

# **Philippines: A partial and fragile victory - Duterte's arrest and our unfinished struggle for justice**

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**Partido Sosyalista welcomes the arrest of former President Rodrigo Duterte by the International Criminal Court (ICC). We join all those celebrating this small but momentous step towards ending impunity, and we pay tribute to the survivors, witnesses, journalists, lawyers, and supporters who never gave up in the perilous pursuit of justice.**

But even as we celebrate this victory, we also join those who are saddened by its insufficiency and who are disheartened by its fragility.

We lament the incapacity of domestic courts to deliver justice to Duterte's victims—sad proof that the institutions meant to protect the weak remain helpless before the mighty. Recognizing that the Marcoses (and others calling for Duterte's head) were themselves ardent enablers of Duterte's crimes and deserve to be held to account as well, we question the government's commitment to ending impunity. Even now we are disturbed by how it has been framing its actions, insisting that it is cooperating with the Interpol rather than the ICC and coldly discussing so-called reciprocal obligations to other states while again relegating the victims to the margins. We also decry the limits of this emerging international legal system—how it can detain the likes of Duterte while being unable to go after the likes of Biden and Netanyahu. And, despite being elated by Duterte's arrest, we are concerned that the conditions which made mass murder possible remain in place today.

For us in Partido Sosyalista, the “war on drugs” was not simply the work of one mad, blood-thirsty maniac. Duterte could not have gotten away with killing at least 30,000 people if he had not been able to organize the fierce devotion of millions of ordinary Filipinos. How Duterte was able to do this is a difficult question until today, and we do not claim to have all the answers. But we start from the view that Duterte's success had systemic roots, having to do with the kind of society the Philippines had become by the 2000s: a deeply unequal and oligarchic capitalist society mired in crisis, torn apart by cross-cutting conflicts and boiling over with anger from the margins.

We believe that, ultimately, so many rallied behind Duterte in this context because they saw him as their savior—and they saw him as their savior because they felt they needed saving.

To be saved from an arrogant ‘imperial Manila’ so oblivious to their suffering and yet so interested in their resources. To be liberated from oligarchs so dependent on their hard work and yet so blind to their basic needs. To be protected from the “dilawans” who refuse to even see them—or worse, who were actually helping those tormenting them. Duterte rode to power on the unheard cries of so many people desperate to be rescued. The tragedy, of course, is that Duterte could not save them; he only reframed and channeled all their rage towards scapegoats who had little to do with reproducing the social arrangements at the root of their suffering.

But this is still only part of the story: Duterte succeeded in large part because those who could have provided an alternative to Dutertismo had become so far removed from people's lives. The Left was too decimated, divided, or distant— subordinating everything to a war from which so many felt alienated or forging a close alliance with some of the very dynasties oppressing them.

For us to prevent crimes against humanity, achieve justice, and celebrate an enduring victory, then, holding Duterte accountable can only be the first of many steps. Long-needed reforms that address the legitimate grievances of Duterte's supporters— including ending the marginalization of the peoples of Mindanao and the Bangsamoro, banning contractualization, and so on—are imperative; freeing our judicial system from the grip of the powerful is an urgent task. But as these steps will always be blocked or rolled back under capitalism, what is ultimately needed is the establishment of a different kind of a society—one rid of all forms of exploitation and therefore one in which no one becomes desperate for salvation. So as we remember the victims of the "war on drugs" and draw inspiration from those who struggle to give them justice, we also reaffirm our commitment to help build such a world—one in which salvation can become a collective and cooperative endeavor.#

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- Partido Sosyalista. Mar 15, 2025:  
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