

Duterte consolidates hold on Philippine politics in midterm election

Joseph Santolan
15 May 2019

On Monday the Philippines held midterm elections contesting thousands of positions, from city council and mayoral posts to the national legislature, including 12 senatorial seats. At the center of the election was the bid by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, now three years in office, to consolidate the hold which he exercises through his allies over Philippine politics. While the election results are still being officially tallied, the unofficial results reveal that the ruling class opponents to Duterte have suffered a historic defeat, securing not a single seat in the Senate.

Since his election in 2016, Duterte has, through a series of party alliances, secured the support of a majority of the Philippine political establishment, including the backing of a supermajority in the House of Representatives. As Duterte launched a fascistic war on drugs, which has now claimed the lives of tens of thousands of poor Filipinos, murdered by police or vigilante death squads, the ruling class in near unanimity lined up in support of his administration.

The one body where the minority opposition still exercised significant sway was the upper house of the legislature. Organized in the Liberal Party, the political apparatus of former President Benigno Aquino III and of current Vice President Leni Robredo, they were able from their position in the Senate to serve as a check on some of the measures which Duterte sought to implement.

The Liberal Party opposition organized its 2019 senatorial bid in alliance with the right-wing party of former military coup plotters, Magdalo, and the pseudo-left organization, Akbayan, naming their slate Otso Diretso (Straight Eight).

Based on the current unofficial counts, all of the available 12 seats in the Senate will go to allies of Duterte. There is an outside possibility that Bam Aquino, an Otso Diretso candidate, might secure the 12th slot.

Every prior midterm election in Philippine history has seen a swing in favor of the opposition party. The defeat of the ruling class opposition by Duterte is unprecedented. At the heart of Otso Diretso's defeat is the character of the campaign which they ran.

Duterte's fascistic policies, martial law and death squads

are a sharp expression of a global trend. Confronting the crisis of world capitalism and the growth of social opposition in the working class, the capitalist class is everywhere preparing the apparatus of authoritarian forms of rule.

There is no democratic opposition to these dictatorial maneuvers in any section of the bourgeoisie. They are all of them committed to the suppression of the working class.

The opposition to Duterte within sections of the Philippine bourgeoisie is not mobilized on the basis of defending democracy, but rather in support of the interests of Washington, the country's former colonial master.

Over the past three years Duterte has, in a volatile fashion, reoriented Manila's diplomatic and economic relations away from Washington and begun to cultivate deeper trade and political ties with Beijing. Otso Diretso made this the focus of their campaign, denouncing Duterte as a stooge of China, decrying him for being unwilling to go to war with Beijing in the South China Sea.

Among the candidates fielded by Otso Diretso were Mar Roxas, scion of a political dynasty, former New York based investment banker and failed presidential candidate. A representative above all of American finance capital, Roxas outspent every other candidate and still failed to secure a seat.

Other opposition senatorial candidates included Gary Alejano, a former military officer guilty of multiple coup attempts, and Florin Hilbay, Solicitor General under the Aquino administration responsible for bringing Manila's case against Beijing before the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea. They spearheaded the Otso Diretso campaign to demand Duterte take an aggressive stance against China.

Four Otso Diretso senatorial candidates in late April attempted to travel to the disputed Scarborough shoal in the South China Sea to plant the Philippine flag as a culminating gesture of their campaign. The opposition cultivated the worst forms of anti-Chinese chauvinism, denouncing Chinese workers in the Philippines, speaking of a "Chinese

invasion,” and posting images on social media of printed Chinese language material in the Philippines as evidence of Duterte’s service as a “puppet” of Chinese “imperialism.”

At the same time, Otso Diretso demanded and secured censorship on Facebook and other social media platforms. Taking their cue from demands raised by the Democratic Party in the United States, they spoke of “weaponized social media” and secured from Facebook a ban on over 200 Facebook pages, one of which had over 3.6 million followers. Facebook stated that the accounts were removed because of “coordinated inauthentic behavior.”

In a word, Otso Diretso opposed Duterte from the right.

Current tallies show that 45.8 million people voted in the midterm elections, approximately 72 percent of the registered electorate, an average turnout for a midterm election in the Philippines. The only precincts that cast a substantial majority of ballots for the Otso Diretso candidates were bastions of the extremely wealthy. Forbes Park, Ayala Alabang, Greenhills, White Plains—the gated communities of the rich—all voted for the opposition.

Among the top vote getters were Cynthia Villar and Grace Poe. Villar, who is an incumbent senator and wife of a former presidential candidate, represents real estate money and is from one of the wealthiest families in the country. Poe is a former presidential candidate, whose husband was an intelligence contractor for the CIA a decade ago.

Two new faces rose to win seats in the Senate, both on the basis of their ties to Duterte. Bato dela Rosa was installed as the head of the Philippine National Police when Duterte took office and was directly responsible for implementing his war on drugs. Bong Go was the special advisor to the President, and more than any other figure was the author and implementor of the right-wing policies of his administration.

The new ruling coalition in the Senate is not as stable as might at first appear. The leading candidates in Duterte’s alliance are established politicians who have attached themselves to his presidency out of a political expediency that may shift. While it lasts, however, Duterte has stated that he intends to use this supermajority to attempt to reinstate the death penalty, to lower the age of criminality to nine, and to remove term limits on the presidency.

A portion of the support for Duterte’s candidates stems from the support which his right-wing populism has among some poor layers of the population. The Philippines is a country with an immense and impoverished petty bourgeoisie—small shopkeepers and owners of micro-businesses. In the absence of an independent movement of the working class, the President’s foul-mouthed denunciations of the elite and of the Catholic church have found wide play.

This is expressed in the collapse of the long-standing

political dynasty of Joseph Estrada, the former movie star who pioneered a milder form of populism during his rise from mayor to president. His brand of posturing as a man of the people has now been supplanted by the right-wing lumpen populism of Duterte. In the 2019 election, his entire family lost all of their political seats, in the senate, in the Manila mayoral race, and in their home base of San Juan.

Like Duterte’s war on drugs, his fascistic program and policies are fostering the growth of extreme right-wing groups which will inevitably be used against growing opposition to deteriorating living standards.

The top political party to secure congressional seats under the party list system was the Anti-Crime and Terrorism through Communist Involvement and Support (ACT-CIS) party. Associated with the Tulfo family of shock journalists, whose fascistic rants in the newspapers and television are closely tied to Duterte, ACT-CIS secured twice as many votes as the second highest party list group. ACT-CIS is an organization founded by former police chiefs dedicated to creating vigilante organizations with government funding, and among its leading legislation is the “community informant reward act.”

The party list organization Duterte Youth won over 350,000 votes, not enough to secure a seat. The organization seems consciously modeled on the Hitler Youth. Its members wear black uniforms with red armbands and advocate violent anti-communism and mandatory military training for high school and college students. Their election statement published on May 6, addressed itself to allegedly “communist” youth, declaring “We will finish you on the streets along with your rapist, criminal and terrorist comrades.” The head of Duterte youth is a member of the Duterte cabinet, head of the National Youth Council.

These far-right organisations, while not yet a mass movement of the type that emerged in Germany in the 1930s, constitute a warning of the police state methods that will be used against workers amid a worsening economic, social and political crisis. Only the development of a movement of the working class independent of all factions of the ruling class and their Maoist allies, and fighting for a socialist and internationalist perspective, can counter this danger.



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