

# The unassuming Australian nun taking on Rodrigo Duterte

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On Monday, Sister Patricia Fox is likely not to be at home.

Normally, she spends the morning sitting in the walled front yard of the modest home in Quezon City, north-east of Manila, that she shares with six of her fellow nuns.

Mornings, she says, are “lazy” time. She drinks tea, takes calls from friends and colleagues and prepares for an afternoon of voluntary work.

But on Monday, if her legal appeals fail, officers of the Philippines Government are expected to arrive, take her away and forcibly deport her – or worse. Jails in the [Philippines](#) are tough places.

The stick-thin 71-year-old nun doesn’t plan to let it happen. “I will go to ground,” she says. “I won’t tell you more, but I won’t be sitting around talking to journalists. They should not deport me when I have an appeal underway. And it won’t happen if I can help it.”

Sister Fox has been living and working in the Philippines for more than 28 years without receiving a word of publicity. Now, she has sprung to international attention as the Australian nun who has riled a president.

In person, it is hard to imagine anyone less threatening. She needs her glasses to read, admits to scattiness and a forgetfulness when it comes to names. She used to be a school teacher, but claims she was “hopeless” – too soft and no discipline.

She says she isn’t scared, though she has lost weight due to stress. Under it all, though, she is determined – and brave. In a turn of events that she admits to finding completely bemusing, her personal story has overshadowed the facts she was trying to bring to international attention when she managed to annoy the president.

For the first time in this interview, Fox revealed that hers is not the only case of deportation. Five other foreign nationals who worked with her have been targeted.

One is in detention, two others have had their passports withdrawn, and two have left the country, one deported and one voluntarily. In all these cases, it has been judged for various reasons that publicity will not help. Fox will not reveal their identities.

## From Melbourne to Quezon City

Fox grew up in suburban Melbourne, the middle of three children in a committed Catholic family. She left school early, finished a teaching degree in night school and became a nun in 1969 at the age

of 21, at a time when religious orders were changing rapidly in the wake of Vatican II.

She worked in the inner Melbourne suburb of Kensington, helping the tenants of public housing towers. Bailing kids out and being a regular character witness before the court inspired her become a lawyer, graduating in 1984 and going on to work in community legal centres.

Fox didn't engage intensely with the aftermath of the Vatican II council, but she and her order were profoundly influenced by liberation theology – the synthesis of Christian theology and Marxism then being developed in the 1960s in Latin America.

In the late 1980s, her order made a profound policy decision to, as she puts it, “see the world through the eyes of the poor”. After research and exploratory visits, they focused on the Philippines, then in the aftermath of the overthrow of President Ferdinand Marcos and the end of martial law.

Fox arrived there to live in 1990, working first in the provinces and rising to be the national co-ordinator of rural missionaries in 2001.

From the beginning, she found common ground with farmers and agricultural workers, and in recent years she has volunteered for organisations including UMA Pilipanas, a peak body of agricultural unions and worker groups.

### **Provoking a president**

Between April 6-9 this year Fox was one of about 30 representatives of human rights groups to travel to the southern island of Mindanao on a fact-finding mission, investigating reports of human rights abuses. Their findings were released this week but have gone almost entirely unreported, both by the Filipino and international media.

Duterte has imposed martial law in Mindanao, citing terrorism both from Islamic State sympathisers and from the New People's Army, the armed wing of the Communist Party.

But the fact-finding mission heard that this was cloaking other motivations. Fox and her colleagues heard stories of indigenous people and subsistence farmers being summarily executed or forced off their land to make way for mining and extensions to palm oil and banana plantations.

In a statement the group said that the Duterte regime, supported by the USA, had “unleashed a dirty war against farmers and communities...Fear and terror engulf the vast population of farmers, national minorities and the civilian population.”

The group gathered testimony of tribal people being forced to join the military, under threat of being declared members of the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist party, and executed. They documented a total of 428 cases of forced or fake surrenders and over 100 cases of farmers being killed, often in front of witnesses, by masked gunmen.

In the communities of Lupiagan and Licoan, the group was told of residents recently being summoned by the military and promised gifts of rice and money. When they arrived, they were instead photographed mugshot style, holding blank placards. Later, they were shocked to hear on the radio that their names were on a list of NPA members who had surrendered.

At every stage, the group was aware of being under surveillance. There were two incidents that Fox believes were the immediate cause of Duterte's action against her. On one day she and other members of the group visited a jail to interview political prisoners, and on another she attended a demonstration of locked-out workers at the Coca Cola factory in the southern city of Davao.

The Coca Cola workers had been employed on contracts for years, with long hours, poor pay and no job security. They formed a union only to find themselves summarily sacked. A picket line was violently broken up by police.

