

Philippine president declares “state of lawlessness” after bomb blast

By Joseph Santolan
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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte seized upon the pretext provided by a bomb blast in a marketplace in the southern city of Davao Friday night to announce a nationwide “state of lawlessness.” The declaration is a significant step toward the formal declaration of martial law.

The bomb, which was set off in Roxas Night Market in Davao, killed 15 people and injured at least 71. Duterte, who was in Davao at the time, appeared at the bombing site at four in the morning and announced to the press that he had placed Davao city under military lock-down and that he was declaring a nationwide “state of lawlessness.”

While stating that this was “not martial law,” Duterte told the press that the military would be “running the country.” He stated, “I am inviting now the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the military and the police to run the country in accordance with my specifications.” Military checkpoints would be set up throughout country, and the military and police would be authorized to conduct searches without warrants of vehicles and persons. Curfews might also be imposed throughout the country.

Duterte then told the media that he had been forewarned that the bombing would take place. He stated that this was why all of his military and police commanders, as well as intelligence heads, were already on the scene in Davao.

He was not able to prevent the bombing because “the Philippines is not a fascist state ... It is unfortunate that this is a democracy and we cannot frisk anybody for just any reason.” He repeated this point later in his press conference, “Unfortunately we cannot stop people because that would be fascist. That is the price of being a democratic state.”

Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana issued a similar

statement to the press, claiming that “the enemy” is “adept at using the democratic space granted by our Constitution to move around freely and unimpeded to sow terror.”

Duterte is openly stating his desire for a police state, if not fascism. According to him, democracy is a problem that must be remedied through direct police/military rule.

Duterte stated that the “state of lawlessness” would last as long he deemed that there was a threat of terrorism or “drug violence.” He cited the epidemic of vigilante killings, for which he is directly responsible by openly encouraging these murders, as a justification for his declaration.

Duterte’s declaration of a “state of lawlessness,” and his calling for the military to “run the country,” was a carefully planned event. Sal Panelo, the official legal counsel of the president, told the press over the weekend that the president had prepared the declaration long before the bombing as part of his campaign against alleged drug criminals. The bombing merely provided a convenient pretext.

The initial police suspect for the bombing is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Operating in the Sulu archipelago, the Abu Sayyaf is a terrorist organization with approximately 200 members. Its activities consist of kidnap-for-ransom, beheadings of hostages, and occasional bombings.

The ASG was created in the early 1990s by Islamist elements returning to the Philippines from Afghanistan, where they had been part of the CIA’s secret war against the Soviet-backed regime. With assistance from then President Cory Aquino, the ASG was created to foment division between the larger Muslim secessionist organizations, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

(MILF).

Over the past 25 years, the ASG has provided the pretext for repeated US military interventions and for the increased militarization of the Philippine state.

The ASG issued a press statement over the weekend denying that they had been involved in the Davao bombing and claiming that a new breakaway group, Daulat Ul Islamiya, had been responsible.

The declaration of a “state of lawlessness” will be used to directly incorporate the military into Duterte’s murderous anti-drug crusade, which has thus far been carried out by the police and vigilantes.

As of September 1, the official death toll from this campaign, which targets the most impoverished layers of the population, was 2,446 in the first two months of the Duterte administration. Of this number, 929 were killed by the police, and 1,507 by vigilantes.

As a point of comparison, the scholarly consensus on Martial Law under the Marcos dictatorship estimates that 3,257 people were killed by state forces from 1972 to the early 1980s. If the current body count continues, Duterte will pass this figure by early October, as he completes his third month in office.

The vigilante killings are being carried out with the direct sanction and encouragement of the Duterte administration. An account published by BBC on August 26 revealed that at least some of the vigilante hit squads are operating on direct orders from local police and are being paid by the police for each of their victims.

Duterte openly sanctioned the hiring of hit squads during his Saturday press conference. He called for the hiring of “mercenaries,” saying, “There’s no other option. These people are like germs, which must be eliminated.”

Business investors and international finance capital continue to enthusiastically endorse Duterte’s dictatorial measures. Guenter Taus, chair of the European Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines (ECCP), told the press that what was needed—just as in “Brussels and Paris”—was a “transparent and obvious severe increase of military and police presence everywhere.” ECCP spokesperson Henry Schumacher told Reuters two weeks ago that investment would flow into the Philippines because “an iron fist is going to be behind it.”

Washington has funded Duterte’s death squads, with

Secretary of State John Kerry supplying \$32 million to support the anti-drug campaign. Whether Washington continues to support Duterte’s fascistic policies depends entirely on whether he toes their line in the South China Sea. Washington is looking for Duterte to aggressively assert Philippine claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea using the ruling against China by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague.

Duterte has thus far attempted to pursue a conciliatory foreign policy toward Beijing, looking to secure increased trade ties with China. Washington has begun raising the specter of “human rights” against Duterte as a means of applying pressure.

Duterte will be meeting with President Obama in Laos this week during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit. He has begun to signal that he will adopt a more oppositional stance toward China as a means of securing Washington’s continued backing.

Over the weekend, Duterte summoned the Chinese ambassador demanding to know why Chinese vessels were operating in the disputed Scarborough shoal, which the PCA had ruled was not Chinese territory. Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay stated, “China will be the ‘loser’ if it does not recognize an international court ruling against its territorial claims in the South China Sea. We are trying to make China understand especially when the dust settles that unless they respect and recognize the arbitral tribunal, they will be the losers at the end of the day on this matter.”

If Duterte demonstrates that he will serve the interests of Washington in their drive to war against China, Washington will drop all concerns about “human rights.” They will back a Duterte dictatorship just as fully as they did the martial law regime of Ferdinand Marcos.

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