

US drive to war dominates Philippine presidential election discussions

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In May 2016 the Philippines will hold its presidential election. The president of the country is elected to serve a single term every six years.

The stakes in the 2016 election are qualitatively higher than in previous polls. This election is not the usual horse-trading for spoils and political patronage. The paramount question in every political debate and interview is war with China.

Over the past five years, since the election of President Benigno Aquino in 2010, Washington has brought the Asia Pacific region to the brink of war. It has systematically undermined Chinese diplomacy and escalated military tensions, provoking Beijing repeatedly, particularly in the South China Sea. Aquino has come to play the role of Washington's point man in the region.

Washington's war drive has riven Philippine politics. The entire political establishment has lurched into the camp of US imperialism. Those who voice even the hesitant wish to build bilateral ties with Beijing are politically buried.

The most popular presidential candidate, according to opinion polling, is Vice President Jejomar Binay of the opposition United Nationalist Alliance (UNA) coalition. Binay has been a close ally of former President Joseph Estrada. He traveled to Washington and announced his complete support for the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) to allow the basing of US forces throughout the country. He had the temerity, however, to suggest that the Philippines should conduct bilateral negotiations with Beijing and pursue joint business ventures with China.

In response, corruption charges were brought against Binay. He has been accused of the crime of plunder under the Anti-Money Laundering Act, an unbailable offense with a mandatory life sentence. Binay, despite

his popularity particularly among the poorer layers of the Philippine electorate, is unable to pull together an election team. No one seems willing to run as his vice-presidential candidate, not even Estrada.

Binay is now reportedly seeking the support of the Lakas-CMD party of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who has been under arrest in a hospital for fraud and electoral sabotage since 2011. The move is certainly an indication of Binay's political desperation, as Arroyo is hugely unpopular. Above all, it expresses the foreign policy orientation of the layers of the bourgeoisie that Binay represents.

During her presidency, Arroyo began to re-orient Philippine political and economic ties toward Beijing. Her presidency is now referred in foreign policy circles as the "Sino-Philippine Golden Age." Malcolm Cook of the Lowy Institute wrote: "If Binay wins ... it would be a return to the policy [toward China] preferred by Aquino's predecessor, President Macapagal-Arroyo."

Aquino's preferred candidate is Secretary of Interior Mar Roxas. Roxas comes from a political dynasty with deep roots in US colonial rule. His grandfather, Manuel Roxas, was handpicked by General Douglas MacArthur to become the first president of the newly independent Philippines. Mar Roxas was a New York-based investment banker, with an MBA from Wharton. He is polling as receiving 5 percent of the vote. He has no base of support, not even in his hometown of Roxas City.

The consensus is that Aquino must look elsewhere to find a viable presidential candidate. One possibility is Grace Poe, the daughter of Fernando Poe Jr (FPJ), the most popular movie star in Philippine history and a former presidential candidate. FPJ died in 2004, having lost to Arroyo in the election of that year.

Grace Poe, who spent the majority of her adult life in

the United States, renounced her dual US citizenship and ran for Senate in 2013, campaigning exclusively on the basis of her father's popularity. She received more votes than any other candidate.

Poe is a politically untested figure. She is not opposed to the EDCA, stating that the basing deal with the US has "good aspects." If she became president it would likely be as the figurehead for other, more powerful political operatives. There is mounting speculation that Poe will receive Aquino's endorsement.

The final leading contender is the long-time mayor of Davao City, Rodrigo Duterte. Duterte has made a name for himself as an extremely right-wing authoritarian leader, the head of a city famed for its death squads. Duterte has played up this reputation.

During a radio interview on May 25, he was confronted with a Human Rights Watch report that over 1,000 people were killed during the late 1990s by death squads in his city. Duterte responded that he was the head of the death squads. "If I become president ... that number will become 100,000. I will feed the dead bodies to the fish of Manila Bay." Two days later, threatened with criminal proceedings by a political rival, Duterte retracted the statement.

Duterte is a volatile man and alters his statements constantly, but he has voiced his strong support for US bases in the country. He stated that if he became president, he would "cut [the island of] Palawan lengthwise into two. The inner half will remain with us. The outer half I will lease to the United States." He has called for mandatory military training for all college-aged men, to prepare them to fight China.

In the most recent surveys, conducted in March, Binay had 29 percent of the vote, Poe had 14 percent and Duterte 12 percent. The majority of the support for Duterte came from the wealthy and upper middle classes. He polled as receiving 21 percent of the upper class vote, giving him a tie with Binay as their front-runner. Duterte received only 10 percent support of the poorer layers of society, compared to Binay's 33 percent support.

A decisive factor in the coming elections could be the role played by the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its front organizations. From the support of the Kabataang Makabayan for Ferdinand Marcos' Nacionalista Party in 1965 to the Makabayan coalition with Manny Villar in 2010, the CPP has

supported a section of the bourgeoisie in every election that the country has held.

In 2013, the CPP's Makabayan coalition supported Grace Poe for Senate. The CPP has long standing ties, however, to Duterte. A Davao city council member from the CPP front organization, Bayan Muna, is a member of Duterte's party and on occasion serves as his spokesperson. Duterte was a member of the Communist Party youth organization, Kabataang Makabayan, in the 1960s and was a student of CPP head Joma Sison.

Duterte announced in January, while standing in front of a hammer and sickle flag, that if elected he would abolish congress, privatize government assets—including social security—and form a coalition government with the CPP. He promised that Sison would be made head of the newly privatized Social Welfare bureau. Sison responded on Facebook, stating: "Mayor Duterte should become President."

However the 2016 presidential campaign plays out, the CPP will play a vital role in whipping up support for a section of the bourgeoisie and pushing forward the US war drive against China.



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