

Maoist-backed, fascist candidate leads Philippine presidential race

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With the 2016 Philippine presidential election due to take place on May 9, the emergence of a far-right candidate as the frontrunner is a stark warning to the working class. Rodrigo Duterte, who has pledged to summarily execute hundreds of thousands of alleged criminals in his first six months in power, is leading in the latest opinion surveys.

A poll conducted by Pulse Asia from April 16 to 20 showed Duterte, the mayor of Davao City, the fourth largest city in the country, with 35 percent support. Erstwhile frontrunner, Senator Grace Poe, was in second, with 23 percent. Administration candidate and Liberal Party standard-bearer Manuel Roxas II, was third with 17 percent, followed by United Nationalist Alliance candidate Vice President Jejomar Binay with 16 percent.

In a similar survey conducted by the Social Weather Station, Duterte had 33 percent support, with Poe also coming in second at 24 percent.

Duterte is a right-wing populist. Between stints as either a congressional representative or Davao City vice mayor, Duterte held the Davao City mayoralty for 22 years. Throughout, without compunction, he openly espoused summary execution of alleged petty criminals and gave free rein to death squads. According to Fr. Amado Picardal, a human rights advocate, the death squads accounted for 1,424 victims. Most were accused of petty crimes and were both poor and young. The youngest was a 12-year-old boy.

Duterte has postured as an “outsider” of the political establishment, a simple “probinsyano” (from the provinces) sparring against the elites in the capital. More truthfully, Duterte is the product of the establishment and a symptom of its political degeneration and shift to the right.

Duterte was a state prosecutor during the dictatorship

of Ferdinand Marcos. He was installed into the Davao City government by President Corazon Aquino. The subsequent explosion of extrajudicial murders in the city was aided and abetted by the successive administrations of President Fidel Ramos and President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Arroyo sought to appoint him as her department secretary of local government, effectively signalling that she would countenance the expansion of Duterte’s vicious law and order campaign nationwide. The signal was taken up and implemented by other cities in Mindanao and the Visayas region.

While Duterte and Davao City police were briefly investigated under President Benigno Aquino, it was all for show following damning reports from the United Nations Human Rights Rapporteur and the international Human Rights Watch.

The political responsibility for the rise of extreme right-wing figures such as Duterte rests with the various Maoist parties in the Philippines. They have assisted successive administrations in suppressing any independent mobilisation of the working class.

Moreover, Maoists and ex-Maoists have been directly involved in cultivating and promoting Duterte for years. Former Maoists staff his campaign machinery, with an ex-guerrilla currently serving as his chief of staff. The assassins of the Davao death squads include former Maoist New People Army (NPA) members and, to this day, continue to use the NPA’s signature method. A member of the Maoist front organization Makabayan is currently a city councillor allied to Duterte.

Significantly, the bloodbath in Davao City has drawn no condemnation from Maoist-aligned human rights organizations. In fact, Jose Ma. Sison, the exiled head of the Communist Party of the Philippines, expressed

his willingness to join a coalition government with Duterte. He dismissed concerns over Duterte's plan for a mass killing of alleged criminals as simply "mouthing off," despite the bloody record in Davao City.

Duterte has pledged to dump a hundred thousand corpses of alleged criminals in Manila Bay—more than enough, he declared, to make the fishes fat. Meanwhile, to big business, the stock and financial markets, he promised "business as usual."

Duterte's threats are above all directed at the suppression of the working class and rural poor. He has promised to deal with any political opposition by closing down government institutions, including the courts and Congress. He has pledged the return of the death penalty and promised to pardon all police and state security personnel implicated in summary executions.

In February, Duterte promised to set up trade union-free economic zones and threatened the union organizers of the Maoist-aligned labor federation, Kilusang Mayo Una, if they conducted any activity in the proposed zones.

The emergence of Duterte is part of the rapid rightward march of the whole political establishment amid a deteriorating economy, sharpening social tensions and the integration of the Philippines into the US war drive against China.

More than a decade of annual economic growth averaging over 5 percent from 2001 to 2015 has been forged on the back of the working class and the poor. The legal minimum monthly wage is well below the government's own poverty line. More than 50 percent of the population remains poor, with social inequality measured as the worst in South East Asia.

Duterte's bloody record has prompted some limited expressions of unease, but not condemnations, in the US media. The concern is certainly not that Duterte will trample on democratic rights and unleash a wave of extra-judicial killings, but rather that he will not be a reliable ally as the US ratchets up pressure on China over the South China Sea.

Duterte, along with all the other presidential candidates, has pledged to implement the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allows the US military to use the Philippines as a forward operating base against China. The candidates have vied with each other in whipping up reactionary

nationalist sentiments, vowing to defend Philippine territorial claims.

At the same time, there are concerns in ruling circles that the rising tensions will cut across business and economic ties with China, which is by far the country's largest trading partner. Throughout the campaign, the presidential candidates have sought to balance, oscillating between bellicose statements against Beijing and a ludicrous insistence that involvement in the US war drive will not affect Philippine economic relations with China.

Duterte is probably the most erratic. One day he declares that he will cut a bilateral deal with China to settle the territorial disputes in the South China Sea in return for economic concessions. Days later, he postures as a Philippine martyr ready to die to defend the country's maritime claims if China refuses to abide by the outcome of a Philippine case currently before a UN tribunal in The Hague.

The Philippine ruling elite is presiding over a capitalist society wracked by brutal exploitation and inequality even as the US war drive threatens to impose more onerous demands on the working class and the poor, turning their children into cannon fodder for the confrontation against China.

None of the establishment candidates will hesitate to use police-state measures to impose their dictates on the working class. Duterte is only the most brazen of the representatives of the bourgeoisie.



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