

Terror scare inflames martial law crisis in the Philippines

By Joseph Santolan
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Reports of a terror attack at an upscale casino in Manila flooded the international press on Thursday. The accounts universally reported that multiple masked gunmen detonated explosives and were shooting at people throughout the resort.

SITE, a US think tank with close ties to military intelligence, reported that the attack was carried out by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). US President Donald Trump opened his press conference on Washington's pulling out of the Paris climate accord by addressing the "terrorist attack" in the Philippines, which he declared he was closely monitoring.

The attack took place in the early hours of the morning, and speculation was rife in both domestic and international media that Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte would declare nationwide martial law by dawn.

Within several hours, Philippine police chief Ronald de la Rosa announced that a single armed individual had attempted to steal gambling chips from the casino, and in the process set fire to a table. Police shot the would-be robber, but no one else was seriously injured.

As of this article's publication, news outlets began reporting a third version of events. Anywhere from 24 to 35 dead bodies have been reported found in the casino on the second and eighth floors, victims, it is claimed, of "suffocation." The alleged robber is said to have killed himself by self-immolation, burned beyond recognition.

The ruling class in both the Philippines and internationally is poised on a knife's edge. The social crisis has become so acute and the drive to world war so advanced, that long before any details emerged they howled "ISIS" and called for "martial law" from around the globe.

Over 22 million Filipinos on the southern island of Mindanao have been living under conditions of military dictatorship for the past week. Using the alleged attack staged by ISIS on the city of Marawi as a pretext, Defense

Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced on May 23 that martial law was being imposed on Mindanao.

Duterte, who had been in Moscow to meet with Putin, was rapidly flown home before he could conduct negotiations with the Russian government for improved defense ties and the sale of weapons.

Meanwhile, US Press Secretary Sean Spicer announced the "solidarity" of the White House with Manila's fight against the "cowardly terrorists" and promised Washington would "provide support and assistance to Philippine counterterrorism efforts." This was an effective endorsement of martial law, as the "counterterrorism efforts" are being conducted under the auspices of military rule.

Both houses of the Philippine legislature passed resolutions endorsing the martial law declaration in overwhelming numbers, clearly indicating their willingness to sign off on a nationwide imposition.

The official narratives produced by the Philippine military and the presidential palace of Malacanang regarding events in Marawi are deeply contradictory. Not a word of the pretexts cited in the official declaration can be relied upon.

Among the claims made by the government to warrant martial law, which are now known to be false, are the following:

- * The Marawi police chief had been captured and decapitated. He appeared on TV two days later to announce that he had not been beheaded.

- * ISIS had seized a hospital and was holding the occupants hostage. The director of the hospital later told the press this was not true.

- * Three schools had been burnt to the ground. Eyewitness accounts stated they are still standing.

- * City hall was occupied; it was not.

The presidential palace also circulated photographs of Filipino forces in combat that were later shown to have

been taken during the Vietnam War.

It is clear, however, that Marawi, which sits on the shores of Lake Lanao and has a population of over 200,000, has been transformed into a war zone. Official accounts state that over 120 people have been killed in fighting over the past week, and claim, without any evidence, that 89 were members of ISIS. Well over 100,000 people have been evacuated, and according to UNICEF over 50,000 are children.

An immense tragedy is being inflicted upon Marawi but not for the reasons given by official government accounts. The military brass, almost certainly with collusion from Washington, has used the city to implement military rule and attempt to force the geopolitical reorientation of Duterte back toward Washington.

Washington bases a small number of elite US forces in the Philippine military camp in Marawi. On the day that Duterte traveled to Moscow, the Philippine military decided to attempt a raid on a local armed clan known as the Maute Group. A firefright broke out. The defense secretary announced that ISIS, based in the nearby town of Butig, had invaded the city. He declared martial law, and Duterte scuttled home.

Elite politics in the Philippines is dominated by rival clans. Most date their power back to the days of Spanish colonialism. Their money flows from old landed claims and is now invested in various industrial concerns. They intermarry and unify their dynasties; they have fallings out and these become wars, known on Mindano as *rido*, which they conduct through private armies.

Maute is an influential clan in the Maranao region. According to Vera Files, an investigative reporting group in the Philippines, “Farhana Maute, the clan matriarch is a known political player and is in conflict with a well-known Butig politician, Dimnatang Pansar. The uptick in violence in Butig appears rooted in a local political squabble.”

Maute had recruited over 100 soldiers to its private army, mostly high-school dropouts ranging in age from 13 to 16. Looking to strengthen its image as the toughest clan in the province, they adopted ISIS as a sort of brand. Last year, the Maute Group kidnapped several mill workers, dressed them in orange jumpsuits and beheaded them, in imitation of ISIS, as a means of establishing this reputation.

This went on for over a year and the military did effectively nothing, but then, just as Duterte went to Moscow, it decided to stage a raid.

The army’s firefright with Maute on May 23 was brief

and successful. The conflict was over while the president was still in flight from Moscow to Manila. The military’s own spokesperson in Marawi announced that the battle was over, and that reports had been greatly exaggerated.

To warrant the extension of the declaration of martial law would require an expanded conflict. Therefore, the military began circulating accounts of an ISIS occupation of the city, put Marawi under lockdown and began invading homes.

The Maute Group is large and therefore the military had many purported members of “ISIS” it could round up. The result was chaos and carnage. The military called in fighter jets to bomb Marawi. Residents who could not flee waved articles of white clothing from windows to indicate they were civilians, hoping they would not be bombed or shot.

Just hours before the casino robbery seized the attention of the press, the military accidentally bombed its own forces in Marawi, killing at least 10 soldiers.

The more than 100,000 people who have been evacuated have not been provided with lodgings, and have been left to beg for food and places to stay, and are dependent on limited relief goods and charity.

Political developments make clear that the military is calling the shots. Duterte is scrambling, in his fascistic and vulgar fashion, to retain its loyalty. Speaking to the troops on May 26, Duterte declared: “During martial law, you can arrest any person, search any house. No warrant... If you rape three women, I will cover for you.”

In another speech, he stated: “I will not end martial law until military tells me to.”

The social function of martial law—suppressing the working class—is already expressing itself. The first documented use of the powers of military dictatorship outside of Marawi took place on May 26, as soldiers attempted to forcibly break up a picket of striking fruit workers in Compostela Valley, 400 kilometres east of the city.

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