tatay, father. Since his election, Duterte’s popularity declined, but it remains strong especially among more affluent layers.

Despite his populist rhetoric, Duterte continued the free-market policies of the previous administrations. After a year in office he has dropped much of his earlier claim to be “leftist,” but the administration continues to present itself as an adversary of “oligarchs.”

Confusion in the Left

Initially, Duterte’s leftist claims were bolstered when he appointed a handful of leaders from the pro-Maoist National-Democrats as members of his administration and the movement entered his heterogeneous coalition.

The Philippine Left has been thrown into confusion by Duterte. Before running for president he was a local strongman, a mayor of Davao City on the southern island of Mindanao. For decades he cultivated a mutually beneficial relationship with the Maoist movement.

The underground Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its above-ground allies, together forming the National-Democratic movement, remain the largest current on the Philippine Left. Mayor Duterte and the Maoists were on friendly terms. Duterte supported legal National-Democratic groups in Davao City while the Maoist guerrillas refrained from attacks that would embarrass the mayor.

The above-ground movements did not target Duterte in protests and muted their criticism of his policies — including his use of a death squad to kill petty criminals, street children and drug addicts in Davao City, a policy that Duterte as president has extended nationwide.

During the election campaign, it turned out that Duterte had the support of parts of the Maoist movement, including important figureheads like their ideologue Jose Maria Sison. Duterte re-opened the peace negotiations with the CPP and the party declared that it was “forging an alliance” with the new president.

The Maoists suggested that through negotiations Duterte could be convinced to implement sweeping social reforms. National-Democrats rallied in support of “Duterte’s progressive policies” and defended him against criticism regarding the extrajudicial killings, claiming such criticism was coming from supporters of the defeated candidates or was part of a “destabilization plot” by the CIA.

Duterte’s nationalist rhetoric about “separating” from the former American colonial power was especially popular among them — but they have been disappointed by continuing cooperation between the Philippine and U.S. militaries.

The honeymoon between Duterte and the Maoists lasted several months. But negotiations stalled, then broke down as Duterte insisted that the Maoists should sign a mutual cease-fire. But even after Duterte declared “all-out war” against the Maoist New People’s Army (NPA), the National-Democratic cabinet-members did not resign. They continued to assure Duterte of their loyalty and defend him against criticism.

Although its expectations of Duterte diminished, the National-Democratic movement was careful to leave open the possibility of a new turn in their relationship with the government. In May, Judy Taguiwalo, the National-Democratic Social Welfare Secretary, still claimed that it was a “no-brainer” that Duterte was opposed to the killings.

Some weeks later, the chair of Bayan (“Nation”), the umbrella of National-Democratic organizations, admitted that the National-Democratic members of Duterte’s cabinet were “objectively helping to deodorize his regime by just doing their jobs competently and consistent with their pro-people stand.”

Only halfway through September did the National-Democrats leave the government coalition, after Taguiwalo and one of her comrades were dropped from their posts. A handful of National-Democrats remain in posts in the administration.

The National-Democrats have now organized a new coalition, "Movement against Tyranny," which aims to "unite all freedom loving Filipinos against tyranny and for human rights." The National-Democrats have been criticized for their opportunism, but the movement remains capable of mobilizing significant numbers.

Marawi and Martial Law

In June, another crisis opened as jihadists claiming allegiance to Islamic State attacked the city of Marawi on Mindanao. The attack provided Duterte with the opportunity to declare martial law for the entire island.

The constitution introduced after the fall of Marcos contains several safeguards intended to prevent another president from using martial law to become a dictator. However, opposition to Duterte in the institutions and parliament is so weak that he has had little difficulty introducing martial law. The fighting also again boosted his popularity.

Although the jihadists are claiming allegiance to Islamic State, the recent violence is an escalation of local dynamics. Mindanao is where most of the country's Islamic minority lives; about 20% of the local population identifies as Muslim. Parts of Muslim Mindanao are among the poorest regions of the country.

