

Philippine President Duterte declares “all-out war” against Maoist party

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Peace negotiations between the Philippine administration of President Rodrigo Duterte and the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) abruptly broke down over the past week. On Tuesday, the Philippine military, with the full sanction of the president, declared “all-out war” against the CPP and its armed wing, the New People’s Army (NPA).

Since he took office in July, Duterte has, under the auspices of his murderous war on drugs, built up the apparatus of military rule, openly speaking on several occasions of his intention to declare martial law. He has at the same time, in a lurching and volatile manner, sought to rebalance Manila’s diplomatic and political ties toward Beijing and increasingly away from Washington.

Duterte has cultivated a base of support for his administration within the lower ranking officer corps and rank-and-file members of the military, whom he has promised massive pay rises. He is moving to turn over the prosecution of his drug crusade to the military, and has pledged to reconstitute a portion of the military as the Philippine Constabulary, the hated force of state repression created by the American occupation and deployed by Marcos to enforce martial law. He gave a state burial to the hated former dictator and is moving to implement a policy of mandatory Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) for high school students, effectively militarizing all of Philippine life.

At the same time, he has relied upon the Communist Party of the Philippines and its front organizations to promote his fascist agenda as progressive. On the basis of their Stalinist program of a two-stage revolution, the CPP and its front organizations have peddled his right-wing populist rhetoric and even promoted the idea that his war on drugs—which has now claimed over 7,000 victims—was of benefit to the working class and poor.

The CPP appointed three cabinet level positions—Social Welfare, Agrarian Reform, Anti-Poverty Commission—and one undersecretary—Labor—to the Duterte administration. Duterte announced his public endorsement of vigilante killings on July 25 during a dinner hosted in his honor by BAYAN, the CPP’s umbrella front group. BAYAN held a rally on the same day where they invited Bato de la Rosa, head of the Philippine National Police, directly responsible for carrying out the drug war, to address the crowd. The armed wing of the CPP, the NPA, announced that it would carry out executions of alleged drug criminals in support of the Duterte administration’s policies.

Meanwhile, the government opened peace negotiations with the CPP, which has been engaged in an armed struggle in the

Philippine countryside since 1969, in keeping with its Maoist strategy of a “protracted people’s war.” Both the government and the CPP issued unilateral ceasefire orders for the duration of negotiations. By December, Duterte had declared in a speech that his administration was secure from destabilization because the Communists “are willing to die for me.”

On January 19, during the third round of peace negotiations held in Rome, Joma Sison, founder and head of the CPP, declared that he believed that Duterte could prove that “he is truly a patriotic and progressive president and fights against the imperialists and oligarchs for the benefit of the people.” Duterte responded in late January by requesting that Washington remove the CPP from its terrorist watchlist.

Yet within one week the ceasefire ended, and within two Duterte had declared the CPP to be terrorists and ordered the military to launch an “all-out war” against the party. What happened?

While Duterte has sought to secure the support of lower ranking officer corps, the top military brass have all been trained in Washington and their loyalties are above all to the Pentagon, not the presidential palace of Malacañang. They were trained by Washington in the art of domestic suppression and for the past 48 years they have been at war with the CPP. Duterte has openly spoken of the rumblings from the military leadership in opposition to his rapprochement with Sison and the CPP, as well as his geopolitical reorientation.

The military brass has gotten into the habit of publicly countermanding the president. When he declared that there would no longer be any joint war games staged with US forces, his Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana informed the press that this was not true and that the war games would continue. In a similar fashion, the military has staged, over the past several months, a series of provocations on the southern island of Mindanao designed to undermine the peace negotiations with the CPP.

At the same time, there is an emerging fragmentation of the CPP leadership. On January 21 the *Manila Standard* reported that three factions were forming within the party’s leadership: Joma Sison and the founding and older members of the party, now based in the Netherlands, were seeking a negotiated settlement with Duterte and a possible coalition government; Benito and Wilma Tiamzon, who headed the party in Sison’s exile until their arrest in 2014, were seeking only the release of political prisoners; but Jorge Madlos, the NPA National Operational Command, wanted to continue armed struggle. This report closely corresponds to the

political developments.

