

Martial law in the Philippines

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For the first time since the fall of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, parts of the Philippines have been placed under martial law. President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo put the southern province of Maguindanao under military rule on December 4, using the brutal massacre of 57 people last month as the pretext. The Ampatuan clan—previously an ally of Arroyo—is accused of carrying out the murders to prevent a rival from running in elections next May.

While martial law has now been lifted, the proclamation has set a dangerous precedent. Whatever her immediate calculations, Arroyo's declaration of martial law has provided an opportunity for the state apparatus to rehearse. After Marcos's ousting, the framers of the 1987 constitution claimed that it would prevent any return of his excesses. But Arroyo circumvented the constitutional constraints with ease by presenting a local atrocity in Maguindanao as a full-scale "rebellion" against the state.

While the nominal target was the Ampatuan family, the resort to martial law was directed above all against the working class and highlights the political consequences that flow from the deepening global economic crisis and rising class tensions internationally.

The Philippines has been battered by the global recession and financial storms: exports are down and remittances from overseas workers have been hit, most recently by the financial turmoil in Dubai. Annualised GDP growth in the third quarter slumped to 0.8 percent, the second quarter figure has been revised downward to 0.8 percent and the overall estimates for 2009 are less than 1.8 percent. Arroyo's ability to fund further stimulus measures is severely constrained by rising public debt, which hit 73 percent of GDP in March.

Even before the global financial crisis erupted in 2008, the social gulf between rich and poor had widened under Arroyo. Her pro-market policies, including increases in the Value Added Tax and privatisations, boosted economic growth to 7.2 percent in 2007—the highest in three decades—at the expense of working people. Economics professor Cielito Habito estimates that 35 percent of the population of 90 million now lives below the poverty line, up from 33 percent in 2006. Another academic, Fernando Aldaba, points out that 20 percent of poor households live in chronic poverty.

Extreme social tensions have been accompanied by the steady erosion of democratic norms. Arroyo was installed in power in 2001 in what amounted to a constitutional coup. A corruption scandal was exploited, with the backing of various "left" and Stalinist parties, to mobilise the middle class in a so-called "People's Power" movement to oust the elected president, Joseph Estrada. His ousting was supported by the military and sections of big business, and rubberstamped by the Supreme Court. Arroyo's presidency has been marked by a sharp rise in extrajudicial killings by military-backed death squads and political payoffs to various allies such as the Ampatuans.

The current election campaign underscores the profound degeneration of Philippine politics. Parties and programs have been largely replaced by unstable political formations and shifting alliances backed by the wealthy families and powerbrokers. The various fragments of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which previously played a key role for the ruling elite in blocking any independent movement of the working class, have become

cheerleaders for one or other bourgeois candidate for president. The CPP is backing billionaire businessman and senator Manny Villar. Some of its rivals support Noynoy Aquino—son of former president Cory Aquino—falsely presenting him as the man for the poor. Despite their efforts, distrust in the entire political establishment is widespread.

Any honeymoon period after the May election will be brief. The new president will be compelled to follow policies that are essentially the same as Arroyo's. Under pressure from global financial capital, the next administration will have to make further inroads into public spending to the detriment of working people. As social and political tensions continue to rise, the ruling elites will have to consider their options, which will include a turn to military rule, particularly in the event of any upsurge of resistance by the working class.

The previous declaration of martial law by Marcos in 1972 took place in the last period of social and political upheaval that began internationally with the tumultuous events of the French General Strike in May-June 1968. In the Philippines, opposition to the Vietnam War, social inequality and the abuse of democratic rights fuelled growing student protests and began to draw in workers. In what became known as the First Quarter Storm, around 50,000 students and labourers stormed the presidential palace on January 30, 1970, before being driven back by police. Four people were killed and scores injured in the violent clashes.

Backed by the US, Marcos imposed martial law, using continuing protests and the rise of the CPP's New People's Army (NPA) as the justification. He shut down Congress, transformed the Supreme Court into a rubber stamp and launched a ruthless crackdown on political opponents. By 1975, an estimated 30,000 students, opposition politicians, journalists and union and peasant organisers had been jailed. With US assistance, Marcos vastly expanded the armed forces and stepped up its offensives against the NPA and the Muslim separatist movement in Mindanao.

The Marcos dictatorship finally collapsed in 1986 amid economic turmoil and widespread opposition. With the backing of layers of business, the military and

the church, Cory Aquino, wife of murdered opposition leader Ninoy Aquino, exploited the popular resentment in the so-called "Peoples Power" movement that ousted Marcos. Her ability to do so depended in large measure on the CPP, which passively abstained from the urban movement, then promoted her as a progressive. Two decades later, the claims that Aquino inaugurated a new period of democracy and progress are in tatters.

It would be wrong to dismiss the latest events in the Philippines as a national aberration. Rather the processes taking place in that country—continuing economic crisis, the decay of political parties and democratic norms, widespread alienation and signs of social unrest—are global in character. Such trends are simply more advanced in the Philippines and similar countries as a result of their greater vulnerability to international economic instability. Martial law in the Philippines finds a parallel in Sri Lanka, for instance, where the military is intruding directly into political life for the first time, with General Sarath Fonseka standing as the opposition's "common candidate".

These developments are a sharp warning to workers everywhere of the new period of political turmoil that has opened up and of desperate lengths to which the ruling class will go to cling onto its power and privileges.

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