

The Philippine Left in a Changing Land

On October 21 nine members of the Philippine National Federation of Sugar Workers were shot dead while participating in a protest. The killers are assumed to be employed by local capitalists. Killings of union, peasant, and other activists have increased sharply under President Duterte. Dozens of activists have already been killed. Under Duterte's authoritarian rule, the Philippine left is faced with new difficulties.

Three weeks before the killings of the trade unionists, the *Philippine Daily Enquirer* published the headline "Duterte fires last leftist in government." The leftist in question is Joel Maglunsod, undersecretary of the Department of Labor and Employment, formerly a leader of the Kilusan Mayo Uno trade-union movement.¹ Meanwhile, attacks by the armed wing of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines, the New People's Army (NPA), increased after a ceasefire broke down in early 2017. Lasting roughly half a year, it was the longest ceasefire ever between the NPA and a Philippine government. But even when it still had allies in the government, the CPP had begun to denounce the Duterte regime as fascist and a pawn of the United States.

How to explain such contradictions? Much international news about Duterte is concerned with the "war on drugs" he unleashed. Since Duterte assumed office in July 2016, conservative estimates indicate that the police or state-sponsored death squads have killed more than 12,000, almost exclusively from the most impoverished sections of Philippine society. The real number of casualties is likely much higher.

During his presidential campaign, Duterte made clear that he was planning to organize large-scale violence. But there was

another side to Duterte's election. He combined macho posturing as a crime buster with demagogy about taking care of the weak and the poor. His campaign slogan "compassion and strength" was typical of his approach. Duterte went so far as to describe himself as a socialist.

Allying with Duterte

This approach convinced significant parts of the left that it could cooperate with Duterte for progressive reforms. Others, who were skeptical about Duterte's claims to be a "leftist," thought it better to keep their fears and criticism to themselves. It had become clear that Duterte had massive support, including among the poor, and parts of the left feared they would alienate themselves from this audience if they strongly criticized the candidate.

The convergence between parts of the left and Duterte peaked in late 2016. Angered by the outgoing Obama administration's tepid criticism of human rights violations, Duterte denounced U.S. neocolonial interference and reminded his audience of atrocities committed by U.S. troops during their occupation of the Philippines in the early twentieth century. Around the same time, he announced his geopolitical turn away from the United States and toward Russia and China. Supposedly leftist writers cheered Duterte's "nationalism" and "independent orientation," while trying to downplay the growing number of murders. One academic declared Duterte had "exploded the century-long stranglehold of global finance capitalism" over the Philippines.

The part of the Philippine left that went furthest in this convergence was the National-Democrats, or NDs. The political and ideological center of this current is the CPP. The party leads a broad range of underground "sectoral organizations" that organize specific groups (youth, artists, church-people, women, and others). Some of these organizations are little more than empty shells, others are more substantial. Above

ground, there is an equally wide alliance of groups that are identified with the political line of the party.

According to this line, Philippine society is not capitalist but “semi-feudal.” Therefore, the CPP aims for a two-stage revolution. The first stage will be the National-Democratic revolution, “anti-feudal” as well as “anti-imperialist,” to break the grip of foreign domination that supposedly has locked the country in this stage. A second phase will be socialist, by which the CPP means it will install one-party rule and a command economy. Aboveground supporters of this line often combine great militancy with surprisingly modest demands—the goal in this phase of the struggle being to confront not capitalism, but “semi-feudalism.”

After his election in May 2016, Duterte offered cabinet posts to the CPP. The party politely declined, saying that as a revolutionary organization, it could not be part of the “reactionary state.” Instead, four leaders of the aboveground ND movement received cabinet-level posts, while others (like Maglunsod) were given lower-ranking posts. “The alliance between the National-Democratic movement and the incoming Duterte regime continues to be forged,” the CPP journal *Ang Bayan* rejoiced in June 2017; by offering cabinet posts to the CPP, Duterte had “strengthened his alliance with the National-Democratic movement.”²

Duterte’s history as a mayor of Davao City, and his role in organizing a death-squad there during the 1990s and early 2000s, was not reason enough to refuse such an alliance. Back then, the NDs already had cordial relations with Duterte, who helped them gain political legitimacy. He coordinated with the NPA for the release of captured prisoners, spoke at rallies called by ND mass organizations, and hosted ND candidates on his slate for the city council elections. From their side, the NDs toned down their criticism. Most of the research on the human rights violations committed in Davao during this period

comes from human rights groups outside the ND orbit.

