

# The rise of Duterte in the Philippines: A warning to the international working class

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On May 10, Rodrigo Duterte was elected president of the Philippines, receiving 39 percent of the vote and besting his nearest competitor by more than 6 million votes. He was elected with a base of support particularly in the middle class and upper-middle class, which he mobilized behind a right-wing populist campaign.

Duterte is a fascistic political figure, the long-time head of death squads in Davao City in the southern Philippines. At the center of his presidential campaign was the repeated promise that he would have the police and military kill alleged criminals. He also threatened to kill workers if they attempted to form a union in Export Processing Zones.

Duterte's election is the product of mounting class tensions bound up with the drive to world war, spearheaded by US imperialism, and is a sharp expression of the move by capitalist ruling elites internationally toward dictatorial forms of rule. It parallels the rise of the far-right worldwide, from the National Front in France, to the AfD in Germany and the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump in the United States.

The ruling class in the Philippines is responding to growing social inequality and class tensions by preparing to employ ever more violent and dictatorial forms of rule. Twenty-five percent of the population of the Philippines lives below the poverty line, earning less than \$225 per year. While the official unemployment rate is 6 percent, only 58 percent of those listed as employed have "paid jobs." The rest have some form of self-employment. This category encompasses everything from collecting scrap for resale to carrying bags in the marketplace.

The fuse on this social powder-keg has been shortened by the imperialist drive to war. In the face of the insoluble crisis of global capitalism, the imperialist

powers, above all the United States, are moving to militarily shore up their declining economic position. The drive of US imperialism to subordinate Russia and China to its economic interests has brought the world to the brink of global war.

Manila, under the outgoing Aquino administration, has played a central role in Washington's war drive against China. The threat of war is palpable in the country. Newspapers routinely carry headlines that the Chinese are invading the Philippines. Under the recently signed Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, the US military will once again maintain bases on Philippine soil. The US bases at Subic Bay and Clark were the source of immense social anger until their leases expired in 1991. Prostitution flourished around the bases and American soldiers were given extraterritorial immunity when they committed crimes.

The top story in *Business World*, the country's leading business daily, the day after the election, was headlined "Business coming to terms with Duterte." The article quoted an economic adviser to small entrepreneurs who stated that "the sentiment among businessmen [was] that given currently solid macroeconomic footing, priority should be law and order." The president of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce likewise stated that Duterte's election was a "clarion call for leadership that will give more attention to order and stability."

"Order and stability"—the code words for violence and repression. Duterte's spokesperson at his initial press conference after the election announced that Duterte would begin his presidency by implementing a curfew at 10 p.m. for all minors. He stated that as the military and police began carrying out his orders, Duterte would not allow the legislature to interrogate or "humiliate" them.

In a speech before the Makati Business Club during his campaign, Duterte announced that he would launch a campaign to “kill criminals” in the first six months of his presidency. The streets of Manila, he said, would be “bloody, very bloody.” The day after Duterte’s election, the head of the Philippine National Police held a press conference announcing that the police were ramping up their preparations to meet the six month goal of the incoming president.

A central factor in Duterte’s political rise is the support given him by the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Throughout his decades as mayor of Davao, where he openly headed death squads that terrorized the working population, the CPP and its front organizations gave him enthusiastic support.

Founded on the program of Stalinism—which sought to secure the geopolitical interests of the bureaucracies in Moscow or Beijing through support for a section of the local bourgeoisie—the CPP has from its inception been hostile to the independence of the working class.

In the wake of the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism in China, and particularly since the outbreak of the global capitalist crisis in 2008 and the mounting threat of world war, the CPP has shifted sharply to the right, on the basis of extreme nationalism and support for American imperialism.

The CPP and its front organizations have used national chauvinism to whip up support for Washington’s war drive against China, leading rallies calling for anti-Chinese pogroms in the Philippines.

Jose Ma. Sison, the head of the CPP, has openly supported Duterte, hailing his fascistic rhetoric. In an article published on May 10, Sison praised Duterte for his commitment to “wipe out criminality.” He wrote, “The revolutionary movement of the people led by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) supports the determination of Duterte to fight corruption and criminality.” Sison and the CPP are looking to negotiate positions within the Duterte administration. A year ago, Duterte promised to form a coalition government with the CPP and the military.

Washington has no objection to the dictatorial aspirations of Duterte. It is, however, concerned that Duterte may be unstable and unreliable in the dispute in the South China Sea. At times he fiercely denounces China and at others he calls for bilateral negotiations to end the dispute.

Greg Poling of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies told the *Washington Times* on May 10 that Duterte will “likely adhere to the national security policies” of the outgoing Aquino administration. That is to say, Washington expects Duterte to continue Manila’s full support for its anti-Chinese drive mounted under the rubric of the “pivot to Asia.”

Poling, however, concluded his statement with a threat. If Duterte did not continue these policies, “he will learn the hard way that governing in Davao is not the same as in Malacañang [the presidential palace.]”

The CPP supports Washington in this. In its statement hailing his election, it “challenged Duterte to assert the national sovereignty of the Filipino people and defend the territorial integrity of the Philippines,” i.e., to aggressively confront China in the South China Sea.

The election of Duterte demonstrates the connection between the growth of militarism and war and the turn by the capitalist class to authoritarian forms of rule and mass repression against the working class. What makes possible the rise of fascistic forces such as Duterte is the absence of revolutionary leadership in the working class based on socialist internationalism. Such a leadership must be built in the Philippines and throughout East Asia as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution.

Joseph Santolan

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