

In landslide vote, Philippine legislature extends martial law

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During a special joint session held on Saturday, an overwhelming majority of both Houses of Congress voted to extend martial law and the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus on the southern island of Mindanao until December 31. In all, 245 congressmen and 18 senators voted for the extension, while 18 congressmen and four senators voted against it.

The landslide legislative endorsement of military dictatorship on Mindanao followed a ruling handed down by the Philippine Supreme Court on July 4 by an 11-3-1 vote that the declaration of martial law was constitutional.

Of the handful of dissenting legislators opposed to the extension, most declared that they were not opposed to military rule, but merely sought to compel the executive branch to seek legislative approval renewing the declaration every 60 days.

The Supreme Court ruling and the nearly unanimous legislative rubber stamp have set the stage for the extension of dictatorship on a nationwide scale. There is no legal hurdle to the extension of military rule, all that is lacking is a pretext.

There is no opposition to martial law in any section of the Filipino bourgeoisie. The entirety of the ruling class is madly scrambling to scrap civilian rule and hand the reins to a military dictatorship.

The country is still scarred by the brutal decade-and-a-half-long military rule of Ferdinand Marcos, and opposition to martial law has been a political shibboleth of long standing. The wholesale embrace of martial law by the Filipino ruling elites is a sharp expression of the crisis of class rule around the globe amid mounting social tensions.

The legislative endorsement, however, does not entail universal ruling class support for President Rodrigo Duterte, the volatile, fascistic death squad leader who ostensibly heads military rule. Martial law is seen by the bourgeois opposition as a means of disciplining the unstable president, and in particular of reorienting

Philippine foreign policy back firmly into the camp of Washington, the former colonial master of the Philippines.

Since he took office a year ago, Duterte has sought, through a series of volatile shifts and vulgar denunciations, to reorient Philippine foreign policy away from Washington and toward Beijing, and to a certain extent Moscow. He sought to placate Beijing by avoiding confrontation over the South China Sea, which Washington by military and legal maneuvers had transformed into a flashpoint for war. He announced that he was curtailing joint military exercises with the US military, and was considering ending the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) basing deal with the US signed by his predecessor.

The Philippine military brass has always been loyal above all to Washington. Their institutions were formed during American colonial rule, and one does not rise to the rank of general without receiving extensive training in the United States. Over the past year, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana developed the habit, increasingly bold in its exercise, of publicly gainsaying the President.

This was not sufficient, however. The volatile and insubordinate Duterte needed to be reined in. During Duterte's visit to Moscow, Lorenzana declared martial law, using the pretext of a conflict of long-standing in the city of Marawi with an elite family, Maute, and their extensive private army, which had occasionally identified itself with ISIS as a means of enhancing its prestige.

By Lorenzana's own admission, US Special Forces were involved in the government's attack on Marawi and the declaration of martial law, which occurred without Duterte's knowledge. Over the past 60 days, the once beautiful city of the northern shore of Lake Lanao has been gutted. Tens of the thousands of residents still trapped in the city have taken to eating sheets to deal with starvation. The city has been relentlessly bombed, each

sortie overseen by US surveillance planes. Government forces have engaged in house-to-house fighting, and US Special Forces have joined their attacks, explicitly authorized to shoot if fired upon.

Duterte held a joint press conference with Lorenzana, during which the latter confirmed the involvement of US forces. Duterte declared that he had not been informed of the US troop presence, and then he disappeared from the public eye for nearly two weeks. He held no meetings, gave no speeches or public appearances of any sort. The press began wildly speculating that he was ill. His press secretary repeatedly announced that he was “resting” and the press should be patient.

Washington meanwhile, latching on to the pretext that this was part of the fight against ISIS, began directly supplying and supporting the Philippine military, circumventing the presidential palace of Malacañang entirely. Sung Kim, US Ambassador to the Philippines, announced on separate occasions the delivery of Cessna surveillance planes, and various weaponry to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). He told an assembly of diplomats and officials on July 6, that Washington “will continue to stand by the Armed Forces of the Philippines”—not the Government of the Philippines—“as they courageously fight terrorism.”

Kim made clear, however, that if Duterte would toe the US line, Washington would endorse his murderous war on drugs. “I want to make clear that we completely understand that there is a serious situation here involving illegal use of drugs, and that the government is right to focus on this important problem, very serious problem for the Philippines,” he declared. To make his point perfectly clear, he concluded, “This is a good time to think about and reflect on America and America’s friendship with the Philippines.”

Lorenzana moved to use his powers as head of the martial law administration in Mindanao to formally restore military ties with Washington. To improve ties with Beijing last year, Duterte had canceled joint maritime exercises with US forces, which clearly targeted China. Lorenzana announced that the Philippine military would be launching a joint maritime drill in late June, which he gave the new name “Sama-sama” (Together).

From June 19 to 25, on the authority of Lorenzana, and with Duterte effectively in hiding, the US navy staged joint maritime operations with the Philippine military. A US littoral combat ship joined the Philippine vessel Gregorio Del Pilar, which Washington had donated to the Philippines several years ago specifically for patrolling

the South China Sea.

It was Lorenzana and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Eduardo Año who appeared before the Philippine Supreme Court in mid-June in a six-hour, closed-door session to argue the legal merits and necessity of martial law—not a civilian representative of the Executive branch.

Supreme Court Justice Francis Jardaleza wrote a separate concurring opinion fully endorsing martial law as constitutional. Jardaleza was the lead Philippine representative of the Aquino administration in its case against China’s South China Sea claim before The Hague, and he worked closely with the US attorney who argued the case. Washington directly appealed to former President Benigno Aquino on Jardaleza’s behalf, and he was appointed to the Supreme Court for his services. His strong vote for martial law is clearly indicative of Washington’s blessing for military rule as a means of furthering its interests.

By mid-July Duterte had re-emerged to public life and he delivered a speech on July 14 which revealed the effectiveness of Washington’s discipline. Gone was the denunciation of the American “sons of bitches,” and in its stead—“Let us give where credit is due. The United States helped the Armed Forces in this fight.”

In a direct reversal of his prior policy of pursuing military relations with Moscow and Beijing, he declared he could not enter into military alliances with other nations as that would violate the current US-Philippines defense agreement. “Do not make the mistake of putting something on my behavior,” he stated. “We have to remain with the Americans.”

In some of Duterte’s subsequent speeches the old, volatile figure occasionally re-emerged, but it is clear that Duterte has received Washington’s message. If he wants to stay in power he must follow the dictates of US imperialism.

As the joint legislature assembled on July 22 to give their unanimous rubber stamp approval to military dictatorship, the man who stood before the gathered assembly and instructed them to vote for its extension, was Delfin Lorenzana.



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