After the presidential elections, it did not take long for the alliance to show cracks as it became clear Duterte was not willing to make real concessions to the NDs. They were serving in a government whose social-economic policies were in continuity with the previous market-liberal administration, while defending Duterte. One ND cabinet member, Social Welfare Secretary Judy Taguiwalo, in May 2017 claimed it was a “no-brainer” that Duterte was opposed to extra-judicial killings.³

An exception seemed to be the peace negotiations between the government and the CPP. The government panel went along with CPP negotiators in drafting an agreement that suggested far-reaching changes, such as land reform, the abrogation of international trade agreements, extensive social services, a break with the United States, state control over strategic sectors of the economy, and the expropriation of certain categories of capital. However, the Duterte regime never planned on implementing anything like it, and negotiations collapsed in early 2017. The last cabinet-level official from the ND ranks, Liza Maza, finally left the administration in August 2018.

The alliance between the NDs and Duterte as president was unique in how far it went, but it was not the first time the ND current entered into agreements with bourgeois power holders. Since the turn of the century, the NDs have participated with considerable success in elections. In his study of the movement, Dominique Caouette describes how the project started in 2001 when ND organizations put up a political party, Bayan Muna (Nation First).⁴ By what Caouette describes as a series of “tractations,” or clandestine dealings, and through support for Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo during the revolt in which she replaced Joseph Estrada as president, the NDs were able to “secure support from the Macapagal-Arroyo clan.” Subsequently, Bayan

Muna won three seats in Congress.

The NDs have expanded their electoral machinery and continue to make deals with bourgeois politicians to win seats in the notoriously corrupt Philippine elections. Embarrassingly, the NDs found themselves in the same alliance as Ferdinand Marcos—the son of the dictator of the same name, who would like to follow in his father’s footsteps—when in 2010 they supported businessman Manny Villar for president. When the campaign for president started in 2016, the NDs initially supported Grace Poe—a relatively inexperienced senator with an unremarkable track record. She owes her career mostly to her name: She is the adopted daughter of Fernando Poe Jr., a star of Philippine action movies.

During the 2016 campaign, though, it became clear that in the region of Mindanao where Duterte built his base, the NDs were campaigning for him instead. Jose Maria Sison, the ideologue of the movement (although in name only an advisor to its diplomatic wing) made this orientation clear by declaring that either a Poe or a Duterte win would be good for “national unity” and either could supposedly open the way to progressive reforms. Sison had (by Skype) a sympathetic interview with Duterte and made sure to praise the candidate’s supposed progressive credentials.

The Persistence of the CPP

Reading CPP statements today, it is as if this CPP-Duterte alliance never happened. The CPP calls for the overthrow of Duterte, and Sison describes the government as “weak” and “isolated,” suggesting it might be ousted in some months.

It is difficult to say how large the ND movement is today. As usual, the movement’s spokespeople and press claim that it is going from strength to strength. One way to gauge support for the movement is by looking at election results of the candidates most closely allied with it. In 2016, the ND

candidate for Senate received almost 6.5 million votes (15 percent; the total population is over 100 million). But the picture is unclear; since such candidates run on platforms that are limited to “progressive reforms,” support for them does not necessarily entail support for even the first phase of the CPP’s projected revolution. In addition, in these elections, voters pick 12 candidates, with one vote per candidate.

But it is clear that the NDs remain by far the strongest current on the Philippine left. The movement has grown deep roots in Philippine society, and through its network of “sectoral” movements and the NPA, it has in a way become self-sustaining.

That in the last two decades the most remarkable successes of the NDs have been in elections and in sustaining their capacity for open protest is ironic, as the CPP considers armed struggle the primary means of achieving a revolution. In theory, all other forms of struggle and all other organizations, legal and illegal, are subordinated to it and ultimately should serve to strengthen guerrilla warfare. Part of the money raised by aboveground organizations, who often have a rather bland public image, is indeed funneled to the underground.



The reasons for the persistence of the NPA are structural. Large parts of the rural countryside are seemingly stagnant, with people still facing the same problems they have faced for generations. Fewer than 10,000 individuals own over a

fifth of the country's total agricultural lands, while almost two million farmers own less than three hectares each and divide among themselves 18.5 percent of the country's total agricultural lands. Still, a bit over half of the population live in the countryside, which is also home to over 70 percent of those officially considered poor. Since the seventies, not only NPA fighters but also commanders are increasingly the children of poor, landless peasants. But its "political officers" are still often drawn from the student movement, and the CPP remains under the leadership of the first generation, who often joined the movement as students.

