

Philippine President Duterte threatens martial law

By Joseph Santolan
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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, speaking on January 14 before the Davao City Chamber of Commerce and Industry, threatened to declare martial law in the Philippines.

Duterte has made this threat in the past and, as part of his murderous drug war, has already invoked a state of national emergency, granting significant extra-constitutional powers to the police and military. The recent remarks, however, are a further escalation of the danger of dictatorial rule in the country.

Duterte began publicly threatening to declare martial law in August, during the second month of his presidency. With each renewed warning, he has further elaborated the grounds for his dictatorship, and manner in which it would be implemented.

The Philippine constitution, drawn up in 1987 following the ouster of the Marcos dictatorship, established that a president may declare martial law only in the event of an invasion or rebellion, and subject to congressional review within 60 days.

In his speech, Duterte rejected both legal limits for declaring martial law, as well as any judicial or legislative review of his dictatorial powers. He stated that any declaration would be to escalate his war on drugs, adding: “If I have to declare martial law, I will declare it. Not about invasion, [or] insurrection ... *Wala akong pakialam diyan sa Supreme Court* [I don’t care what the Supreme Court says] ... I will declare martial law if I want to. *Walang makapigil sa akin*. [No one can stop me] ... If you ask for the basis, you son of a bitch, I don’t care.”

Duterte doubled down on these statements in a speech on January 18, making his murderous intentions clear, insisting that the 60-day legislative review gave him too short a period to “complete the slaughter.”

Solicitor General Jose Calida defended the legality of

such measures, declaring that Duterte, as “father of the nation,” would use martial law to take power away from “certain functionaries” in the legislature and judiciary, and calling Duterte “a political genius actually.”

During a press conference on January 24, US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim articulated the perspective of the newly-installed Trump administration toward the Duterte government. He declared Washington’s endorsement of Duterte’s war on drugs, citing behind-the-scenes support for this campaign from the Obama administration’s Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) over the past six months as one of the “bright spots in bilateral relations.”

The ambassador stated that these relations had gone through a “rough patch,” as the Obama administration had publicly raised human rights concerns over the campaign. However, he admitted Washington had secretly continued funding and supporting the campaign.

Washington used the pretext of human rights to pressure Duterte to pursue an aggressive policy against China in the South China Sea, but Duterte responded by denouncing the Obama administration and seeking improved economic and diplomatic relations with Beijing and Moscow.

Duterte hailed Trump as someone with whom he is eager to work, and repeatedly declared that Trump endorsed his war on drugs during a phone call held in early December.

Ambassador Kim, asked by the press about the Trump administration’s position on the drug war and the explosion of extrajudicial killings under Duterte, cited Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who declared that he “wanted more information before passing judgment” on the matter. Washington would continue

its support for Duterte's war on drugs, Kim declared.

Questioned about Washington's response to Duterte's repeated threats to declare martial law, Kim said he would not comment on "hypothetical situations."

Duterte announced on Tuesday that Trump had sent regards and a statement of support for the Duterte administration's policies via the head of the Miss Universe pageant, which is currently being staged in Manila, and which was owned by Trump until 2015.

The official body count from Duterte's war on drugs has risen to more than 7,000 in the past seven months. Over 2,000 of those killed were shot by police on unsubstantiated charges that they were somehow part of the drug trade. The remaining victims have been killed by vigilantes and paramilitary forces.

Duterte has used the drug war to increase the powers of the executive branch over all aspects of government via the police and military. He released a list of mayors throughout the country whom he claimed were involved in the drug trade, ordering local police chiefs two weeks ago to "shoot-to-kill" anyone on the list.

Throughout all of this murder, and as his preparations for military dictatorship advance, Duterte has enjoyed the warm support of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its front organizations. On the basis of nationalism, they have endorsed his policies as progressive and have entered into an alliance with his administration. They appointed four of his cabinet members from their ranks, including the secretaries of agrarian reform and social welfare and development.

The CPP and the Duterte administration have just concluded their third round of peace talks in Rome, where both parties worked to end the 48-year-old armed struggle of the CPP's New People's Army (NPA). Joma Sison, founder and head of the CPP, declared that the party and the government could reach an agreement to achieve a "progressive" national economy and conclude a complete peace deal by 2020.

During his prepared remarks, delivered on January 19 at the opening of the third round of negotiations, Sison said Duterte "can prove in real and concrete terms that he is truly a patriotic and progressive president and fights against the imperialists and oligarchs for the benefit of the people." Sison made these declarations several days after Duterte's most recent threats to

declare martial law and carry out "slaughter" in the Philippines.

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