

Philippine administration steps up police-state measures

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At the instigation of the administration of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, steps have been taken this month to intensify the so-called war on drugs which is being used to prepare police state measures against the working class.

The lower Congressional house has now restored the death penalty for drug-related crimes. The military formally joined Duterte's anti-drug war. The police have re-started their operations against drugs. And Duterte, after visiting the military junta in Thailand, has once again publicly threatened to impose martial law on the pretext of eliminating drugs.

Early this month, the Lower House approved House Bill No. 4727, re-imposing the penalty of Reclusion Perpetua and the death penalty for drug-related crimes. Reclusion Perpetua, a far more stringent version of life imprisonment, fixes the minimum sentence at 30 years without parole and includes a life-long ban on holding political office. The bill has now gone to the Senate where political allies of Duterte are also in majority.

Underscoring the disarray of the political party of former President Benigno Aquino III, half of the Liberal party congressmen voted for the bill. Party leaders had previously made strenuous public avowals to vote against the death penalty.

The Maoist Makabayan bloc voted against the bill. In a statement to the *Sun Star Daily*, Makabayan bloc member, Carlos Isagani Zarate said, "The Makabayan bloc is vehemently against the measure even with its supposedly watered down version, as the death penalty bill is deliberately anti-poor." He added that "this will be no different from the current spate of extra-judicial killings wherein 99 percent of the victims were poor."

Zarate's opposition is entirely hypocritical. Four Makabayan members hold key positions in Duterte's cabinet and bear political responsibility for his policies, including the brutal anti-drug war.

Initially bill covered 21 crimes, including plunder of public funds, bribery and murder, but the lower house whittled the list down to just drug-related crimes, for which the maximum penalty is death and the minimum penalty is Reclusion Perpetua.

Other draconian legislative measures are also being prepared. Next in the agenda is the expansion of Duterte's war on crime to include children as young as nine years of age.

Backed by the Speaker of the House, Pantaleon Alvarez, a bill to lower the minimum age of criminal responsibility to nine years is now under deliberation. The bill declares as state policy, "that the Filipino youth shall be taught to accept responsibility for their words and deeds as early as possible, and not to unduly pamper them with impunity from criminal responsibility upon reaching the age of nine years."

Also this month, the Philippine National Police has re-launched its campaign against drugs. "This time," Police Chief Ronald dela Rosa claimed, "we will make sure that this will become less bloody if not bloodless campaign."

Within 24 hours, the police announced eight crime suspects have been killed in separate gun battles and another 21 have been arrested in the province of Bulacan, just north of Manila. Within a week, the police reported an additional nine crime suspects had been killed and 446 arrested nationwide.

The official numbers are now 60 killed from police operations, over 4,000 alleged drug suspects arrested, over 23,000 drug users surrendering to the police and more than 205,000 houses visited by police in the house-to-house campaign of intimidation.

The previous campaign from July 2016 to January 2017 resulted in over 2,500 drug suspects killed in police operations with a 97-percent kill rate, that, according to the Reuters news agency, was "the strongest proof yet that the police were summarily shooting drug suspects."

The police also went to over 6,800,000 houses threatening and bullying residents, resulting in more than 1,175,000 million declaring themselves either drug addicts or drug suspects or both.

Another 4,525 were killed and attributed to death squads which, according to Amnesty International, have closed links to, and paid off by, the police.

The police campaign was brought to a halt following the exposure of police involvement in the kidnapping for extortion and murder of South Korean businessman Jee Ick Joo in December 2016. The ensuing public controversy forced Duterte to pull the police off his war on drugs and to make a show of “cleaning up” the force. Some 40 percent were accused of corruption and a score of officers were sent off to war-ridden posts in the southern Philippines.

While the police no longer reports the number of alleged drug suspects killed by death squads, the summary or extrajudicial killings continue albeit at a slower rate of about five per day, down from 30 murders a day.

Duterte has also moved to militarize and centralize the war on drugs. He has formed the Inter-Agency Committee on Anti-Illegal Drugs composed representatives from 21 government entities, including the defense department, the armed forces, the national police, agriculture department, and even the education department.

Significantly, the social welfare department headed by the Maoist Judy Taguiwalo has also been included in the committee, underscoring the political complicity of the Maoists in Duterte’s war on drugs.

Nominally headed by the civilian Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), the military has assigned a 500-man task force to provide the “muscle” to the committee’s operations.

The real purpose of the war on drugs is to establish a vast police-state apparatus that will be used to suppress social opposition from workers and the poor. It is no accident that the vast majority of the victims of the war on drugs come from the poorest layers of society.

Social tensions are already erupting. In the same week that the police re-launched their war on drugs, hundreds of urban poor took over 5,000 units of unoccupied government housing at five sites in the province of Bulacan, near Manila.

More have followed suit. As of March 17, an estimated 15,000 homeless have reported to have occupied a total 8,500 units of empty government housing despite Duterte accusing them of “anarchy” and warning of brutal eviction.

Duterte is openly preparing for dictatorship. In 25 speeches and interviews since August 2016, he has either threatened to impose martial law or insisted he already had the power to impose draconian measures anyway. The president has repeatedly outlined how he could end the limits to martial law set by the 1987 constitution.

In March 24, speaking to the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce of the advantages of martial law, Duterte chillingly stated: “There is no more court. I do not have to go to the court to apply for a search warrant. I do not have to go the courts to secure a warrant of arrest. Martial law, just like [the dictator] Mr. Marcos, he used the *aso* (Arrest, Search, Seizure Order). It’s a cruel process and it is taken care of by the military.”

These preparations for dictatorial rule are being advanced as opposition grows to the brutal methods of the anti-drug war. Opinion surveys, while reported by the media as revealing strong support for Duterte himself, nevertheless indicate deep hostility to his police state measures and the danger of dictatorship.

A Social Weather Station survey conducted in December, revealed that an overwhelming 80 percent of the population feared that they or a loved one would be killed as part of Duterte’s war on drugs. Some 94 percent wanted illegal drug trade suspects be arrested and kept alive. Over 60 percent declared that extrajudicial killing was not a solution but a serious problem of the current administration.

Even more revealing, another survey, conducted by Pulse Asia in January 2017, showed that 74 percent of the public disagreed with imposing martial law for any reason. Significantly, among the working class and the poor, it found that opposition to martial law skyrocketed from 12 percent in September 2016 to 76 percent in December 2016.

The ruling elites are acutely aware, that amid the growing danger of US imperialist war against China and Russia and the deepening crisis of the global capitalism, a social explosion of the working class and poor, internationally and in the Philippines, will sooner rather than later occur and are preparing accordingly.



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