A researcher at the National War College in Washington recently recognized that factors driving people to join the NPA are the same as they have been since its founding in the late sixties: "Many of the historical drivers of NPA recruitment remain in place today—widespread poverty and income disparity, land exploitation, labor exploitation, human rights abuses, political marginalization, and discrimination in the rural hinterland." The government's recent claims to be on the cusp of defeating the NPA lack credibility.

The NPA is strongest in remote rural areas where there is little presence of state institutions. In such areas, the NPA can play a role in protecting the local population against bandits and in intervening in local conflicts. The NPA is also a source of financial means; it imposes "revolutionary taxes" on companies that operate in areas where it is active.

The NPA also has an important symbolic role. CPP imagery and texts often depict the strength and heroism of the guerrillas, ever surging forward. Those killed in combat are celebrated as martyrs and become subjects of books and articles. Such texts emphasize the conviction and sacrifice of those who chose the hard and dangerous life in the NPA. Such dedication is made into an argument for the movement's political line; disagreement would mean disrespecting the martyrs. The myth of the people's war, certain of final victory, still has power.

But 49 years after its founding, the NPA is far from its goal of “encircling the cities.” According to recent statements, the NPA has between six and ten thousand regulars and about half of its strength is based on the southern island of Mindanao. In late 2016, the CPP organized a congress (the second since its founding in 1968) at which, it claims, representatives of “close to seventy thousand members” were present. The movement has been known to exaggerate its strength; for example, in the early 2000s it claimed that the NPA numbered in the tens of thousands.⁵

The Left Against Duterte

Now mobilizing against Duterte, the NDs launched the Movement Against Tyranny, convened by a coalition of leaders of mass movements, priests, and political personalities. The ND mass organizations are the coalition’s backbone and make it the opposition coalition with the largest mobilizing potential. Reflecting the usual ND strategy to build multi-class coalitions, its call is directed specifically against the Duterte regime’s authoritarian attacks on the institutions and rules of liberal democracy.

The Movement Against Tyranny is not the only opposition. Another opposition coalition is Tindig Pilipinas, or “Rise Up Philippines.” Philippine activist Joshua Makalintal describes it as “a broad coalition that includes minority blocs from Congress; figures from the previous Liberal Party establishment; the social democratic party Akbayan, which coalesced with the liberals in the previous administration of Benigno Aquino; and the nationalist, anti-communist Magdalo group, composed of former junior officers of the armed forces led by Antonio Trillanes, Duterte’s most vocal critic in the Senate.”⁶

Finally, there is Laban ng Masa, or “Struggle of the Masses.” A coalition of socialist and progressive groups and parties

that opposed Duterte from the beginning, it is the only coalition to explicitly present itself as left-wing and to analyze the rise of the Duterte regime as a symptom of a structural crisis of Philippine society. Since the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, the Philippines has been superficially a liberal democracy. In practice, however, cliques of capitalists (often families) have captured the state, combining economic and political power. Laban ng Masa targets this “elite democracy” and proposes “a system marked by real participatory democracy and real economic equality.”

Laban ng Masa is led by scholar-activist Walden Bello. Bello became a member of Congress for Akbayan in 2010, when it was allied with President Benigno Aquino and the Liberal Party. Although remaining a party member, Bello resigned his seat in 2015 in protest against Aquino’s attempts to wash his hands of a bloody, botched police operation and corruption in the government. In 2016, Bello ran for Senate in a campaign that remained independent from bourgeois alliances and politicians and won a little over one million votes, coming in 36th in a contest where the top 12 won seats. However, Laban ng Masa lacks the resources of Tindig Pilipinas or the infrastructure of the Movement Against Tyranny.

Laban ng Masa brings together much of the more radical, non-ND Philippine left. The leaders of the NDs often label this part of the left as irrelevant, call it “counter-revolutionary,” or worse.⁷ During the 1990s and early 2000s, dozens of former ND activists as well as organizers from other progressive movements were killed by the NPA, and threats persist. The NDs used such violence to maintain their dominance.⁸ Although none of the non-ND groups have the strength of the NDs, they have become part of political reality and play significant roles in parts of the country.

