

Forty-eight years since Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines

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On September 23, 1972, forty-eight years ago today, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos issued Proclamation 1081, imposing martial law on the country. Using its dictatorial powers, Marcos oversaw a brutal crackdown on the working masses of the Philippines. He used his military dictatorship to remain in power until 1986, when a mass movement ousted him and a section of the military and Washington withdrew their support for his rule.

Martial law was not a surprise. Although the date of its imposition was unexpected, everyone in Philippine politics had been openly discussing its likelihood since the beginning of 1970. Protests denouncing the threat of martial law had repeatedly shaken Manila over the previous two years. The ruling elite discussed it in the legislature, and major daily papers published statements advocating or denouncing it.

The framework for military dictatorship in the Philippines had been erected by the United States, which enshrined the presidential power of martial law in the Constitution of its former colony, prior to granting independence. A number of prior presidents had threatened to impose military rule—ending elections, closing the legislature, and suspending the writ of habeas corpus. None, however, had succeeded.

What distinguished Marcos' imposition of military rule from the attempts of his predecessors was the global crisis of capitalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that produced conditions of mass upheaval and revolutionary situations internationally. The demonstrations and strikes in the Philippines paralleled similar events throughout the world.

The response of the ruling elite was to turn to dictatorial forms of rule. Marcos' proclamation was part of a rising tide of global authoritarianism. The elite opponents of Marcos fought to secure the reins of the coming dictatorship for themselves; they did not fight to defend democracy. There was unanimity in the entire ruling class that dictatorship was necessary to prevent the emergence of a revolutionary struggle for power by the Filipino working class and oppressed masses.

Marcos had the military stage bombings throughout Manila in 1971-72, to provide a pretext for his declaration. At the beginning of 1972, he met with Indonesian dictator Suharto, who had risen to power in the genocidal crushing of the mass Indonesian Communist Party in 1965-66, to discuss the tactics of establishing military rule.

Marcos began convening regular meetings of a cabal of ten military leaders and two civilians to arrange the details of martial law. This council became known as the Rolex Twelve, because Marcos gave each of them a Rolex watch after he had established his dictatorship.

On September 22, Marcos' Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile staged an attack on his own motorcade. We know that the attack was

staged because Enrile himself confessed to it in an interview with the *New York Times* in 1986. Seizing on this final pretext, Marcos signed Proclamation 1081 and imposed martial law on the morning of September 23. Because of a superstitious predilection for multiples of the number seven, he backdated the declaration to September 21, thus rendering the official date for the declaration of martial law a historical falsehood.

Marcos shut down all of the press, television and radio networks. He suspended the writ of habeas corpus and used the powers of martial law to carry out mass arrests. His bourgeois opponents were released within weeks and either went into exile abroad, or embraced the dictatorship. Only two members of the elite opposition remained in prison: Jose Diokno and Ninoy Aquino.

The elite opposition to Marcos had centered around Ninoy Aquino, who had sought to use the mass unrest of the time to remove Marcos from office and install himself in power. Aquino met with several CIA operatives of the US embassy in the weeks leading up to Marcos' declaration, and told them that he was thinking of attempting to seize power, with the assistance of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). But he assured them that if he succeeded he intended to impose martial law and stage public executions by firing squad. There was no section of the elite opposition that defended democracy.

The brutal weight of military rule was brought to bear upon the working masses of the Philippines. Marcos banned strikes and arrested, without charge, anyone suspected of being a dissident. The military began carrying out the torture and murder of working and impoverished Filipinos on an industrial scale.

Between 1972 and 1977, sixty thousand Filipinos were arrested for "political reasons." A new word entered the Filipino vocabulary, "salvage." The brutal verb described how the military would disappear individuals, torture and murder them, and then toss their corpses into vacant lots or drop them by the side of the road. Thousands were salvaged under Marcos' reign of terror.

The criminals responsible for these acts have suffered no consequences. Enrile, who oversaw the apparatus of torture and murder, was made Defense Minister by Cory Aquino, when she replaced Marcos in 1986. He went on to become senate president. While Ferdinand Marcos died in exile, the elite has rehabilitated his family. His widow Imelda still goes on shopping sprees and her children occupy positions of political power. President Rodrigo Duterte, on taking office, arranged for Ferdinand Marcos to receive a state burial in the Libingan ng mga Bayani, the national cemetery of heroes.

A central role in facilitating the imposition of martial law was

played by two rival Stalinist Communist parties, the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Dr. Joseph Scalice, in his UC Berkeley PhD dissertation, *Crisis of Revolutionary Leadership: Martial Law and the Communist Parties of the Philippines, 1957-1974*, has demonstrated, in copious detail, how these parties subordinated the mass movement to rival factions of the elite who were vying for dictatorship.

