

“Red-tagging” accusations at the centre of elite conflict in the Philippines

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Political forces associated with the fascistic administration of President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines are escalating a McCarthyite “red-tagging” witch-hunt, alleging that legal political organisations are secretly part of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and actively supporting “terrorism.” The dispute is an initial salvo between rival sections of the elite in the mounting political tensions leading up to the May 2022 presidential election.

The Philippine Senate Committee on National Defense and Security, Peace, Unification and Reconciliation last week concluded a three-session investigation into claims that the political parties that comprise the Makabayan bloc were secretly controlled by the CPP.

The Senate committee called witnesses, introduced as former cadre of the Communist Party, who raised charges that the elected legislators of the Makabayan bloc were in fact members of the CPP, which has been outlawed as a “terrorist” organisation.

The Makabayan bloc is the legislative coalition of the various sectoral political groups under the umbrella of Bayan. Bayan comprises a wide array of groups, including Gabriela (a women's rights organisation), Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT), Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU, a labor union group), a peasants' organisation, multiple youth organisations, student groups, religious organisations of a political bent, etc. The list is extensive.

Over the past six months, a number of activists of these organisations have been targetted for persecution. Some have been killed in extrajudicial assassinations, others have been arrested.

Behind the red-tagging attacks on Bayan is the powerful apparatus created by the Duterte administration, the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). The NTF-ELCAC was formed in December 2018 with an annual budget of nearly 20 billion Philippine pesos (\$US415 million), a staggering sum dedicated exclusively to anti-Communist propaganda.

The Anti-Terrorism Act, passed in July 2020, extended the power of NTF-ELCAC. It authorised warrantless

wiretapping, surveillance, and arrest without warrant for up to 24 days of anyone accused of terrorism, by the Anti-Terrorism Council, of which NTF-ELCAC is a core member. The Anti-Terrorism Act goes into full effect in 2021.

Duterte is targetting Bayan because he knows that it will play a central role in channelling mass support behind the elite opposition in the next election, and will be involved in any behind-the-scenes machinations for his ouster.

Neri Colmenares, a three-term legislator of the Makabayan bloc, made this point explicitly in a press conference on November 2. He declared that “behind the red-tagging of the progressive party-lists is the government's electoral agenda to cripple the opposition in the coming 2022 national elections.” He stated that they “would campaign for the opposition” and that “the administration would utilise its resources to remain in power.”

The red-tagging attack on Bayan and its member organisations is a key component of the political faction in the ruling elite. While Duterte, by funding NTF-ELCAC and creating the climate of extrajudicial killings, has sharpened the McCarthyism considerably, “red-tagging” as an aspect of ruling class rivalry has a half-century long history in the Philippines.

Bayan and its affiliated organisations share a common political line with the Stalinist CPP: an orientation to the formation of an alliance with a section of the capitalist class in the name of nationalism. Both the CPP and Bayan insist that the tasks for a revolution in the Philippines are not yet socialist in character but national and democratic only, and that a section of the capitalist class—the so-called national bourgeoisie—will play a progressive role and are a necessary ally of workers and peasants.

In service to this program, the CPP and the legal organisations that follow its political line have concluded alliance after alliance with different sections of the political and economic elite in the Philippines, with disastrous results for working people. There is hardly a single oligarchic family or political party to which the CPP has not at some

point been tied.

This fact gives a somewhat farcical and deeply hypocritical character to the entire bloody affair. The CPP and Bayan supported Duterte as mayor of Davao City for decades and enthusiastically backed his first year as president. Representatives of Bayan served on his cabinet and Jose Maria Sison, founder and ideological leader of the CPP, issued numerous statements hailing the “progressive” character of the Duterte administration.

Duterte cultivated this relationship. He delivered speeches in front of a hammer-and-sickle flag, proclaimed himself a “socialist,” and posed with raised fist for photographs with the representatives of Bayan.

The class function of Stalinism, and therefore of the Maoist CPP and Bayan, is to channel working class and peasant opposition behind the interests of a section of the capitalist class. When the party’s relations with Duterte broke down, largely due to the intervention of the Philippine military, the CPP began to look to form an alliance with the ruling class opposition.

During the heyday of Bayan’s relations with the newly elected president, the bourgeois opposition to Duterte denounced his ties to Communists. Sen. Panfilo Lacson, who rose to political prominence as a murderous member of the Philippine National Police, openly engaged in red-tagging. Lacson now chairs the Senate committee investigating red-tagging. He declared that the burden of proof rests on those making accusations against the Makabayan bloc, and stated that he would look into legislation criminalising red-tagging.

The hypocrisy is universal. Duterte red-tags his former allies; the elite opposition, former red-taggers, now decry red-tagging; and Bayan and company denounce as a fascist Duterte, whom they assisted to power, and turn to ally with those whom they previously denounced.

The ruling class opposition to Duterte remains a political minority. It is organised around the Liberal Party (LP) of Vice President Leni Robredo.

Bayan has called for the criminalisation of red-tagging. Their Liberal Party allies in the Senate have declared that they are looking at crafting a bill to carry this out.

LP Sen. Francis Pangilinan said it was “worth looking into.” Sen. Risa Hontiveros, of the pseudo-left Akbayan Party, stated that said she “would consider it.”

A core constituency of Akbayan’s founding membership were breakaway groups from the CPP in the 1990s, and Akbayan shares a common nationalist program with Bayan. Akbayan, however, effectively merged with the Liberal Party during the Benigno Aquino III administration, and shares a common slate with the LP. In the past, Akbayan has denounced the groups comprising Bayan as “front organisations” of the CPP, and Bayan has decried this red-

tagging. The CPP and Akbayan have now aligned, however, behind the same set of bourgeois interests.

The Senate hearings did not have the result that Duterte sought. On November 30 he bluntly stated in a press conference that the Makabayan bloc were members of the Communist Party. National Security Advisor Hermogenes Esperon, Jr., a leading figure in NTF-ELCAC, declared that they were pursuing “the disqualification of the Makabayan bloc before the Commission on Elections.”

On December 4, the human rights group, Karapatan, a member of Bayan, filed a criminal complaint against Esperon, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Southern Luzon Command chief Lt. Gen Antonio Parlade, and Presidential Communications Undersecretary Lorraine Badoy—all ranking NTF-ELCAC officials. The complaint charged them with crimes against humanity.

The McCarthyite allegations of NTF-ELCAC, armed with the power of the Anti-Terror Act, are an imminent threat to the Filipino working class. The full force of reaction and authoritarian rule is being prepared to crack down on any emergence of mass unrest and opposition in the country.

The CPP and the organisations that follow its political line oppose red-tagging as a means of securing an alliance with ruling class opponents conspiring against Duterte. The forces with whom the CPP is currently allied have in the recent past waged a similar McCarthyite campaign.

It is impossible to fight against McCarthyism, red-tagging, and reaction on the basis of the Stalinist program of the CPP. The only way forward for the Filipino working class is to fight for its own independent class interests. This requires a break from every section of the capitalist class and their political props in the CPP and Bayan.



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