In August, the peace negotiations were jeopardized when NPA units under Madlos carried out a firefight with military forces. On January 30, five days after the last round of peace negotiations, Madlos announced through the party Facebook page which he controlled, that he would be making an important announcement the next day. On January 31, he posted an announcement that he was calling off the CPP's unilateral ceasefire effective February 10 because of repeated military incursions.

On the same day, Sison's right-hand man, Fidel Agcaoili, who is heading the CPP negotiating team through its National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) organization, issued a statement on a separate party Facebook page which the Netherlands group controls. He stated, "We declare that as of today, there have been no orders from the CPP-NPA leadership to revoke its unilateral ceasefire declaration. The CPP-NPA's unilateral ceasefire remains in place. ... We strongly advise Secretary Dureza [head of the government negotiating team] not to raise the bogey of disunity among the ranks of the revolutionary movement."

On February 1, NPA forces under Madlos engaged in a firefight with the military and killed three soldiers. The military claimed that the three killed had been arrested and executed, and their bodies "desecrated." Madlos responded that their bodies had not been "desecrated" but that they were in an advanced state of decomposition when the government forces located them 24 hours later. In a separate encounter, NPA forces captured three other soldiers.

Seemingly unable to control the flow of events, Agcaoili issued a statement on February 1 "assuring the government" that "the recently announced termination of the NDFP's unilateral ceasefire does not mean the termination of the peace negotiations." On February 2, he issued another statement that the "NDFP reiterates its commitment to move forward with the peace negotiations." He issued instructions—which have thus far been disregarded—for the three soldiers held hostage to be released.

The roots of the tension between the Netherlands group and the NPA forces under Madlos would seem to be over the disposition of the NPA forces in the wake of a successful peace deal. The NPA currently operates a fairly profitable racket for its leadership, exacting "revolutionary taxes" from local businesses for protection and permission to continue operation, particularly on the island of Mindanao. In a speech delivered in June, Sison proposed to transform the NPA into "armed guards" for industry, i.e., to become the agent directly engaged in suppressing the working class, as well as to integrate them within the Philippine Armed Forces. For both Sison and Madlos, the armed wing of the Communist Party exists to secure their political and economic privileges, and they are fighting over its disposition.

Duterte responded with initial hesitation to the Madlos announcement that the unilateral ceasefire was ending. He warned in a speech that if he continued peace talks after the NPA attacked soldiers, the military "might kill me, and whom will you be talking peace with if that happens?" On February 3, he announced that the government was responding by lifting its unilateral ceasefire.

On February 5, Duterte delivered a speech in which he gave full vent to his anger against the CPP. He denounced the party as

"spoiled brats" and announced that there was no difference between the CPP and any "terrorist organization." He said that he had no interest in resuming peace talks for the rest of his administration. The next morning he issued arrest orders for the 13 leaders of the CPP who had been released from prison to facilitate the peace negotiations, and the police arrested one of them that afternoon.

The CPP leadership in the Netherlands responded to Duterte's declaration of war against the party, by reiterating that "We continue to look forward to scheduled talks on February 22–24." That evening Duterte held a cabinet meeting which the CPP appointed members attended. They issued a statement declaring, "We will continue to engage within the Cabinet and the rest of the administration ..." They hailed "the political will of President Duterte" which had allowed the peace talks to make "historic strides" and declared that the government and the CPP "have never been closer in their articulation of a shared vision of a society that addresses the root causes of war—poverty and inequality." They continued, "the foremost concern of both parties in the peace negotiations [i.e., Duterte and the Maoists] is the interest of the Filipino people to address the roots of poverty and achieve a just and lasting peace."

While the CPP and its front organizations continued to hail Duterte as progressive and reiterate their desire to work with him, the military leadership latched onto his February 5 speech. Defense Secretary Lorenzana delivered a speech to a press conference on February 7 in which he declared that Duterte had asserted that there was no difference between the CPP and the terrorist group, Abu Sayyaf. The military, he said, was launching an "all-out war" against the Communists.

That afternoon, the Manila chapters of the front organizations of the CPP marched to the presidential palace to appeal to Duterte to "urgently resume the peace negotiations." Not one of their statements denounced Duterte, but all blamed sections of the military leadership for leading him astray. The marchers were dispersed by the presidential security forces.



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