Political crisis in the Philippines intensifies

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The political crisis in the Philippines has reached a very advanced stage. Mass anger over catastrophic social conditions, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is emerging alongside machinations within rival sections of the elite for the removal of President Rodrigo Duterte. The possibility of a constitutional coup against Duterte, through the withdrawal of military support for his presidency and the installation of Vice President Leni Robredo in his place, is being openly discussed.

Duterte took office in 2016, with more support from the wealthiest layers of Philippines society than any other candidate. A substantial majority of the middle, upper middle, and upper class voted for Duterte according to exit polls. These social layers were enthusiastic about Duterte's law-and-order agenda, including his promise to violently suppress the poor through a "war on drugs." His right-wing, fascistic rhetoric appealed to them as a means of preventing the emergence of social unrest, which would jeopardize their property interests.

While Duterte's own party held very little clout in the legislature after the election, by the time of his inauguration, he was backed by a legislative super-majority of unprecedented size, comprising nearly every elite party in the country.

Duterte also received the enthusiastic backing of the national democratic movement, the wide range of parties and sectoral organizations that follow the political line of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The Makabayan Coalition, the legislative umbrella organization of the national democratic movement, pledged support for Duterte and contributed to his super-majority.

That a substantial portion of the ruling elite is now turning against Duterte is a result of two basic developments.

First, in an attempt to develop the notoriously poor conditions of Philippine infrastructure, which have long stunted the expansion of capital investment, Duterte has turned to China for loans to fund his "Build Build Build" program. However, Washington's aggressive moves against Beijing in the South China Sea and throughout the region, have made it impossible to placate US imperialism and improve ties with China. Duterte has thus downplayed the Philippine claim to the disputed waters in the South China Sea, and ended involvement in some of the most aggressive US war games in the region.

The Philippines was a colony of US imperialism for fifty years, and the political and economic power of the elite has been built around the economic interests of its former colonial master. As Duterte reoriented the alignment of Philippine foreign policy away from Washington, layers of the elite most closely tied to Washington became increasingly displeased.

Second, despite his fascistic war on drugs and the imposition of martial law in the southern island of Mindanao, Duterte has proven incapable of stemming the mounting tide of social unrest. Mass anger at inequality, and the callous indifference of the state to the immense suffering of the population, under conditions of the pandemic, have produced a social powder keg. The ruling-class opposition is looking to shore up the power of the state, under a semblance of competent leadership, by removing the increasingly despised Duterte.

These concerns are doubtless shared by sections of the top military brass. The Philippine military was built from the ground up by Washington, and many of its leadership graduated from West Point, or received training in Annapolis. Their loyalty is ultimately to Washington. Sections of the officer corps have demonstrated repeatedly over the past three decades that they will attempt to carry out a coup d'état, if they disagree with the policies of the civilian government.

The political crisis centers around Vice President Leni Robredo, a leading member of the opposition Liberal Party. The Philippine constitution mandates the selection of the President and Vice President, not through a party slate, but on the basis of the highest vote-getter for each office. The vice president almost invariably winds up as the political rival of the president and, in times of unrest, the focus of elite opposition turns to the removal of the president and installation of the vice president, via a constitutional coup.

Duterte has gone on the offensive. He has shut down ABS-CBN, the largest media company in the country, which operated television and radio networks, and has refused to

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renew its franchise. The network, which was associated with the political opposition, was issued with cease-and-desist orders in late May, and compelled to end all broadcasts.

The pro-Robredo faction is seeking to build on the historical precedent established in 2001, when the former president, Joseph Estrada, was removed. Mobilized against the president on the basis of corruption charges, a largely middle-class protest movement demanded Estrada's ouster. The most influential sections of the business community had issued statements calling for his removal.

The tide turned against Estrada when his Defense Secretary and the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, along with various heads of the military and police, announced that they were withdrawing support from the president and backing the installation of the vice president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. A mass resignation of cabinet secretaries followed. Estrada abdicated and Arroyo took up the reins of power.

This was a constitutional coup and its center was the shifting support of the military. There are strong indications that the elite opposition is now angling to repeat this pattern by inducing the military to withdraw its support for Duterte and arrange the installation of Robredo.

At the center of these machinations is the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the range of organizations that follow its political line, in the national democratic movement. The CPP played a critical role in whipping up support for the removal of Estrada and in stabilizing the newly installed Arroyo administration, denouncing attacks on Arroyo during the first year of her presidency.

The CPP is a nationalist organization founded on the program of Stalinism. It insists that the tasks of the revolution in the Philippines are not yet socialist in character, but national and democratic only. A section of the capitalist class will therefore, they argue, play a progressive role. Unsurprisingly, the party's history has consisted in an uninterrupted series of attempted alliances with different factions of the elite. The enthusiastic support that the party extended to Duterte in 2016 was an expression of this program.

The founder and ideological leader of the CPP, Jose Maria Sison, has issued repeated statements over the past half year, ruminating on how to remove Duterte from office. In a talk delivered to the International League of People's Struggles (ILPS) on September 11, Sison outlined the scenario: a military coup.

Sison declared that a majority of military officers were either "patriotic or pro-US," and that these two factions constituted the basis for the withdrawal of military support from Duterte. The role of a mass movement of workers and youth in this schema would be to encourage the military to withdraw its support.

In a statement written in February, Sison claimed that certain police and military officers, whom he referred to as "patriotic elements," and his "comrades," had informed him that they believed that "a broad united front of mass actions" was needed before the military would move. Sison stated that "the anti-Duterte groups in the military and police will not act against Duterte unless they see protest mass actions, with hundreds of thousands of participants in the national capital region."

The CPP's long-standing pretext for the concessions and support that it provides to its elite allies is that these are a necessary component of peace negotiations. Julie de Lima, interim chair of the peace panel of the National Democratic Front of the CPP, announced on September 18 that the party would begin engaging in peace talks, not with the president, but with Robredo and the Liberal Party.

She called on all "democratic forces to build the broadest united front" behind these arrangements with Robredo, and held out the possibility of the "ouster" of Duterte.

The role of Stalinism is to attempt to bring about an alignment between the emerging struggles of workers, young people and the oppressed masses of the Philippines, on the one hand, and a section of the elite, on the other. This constitutes a fundamental betrayal and subordinates the interests of the working class to its enemy, the bourgeoisie.

There is no section of the elite in the Philippines interested in defending democracy or advancing the interests of the working masses. The Liberal Party opposition, currently being promoted by the CPP, was allied to Duterte in 2013. The CPP itself backed Duterte in 2016.

The only means for workers, young people and the oppressed masses of the Philippines to fight against dictatorship and defend themselves against the attacks on their lives by the fascistic Duterte, is by breaking from the CPP and its Stalinist politics. Workers have their own interests, independent of every section of the capitalist class. The fight to defend these interests requires the struggle for socialism and internationalism.

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