Philippine military breaks longstanding agreement, returns forces to campuses

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On January 15, Philippine Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana, in letter to University of the Philippines (UP) President Danilo Concepcion, unilaterally abrogated a standing agreement between the Department of Defense and UP banning the entrance of military forces on UP campuses.

Lorenzana used politically menacing language branding students as "Communists" to justify the renewed incursions of the military onto state university campuses after a more than 30-year ban. He declared that the campuses were sites of "clandestine recruitment" by the Communist Party, which he labeled a terrorist organization. The military would be establishing a presence on UP campuses to protect "youth against the enemies of the Filipino people."

The University of the Philippines is the prestigious state university system, founded in 1908 during the American colonial period, with a number of campuses throughout the country. Its flagship campus, UP Diliman in Quezon City, Metro Manila, has played a leading role in the country's student activism for the past half-century.

Prior to the 1989 agreement, the military regularly deployed its forces on the campus in full assault gear. Student activists were arrested or 'disappeared.' Soldiers opened fire on student protestors on more than one occasion.

In June 1989, under the Corazon Aquino administration, the military abducted Donato Continente, a student journalist writing for the campus paper, Philippine Collegian, from Vinzons Hall, the campus student center. Continente was tortured and forced to confess to the assassination of US military Colonel James Rowe. Rowe was training counter-insurgency forces in the country and had been killed in an ambush by the Alex Boncayao Brigade, the urban hit squad of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which was then active in Manila.

As a result of the uproar over the abduction of Continente, then Defense Secretary Fidel Ramos was compelled to sign an agreement with UP that the military and police would not deploy any forces on the state university campuses without a request from university officials, or in "cases of hot pursuit and similar occasions of emergency."

Lorenzana has now torn up this agreement. When his letter became public on Monday, January 18, it was immediately greeted by an outcry of protests on campuses and social media. The hashtags #DefendUP and #UPFight began to go viral.

Lorenzana sharpened his threatening anti-communist rhetoric in response to the protests, issuing a statement on Tuesday in which he declared that the 1989 accord was "obsolete" and that the University of the Philippines had become a "safe haven for enemies of the state."

The military on Wednesday seized the opportunity to deploy truckloads of heavily armed soldiers in camouflage gear to the Diliman campus under the absurd pretext that they were going to teach students about "urban gardening."

The abrogation of the 1989 UP-Department of National Defense (DND) agreement is a marked escalation in the ongoing campaign of red-tagging and repression being conducted by the administration of the country's fascistic president, Rodrigo Duterte. Duterte has overseen the creation of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), a heavily funded government body dedicated to anti-Communist propaganda and to the persecution of anyone accused of being associated with the CPP.

Over the past four years, the Duterte administration has overseen a campaign of mass murder and repression against the poor waged by the police, military, and paramilitary groups, in the name of a "war on drugs." More than 30,000 people have been killed.

The repressive measures of the Duterte administration

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are aimed above all against the emergence of mass social unrest. The fascistic and dictatorial steps of the Duterte administration are a national expression of the shift to authoritarian forms of rule by the ruling class around the globe in the context of acute social and economic crisis.

Duterte received the support of the Stalinist CPP in the initial stages of his administration. But under intense pressure from the military, and in particular Lorenzana, Duterte broke ties with the CPP and turned the murderous apparatus of the state against the organizations associated with its political leadership.

The mounting attacks against activists accused of being "communists" and against organizations tied to the political line of the CPP, expresses sharpened tensions in the Philippine ruling elite.

When the CPP's ties with Duterte were severed, the party reoriented to his bourgeois rivals and are now working in a de facto partnership with the opposition Liberal Party and its head, Vice President Leni Robredo. The founder and ideological leader of the CPP, Jose Maria Sison, has issued multiple statements over the past year calling on restive sections of the military leadership to withdraw support from Duterte and install the Vice President in office.

The return of the Philippine military to the University of the Philippines campuses is both a salvo in the ongoing struggle between rival factions of the elite and another step towards authoritarian rule.

The moves taken by Duterte toward establishing direct military rule are far advanced, and the Philippine military is now operating in a semi-autonomous fashion. Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque told the press that the president was not consulted by Lorenzana prior to the abrogation of the UP agreement. He added, however, that Lorenzana was Duterte's "alter ego," so "of course, the President supports the decision of Secretary Lorenzana."

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