

Communist Party of the Philippines resurrects urban hit squads

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During an online event on December 26 celebrating the 52nd anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), founder and ideological leader of the party, Jose Maria Sison announced that the CPP would be resurrecting its old practice of employing armed city partisans, known as Sparrow Units, after three decades of dormancy.

Sison presented the party policy as responding to “demands” from “middle forces”—a much used term drawn from the phrasebook of Stalinism to refer to its allies in the bourgeoisie and the middle class.

The crisis of capitalism, heightened to unprecedented levels by the global pandemic, has created explosive social tensions in every country. The ruling class around the world, frantic to retain its hold on power, has turned to authoritarian forms of rule, coups and insurrections, and the creation of fascist movements.

The Philippines is no exception. The working population of the country confronts skyrocketing unemployment, dismal medical care in the midst of pandemic, and the worst mass hunger since the Japanese occupation. As in the past, the CPP’s resurrection of Sparrow Units is bound up with its efforts to seek bourgeois allies even as the ruling class as a whole is seeking the means to suppress unrest and secure a firm hold on power.

The party quietly initiated the creation of new Sparrow Units in December 2015 as a component of its support for the presidential candidacy of Rodrigo Duterte. It was seeking to integrate its hit squads into his ‘war on drugs,’ a campaign of mass murder targetting the country’s poor.

Having broken with the president, the CPP is now pursuing an alliance with coup-plotting sections of the military. The Sparrow Units are intended to serve as a component of this alliance.

The history of the CPP and its use of urban hit squads confirm this assessment. Sparrow Units have a bloody past and reveal the party’s integration into the ugliest aspects of Philippine politics.

The CPP was founded in December 1968 on the Maoist

conception of protracted people’s war, armed struggle in the countryside to encircle the cities leading up to the seizure of power. The party was founded on the program of Stalinism, which seeks to subordinate the working class to a section of the capitalist class in the name of a “national democratic revolution.” The armed struggle was a means to achieving this political end.

In March 1969, the New People’s Army (NPA) was established, building on remnants from the suppressed Huk rebellion peasant uprising of the early 1950s. While the CPP leadership routinely announces that it is building up its forces in the countryside, it has gotten no closer to its goal over the last forty years. In fact, it has witnessed a slow attrition.

The function of the NPA is not to surround the cities from the countryside, let alone to aid the working class in the seizure of power, but to give political clout to the party leadership in its negotiations with the bourgeoisie. The rhetoric of protracted people’s war has enabled the CPP to retain its hold over the waves of radicalization in the country’s youth and workers. It has then instructed these layers to support and pressure the party’s bourgeois allies.

The 1980s were a decade of political upheaval in the Philippines. Long-time dictator Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown in 1986 by a popular uprising that was coupled with a military coup. A rival section of the bourgeoisie, represented by President Corazon Aquino, took power and suppressed mass unrest through the military and the use of paramilitary death squads.

The CPP formed a close alliance with the Aquino administration in 1986. The military, however, by means of coup threats pressured Aquino to break all ties with the party. Within three years, the CPP was working with rival sections of the military who were plotting by means of coup d’état to remove Aquino from office.

It was in this context that the party created its Sparrow Units. These units, which conducted urban assassinations of those deemed “enemies of the people,” were tools in the party’s growing alliance with various sections of the

bourgeoisie, in the same fashion as its armed struggle in the countryside.

The urban hit squads first emerged in the southern city of Davao, where they played their most prominent role. Units of three assassins, who would often include young boys, would rapidly approach a target from behind, shoot him in the back of the head, and flee. The targets were often traffic cops who were killed for their pistols.

Over the course of the 1980s, the Sparrow Units fought for turf with fascist vigilante death squads. These death squads were eventually organized into Alsa Masa, whose core members had emerged out of the NPA in the wake of a series of murderous internal purges in the party. The turf war turned Davao into the murder capital of the Philippines, with an average of two people killed every day in the mid-1980s.

Rodrigo Duterte, an ally of Aquino, rose to prominence out of this chaos. He secured the loyalty of both Alsa Masa and the Sparrow Units, and effectively transformed them into paramilitary soldiers in his campaign of terror in Davao, as part of what he termed a war on drugs and criminality.

Sparrow units were formed in the capital region of Metro Manila and by the end of the 1980s, they were being used in the party's tactical alliance with right-wing coup plotters in the military, organized in the Young Officers' Union (YOU). The YOU supplied the CPP assassins with explosives which they used throughout the city as a part of a joint destabilization campaign. The party's Manila hit squad took the name Alex Boncayao Brigade (ABB).

In the early 1990s, the CPP fragmented. Sison reestablished control over the fragment that retained the party's name. Filemon 'Popoy' Lagman, head of the ABB, was among those who broke with Sison. Sison put an end to the Sparrow Unit policy, which he had previously supported, accusing it of political excesses.

It was in late 2015 that the party resurrected this long dormant tactic as a component of the party's support for the candidacy of Duterte. Duterte made clear throughout his campaign that he would be pursuing a policy of mass murder, under the guise of a "war on drugs." He infamously compared himself to Hitler, and stated that if elected a hundred thousand dead bodies would be floating in Manila Bay.

The majority of the murders in the war on drugs have been carried out by vigilante groups. As it did in the mid-1980s in Davao, the party attempted to cement its alliance with Duterte by integrating itself in this fascistic campaign.

As Duterte took office, the nationwide war on drugs rapidly ramped up, and hundreds of corpses began to appear in the streets of Metro Manila with cardboard signs attached declaring that the victims were drug users.

The CPP announced in multiple publications that it

supported Duterte's war on drugs. Duterte gave speeches in which he called on the NPA to join in the war on drugs. Sison responded in an interview on CNN welcoming the opportunity.

The Philippine military fiercely opposed Duterte's intimate ties with the party. As it had done in the 1980s with Aquino, the military compelled Duterte to sever ties with the CPP, using the threat of a coup and the imposition of martial law on the southern island of Mindanao. By 2018, the falling out between the Duterte administration and the CPP was complete.

Sison and the CPP are now publicly calling on rival sections of the military leadership, who are disgruntled by Duterte's close ties with Beijing, to withdraw support from the president and to assist in the installation of Vice President Leni Robredo, who is the head of the bourgeois opposition to Duterte.

It is the elements around Leni Robredo and the Liberal Party that Sison refers to when he speaks of calls from the "middle forces" for the return of the Sparrow Units.

There is nothing progressive in the strategy and tactics of the CPP. They have served for decades as a murderous appendage of bourgeois rivalries and have subordinated social unrest to the interests of their elite allies.

The working masses of the Philippines confront immense dangers in the fascism of Rodrigo Duterte and the coup-plotting of his bourgeois opponents. The CPP have allied with and assisted first one and now the other.

The only way the Filipino working class can oppose these dangers is through their own political independence in the fight for socialist revolution. This requires a complete break with the CPP, its Stalinist program of nationalism and class collaboration, and all of its political appendages.



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