Philippine President Duterte delivers State of the Nation Address

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On July 25, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte delivered his first State of the Nation Address to the opening of the Seventeenth Congress of the Philippines. His speech was a repugnant mixture of proposals to assist big business in the exploitation of cheap labor and repeated statements sanctioning the murder of alleged criminals.

During his speech, Duterte announced that the government would begin a "unilateral ceasefire" in its conflict with the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New Peoples' Army (NPA) "effective immediately."

The CPP's front organizations staged a large rally outside the Philippine legislature in support of Duterte's agenda. Joma Sison, CPP founder and head, issued a statement welcoming Duterte's announcement of the ceasefire. The CPP, through the National Democratic Front (NDF), stated that it would reciprocate the ceasefire as soon as it had received the full text of the declaration.

On the economic front, Duterte assured investors that he would "continue and maintain current macroeconomic policies, and even do better." Former President Benigno Aquino's economic policies over the past six years followed the dictates of international finance capital to the letter, and were marked by austerity measures and the privatization of education and other public services.

Duterte stated that he would continue these policies, but would improve upon them by lowering "corporate income tax rates" and relaxing "bank secrecy laws." The Philippines has some of the strictest bank secrecy laws in the world, a residue of the martial law regime of Ferdinand Marcos which set up the regulations to hide stolen assets.

Washington has long been demanding that Manila scrap these laws, which it sees as a hindrance to its neo-colonial machinations within the country. Bank secrecy laws were an impediment to the impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato Corona in 2012, in which Washington played a key role in furtherance of its "pivot to Asia" (see: "Further US involvement in Philippine constitutional crisis").

These changes, Duterte claimed, would "attract investment" that would generate "jobs that are suitable for the poor and less skilled members of the workforce"—that is to say, his administration was aiming to expand low wage and sweatshop labor employment.

He doubled down on this point, saying that he would carry out "reforms to ensure competitiveness and promote ease of doing business" to develop "labor-intensive industries."

The influential Makati Business Club (MBC) enthusiastically hailed Duterte's speech, announcing that they "welcomed the Duterte administration's declaration of a unilateral cease-fire" as well as "its stance against criminality, drugs, and graft and corruption."

The six years of the Aquino administration were marked by rising prices of basic goods and stagnant wages. The living conditions of ordinary Filipinos, the majority of whom already live in poverty, deteriorated considerably. This worsening poverty has seen a marked rise in reported crimes, but also carries with it the threat of struggles by the working class. Duterte's promises to drown alleged criminality and drugs in blood have been openly welcomed by the business community both locally and internationally.

Since June 30, when Duterte took office, having issued repeated calls for the extra-judicial murder of alleged criminals, a bloody killing spree has been

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launched in the country. According to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 364 people have been killed by police or vigilantes on allegations of being criminals or involved in the drug trade. An additional 54 people have been killed in the past 48 hours, averaging more than one state-sanctioned murder per hour.

The overwhelming majority of those killed were deeply impoverished. Police have been responsible for more than half of the killings, while vigilante gangs—who bind their victims in duct tape before shooting them and leave cardboard signs on the corpses announcing that the victim was a "drug pusher"—have been responsible for the rest.

Over two-thirds of Duterte's speech, a full hour of his hour-and-half-long State of the Nation Address, was dedicated to unscripted, rambling, almost stream of consciousness asides, semi-incoherent and articulated largely in a vulgar street Tagalog. These were mainly dedicated to bullying the impoverished with threats of murder.

The *Inquirer's* body count since Duterte assumed office is maintained on a page entitled "The Kill List." The page is headlined by a moving photograph of a weeping young woman cradling the barefoot body of her murdered husband, a pedicab driver. A piece of cardboard labeling him a "pusher" lies on the Manila street beside them.

Duterte went out of his way to mock this image. "To those of you who aren't deaf, and who haven't yet entered the drug trade, if you don't want to die, if you don't want to be hurt, don't rely on those priests and on 'human rights,' they won't protect you from being killed. Don't do it. Your corpse will be sprawling and you will portrayed in a broadsheet like Mother Mary cradling the dead cadaver of Jesus Christ."

He told the audience, "I have to slaughter these idiots who are destroying my country" and added "I told the military if you see any [criminal], shoot them. Even if they surrender with a white flag. That's just for war, not criminals. Shoot them. Show no mercy to them."

With his vulgar, bullying language and his policy declarations, Duterte is working to build a fascist movement among the petty bourgeoisie and lumpen proletariat. Isidro Lapeña, newly-appointed head of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), announced that the government would be funding the creation of a nationwide Alsa Masa against drugs.

Alsa Masa was a vicious anti-Communist death squad that emerged out of elements of the Communist Party in the mid-1980s when the CPP was carrying out a bloody internal purge. Alsa Masa terrorized the population by carrying out barbaric murders, torture, the mutilation of corpses and other unspeakable crimes. Ismael Sueño, head of Interior and Local Government, announced that the government would be creating a network of "village-based spy groups."

Duterte's policies have received the enthusiastic support of the Maoist CPP and its front organizations. BAYAN, the CPP's umbrella front group, staged a rally of nearly 40,000 people on the occasion of the State of the Nation Address. They bussed over 7,000 people in from the various provinces of the country.

The State of the Nation rally is an annual tradition for the CPP. They invariably burn an effigy of the president. This year there was no effigy. They carried murals hailing the "progressive agenda" they claimed Duterte would adopt. Some of their banners read "Support the Progressive Programs of Duterte." Not a single criticism was made.

BAYAN invited Ronald dela Rosa, newly appointed Chief of Police, to speak at their rally. This man is directly overseeing Duterte's ongoing murder campaign. Dela Rosa was given the platform and microphone by BAYAN to address the crowd. Renato Reyes, head of BAYAN, posed for a smiling handshake photograph with dela Rosa for the press.

The CPP's youth front, Anakbayan, issued a statement that "welcomed President Rodrigo Duterte's first State of the Nation Address (SONA) as a breath of fresh air."

After his speech, Duterte sent police forces to gather the leaders of BAYAN and other CPP groups to meet with him. They met with the president for over an hour and a half.

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