The collapse of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, and of the Soviet Union a few years later, triggered a cycle of internal

debates, purges, and splits in the CPP-led movement in the 1990s. Those who stuck with the CPP and the ND movement were labelled “reaffirmists” or RAs, after the document in which Sison laid down the line for the movement: *Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors*. Those who disagreed were consequently called RJs, short for rejectionists.

Undoubtedly one of the most important reasons why the CPP has proven so persistent is that millions of Filipinos are caught in poverty in a stagnating countryside. The CPP’s attacks on “feudal landlords” ring true to them, as does its insistence on the agricultural character of Philippine society. But continuing uneven and combined development has produced sharply diverging realities in Philippine society. Parts of the countryside remain underdeveloped, but the share of total employment that is agricultural has shrunk to around a third. Stagnating agricultural productivity has meant that agriculture’s share of gross domestic product has declined from 22 percent in 1990 to 11 percent in 2014. Over the past five decades the urban population grew by more than 50 million people, and cities now represent more than 70 percent of the country’s GDP. The power of the traditional landlords as *landlords* has been declining, although some have managed to expand their operations into other, growing sectors such as services and mining.

Duterte’s election was a symptom of such changes. Since the fall of the Marcos regime, the Philippines has been ruled by a dominant bloc that included the local capitalist class (among them landlords), the Catholic Church, and representatives of U.S. influence such as U.S.-trained military commanders and neoliberal technocrats.

Duterte does not come from the traditional, landed capitalist class, but instead built a coalition of local capitalists and ranted against “landlords” and oligarchic sugar planters (a reference to his rivals, the Aquino dynasty). Duterte is also defying another component of the old dominant bloc: the

Catholic Church. Some years earlier, the struggle over the Reproductive Health Act made visible a relative decline of the church's political strength. This law was intended to provide access to contraception, sex education, and family planning and was introduced after years of debate in 2012. Despite desperate attempts of Catholic clergy and media outlets, a majority of the population continued to support the Reproductive Health bill.⁹ Priests have criticized human rights violations committed under Duterte, and he has gone on the offensive against his religious critics by ridiculing Catholic sanctimoniousness and hypocrisy.

While confronting some parts of the previous dominant bloc, Duterte has attempted to integrate others. The United States continues to play an important role in the Philippines. Important representatives of its influence are American-trained army officers and technocrats. Duterte included both groups in his government, and military ties between the United States and the Philippines continue. Initially, Duterte's anti-U.S. rhetoric and seeming rapprochement with the Maoists led to doubts about support for him in the strongly pro-U.S. army. Duterte has, however, been busy trying to win the favor of soldiers, increasing their pay, visiting army camps, and appointing (retired) generals to high positions in his administration. Duterte has now given the army a free hand in its fight against the guerrillas. As he did earlier regarding the police in the "war on drugs," Duterte promised to protect soldiers who violate human rights.

Duterte's rhetoric about a "divorce" from the United States was proven to be overblown, but in terms of international politics he did move closer to Russia and especially China. This must be a source of dissatisfaction in Washington, especially since the United States has been pushing against China's attempts to extend its power in the region.

Duterte's reluctance to challenge Chinese territorial claims

in the South China Sea is a complicated issue for the Philippine left. Opposition to U.S. imperialism is a key element of the whole Philippine left, and the policy of the previous government to rely on the United States against China was denounced as part of the neocolonial agenda to control the Philippines. But the days when the CPP referred to China as “an iron bastion of socialism” are long gone—it now considers that since the fall of the Gang of Four, China has restored capitalism.¹⁰ Chinese ambitions in the region have removed most of the left’s remaining illusions about Chinese “socialism.” At most, there is nostalgia for what was once a model for much of the Philippine left and the idea that the United States-China confrontation can somehow provide maneuvering space for progressive forces.

