

Duterte takes office as president of the Philippines

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Rodrigo Duterte, the fascistic former mayor from the southern Philippines, took the oath of office as the 16th president of the country June 30. He was elected in early May with a plurality of just 38 percent of the overall vote. He ran on a platform of law and order, vowing to violently suppress alleged criminals, mobilizing both the police and vigilante groups.

Duterte takes office under conditions of mounting economic and political crisis on a global scale. Widening social inequality and the growing danger of world war have destabilized bourgeois rule and are also fueling the reemergence of the working class as an active revolutionary force.

A report by the World Bank on the Philippine Labor Market published last week revealed that the rate of exploitation of labor increased sharply over the past decade, with a high-rate of growth in labor productivity and stagnant real wages. The majority of workers are informally employed and paid poverty-level wages.

Washington's war drive against China in the South China Sea, as it seeks to buttress the declining US global economic position by military means, has had a profoundly destabilizing influence on Philippine politics. The outgoing Aquino administration served over the past six years as a spearhead for Washington's pivot to Asia," aggressively denouncing China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and establishing a new basing deal for US forces in the country.

The sharply increased tensions with China undermined trade ties between Manila and Beijing and saw a curtailment in direct Chinese investment in Philippine infrastructure.

Duterte's presidency represents a move by the Philippine ruling class to resolve the political crises in the country through dictatorial forms of rule, based on

sections of the petty bourgeoisie who have been mobilized behind his right-wing populist platform. He aims to create a climate for increased business investment, particularly of foreign capital, through the suppression of the working class.

Duterte carried only a plurality of the vote. His party, PDP-Laban, has only three members in the 290-seat House of Representatives, and one representative in 24-seat Senate. Were there any significant opposition to his policies in the Philippine ruling class, he would be easily political isolated and opposed.

However, the various rival political parties have all lined up to pledge nearly unanimous support for the incoming president. He controls a super-majority of the legislature, with over 200 congressmen forming a bloc in support of Duterte, and a similar super-majority in the Senate. The remaining politicians who are not in the super-majority have not organized themselves into a coherent minority.

Among the first items that Duterte has requested of the incoming legislature is the restoration of the death penalty by public hanging, a practice implemented by the American colonial occupation. Representatives in both houses have already drawn up bills to this effect.

Duterte delivered his inaugural speech in English before a small audience of politicians, diplomats and guests in the presidential palace of Malacañang.

Directly addressing any opposition to his law and order drive, he stated: "I know that there are those who do not approve of my methods of fighting criminality, the sale and use of illegal drugs and corruption. They say that my methods are unorthodox and verge on the illegal."

He responded by telling "Congress and the Commission on Human Rights" to mind their own business: "You mind your work and I will mind mine."

He said his drive against criminality “will be relentless and it will be sustained.”

Duterte is looking to secure Chinese investment in the country’s infrastructure without earning the ire of Washington. He met on several occasions over the past month with Chinese diplomats to negotiate the possible terms for Beijing’s funding of a major railway line to facilitate the use of an international airport terminal outside of Metro Manila.

In his inaugural address, he attempted to assuage American concerns by stating that “the Republic of the Philippines will honor treaties and international obligations,” indicating his intent to go ahead with the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) basing deal with the US concluded by the outgoing administration.

A key factor in deciding the Duterte government’s relationship with both Washington and Beijing will be its response to the scheduled July 12 decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague on Manila’s case against Chinese claims over disputed portions of the South China Sea.

Duterte held his first cabinet meeting on the afternoon of his inauguration. Foreign Affairs Secretary Perfecto Yasay, in a portion of the meeting inadvertently broadcast on national television, said: “During our meetings with foreign government representatives here, especially those who are concerned with ensuring ‘freedom of navigation’ and ‘maritime security,’ they seem to project the impression that when the decision will come out on July 12 they would like for us to make stronger statements. I am adverse to that idea and I have told them in no unmistakable terms.”

Yasay declared the decision would need “study” and there would be “plenty of nuance” to be analyzed. He further stated that US involvement in the South China Sea was in pursuit of its own national interests, which “is both economic and military.”

Duterte’s attempts to balance between Washington’s war drive and economic ties with Beijing have contributed to the inconsistent and confused character of his political declarations. The one unwavering aspect of his political platform is his preparation to violently suppress the working class.

The Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its front organization have played a vital role in securing support for Duterte among layers of the

working class and peasantry. The CPP leadership has opened peace talks with Duterte, oriented to the formation of a “coalition government.” Three representatives of the CPP’s front organizations have taken cabinet-level positions in his administration.

BAYAN, the CPP’s umbrella front organization, has issued repeated statements in support of Duterte. On June 29, it convened a “National People’s Summit” to prepare a People’s 100 Day Agenda for the government. “The Filipino people are elated over Duterte’s nationalist and pro-people policy pronouncements,” it stated.

In the evening of June 29, BAYAN had thousands of people bussed to Manila from throughout the surrounding provinces. They staged a march to the presidential palace on June 30 to coincide with Duterte’s inaugural address. They called on him to fulfill his “promises to the people,” which they “greeted with high hopes.”

The police escorted and assisted the marchers. Following his inaugural address, Duterte sent members of the Presidential Security Group to escort the leaders of BAYAN and other front organizations of the CPP into the presidential palace. He met with them for over 40 minutes, and they presented him with a copy of the “people’s agenda.” At the end of the meeting, Duterte posed for photographs with the leaders, raising his hand with them in a clenched fist salute.

Joma Sison, founder and head of the CPP, sent greetings to a gathering celebrating Duterte’s installation. He “celebrated with them Duterte’s election” and hailed the peace talks between the CPP and the government as leading toward an “independent, democratic, developed, prosperous and peaceful” Philippines. He concluded his speech by saying: “Long live President Rodrigo Duterte!”

As the Duterte government begins to implement its political agenda, the CPP and its front organizations are positioning themselves to be at the front lines in carrying out the suppression of the working class.



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