

Elite factions struggle for control of Philippine legislature

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In mid-October, two rival factions in Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's super majority in the House of Representatives fought for control of the legislature. At stake in the dispute was political patronage, control over the distribution of committee appointments and of funds, which both sides were looking to secure as an opening salvo in the 2022 presidential race.

During his four years in office, Duterte has engaged in the gradual expansion of authoritarianism. He has encroached upon the legislature, shut down major media outlets, declared martial law in the southern island of Mindanao, and launched a fascistic campaign of police and paramilitary violence against the poor in the name of a "war on drugs."

Throughout this period, as he has stripped away basic constitutional and democratic rights, Duterte has received the support of a historically unprecedented super majority in the legislature. Duterte's own party, PDP-Laban, is a minority party and has been losing members. His hold on power rests upon the support that has been given to him by nearly every faction of the ruling elite and their various political parties.

The super majority behind Duterte expresses the consensus in the Philippine ruling class that authoritarian and fascistic forms of rule are necessary to preserve their interests against the threat of unrest. The staggering levels of social inequality in the country, now compounded by the mass suffering produced by the Covid-19 pandemic, have created the conditions for an explosion of mass anger.

There is likewise, at present, consensus within the super majority for Duterte's policy of improved ties with Beijing at the expense of relations with Washington. Duterte has launched a massive infrastructure program, under the name "Build, Build, Build," looking to better integrate the country's regional

economies for international investment. He is looking to secure investment from Beijing to fund these projects and has distanced himself from Washington's aggressive military and diplomatic offensive against China.

As the social crisis sharpens and as the apparatus of authoritarianism expands, tensions have mounted within the super majority, which comprises rival sets of capitalist interests. None of them is opposed to dictatorial forms of rule, but they are all looking to have their hands on the helm of the state. The question of the May 2022 presidential election looms large.

Over the past year, two significant blocs emerged within the super majority forming behind rival contenders for Speaker of the House of Representatives: Alan Peter Cayetano and Lord Allan Velasco. Lord is in fact his name and not his title.

Cayetano has presidential aspirations and is poised to run in 2022. Behind Cayetano is the support of Manny Villar's Nacionalista Party and the National Unity Party. Villar is a billionaire real estate tycoon whose economic interests are clearly expressed in Duterte's infrastructure policy and geopolitical rebalancing.

Duterte sought the support of this faction of the elite in 2016 when he made Cayetano his running mate. Cayetano was defeated in the Vice Presidential race and Duterte appointed him Secretary of Foreign Affairs. With his eye on the presidential palace of Malacanang in 2022, Cayetano resigned as Foreign Affairs Secretary in 2018 and ran for Congress, looking to become Speaker of the House.

Cayetano's rival Velasco has the support of the Nationalist People's Coalition, behind which stands Ramon Ang, a billionaire tycoon and head of the powerful San Miguel Corporation. The San Miguel Corporation is largest corporation in terms of revenue

and controls a substantial portion of food and beverage production, real estate and infrastructure.

Seeking to hold the super majority together, and demonstrating his control over the pliant legislature, Duterte brokered a gentleman's agreement in 2019. Cayetano would serve as Speaker of the House for 15 months and Velasco would follow him for the remaining 21.

October 2020 marked the agreed upon transition between Cayetano and Velasco, in the midst of ongoing deliberations over the 2021 national budget. Whoever controls the speakership in 2021 will be able to appoint the heads of various influential legislative committees and oversee the doling out of pork barrel funds. This sort of patronage is a critical component of the preparations for the presidential election of 2022.

One the leading aspirants for Malacanang is Sarah Duterte, the influential daughter of the president and current mayor of Davao. Velasco is lining up behind Sarah Duterte's campaign, while Cayetano is looking to head his own ticket. Factions are beginning to form behind these two rivals.

Former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, herself long associated with realigning Philippine foreign policy toward Beijing, is lining up behind Sarah Duterte.

In early October, looking to extend his control of the speakership in defiance of the gentleman's agreement of 2019, Cayetano abruptly concluded the House's second reading of the budget and sent the legislature into an early recess. It was not scheduled to reconvene until November 16 and the budget, with its emergency Covid-19 provisions, remained unapproved.

Duterte gave a speech on October 8 declaring that if Congress did not resolve its impasse and "pass the budget and constitutionally" he would "do it for them." Duterte was openly threatening to suspend the constitution.

With the legislature padlocked, Velasco convened 186 legislators out of the total 299 members of the House, at the Celebrity Sports Club, where they voted to make him Speaker of the House. Arroyo's Lakas-CMD party proved to be the decisive swing vote in securing a majority for the speakership for Velasco.

Deputy Speaker Neptali Gonzales II, aligned with Cayetano, declared that the gathering was a "rump and illegal session" in which the rules of the House did not

apply.

Duterte intervened and declared his support for Velasco as Speaker. Recognizing which way the wind was blowing, the minority opposition Liberal Party of Vice President Leni Robredo, looking to not be completely cut off from the spoils, threw its support behind Velasco.

Duterte summoned a special session of Congress from October 13 to 16 to resume deliberations on the 2021 national budget, which voted for the budget to go on to the Senate.

Both Velasco and Cayetano issued public apologies, not to the Filipino people, but to the President. Velasco declared that he was upholding "the word of honor of our beloved President Duterte." Cayetano grovelled, "Mr. President, if I made a mistake, my reading was wrong, I misunderstood that you want to continue and finish the budget, I apologize. It was not my intention—not to follow you."

Velasco then staged a photo op with his majority bloc posed with the fascistic raised fist salute of Duterte.

There is no democratic content to the faction fight in the Philippine legislature. Neither side of the super majority, nor the minority bourgeois opposition, is opposed to Duterte's authoritarianism. Rival factions of the elite are engaged in a struggle over patronage rights in the year before an election. The stakes are particularly high because everyone knows that dictatorship may be imminent. Whoever secures Malacanang in 2022 may stay there for a very long time and may turn the apparatus of the state against their political rivals.



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