The national government has always marginalized the Moros (the name dates back from the Spanish period). Decades ago, Moros were pushed off their land in favor of Christian settlers in a resettlement program organized by the national government. Later, Marcos' attempts to centralize state power meant that local Muslim elites who previously represented and cooperated with the national government lost power.

In the early seventies, Mindanao erupted in war. A new generation, many of whom had studied in Egypt and Libya and were influenced by the pan-Islamic and nationalist ideas of that era, allied with parts of the dissatisfied elite to form the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), an armed movement aiming for the creation of a separate Moro republic.

The war reached a peak in the mid-seventies with over 13,000 dead and more than a million refugees. Although the MNLF, and its split the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, entered peace negotiations with the government and renounced their goal of separation, Mindanao has remained restless. The Fronts never disarmed, and scattered clashes continue.

The peace agreements did not solve the causes of the ongoing violence. Mindanao remains almost an internal colony to "imperial Manila," a source of agricultural products, minerals and cheap labor but underdeveloped and underrepresented. Members of the national elite ally with local warlords who deliver them votes and keep their fiefdoms under control.

In this context, militant groups are able to find recruits and support, and new groups are formed. These movements are not homogeneous or tightly organized. Local loyalties, often to certain clans, are frequently more important for their supporters than formal political affiliations or agreements.

Some Moro groups are little more than criminal gangs, enriching themselves through kidnapping and extortion, others are more political. Alliances and rivalries are often fluid, and members of the local elites form or support armed groups as tools in their competition with others.

Reflecting international influences, since the early eighties militant Moro movements have become more and more influenced by Islamic fundamentalist ideas. Ties to regional jihadist networks have existed since the nineties. In particular, the group that attacked Marawi City has its roots in the private army of the wealthy Maute family.

Joseph Franco, a research fellow at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies who has worked with the Philippine military, says that in early last 2016 the Mautes projected themselves as followers of Islamic State to "spook and coerce" a rival clan; then "that tactical use of terrorist imagery took on a life of its own."

For a younger generation, references to Salafist jihadism (violent Sunni fundamentalism) are not just a tactical ploy. The Philippine army claims to have killed two of the Maute sons during the fighting in Marawi City. Unlike the MILF, the Maute group has been targeting Christians for murder and desecrating Christian churches.

Fewer than 1000 fighters strong, the Maute group is trying to provoke a religious war on the island. Their attack on Marawi City was meant to gain national and international recognition. Its success probably surprised even the Maute group.

Despite facing thousands of government troops supported by airplanes and artillery, in mid-September the group was still not completely pushed out of the city and had killed over 130 soldiers.

So far, the violence has largely remained confined to Marawi, but the Mautes have allied with other splinter groups that adopted similar terrorist tactics and future attacks are likely. The government army has resorted to such large-scale violence and brute force that much of Marawi City has been flattened, creating a traumatized and hostile population among whom the Mautes or similar groups most probably will find future recruits.

Targeting the Left

Philippine leftists, including National-Democrats, fear the country is drifting towards dictatorship. The bourgeois opposition is weak, and many of its representatives defected to the government.

One of the few bourgeois politicians who strongly opposed Duterte's human rights violations, Senator Leila de Lima, was accused of cooperating with drug lords and imprisoned. State violence and the campaigns of slander and harassment by his supporters make opposition difficult and dangerous. Critics of the government are removed from their posts and intimidated.

Political killings strongly increased over the last months. Dozens have been killed, most of them from the National-Democratic movement, but activists from other currents such as the Philippine section of the Fourth International, the Revolutionary Workers' Party of Mindanao, and the Partido Manggagawa have also been targets.

In addition, social resistance against the Duterte regime is weakened by divisions among the Left. The National-Democratic organizations refuse to cooperate with or often even to recognize other progressive groups. The labor movement is divided between the National-Democratic Kilusang Mayo Uno and the coalition SENTRO.

