

# US drive to war with China dominates Philippine presidential election campaigns

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18 January 2016

On January 10, the election season for the presidential election to be held on May 9 officially opened in the Philippines. At the center of all of the campaigns—characterized by corruption scandals and threats of electoral disqualification—is the threat of war with China.

President Benigno Aquino was elected to office in May 2010. Over the past six years, as Washington pushed ahead with its drive to militarily contain and subordinate China, tensions over the disputed South China Sea have been raised to a fever pitch. Working closely with the Obama administration, Aquino has made Manila the spearhead of Washington's "pivot to Asia."

From the legal case against China in The Hague, to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) for the basing of US forces in the Philippines, to the deliberate provocation of Beijing in the South China Sea, Washington has—in large part through its proxy Aquino—brought the region to the brink of war.

Deepening economic crisis, massive social inequality and the imperialist drive to war have shifted bourgeois politics sharply to the right. Not one of the major presidential contenders presents even token opposition to the restoration of US bases in the country.

When in 1991, the Philippine Senate voted 12-11 not to renew the lease on the bases, the so-called "Magic 12" were hailed as heroes of bourgeois nationalism. Today, this vote is spoken of by leading political figures as having been "a mistake." The *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the country's leading paper, which gave fiery editorial support to the ending of the bases deal in 1991, now just as fiercely advocates for the restoration of the bases.

There are, however, significant sections of the Philippine bourgeoisie who are concerned that the tensions over the South China Sea are jeopardizing key business ties with Beijing. China is the Philippines' second largest trading partner after Japan. In 2014, trade

with China accounted for 14.3 percent of all Philippine trade, while the United States accounted for only 11.2 percent, a difference of over \$4 billion. These sections of the bourgeoisie would like to initiate bilateral talks with China in an attempt to defuse tensions and maintain trade ties.

Current vice president and, according to recent polls, front-runner in the presidential election Jejomar Binay, represents these interests. Binay attempted to cultivate US support for his candidacy, announcing that he was running at the headquarters of the influential think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and stating that he "unwaveringly supported" the EDCA basing deal.

However, Binay also desired to pursue closer ties with China. He announced that he favored a bilateral resolution to maritime disputes and would even support joint ventures for energy resource exploration in the South China Sea. Binay was quoted as saying, "China has money, we need capital."

Washington will not tolerate such a balancing act. A series of major corruption scandals were launched against Binay. The evidence for many of the allegations against him was supplied by the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC). The AMLC was created in the Philippines with direct assistance from Washington and figured prominently in the impeachment of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Renato Corona. The impeachment of Corona laid the groundwork for the approval of the EDCA.

Binay is currently polling at 31 percent of the vote, according to a Business World-Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey conducted on January 10. His nearest rival is Grace Poe, who is polling at 24 percent.

Poe is the adopted daughter of Fernando Poe Jr. (FPJ), who was likely the most famous and popular movie actor in the history of Philippine cinema. FPJ ran for president in 2004 against Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and was

defeated in an election for which charges of electoral fraud were later brought against Arroyo. FPJ died in December 2004.

Grace Poe spent the majority of her adult life in the United States. She was educated at Boston College, graduating with a degree in political science in 1991. She interned for the Republican governor of Massachusetts, William Weld. She moved to Fairfax, Virginia, and lived there until the death of her father.

In 2010, Aquino appointed her head of the Movie and Television Review and Censorship Board (MTRCB). In 2013 she ran for Senate, largely on the strength of her father's name. She received the support of the Makabayan Coalition, a political front organization of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

Poe has a very limited political track record. She is, however, strongly pro-Washington and was herself an American citizen until quite recently.

Binay's party led the campaign to file a suit for the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) to disqualify Poe from running for president in part on the reactionary grounds that Grace Poe, who was adopted as an infant, was a "foundling" and as such "by definition stateless." In other words, it was impossible to be certain that Poe's biological parents were Filipino citizens.

In December, Comelec voted to disqualify Poe. She appealed to the Supreme Court. The Court has issued a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) on her disqualification while it adjudicates the case. Poe continues to campaign, but it is quite possible that she will be legally removed from the race before the election.

Neck and neck in the polls are Mar Roxas and Rodrigo Duterte, at 21 percent and 20 percent respectively.

Mar Roxas is the administration candidate. He has been the right-hand man of Aquino since the beginning of his administration. A Roxas presidency would be a continuation of the policies of the Aquino administration.

Roxas is the grandson of president Manuel Roxas, who was handpicked for office by Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Mar Roxas was educated at Wharton School of Business and was a New York-based investment banker for years. Mar Roxas is not a popular candidate; no amount of populist posturing during stump speeches can turn the man of Wall Street into a man of the people.

Ernie Bower, head of Southeast Asia at the CSIS, summed up Washington's dilemma with Poe and Roxas in an article published last week. "Grace Poe and Mar Roxas are the two candidates most likely to carry on Aquino's course. ... Poe, though independent, aligns

closely with the Liberal Party [of Aquino]. Roxas is a longtime member of the Liberal Party and has repeatedly supported the president's approach to China. But Poe's likelihood of staying in the race is looking increasingly unlikely as she appeals her disqualification by the Commission on Elections, and Roxas polled in the middle of the pack for both presidential surveys released in December."

The final leading candidate is Rodrigo Duterte. The long-time mayor of Davao represents the emergence of the far-right onto the main stage of Philippine politics. Duterte has styled himself as being based in the masses, but polls have repeatedly shown that the majority of his support comes from the upper middle class. Duterte has been a close ally of the CPP and its front organizations for decades.

Duterte makes no attempt to hide that he is closely connected to Davao's death squads, telling the media that he has been responsible for the extra-judicial killings of hundreds of alleged drug pushers and criminal elements. He publicly warned anyone who might file a legal complaint against him, "If you file a case, I will mow down your family too."

Duterte has stated that if elected he would bring back the death penalty in the form of public hangings. He has called for several Philippine islands to be turned over to multinational corporations as their own territory. He strongly supports the return of US bases—openly offering half of the major island of Palawan for exclusive US occupation—and has called for mandatory military enrollment for all young men in preparation "for war with China."

Duterte announced that if the legislature opposed him in these measures he would declare martial law.



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