

Philippine political opposition deepens as Beijing-Manila relations sour

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In the wake of President Obama's no-show at the Asian-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits last month, political opposition to Philippine president Benigno Aquino is spreading in the Philippines.

A collection of rival bourgeois political figures have come together around a corruption scandal over Aquino's alleged abuse of presidential "pork barrel" discretionary funds, the Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP).

There are escalating concerns inside the ruling elite over the viability of Aquino's policies. On the one hand, his role as the leading proxy of Washington's aggressive moves in the South China Sea against Beijing is seen as both militarily and economically untenable. On the other, that Aquino is becoming a political spent force, which may prove incapable of containing mounting anger in the working class over burgeoning social inequality.

One of the initial signs of the rift between China and the Philippines came in the second month of the Aquino presidency, when a hostage crisis resulted in the death of eight tourists in Manila from Hong Kong. The deaths were widely perceived as being the result of gross incompetence on the part of Manila police and of mismanagement by Aquino himself.

On October 9, on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit, Aquino met briefly with Chinese premier Li Keqiang. The Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* reported that Li "urged Philippine President Benigno Aquino to resolve the row over the Manila bus hostage crisis as soon as possible, taking the impasse to a new diplomatic level."

Hong Kong has had a standing demand for three years that Aquino provides an official apology for the

event, something that he has consistently refused to do.

On October 23, during the president's annual meeting with the Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines (FOCAP), Aquino explicitly denied having spoken with Li regarding the Hong Kong hostage crisis during the ASEAN summit. Two days later, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying issued a statement describing Aquino's words as "totally untrue." The Philippine press then said that Beijing had called Aquino a "liar."

The Aquino administration has repeatedly issued public statements that the Philippines will not apologize to Hong Kong for the events of August 2010. Threats of economic sanctions and a legislative ban on Philippine domestic workers have been proposed by politicians in Hong Kong. There are over 150,000 Filipino domestic workers currently employed in Hong Kong.

Former Philippine President Joseph Estrada, now mayor of the city of Manila, has offered to travel to Hong Kong to apologize for the 2010 incident. Estrada is one of the heads of the opposition political coalition, the United Nationalist Alliance.

Hong Kong officials have responded that their demand is not merely for a formal apology, but also compensation for the families of the victims and criminal charges filed against those whom they say botched the rescue operation. Estrada issued a statement that he is now trying to raise funds for the compensation from the "business community."

On November 5, Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying issued an ultimatum: "Unless, within a month, there are concrete steps taken to resolve this issue, the government will take necessary actions to apply sanctions." He suggested, however, that either Aquino or Estrada could meet this demand: "I urge the

Philippines government and/or the Manila municipal government to quickly come up with a proposal to respond to the families of the deceased and the requests of the injured.”

On September 3, Philippine Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin held a press conference in which he announced that Beijing had quite recently placed over 30 concrete pilings in the Scarborough shoal, a portion of the South China Sea claimed by both the Philippines and China. He showed grainy aerial photos to substantiate this claim and stated that these concrete pilings were preparatory to Chinese construction in the disputed waters.

Gazmin testified about these developments to the Philippine House of Representatives, stating that the pilings would be used to build a Chinese garrison in the South China Sea.

On October 24, in the aftermath of the Obama no-show and with the emergence of an open political opposition to Aquino, various press outlets tied to opposition leaders broke a story that the concrete pilings had been placed in the Scarborough shoal not by Beijing and not recently, but rather by the US Navy for target practice several decades ago.

The Aquino administration retreated from its claim, acknowledging that the concrete pilings were “old,” although not admitting that they had been placed in the disputed waters by the United States.

Demands for Gazmin’s immediate resignation began to circulate in editorials and media discussions. Gazmin issued a statement that he was ready to resign if the president asked him to. Addressing a gathering of military leaders during ceremonies at the military headquarters in Camp Aguinaldo on Monday, Aquino stated that Gazmin should not believe the “rumors” about the demand for him to resign.

According to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Aquino “devoted half his speech” to praising Gazmin, whom he described as the “rudder of our soldiers.”

The strong declaration of support for Gazmin before the assembled military top brass served a clear political purpose. Bourgeois opposition figures, in particular former Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato Puno, have stated that their push for a ballot initiative to end presidential pork barreling is designed to get the masses “off of the streets.” Should the initiative fail, they have warned, the military would be obliged to step in “to

prevent blood from flowing in the streets.” This would take the form of a military coup that would set up an interim government.

By enthusiastically supporting Gazmin, Aquino is moving to preserve the loyalty of the military brass to his defense secretary and his government.

Gazmin addressed the question of a coup in a press briefing later in the day. “When you talk of destabilization, it’s a serious problem ... You need manpower, the units, the commitment of the people. You need the belief of the people in you.” However, he added: “It’s more difficult for me [to prevent a coup] now because I am no longer a member of the AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines] even if the AFP is under me.”

President Aquino took the rare step of issuing a live address to the nation on prime time television on October 30, defending himself against accusations and denouncing his detractors. In his 12-minute speech, he stated: “The issue here is theft. I am not a thief. I am the one who goes after thieves.”

Comparisons to American President Nixon’s “I am not a crook” speech filled the news and social media the next day.

Aquino has now stated that he will travel throughout the country to explain to the population the need for the Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP). The crucial witness in the ongoing pork barrel corruption scandals, Janet Lim Napoles, alleged to be the mastermind in the mishandling of funds, is scheduled to appear for cross examination in the Philippine Senate on Thursday.

The bourgeois opposition, meanwhile, is to hold a congress to draft a ballot initiative for the elimination of all pork barrel discretionary funds on November 8 and 9 in Cebu City.



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