The human rights movement is similarly divided between the National-Democratic group Karapatan and the iDEFEND coalition. The broad Left, ranging from socialist groups to networks of progressive NGOs in the country, had difficulty orienting itself faced with a president who claimed to be a socialist, mouthed anti-U.S. rhetoric and appointed well-known leftists to his administration.

Herbert Docena speaks of a crisis of the workers movement; “Twenty, thirty years ago, at least ten percent of workers were members of unions, now that is two percent. That put a lot of limits on what the Left can do.

“Out of desperation and frustration, the Left chose to take part in liberal institutions or to cooperate with factions of the elite. This was crucial; at the time when people were fed up and looking for an alternative, they saw the two most powerful currents of the Left either in alliance with the previous president, as the social democratic party Akbayan did, or with the Marcoses, Duterte or some other elite faction, as the National-Democrats did.

“It is difficult to see National-Democrats share a platform with the Marcoses, and then you have the social-democrats who joined the previous government. That makes it difficult to present an alternative outside of those existing structures. The main forces of the Left squandered an opportunity.”

According to C.J. Galunan of Block Marcos: “The Left failed to develop a long term vision and underestimated the potential there was. Instead, short terms gains, for example in elections, were prioritized while the National-Democrats continue to prioritize the armed struggle in the countryside over all other forms of struggle.”

A first dent in Duterte’s power appeared after the president kept his promise to give the Marcos family permission to bury their dead patriarch in the cemetery for national heroes. Spontaneous protests broke out, often involving young people relatively new to progressive politics. Recent cases of killings of teenagers by the police have fed rising dissatisfaction. Still, Duterte continues to implement his authoritarian agenda. The government aims to rewrite the constitution to favor the regional political dynasties and oligarchs that serve as Duterte’s crucial allies, and the Marcos dictatorship is being rehabilitated.

The Philippine Left, in all its various shapes, retains social weight and roots. But because of the lack of a convincing alternative this weight does not translate into political influence. Says Galunan: “There is a new, emerging left in the Philippines, in or outside the existing currents. We need to distinguish ourselves from the elites, but also critically examine the past failures of the Left.”

The struggle against authoritarianism and for human rights will be central to the formation of a new Left. Such a new Left would need to be as radical as the disillusionment with the EDSA republic is deep, and remain independent from all factions of the Philippine elite. The next few years will be decisive — and dangerous.

Trump and Duterte

Philippines President Duterte presents himself as a nationalist who is especially opposed to the continuing strong influence of the former colonial power, the United States. After Barack Obama voiced pro-forma concern over human rights violations in the Philippines, Duterte called him a “son of a whore.”

Duterte referred to U.S. atrocities committed during its colonization of the Philippines, and said U.S. troops should leave the country. While campaigning he promised an “independent foreign policy.” The high point of this rhetoric came in October 2016 when Duterte declared “sep→ar→ation from the

U.S.” and the intention to join the “ideological flow” of China and Russia.

But the ferocity of Duterte’s rhetoric has not been matched by acts. Joint U.S. and Philippine exercises continue, construction of facilities for use by the U.S. military continues, and Duterte expressed his thanks for U.S. support to the Philippine army in the fight for Marawi City.

And after Donald Trump praised Duterte for his “unbelievable job on the drug problem” in a phone call in May, signaling that the U.S. government would not object to the killings, Duterte’s anti-U.S. tirades lessened, although he still refused an invitation from the White House.

Duterte’s “nationalist” posing serves two ends. One is that he is trying to rebalance the Philippines’ relationship with the United States, and develop more friendly ties with China. Duterte signed multi-billion-dollar deals with the Chinese government that are bound to be immensely profitable for his allies.

Secondly, Duterte uses nationalist pretenses to deflect international criticism, accusing critics of hypocrisy and ignorance. The continuing weight of the pro-U.S. Philippine army, however, ensures that any real “separation” remains unlikely.

P.S.

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