On the day the fact-finding mission visited, the workers had called a press conference outside the walls of the factory. The military turned up, but the press didn't. Nevertheless the workers organised speeches and Fox was invited to say a few words.

Aware of the bristling military presence, she reflected that Duterte himself had stated he wanted to end the practice of long-term casual work. She agreed to speak. "I thought I'd just quote the social teachings of the Catholic Church. You know, the right to unionise, the right to a fair wage, the right to security of tenure. And I said that I felt sorry for them, and that I hoped they got their jobs back so they could care for their families. You know, pretty tame sort of stuff."

### **"He's clearly angry"**

Shortly after she returned to Manila, Fox heard that other members of the fact-finding delegation were in trouble with the authorities.

She was nevertheless taken by surprise when, at two o'clock in the afternoon on 16 April, six black-uniformed officers from the immigration authorities hammered on her door and demanded she go with them immediately, to "clarify" some things.

When she arrived at the bureau of immigration she was told she was being deported as an undesirable alien because she had been joining illegal rallies.

Fox believes that she, like some of her colleagues who had been targeted, was expected to leave the country quietly. But in her 28 years of work in the Philippines Fox had gained many supporters.

She had texted friends while in the car being driven to the bureau, and within hours of her arrest church representatives and community groups had mobilised. A crowd had gathered outside the bureau, and international groups were making statements and inquiring about her welfare.

She sensed the tension in the room as the officials struggled with the growing outcry, while trying to comply with what is now known to have been a direct instruction from the President.

By evening, a pro bono lawyer arrived to represent her. Demanding to see the evidence, Fox and her lawyer were shown two photos - one of the visit to the political prisoners and one of the gathering outside the Coca Cola factory. Neither, Fox's lawyer pointed out, were rallies.

The story shifted. Fox did not have her passport on her. It was being kept by the travel agent who handles the sisters' business. Now, she was told that she was being deported because she was an undocumented alien.

She spent that night sleeping on the floor of the office. Her lawyer presented her passport to the bureau at about 10am the next day, and after more hours of waiting Fox was released, on the understanding that the department would take five days to present further evidence against her, and that her lawyers would have ten days to contest it.

As she walked out of the bureau, Fox was surrounded by cheering supporters, but the euphoria didn't last. The next day was chilling. Duterte declared in a public address that he had personally ordered her to be investigated for "illegal political activities" and went on to publicly denounce her, saying she had treated "the Philippines like a mattress to wipe your feet on".

“He’s clearly angry, and that’s frightening,” says Fox.

On April 23, with the deportation case still before the courts, the government revoked her missionary visa and gave her 30 days to leave the country. Fox’s legal team found out when the bureau issued a media release. An appeal to the Department of Justice bought Fox an extension of the deadline, until this coming Monday.

The government was claiming that missionaries were meant only to preach and convert, and were not meant to travel outside their local area. After 28 years in the country, this was news to Fox.

It is this – the attempt to prevent foreign religious people from engaging in advocacy – that has galvanised the international religious community. The case is now being fought because of the importance of the precedent. Hence Fox’s determination to avoid being deported before proper legal process.

### **“The international community has to open its eyes”**

She has been asked by some of her friends whether she would agree to meet Duterte, given a chance. “I said I would hold a meeting with him if I could take with me the people that I spoke to on the fact-finding mission. The farmers, the tribal people, the workers, the fisherfolk. They are the people that I would like him to listen to. Because they’re the ones whose lives are at stake.”

Meanwhile, she says: “The international community has to start looking at what’s happening here and not closing their eyes to it because business interests.”

She was pleased to see that the Australian foreign minister, Julie Bishop, spoke up recently for human rights in the Philippines. On the other hand, the United States, China and Australia have helped the Philippines anti-terrorism effort through intelligence-sharing and financial aid. The mining companies that are causing farmers to be pushed off their land are internationally owned, including Australian interests.

One way or another, Fox is likely to be back in Australia before Christmas. Her visa, before it was cancelled, was due for renewal in September. Even if she wins it back, it is hardly likely to be renewed.

And what will she do once back in Australia? She has no idea. She would, she says, be much more outspoken about what she has seen than she can be while living in Manila.

Otherwise, “I’d find some cause to get involved in, like refugees.”

Manila, these days, is a frightening city for those who fall out of favour with the authorities. People are shot in the night as part of the so-called war on drugs.

Is Fox frightened something might happen to her?

She knows her family and fellow nuns are worried. “I think, though, that I am now too high profile for anything bad to happen. Me! I am the least interesting person I know. But there you go. Isn’t it strange?”

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**Margaret Simons**

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