

Duterte declares martial law on Philippine island of Mindanao

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On Tuesday, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte placed the southern island of Mindanao under martial law and threatened to extend military rule throughout the country. The declaration suspends the writ of habeas corpus and authorizes the arrest without warrant of any of Mindanao's 21 million inhabitants. Duterte explicitly sanctioned the military to shoot anyone who violates curfew.

The declaration was ostensibly in response to a terrorist attack staged on the city of Marawi by a local affiliate of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The details regarding the incident are still hazy and the official government accounts are contradictory.

Behind the imposition of martial law lies a profound social crisis and the geopolitical machinations of Washington. Looking to improve ties with China, immensely soured by Washington's war drive in the South China Sea, Duterte has sought to reorient Manila's diplomatic and economic relations away from the US and toward both Beijing and Moscow. On the day martial law was declared, Duterte had arrived in Moscow where he was scheduled to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to hammer out details of a military cooperation agreement.

Throughout this reorientation, the country's military brass, who were trained by and are loyal to US imperialism, have moved to subvert Duterte's pivot away from Washington. They have become increasingly bold in their maneuvers, publicly contradicting and countermanding the president. When Duterte declared he was canceling the US basing deal in the country or ending US war games with the Philippines, Defense Secretary Lorenzana repudiated the president's statements. Duterte has made no effort to gainsay Lorenzana and has increasingly granted him free rein to run the country.

Duterte has sought to secure the loyalty of his military and police forces by launching his fascistic war on drugs, a campaign that has resulted in the murders of at least 9,000 people since July 2016.

The martial law announcement was made in Moscow, not by the president, but by Lorenzana. A presidential spokesperson stated that martial law had been declared and turned over the microphone to Lorenzana.

When President Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law in

1972, it was on the basis of a carefully prepared proclamation, whose pretexts included a number of bombings staged over several years. Duterte presented no such document with the announcement. Marcos used the military to seize power in 1972; in 2017, it appears that the military is increasingly using Duterte to its own ends.

Lorenzana declared that the president needed to leave Russia immediately and return to the Philippines to deal with the emergency. Duterte's meetings with Putin would be canceled, Lorenzana said, and the president was too busy to speak to the press. It was not until Duterte was in flight to the Philippines that he finally issued a statement, via a Facebook video. Duterte said Marcos's use of law had been "very good" and his declaration would not be "any different from what President Marcos did. I'll be harsh."

On arrival in Manila, Duterte threatened to declare martial law throughout the entire country, claiming there were also ISIS agents on the northern island of Luzon. When asked by reporters for the official declaration, Duterte claimed he had forgotten it at the hotel in Moscow. He later claimed this was "a joke," and the presidential palace eventually produced the official declaration. Duterte announced that Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff Eduardo Año would serve as martial-law administrator of Mindanao.

The pretext for martial law has been the subject of wildly varying accounts. Lorenzana declared that 100 gunmen loyal to Maute, the Philippine wing of ISIS, under the leadership of Isnilon Hapilon, had attacked Marawi City. He claimed that they had seized a hospital, City Hall, a church, and a public school and burned a number of them to the ground. They had occupied the city's main thoroughfare and were holding hundreds hostage.

As Duterte flew to Manila, the narrative rapidly unraveled. Captain Joan Petinglay, spokesperson for the military's Western Mindanao Command, the regional group directly responsible for events in Marawi, told the press that only 15 gunmen loyal to Hapilon were in Marawi. It further emerged that these forces had not attacked the city but had begun shooting after they were raided by the military. Petinglay described the reports of Hapilon burning a school and seizing a hospital as "disinformation."

AFP public affairs office chief, Colonel Edgard Arevalo, declared on Wednesday that the “situation in Marawi has been stabilized. Security forces are in full control of the situation. The armed men we are dealing with are not ISIS but [members of a] local terrorist group.”

In other words, according to the military’s own spokespersons, the entire pretext given by Lorenzana for martial law was fabricated. A death count of 20 claimed in the encounters also varies widely. This figure includes only Maute and military members, not civilians, suggesting it was a firefight, not a siege of the city.

Hapilon, and the Maute group, are members of the terror group Abu Sayyaf, an organization established by the CIA with assistance from the Corazon Aquino administration in the late 1980s.

The CIA funded and armed the group out of elements returning from Afghanistan where they had fought alongside the Taliban with Washington’s backing. The CIA sought to use Abu Sayyaf to split the Muslim insurgent movement in the southern Philippines.

Abu Sayyaf, which rapidly degenerated into a gang best known for kidnapping tourists for ransom money, has repeatedly served as a pretext for US military intervention in the country. In 2016, Hapilon pledged allegiance to ISIS and in January 2017 an ISIS web site declared he was the head of their work in the Philippines.

Big business immediately supported military dictatorship. The Management Association of the Philippines described martial law as “a good signal to the business community.” The International Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines declared it was “a welcome development” while the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry described it as “a plus point” for Duterte.

The entire ruling class has embraced military dictatorship with not a single political figure opposing martial law. According to the Philippine constitution, drawn up following the Marcos dictatorship, any martial law declaration must be ratified within 48 hours by the legislature. By seemingly universal consent, the leading representatives of both the Senate and the House have declared that their legislative bodies see no need to review the declaration.

Former President Aquino declined to comment. Vice President Leni Robredo, the highest ranking member of the opposition party, held a press conference in the military Camp Aguinaldo alongside leading generals. She declared: “Let us trust our AFP ... whatever it is that is needed, let us support them.”

Those legislators responsible for filing impeachment charges against Duterte for his failure to prosecute the Philippine claim in the South China Sea against Beijing, likewise presented no opposition to martial law, but said it might be needed for longer than 60 days.

These responses clearly expose that there is no constituency

for the defense of democracy in any section of the bourgeoisie.

Tail-ending the bourgeoisie are the front organizations of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The CPP is in the advanced stage of peace negotiations with the president, and have appointed four of his ministers. The Maoists are now part of the cabinet of a martial law government.

Even as military dictatorship is imposed, the CPP is still looking to secure advantage from its relationship with Duterte. The CPP youth front organization held a prayer vigil on Wednesday, not against martial law but for the “victims in Marawi.” It declared it would light candles to “urgently call the attention of Duterte on the dangers of martial law” and “we would like to remind the good president that Philippine history itself is a testament to the failure of martial law.”

The chief beneficiary of military rule will be the US. The *Washington Post* wrote on Wednesday that with the martial law declaration, “Duterte may be more willing to work with the United States, experts said, potentially changing the dynamic among Washington, Manila and Beijing.”

While Duterte’s entire cabinet was in Moscow with him, a senior US government official was on the ground in Manila. US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs Susan Thornton happened to be in the country for the 24-hour window in which martial law was declared.

As Washington supported the military dictatorship of Marcos, which murdered thousands to sustain its hold on power, so now it will embrace martial law under Duterte. During his less than 12 months as president, Duterte has overseen more the twice the number of state killings carried out during the entire military rule of Marcos. Washington already sanctions this slaughter.

A recently published transcript of US President Donald Trump’s phone call to Duterte on April 29 reveals that Trump opened the conversation by declaring: “I just want to congratulate you because I am hearing of the unbelievable job on the drug problem. Many countries have the problem, we have a problem, but what a great job you are doing and I just wanted to call and tell you that.”



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