

Constitutional crisis unfolds in the Philippines

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A constitutional crisis is brewing in Manila. President Benigno Aquino has over the past three years—with the strong support of Washington—used corruption charges to remove his political rivals from office, including the impeachment of the Supreme Court chief justice and the arraignment of three leading senators.

The political opposition pushed back, filing a case before the Supreme Court against Aquino's use of pork barrel funds, known as the Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP). On July 1, the Supreme Court ruled 13-0 with one abstention that DAP was partially unconstitutional. Aquino's opponents seized on this ruling to file impeachment charges in the legislature against the president. Over the past two weeks, rumors of impending military coups have been circulating widely.

The driving force behind Aquino's consolidation of power was the US "pivot to Asia." As Washington has escalated its drive to militarily encircle China, Aquino has come to play a leading role for US imperialism. He has provocatively confronted Chinese ships in the South China Sea, filed a legal case against Beijing's territorial claims before the UN, and has signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with Washington allowing for the basing of unlimited US forces anywhere in the country.

Aquino's predecessor, former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, during her time in office began to reorient Manila's economic ties toward Beijing. Aquino's power consolidation has been focused on removing any political figure with ties to Arroyo, or who has voiced even tepid, pro-forma opposition to the basing of US forces in the country.

One of the primary means used by Aquino to subordinate both houses of the legislature to the authority of the executive branch has been allegations of his opponents' allegedly corrupt misuse of their pork barrel funds, known as Priority Development

Assistance Fund (PDAF).

Using testimony from businesswoman Janet Lim-Napoles, the alleged mastermind of the systemic theft of PDAF money with the collusion of legislators, Aquino targeted opposition Senators Juan Ponce Enrile, Jinggoy Estrada, and Ramon Revilla. Immediately prior to the emergence of the PDAF scandal, these senators had expressed limited reservations regarding the EDCA basing deal. They have now been arraigned on charges of plunder and are currently detained at the police headquarters in Camp Crame.

In 2012, Aquino had used his own pork barrel program, DAP, to disburse funds to every member of the legislature who followed his leadership and voted to impeach Supreme Court chief justice Renato Corona, a key Arroyo ally. It was this fund that the Supreme Court ruled partially unconstitutional in the beginning of July.

On July 14, Aquino delivered a speech directed at the Supreme Court. It contained a thinly-veiled threat: "My message to the Supreme Court: We do not want two equal branches of government to go head to head, needing a third branch to step in to intervene ... Do not bar us from doing what we swore to do. Shouldn't you be siding with us in pushing for reform?"

Aquino has strong control over the legislature and used it less than two years prior to impeach Corona. The reference to the "third branch" stepping in is a threat to again employ the legislature against the Supreme Court.

Coup rumors have been routinely cropping up in the major news outlets over the past few weeks. Detained Senator Enrile, the former defense secretary under Marcos, has close ties to the military, and during the presidency of Corazon Aquino—the current president's mother—he led a number of coup attempts. Rival former coup leader and current senator Antonio Trillanes declared that the coup rumors were baseless. The

leadership of the military has issued regular press statements assuring that it was “loyal to the chain of command.”

The crisis of bourgeois political rule in the Philippines flows from the profound social crisis gripping the country. Social inequality continues to grow, and following the dictates of international finance capital, the Aquino government is escalating its austerity measures and the privatization of the last vestiges of its social functions.

In the wake of the devastation wrought by typhoon Haiyan and the utter failure of the state to mount an adequate response, along with the announcement of the EDCA and the wholesale return of US imperialism to the country, the Philippines is a social powder keg.

For the bourgeoisie of the Philippines, as around the globe, the old forms of rule and the trappings of democracy are becoming unsustainable. With his drive to subordinate the rival sections of government and his rolling out the red carpet for the US military, Aquino is pushing to establish dictatorial forms of rule in advance of the emergence of a mass movement of the working class.

No section of Aquino’s rivals are in any way opposed to the drive of US imperialism in the country. At the head of the opposition party is the man who would replace Aquino in the event of his impeachment, Vice President Jejomar Binay.

Binay’s political allegiances are crystal clear. Speculation in the Philippine press regarding Binay’s possible bid for the presidency in 2016, were laid to rest, when Binay traveled to New York and announced his candidacy at a forum hosted by the influential Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Binay explicitly declared his complete support for the EDCA deal and went further to state that if he became president he would revise the Philippine constitution to allow the Philippines to join Washington’s Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal.

The concern of the opposition stems from the experiences of the Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s and early 1980s. In the face of the mass working class struggles and protests that shook Manila in 1970-72, every section of the bourgeoisie spoke of the need to impose martial discipline on the populace. Leading opposition politician, Benigno Aquino, father of the current president, called for the declaration of martial

law in an interview with the *Far Eastern Economic Review* months prior to the actual declaration issued by Marcos.

Marcos used his dictatorial powers to arrest his bourgeois political rivals and to appropriate their business interests and land holdings and to dole them out to his cronies. The lesson which the Philippine bourgeoisie drew from the Marcos dictatorship was not the value of ‘democracy’ but rather not to be among those excluded from power.

It is this fear that is driving the jockeying for position in the upper echelons of the Philippine state.

Aquino deliberately invoked this history in his State of the Nation Address on July 28, when he concluded, “The Vice President knows this—we were together in 1987. There was a coup d’état, and I was ambushed ... It’s hard not to think about these things, considering the people we’ve been going up against. Will there be a day when I go on stage, for work, and—will someone manage to plant a bomb?”

To any informed political observer, Aquino’s reference to a bomb “on stage” is patently obvious. On August 21, 1971, a grenade went off on the stage of a political rally at Plaza Miranda in Manila. This bombing served as the pretext for Marcos’ immediate suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, and subsequent declaration of martial law.

The wheels of history have turned, and it is now an Aquino who is using an oblique reference to Marcos to hold out the imminent threat of dictatorship against his political opponents.



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