The two parties shared the political program of Stalinism. They both insisted that the tasks of the revolution were not yet socialist but were national and democratic in character. On these grounds they argued that there was a progressive section of the capitalist class and the task of workers and peasants was to ally with this “progressive section of the national bourgeoisie.”

The parties were split, however, along the lines of the Sino-Soviet dispute and were oriented to rival factions of the elite. The older party, the PKP, followed the line of Moscow, and established ties with Marcos, supporting his imposition of martial law. In 1965, prior to the split in the PKP, the party had endorsed Marcos for president. A key role in his endorsement was played by Jose Maria Sison, who would later found the CPP. Sison instructed workers, youths, and peasants to support Marcos in the election, on the grounds that Marcos would keep the Philippines out of America’s war in Vietnam. One week after the election, Marcos told the *Washington Post* that he planned to send troops.

On the basis of the party’s support, leading members and fellow travellers of the PKP were given salaried positions in the Marcos administration. One of their fellow travellers ghost-wrote *Today’s Revolution: Democracy*, which served as Marcos’ ideological justification for military rule. Other sections of the party secretly assisted the military in conducting its bombings throughout Manila.

When martial law was imposed, the party moved within days to support the dictatorship. A section of the party’s youth opposed this and broke away from the PKP. The PKP systematically murdered these oppositionists, labelling them “Trotskyites,” in order to consolidate its support for the dictatorship.

The PKP shot around seventy of its own members in early 1973, then staged a congress, which endorsed martial law on the grounds that it was assisting the rapid achievement of national industrialization. All members of the party were obligated to declare agreement with this statement in order to maintain their membership. The party officially endorsed the president at a public press conference in 1974, and its leading members took up positions in the ministries of labor and foreign affairs. Others were given commissions in military intelligence to assist with the suppression of the CPP.

The CPP, founded at the end of 1968, followed the political line of Beijing, which used the armed struggle in the countryside and the rhetoric of “cultural revolution” to channel mass unrest behind the conspiring sections of the elite. Aquino assisted in the founding of the CPP, arranging for Sison to meet with a group of peasant guerrillas who were operating on Aquino’s sugar plantation. The meeting arranged by Aquino led to the founding of the CPP’s New People’s Army in 1969.

The CPP, through a vast network of front organizations, most prominently the Kabataang Makabayan (KM, Nationalist Youth), channeled the unrest of the early 1970s behind Aquino and the Liberal Party. They campaigned for the Liberal Party slate in the 1971 election. The entire mass movement of the time, driven into the streets by the skyrocketing cost of living and the threat of martial law, was diverted behind these rival aspirants for dictatorship.

When Marcos imposed martial law, the elite opposition acquiesced, and the movement, which had been subordinated to their leadership, died. The CPP’s Stalinist opposition to the independence of the working class and the program of socialism was the decisive historical factor in Marcos’ successful imposition of military rule.

Dr. Scalice’s recent lecture, “First as Tragedy, Second as Farce: Marcos, Duterte and the Communist Parties of the Philippines,” exposed this history of the CPP and demonstrated that there was a programmatic continuity between their facilitation of dictatorship in the early 1970s, and their enthusiastic support for Duterte in 2016, as a “left president” of “socialist orientation.”

Sison and the CPP have attacked Dr. Scalice with lies and slanders, calling him a “paid agent of the CIA.” On the anniversary of martial law, the party is trotting out the same potted histories of the 1960s and 70s they have delivered for years, in which they claim to have been the revolutionary opposition to dictatorship. They have not responded to a single substantive point raised in Dr. Scalice’s historical lecture. They cannot. Every damning word of it is true.

Rodrigo Duterte, a fascistic thug at the helm of the state, is consciously drawing on the playbook of Ferdinand Marcos. His moves toward the imposition of dictatorship are far advanced. The CPP supported him as he took office. As they did in the 1970s, they are now attempting to channel mass unrest behind the elite opposition. Sison is appealing to “patriotic and pro-US sections” of the military brass to withdraw support from Duterte and support the installation of his political rival Vice President Leni Robredo, a leading member of the opposition Liberal Party.

The lessons of Marcos’ imposition of dictatorship, forty-eight years ago, are clear and they are a warning to the international working class. The only way forward in the fight against the rising tide of global authoritarianism is the political independence of the working class from every section of the capitalist class and their headlong rush to dictatorship. Such independence can only be achieved if workers adopt a program based on their own class interests, which is the fight for international socialist revolution. This is the program of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which has fought against every Stalinist betrayal of the working class.



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