Duterte allies dominate Philippine midterm election campaign

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21 January 2019

The Philippines is in the thick of final preparations for the 2019 elections. At stake are 12 senate seats, out of 24, and all of the seats in the House of Representatives, as well as provincial, city and municipal offices. The election is scheduled for May 13, and campaigning will officially commence on February 12.

Politics in the Philippines is an exceedingly bloody affair, and each election is marked by scores of political murders. Already in the 2019 election, which is not yet officially opened, a congressman has been gunned down on the orders of his political rival. If local elections are included, where blood is shed with impunity, the death toll for the 2019 elections already exceeds 10.

This has long been the face of Philippine "democracy," which was created from the ground up by direct American colonial rule and shaped by US imperialism. It is a scramble by rival oligarchic dynasties for the lucrative spoils and repressive apparatus of the state. Each election they form themselves into parties, most of which have no platform but are tied to the interests of a particular family or set of families. These parties gradually form themselves into two rival coalitions vying for office. The coalitions generally hold until the next election, when all bets are off and the realignments begin.

The 2019 elections will be dominated by the same names that have crowded every ballot sheet for the past half century: Marcos, Estrada, Aquino, Roxas, Osmena. Disgraced former President Joseph Estrada and two of his sons are running for office. The eldest daughter of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Imee Marcos, is running for the Senate. The election campaign of 2019 will be dominated by the coterie of a former dictator, politicians facing long-standing corruption charges, movie stars, and military men who have attempted on multiple occasions to overthrow the government by coup.

Like its ruling class counterparts around the world, the Philippine bourgeoisie is in crisis. Massive social inequality and the growing waves of international class struggle have produced a crisis of class rule. The Philippine elite has gathered in its majority behind the fascistic populist, President Rodrigo Duterte, in mobilizing the violence of the state against the working class and poor of the country.

Survey results published by the Social Weather Station (SWS) in December revealed that of the 12 front-runners for the Senate, eleven of them are allies of the president. The sole opposition figure in the top 12 is Liberal Party politician and failed presidential candidate, Mar Roxas. Front runners, Grace Poe, who was the leading presidential rival to Duterte in 2016, and Cynthia Villar, Senator and wife of a former presidential candidate, have now both aligned themselves with the Duterte administration.

The size of the dominant coalition is striking; it has brought together dynasties which were formerly fierce rivals. This alignment expresses the unanimity of the ruling class in its endorsement of Duterte's War on Drugs, which is in fact a campaign of state violence against the poor and the working class, which has over the past two years racked up a body count in the tens of thousands.

On January 11, the non-governmental organization Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) published a report entitled "ACLED 2018: The Year in Review." It stated, "The Philippines is a war zone in disguise. More civilians were killed in the Philippines in 2018 than in Iraq, Somalia, or the Democratic Republic of Congo—highlighting the

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lethality of President Rodrigo Duterte's 'War on Drugs'-*cum*-state terror campaign. Throughout the year, the Philippines saw similar levels of fatalities from direct civilian targeting as Afghanistan." The report added, "The Philippines ... while not facing a conventional war on the scale of Afghanistan or Syria, is one of the deadliest places in the world to be a civilian."

The unanimity of Duterte's coalition, which has brought together the combined force of former presidents Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, previous mortal political enemies, is based on its endorsement of this state violence. This orientation is clearly revealed in their combined efforts to lower the age of criminal accountability in the country from 15 to 9. A bill to this effect has already passed the House by an overwhelming majority and is poised to pass the Senate as well.

Scores of children have already been killed in Duterte's war on drugs. The new legislation targets children as "drug couriers." Children under the age of 9 accused by the police of crimes will face mandatory community service, while those nine and older will be sent to prison as adults. The Duterte coalition has given full-throated endorsement to this legislation.

Not content with his ruling class backing, Duterte is bringing his own coterie into the elections in an attempt to sharpen the fascistic character of elite politics in the country. His daughter, and mayor of the southern city of Davao, Sarah Duterte Carpio, is running for Senate. Presidential assistant Christopher 'Bong' Go, in many ways the brains behind the 'war on drugs,' and the head of police, Bato de la Rosa, the man directly responsible for its implementation, are likewise running for senate and are currently polling in 14th and 15th slots.

The bourgeois opposition to Duterte has gathered behind the platform of the Liberal Party of former President Benigno Aquino III. The Liberal Party, now largely led by Leni Robredo, the current vice president, has formed an "Opposition Coalition." The only parties which have joined them are the pseudo-left group, Akbayan, and the right-wing military party, Magdalo, which under the leadership of Antonio Trillanes has been associated with several military coup attempts. Akbayan emerged out of a merger of a section of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines and various Social Democratic organizations in the 1990s and eventually integrated itself into the Liberal Party apparatus.

The "Opposition Coalition" has focused its political ire not on the fascistic policies of the Duterte administration, but rather on his geopolitical realignment and his establishment of improved economic and diplomatic ties with China. Above all, they have denounced Duterte for not escalating Manila's confrontation with Beijing in the South China Sea. In this matter, Akbayan has played the leading role, heading street protests against Xi Jinping and Duterte and decrying "Chinese imperialism." Among the Senatorial candidates of the Opposition Coalition is former Solicitor General Florin Hilbay, who represented the Aquino administration in its legal case against Beijing's South China Sea claim in The Hague in 2015–16.

The Liberal Party coalition represents sections of the Philippines bourgeoisie who are alarmed at Duterte's departure from the established ties with their former colonial master and are looking to return the Philippines firmly to the camp of Washington. Their attacks on Duterte have been combined with unstinting praise for his Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, who they see as a balancing weight in favour of Washington within the Duterte administration. The fact that the man they are praising is directly overseeing the second year of martial law on the island of Mindanao indicates that they have no genuine concern for democracy or opposition to the dictatorship which is being prepared. They are merely looking to tie it to Washington.

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