Different Paths

Diverging social developments mean that in different parts of the country, the left is faced with very different realities and is rooted among different social layers. Not surprisingly, this has produced different political trends. Although the influence of the ND tradition, in which many of the left’s older activists got their political training, is still visible, RJs have developed their own, diverging political lines. The Partido Manggawa (PM) or Labor Party, and the Partido Lakas ng Masa (Party of Strength of the Masses, although the party also uses Party of the Laboring Masses in English), for example, are two groups whose history can be traced back to the ND movement in the Manila region; these remain strongest among urban workers. PM’s orientation has been described as emphasizing “the gradual rebuilding of the strength of the labor movement in the short run, [enabling the party] to play a crucial role in the PALEA dispute,” referring to a trade-union struggle of the Philippine Airlines workers that drew international attention.¹¹

Other groups remain more orientated toward work in the

countryside and among poor peasants. The Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines, for example, split from the CPP in the late 1990s. It considers itself heir to the ND tradition and sticks to the Maoist strategy of "Protracted People's War," the gradual building of a rural, peasant-based guerrilla force. In the south of the country, also mainly in rural areas, the Revolutionary Workers Party-Mindanao is active. Its name comes from a failed attempt in the late 1990s to unite RJ groups in a Revolutionary Workers Party-Philippines. The Mindanao group rejected the surrender by this party to the government and separated. The RPM-M is a member of the Fourth International and is primarily rooted among rural proletarians and peasants. An important focus for the party is the indigenous people of Mindanao, called the Lumad. This poses specific questions, for example the protection of remaining traditions of communal ownership and the working of traditional systems of justice. It also means the party has to navigate conflicting claims over land by Lumads and the movements of the island's Muslim population, the Moros.

The political differences are real but don't necessarily preclude the formation of united fronts. Sadly, personal conflicts and rivalries, sometimes stemming from the acrimonious splits that produced the different groups, hinder the forming of alliances and weaken the non-ND left.

But against the violence unleashed by Duterte and the increasingly authoritarian state, the greatest left-wing unity is needed. Recent signs that such unity is possible are points of hope. During the latest protest on the occasion of the yearly State of the Nation Address, different groups, including aboveground allies of the NDs and non-NDs, mobilized together and shared the stage. And on May 1, labor organizations allied with the NDs rallied together with groups from other political backgrounds. Even the ND movement is not as homogeneous as its leaders would like it to be. Especially younger activists are growing weary of the divisions on the

left. They are aware that Duterte's rise, a symptom of the bankruptcy of "elite democracy," was partly caused by the left's inadequacy as an alternative. As Philippine socialist Herbert Docena has written, only through "building a broad, united, and democratic mass movement" that is capable "not only of ousting Duterte but also of resisting other elites desperate to return to power" can an alternative become possible.¹² Philippine socialists deserve international solidarity in building this alternative.

Notes

1. [Inquirer](#), Oct. 3, 2018. At the end of October, however, Maglunsod was still attending government meetings.
2. *Ang Bayan*, June 7, 2016, 1.
3. Rappler.com, "[CA grills Taguiwalo over links to left.](#)" This was during a meeting to consider confirming Taguiwalo in her cabinet position.
4. Dominique Caouette, *Persevering revolutionaries. Armed struggle in the 21st century. Exploring the revolution of the Communist Party of the Philippines*, vol. II (unpublished PhD thesis, 2004), 397.
5. CPP chair Armando Liwanag's (Jose Maria Sison) message on the occasion of the 34th Anniversary of the CPP, December 26, 2002, claimed the NPA had "a sum total of at least three divisions or nine brigades or 27 battalions of full-time Red fighters with high-powered rifles."
6. Joshua Makalintal, "The challenges of building a united resistance in Duterte's Philippines," [Waging Nonviolence](#), Mar. 14, 2018.
7. A particularly grievous example was the December 2004 issue of *Ang Bayan*, which included an overview of "counter-revolutionary Trotskyites and Social-Democrats" that included much of the non-ND left at the time.

Extensive documentation of the killings, and the CPP's attempts to justify them, can be found [here](#).

8. Alex de Jong, "Muddying the Revolution," [Jacobin](#), Sept. 2, 2018.
9. In the end, the Catholic hierarchy had to use the recourse of the high court to gut the bill under the cover of "religious freedom."
10. This view was part of Sison's "rectification" in the CPP. During the late 1970s and the 1980s, when Sison was in prison, the CPP continued to regard China as socialist and followed its line in international issues such as in expressing support for the Khmer Rouge and denouncing Cuban intervention in Africa as "social-imperialism."
11. Ben Reid, "Duterte and the prospects for struggle in the Philippines," [Marxist Left Review](#) (No. 16, Winter 2018).
12. Herbert Docena, "Why Duterte has to be ousted, and why even that won't be enough to defend ourselves," [Rappler.com](#), Aug. 26, 2017.