

Leading opposition senator arrested in the Philippines

By Joseph Santolan
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On February 24, Philippine Senator Leila de Lima, the most vocal political opponent of President Rodrigo Duterte's murderous war on drugs, was arrested on charges of drug trafficking. De Lima's arrest is an expression of the advanced political crisis in the country which is rooted in the dispute within the country's ruling class over Manila's geopolitical orientation.

Since taking office in July 2016, Duterte has reoriented Manila's foreign policy, in a volatile but nonetheless steady manner, away from Washington and toward improved economic and diplomatic ties with Beijing. Duterte undertook a series of moves calculated to improve relations with China, which had soured drastically under his predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, who had functioned as the leading regional proxy of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" against Beijing. Duterte has deliberately ignored the ruling handed down by the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) dismissing China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, and moved to end the most aggressive joint military exercises with the US military in the disputed waters.

At the same time, under the guise of a "war on drugs," Duterte has readied the apparatus of military dictatorship. Since he took office, over 7,000 people, the overwhelming majority of them from the poorest layers of society, have been killed in this campaign of police and vigilante murder. He declared a national state of emergency in September, which has not been lifted, granting the police and military to enforce checkpoints and carry out warrantless searches. He has threatened to declare to martial law.

Seeking to use the pretext of "human rights" to pressure Duterte back into the fold, the Obama administration raised mild public criticisms of this policy, while secretly continuing to supply tens of millions of dollars to the Duterte administration's drug enforcement measures. Duterte responded in an unhinged fashion to these criticisms, and relations worsened further.

There is no genuine opposition to military dictatorship in any section of the Philippine bourgeoisie. When Duterte

took office, the various opposition parties all joined with his party—which was a small minority in the legislature—to form a vast "super-majority" bloc. As he launched his murderous crusade, no one voiced opposition.

The opposition to the war on drugs, spearheaded in the legislature by Liberal Party Senator Leila de Lima, is a manifestation, above all, of the interests of Washington, which had sought to use the issue to pressure Duterte, and is now looking at the possibility of securing his ouster.

De Lima served as justice secretary under the Aquino administration, and in this capacity she prosecuted a number of corrupt campaigns against political rivals from the predecessor Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo administration (2001–2010). Arroyo had sought to increase Philippine economic ties with China, a move which entailed shifting Manila somewhat out of the ambit of Washington. No move on her part was as flagrant as those which have been undertaken by Duterte, but Washington was not prepared to tolerate this violation of its interests by its former colony.

Arroyo herself was imprisoned on corruption charges by Leila de Lima, and Arroyo's allies, including the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Renato Corona, were likewise hounded. De Lima oversaw the charges filed against Corona, who was impeached. At least part of the evidence used against Corona was supplied to De Lima by the US Embassy in Manila.

Elected Senator in 2016, De Lima was chair of the Senate Justice Committee, in which capacity she conducted an investigation into claims that Duterte had been the head of longstanding death squads in Davao City, where he had been mayor prior to election as president. Duterte has on numerous occasions admitted, boasted even, that he was the head of these death squads. De Lima brought witnesses before the Senate to testify to the murders which Duterte had ordered.

Duterte first sought to remove De Lima by impugning her character, denouncing her as a "loose woman" for having had an affair with her driver, and threatening to publish video evidence of this. When this failed to stick, Duterte's

Justice Ministry issued a warrant for De Lima's arrest, citing the testimony of prison inmates convicted of high-level drug charges that De Lima, during her stint as Justice Secretary, had facilitated the smuggling and trafficking of drugs within the Philippine prison system.

Another key opponent of Duterte in the legislature is Senator Antonio Trillanes. On February 20, Trillanes produced a new witness against Duterte, a former Davao police officer named Arthur Lascañas, who claimed to have served as a leader of the Davao Death Squads (DDS) under Duterte. Lascañas' account corresponds closely to what had already been established by prior accounts, including at least in part to Duterte's own boastings.

Lascañas revealed that the former members of the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), served as the muscle for carrying out hits on Duterte's orders. He explained that the initial killings carried out by the Davao Death Squad in the late 1980s, had notes left on the corpses which were signed, not by the DDS, but by the NPA. The DDS was paid for every victim killed. Duterte used the DDS to target the poorest layers of Davao society as well as his own political opponents. Lascañas also claimed that a string of bombings of local mosques in the early 1990s in Davao had been carried out on the orders of Duterte.

Trillanes, who has been instrumental in bringing these and earlier charges against Duterte, is a sordid political figure. A Navy lieutenant, he led a coup attempt against the Arroyo administration in 2003, for which he was imprisoned. He was elected for Senate from prison in 2007, and staged another brief military standoff later that year, seizing the Manila Peninsula Hotel, where he denounced Arroyo for "treason" for having signed a deal for joint oil exploration in the South China Sea with China. This coup attempt—which was staged with assistance from both the Maoist CPP and the pseudo-left Akbayan—failed and Trillanes took up life as a Senator. During the Aquino administration, Trillanes served as a key ally, bringing corruption charges against Vice President Jejomar Binay, who was interested in pursuing expanded economic ties with China. Trillanes served as the Aquino administration's back-channel negotiator with China during the tense military stand-off over the Scarborough shoal in 2012.

Trillanes and De Lima articulate the interests of sections of the Philippine ruling class who are intimately tied to Washington and are looking to reverse the reorientation of Manila's foreign policy under Duterte. As pressure tactics have proven fruitless, they are making preparations to attempt his ouster, a fact that is openly being discussed.

The Liberal Party, however, which would be the logical standard-bearer of such a move, is in disarray. Duterte's

allies in the Senate, headed by Senator Manny Pacquiao, successfully moved to have the Liberal Party chairs of several Senate committees removed from their positions over the weekend. Former President Aquino convened a meeting of the Liberal Party on Monday, where he called on Liberal Party legislators to break with the super-majority allied with Duterte in the legislature, but was unable to secure support for the move. The majority of the Liberal Party legislators are fearful of the backlash in the legislature from Duterte's allies.

The remaining bourgeois opponents to Duterte are gathered around Vice President Leni Robredo, a member of the Liberal Party, who, in the event Duterte was removed from office, would take his place. The pattern for such a political transition was established by the removal of President Joseph Estrada by what amounted to a military-backed constitutional coup in 2001 and the installation of Vice President Arroyo.

Duterte has sought to secure the support of the military, as he is readying the apparatus of martial law, doubling soldiers' salaries and granting the military effectively carte blanche powers. The top brass, however, have been trained by, and are loyal to, Washington. Duterte's peace talks with the Maoists, and, above all, his geopolitical reorientation, have provoked coup rumblings among the military leadership.

Congressman Gary Alejano, a former military officer, who followed Trillanes in his coup attempts in 2003 and 2007, told the press on Monday that such coup plotting was being discussed, and while there were as yet "no ouster moves against the President ... there is always a breaking point."

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