

Political showdown erupts in the Philippines

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Over the past week, long-simmering political tensions in Manila came to a head in an open standoff between Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and the ruling class political opposition. Duterte attempted to order the arrest of leading oppositionist, Senator Antonio Trillanes.

On August 31, Duterte signed Proclamation 572, revoking an amnesty extended to Trillanes by his predecessor President Benigno Aquino III, who pardoned Trillanes for leading two military coup attempts against Aquino's predecessor Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The proclamation was made public on September 4, as Duterte, traveling in Israel, had his administration request an arrest warrant for the senator.

The Makati regional trial court balked at the request, declaring that the amnesty extended to Trillanes by Aquino had suspended earlier criminal proceedings against the senator and that if the amnesty was lifted, he should not be arrested, but brought back to court. The Department of National Defense (DND) then ordered a military arrest, for which it claimed no warrant was needed.

Trillanes took up residence in his office in the Senate building, and Senate President Tito Sotto, at the request of the minority bloc, insisted that arresting officers would not be allowed inside the legislature. The next day Trillanes filed a request before the Supreme Court for a Temporary Restraining Order on the military arrest. In the midst of legal proceedings on September 6 and 7, the DND announced that it would not pursue the arrest of Trillanes, but would await a ruling on Duterte's revocation of the Senator's amnesty.

As of this morning, Trillanes remained within the legislature, but he had publicly declared his intention of leaving the building. Duterte, promising not to arrest him, dared the senator to do so.

The battlelines being drawn between Duterte and Trillanes are sharp and run deep. They express the twin

pressures upon the Filipino ruling class of geopolitical tensions and mounting social unrest.

Gathered around Trillanes are the remainders of the once powerful Liberal Party of former President Aquino, of which current Vice President Leni Robredo is now the head. A former Navy lieutenant and leader of the Magdalo Party, which represents restive sections of the military officer corps, Trillanes also has the backing of certain coup-plotting elements within the military.

To these forces is added the pseudo-left Akbayan party, which has been tied to the Liberal Party since 2010, and the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which over the past year broke its alliance with Duterte and denounced its erstwhile ally as a "fascist."

On Tuesday, in a two-hour televised interview staged with his legal adviser, Sal Panelo, Duterte declared that "a foreign country sympathetic to us" had supplied him with recordings of conversations that detailed how the Magdalo and Liberal parties and Joma Sison, head of the CPP, were plotting a military uprising to overthrow him.

While all the accused parties denied the allegation, they have conspired together in the past. Trillanes staged a military coup attempt in 2003 and was imprisoned. President Arroyo had begun to reorient Philippine diplomatic and economic ties toward China, so Washington responded with moves to destabilize her government. Magdalo attempted another military coup in February 2006, and with the full support of both Akbayan and the CPP, who coordinated their efforts with the military officers. The attempt fizzled.

In 2007, with the backing of Akbayan, Trillanes ran for Senate from his jail cell and was elected. Trillanes along with Bayan Muna, a political party closely tied to the CPP, filed treason charges against President Arroyo for signing a deal with China for the joint exploration

of the South China Sea.

In 2010, with the election of President Aquino, the Liberal Party took power, and shifted the Philippines' ties back to Washington. Manila, under Aquino, came to serve as the leading proxy in Washington's military drive against China, as part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia." Akbayan joined with the Liberal Party and rode its coattails to power. Akbayan representative Risa Hontiveros became a senator. Former President Arroyo was charged with corruption and arrested.

Duterte's election in 2016 reversed this course. In volatile fashion, he publicly attacked Washington and moved to establish diplomatic and economic ties with China on an unprecedented scale. As he consolidated and won the support of large sections of the ruling class, the Liberal Party crumbled, losing many members and most of its seats in the legislature. Its leaders chose to bide their time.

The May 2019 election is approaching, however, and the deadline for the declaration of candidacy is October 17. The various sections of the ruling class, in a ritual they conduct every three years, are renegotiating political ties.

The political maneuvering now occurs in an explosive social context. Anger is mounting among broad layers of the population over social inequality and skyrocketing prices of basic commodities.

During August, inflation hit 6.4 percent, the worst in a decade, while the price of basic foods, above all rice, went up substantially more. The press over the past three weeks has been full of pictures of people standing in line for hours to purchase government subsidized rice, of which they can buy a maximum of five kilos per person. The price of fish has gone up by as much as 20 percent, and vegetables as much as 35 percent.

This social anger is finding increasingly open expression. In the first half of 2018, the number of strikes went up nearly 20 percent over the same period in 2017.

In June, before the massive inflation set in, Duterte's approval rating had already dropped to 57 percent, its lowest point since he took office. While it has not been officially measured since, it has doubtless plummeted since.

Sison, founder and head of the Stalinist CPP, responded to Duterte's statements with an open appeal

on September 11 for support from the military. In 2016, he had publicly proclaimed the possibility of the CPP forming a "coalition government" with Duterte, and instructed several leading members of the CPP's front groups to enter Duterte cabinet.

On September 11, Sison claimed that he had not yet spoken to Trillanes, but stated that it "is no secret" that the CPP seeks to form a "broad united front of patriotic forces." In order for the ouster of Duterte to succeed, these "patriotic forces" needed to secure the support of "Duterte's own military and police forces." Sison, along with Trillanes and the Liberal Party, is looking for the police and military, which are still carrying out Duterte's death squad campaign against the poor, to shift allegiance into the rival camp, the one that is openly pro-Washington.

Anxious to shore up his political position, Duterte politely requested a private audience with US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim. No details of the meeting were released, but Kim subsequently tweeted: "Excellent meeting with President Duterte to discuss shared goals including defense priorities and economic partnership. Our alliance remains strong and ironclad."



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