

Philippine president declares martial law in Maguindanao province

Peter Symonds
12 December 2009

In a move that marks the further erosion of democratic rights in the Philippines, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo imposed martial law from December 4 over most of the province of Maguindanao on the southern island of Mindanao.

Arroyo cynically used the massacre of 57 people, including 31 journalists and media workers, on November 23 to justify her declaration. The armed forces have taken control of the province and dispatched heavily armed soldiers backed by armoured vehicles and war planes to hunt down members of the Ampatuan family and their private army that allegedly perpetrated the brutal murders.

On November 23, family members of Esmail Mangudadatu, a political rival of the Ampatuans, accompanied by lawyers and journalists, were travelling in a convoy to file his election papers for the post of Maguindanao governor. They were stopped outside Ampatuan town by dozens of gunmen, who forced them to drive to a remote location off the highway then murdered them all and buried the bodies in pre-prepared graves. The victims were shot and hacked to death. Some of the women were raped and mutilated.

The massacre provoked widespread outrage in the Philippines and internationally, not least because the powerful Ampatuan family was allied to President Arroyo and had assisted her in winning her widely disputed victory in the 2004 elections. Allegations of election rigging and corruption in Maguindanao province were rife, reinforced by the fact that in a number of towns her opponent received no votes at all.

Arroyo immediately sought to distance herself from the massacre by expelling Ampatuan family members from her party, Lakas-Kampi. By declaring martial law and ordering a crackdown on the Ampatuan clan, that message has been further reinforced. While Arroyo is constitutionally barred

from running for another term in the May 2010 elections, she is seeking a congressional seat and the Lakas-Kampi presidential candidate is polling behind his rivals at this stage.

So far about 150 people have been arrested in connection with the massacre. Local mayor Andal Ampatuan Jr, who allegedly organised and was present at the killings, has been detained and charged with 25 counts of murder. His father, Maguindanao Governor Andal Ampatuan Sr, and his brother, Zaldy Ampatuan, the governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, have been removed from their posts and charged with rebellion. Family compounds have been raided for arms.

The army has called on an estimated 2,400 armed gunmen connected to the Ampatuan clan still at large in 16 of Maguindanao's townships to surrender. Last Sunday, police commandos clashed briefly with armed Ampatuan loyalists in the township of Datu Unsay before armoured personnel carriers were sent in. On Tuesday, the air force flew two OV-10 bombers over the province in what a military spokesman described as "a persuasion flight". The entire local police force has been replaced due to concerns about its allegiance to the Ampatuans.

The military has encouraged the growth of large private armies in Mindanao as a means of countering a long-running insurgency by Islamic separatists, particularly since Arroyo took power in 2001. The strategy of backing local warlords parallels that used in Iraq and Afghanistan by the US military, which also maintains a quasi-permanent presence of between 300 to 500 Special Forces troops in southern Mindanao under the guise of training the Philippine military in counterinsurgency. In 2006, Arroyo legitimised these private armies as Civilian Volunteer Organisations, operating in support of the security forces.

Andal Ampatuan Sr, who has been Maguindanao

governor since 1998, has used his militia to transform much of the province into a family fiefdom ruled by fear and payoffs. Most of the main towns are run by mayors and deputy mayors who are either family members or close allies. The Ampatuan clan controls the finances of the mainly rural province—the country’s third poorest—with most of the revenue coming from a share in national taxes. The alliance with Arroyo guaranteed the family’s local power in return for delivering the province’s votes to her party.

The declaration of martial law for the first time since the fall of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 has far broader ramifications than the crushing of a local warlord and has already provoked considerable opposition. Under the revised 1987 constitution, martial law can be invoked only to deal with a rebellion or a foreign invasion and can be extended beyond 60 days only with congressional approval. Martial law suspends civil rights, including habeas corpus, thus allowing for arbitrary detention with charge.

Arroyo absurdly claimed that martial law is necessary to put down “a public uprising” in Maguindanao—that is, by a “rebellion” by a loyal political ally who has worked hand-in-hand with the armed forces. The constitutionality of Arroyo’s declaration of martial law was challenged in the Supreme Court on Monday, but the judges ruled against granting a temporary restraining order. Critics have pointed out that charging Andal Ampatuan Snr and other family members with rebellion might turn out to be a blessing in disguise: the charge is notoriously difficult to prove and, as a political crime, might clear the way for pardons.

The martial law declaration is currently being discussed in a joint session of Congress, which met on Wednesday and Thursday and is due to vote next Tuesday. Under the constitution, the session is able to question key officials for up to 20 hours but no debate is allowed and discussion on any challenge to the declaration is strictly limited. While a majority of senators oppose the imposition of martial law, Arroyo’s supporters control the House. The joint session is expected to approve the measure.

The declaration of martial law sets a dangerous precedent. Arroyo has already declared that she will maintain military rule over Maguindanao province for as long as necessary to deal with the so-called uprising. If the November 23 massacre can be leveraged into a “rebellion” then a range of pretexts can be manufactured to justify military rule in other areas.

From the outset of her presidency, Arroyo has rested

heavily on the military. She came to power in 2001 in what amounted to a constitutional coup against the elected president Joseph Estrada. After a lengthy political crisis involving corruption allegations against Estrada, a “Peoples Power” movement was engineered with the assistance of various Stalinist and “left” groupings. With the backing of the military, sections of big business and the Supreme Court, Arroyo, then the vice-president, was installed as Estrada’s replacement.

Arroyo won the 2004 presidential election, but the result was widely disputed. She barely survived a concerted attempt to have her impeached in 2005 over corruption allegations involving her husband and evidence that she had attempted to directly influence the 2004 election. Her support plummeted after tapes emerged of a purported conversation with a senior election official about rigging the result.

According to recent polls, Arroyo is the most unpopular president in Philippine history. Her administration has driven through pro-market measures that have only deepened the divide between rich and poor. Her presidency is also notorious for the hundreds of political murders of journalists, leftists and non-government organisation activists that are widely believed to have been carried out by the military.

Campaigning for the elections next May has already begun. The Maguindanao massacre is a clear warning that political violence will be extensive as the rival families that control the country’s economic and political life seek to shore up their positions, amid a worsening economic crisis. Such conditions may well provide the pretext for Arroyo to extend martial law and exploit it for her own political purposes.

More fundamentally, the declaration of military rule is a sharp warning of the type of measures that will be used after the election to deal with any opposition, particularly from the working class, to the deepening attacks on living standards and democratic rights.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact