

Philippine presidential elections open, dominated by fascist and far-right forces

John Malvar
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Public political strife and backroom manoeuvring increased markedly over the last two weeks in the Philippines as scores of presidential aspirants filed their candidacy for the country's May 2022 elections. The election promises to be the most heated in memory, its tensions fuelled by unprecedented levels of social unrest and geopolitical crisis.

Ninety-seven contenders filed official candidacy for the presidency by the October 8 deadline. The next month will be marked by political barter and the formation of alliances, as until November 15 all official candidates for office have the option of withdrawing and filing to run for a different position.

An examination of the leading candidates for the presidency reveals that the ruling elites in the Philippines are preparing to run the most right-wing election campaign in the country's history.

At stake in this are three critical questions:

Will the new administration continue the fascist policies of the administration of Rodrigo Duterte, which has conducted a murderous "war on drugs" that has killed over 30,000 impoverished Filipinos?

Bound up with this, how will the new administration suppress any struggle from the working masses as the capitalist class attempts to ramp up production in the country which continues to be ravaged by the pandemic as less than 20 percent of the population has been vaccinated?

Finally, as war tensions in the region reach a fever pitch, will the next president continue Duterte's reorientation of Manila's geopolitical and economic ties away from Washington toward Beijing, or will they reverse this policy?

Outgoing President Rodrigo Duterte is constitutionally prohibited from seeking a second term as president. He made the surprise announcement last week that he would not be running for the Vice Presidency, an office he had been widely expected to seek. Duterte cited a recent poll indicating his declining popularity, although his main calculation is to attempt to secure the victory of a loyal successor.

Duterte faces charges before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for his war on drugs, and the next president will be able to shape to a large extent the access and outcome of the ICC's investigation.

Among the leading candidates for the presidency is Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., son of the former dictators Ferdinand and Imelda, who ruled the country through a brutal martial law regime from 1972 until their ouster in the 1986 "People Power" revolution. Marcos's candidacy represents an undisguised attempt to historically rehabilitate the dictatorship and employ its methods again today.

Marcos was no political innocent at the time of his parents' rule. He was an adult and in the 1980s he was vice-governor and governor of the northern province of Ilocos Norte as part of the Marcos' dictatorship. He grew rich from his family's use of the state to steal billions of dollars.

Marcos has made the rehabilitation of the martial law dictatorship a centerpiece of his campaign, openly proclaiming it the "golden era" of Philippine history, a time of discipline and progress. He advocates the rewriting of the country's textbooks accordingly, and his supporters

campaign in the mainstream and social media to falsify the past on a truly colossal scale.

Another leading contender for the presidency is presidential daughter Sarah Duterte-Carpio. Long-time mayor and vice-mayor of the southern city of Davao, Duterte-Carpio followed in her father's footsteps in overseeing a fascist iron rule to crack down on alleged criminality. Duterte did not declare her intention to run for president, and filed a candidacy to run for re-election as mayor. It is quite possible over the course of the next month that she will withdraw and declare instead for the presidency, a tactic her father employed in 2016. A Duterte-Carpio presidency would represent the most direct continuation of the fascist policies of the outgoing president.

The list of leading candidates for president is full of names of a similarly fascist and far-right character; it is a political rogues gallery of murderers and scoundrels. Among them are:

Senator Panfilo "Ping" Lacson, who headed the torture apparatus of the military under the Marcos dictatorship before rising in the ranks of the Philippine National Police with a national reputation for the extrajudicial killing of alleged criminals.

Senator Manny Pacquiao, famed as a boxer, is a vociferous supporter of Duterte's "war on drugs" and advocates for the restoration of the death penalty and for its widespread use on "criminals" as young as twelve.

Manila Mayor Isko Moreno, formerly a television celebrity, was a leading supporter of Duterte and is known for his right-wing populism, calls for discipline and the scapegoating of the city's sizeable population of Chinese Filipinos.

The bourgeois opposition to Duterte has lined up behind the candidacy of Vice President Leni Robredo. Robredo is chair of the Liberal Party (LP), which was the party of Marcos's leading ruling class rival, Benigno Aquino (assassinated in 1983), and of presidents Corazon Aquino (1986–1992) and Benigno Aquino Jr (2010–2016).

Robredo is widely depicted as the defender of human rights and democracy against the tide of right-wing populism and outright fascism unleashed by Duterte. The truth, however, is that the Liberal Party was instrumental in the creation of Duterte and the current political climate of far-right politics in the country. It was the Benigno Aquino Jr. administration that transformed the Davao mayor, then a member of the Liberal Party, into a figure of national prominence, depicting his "iron discipline" as the way forward for mayors throughout the country.

Most fundamentally, it was the bitter public disillusionment with the policies and character of the Liberal Party and the Aquino administrations that made possible the climate of revisionism surrounding the martial law regime of Marcos. Having presented themselves as the democratic opponents of dictatorship, the Aquino administrations were characterized by brutal crackdowns on the working class and peasantry, including multiple massacres of unarmed demonstrators by the military and police. They thwarted any meaningful land reform, which would have impacted their vast sugar estates. It was in fact the Liberal Party and the Aquino

administrations that were instrumental in the return of the Marcoses to the Philippines and their restoration to political prominence and credibility.

Robredo will continue the Liberal Party's policy of useful alliances with fascistic and right-wing figures. On the senatorial slate of the Liberal Party is the Sen. Antonio Trillanes of the far-right Magdalo Party. Trillanes rose to prominence for attempting on two occasions as a naval officer to seize power in a military coup d'état. Magdalo sought to form a military junta and take power from then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Robredo recognizes just how tarnished is the reputation of her own political party. The Liberal Party has been associated with the colour yellow for decades. Every banner celebrating "people power" and the ouster of Marcos has been yellow. Robredo announced that her campaign would use the colour pink, in the most superficial of attempts to bury the now hated legacy of the party of which she is chair.

Washington has played a major, at times decisive role, in every election staged in its former colony. The bloody Marcos dictatorship received the support and sanction of the Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations. The Corazon Aquino administration was propped up and sustained with the support of US imperialism.

The ever-more aggressive moves by Washington to maintain its global hegemony in the face of the economic rise of China has brought the world to the brink of a catastrophic global war and has turned the entire Asia-Pacific region into a series of flashpoints. In this context, Duterte, looking to secure investment from China, substantially reoriented Manila's diplomatic and economic ties from Washington to Beijing.

The geopolitical allegiances of each of the candidates in the upcoming election is thus a fundamental question. A majority of the leading candidates seems to favour a continuation of the policies of Duterte, although most are likely willing to negotiate. Robredo, however, is the only candidate that is clearly tied to the interests of Washington.

For months, as the deadline for declaring candidacy approached, Robredo hesitated, refusing to state if she intended to run. It does not seem that she was being politically coy, her reluctance felt genuine. On October 4, the ad interim Charge d'Affaires of the US Embassy in Manila, Heather Variava, travelled to the office of the Vice President and met privately with Robredo. Variava was quoted in the press as stating that the Philippines and the United States "were the strongest of allies," and promised that Washington would be supplying much-needed vaccines to the country.

That afternoon, the Robredo camp announced that Robredo would be making a major announcement the next morning. On October 5, Robredo, dressed in bright pink, announced that she would be running for president.

ISambayan, an umbrella political organization whose sole concern is opposition to relations with China and escalating Manila's claim to the South China Sea, announced that it was giving its endorsement to the presidential candidacy of Leni Robredo.

The various factions of Stalinism and pseudo-left politics in the Philippines are throwing themselves into relations with various bourgeois candidates, particularly Robredo.

Akbayan, a political organization formed in the 1990s from breakaways from the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and various social democratic organizations, has effectively merged with the Liberal Party. Sen. Risa Hontiveros, of Akbayan and the LP, is running for re-election of Robredo's slate.

Many of the various political organizations founded by Popoy Lagman, likewise breakaways from the CPP in the 1990s, including Sanlakas, Partido Lakas ng Masa, and Laban ng Masa, all attempted to form ties with Robredo during her lengthy period of hesitation. On October 3, Walden Bello, chair of Laban ng Masa, wrote of how "Laban ng Masa has sought a meeting with her for nearly three months to talk about possibilities, but she and her people won't give us the time of day." He

denounced Robredo for her "courtship" of "former Duterte allies" and "the right."

In frustration, Laban ng Masa announced that they would be fielding an "independent candidate of the working class," Leody de Guzman, a union leader. De Guzman and Robredo wound up filing their candidacies on the same day.

Within a day, this supposed "independent working-class" candidate had issued an official party statement hailing the candidacy of Robredo: "Laban ng Masa welcomes VP Leni Robredo's candidacy for the presidency. We look forward to hearing her platform ... We also look forward to hearing about how she intends to bring Duterte to jail ... We welcome the opportunity for us and our presidential candidate ... to engage with her on all these crucial issues."

The CPP, through the various legal organizations that follow its political line, has not yet endorsed a candidate, but they are working to establish ties with one. The founder and ideological leader of the CPP, Jose Ma. Sison, has posted enthusiastic statements on Facebook about the candidacies of Pacquiao, Moreno, and Robredo.

The CPP's full throated support for Duterte in 2016-17—in which they promoted him as a leftist, backed his war on drugs, and picked candidates for his cabinet—demonstrates that there is no candidate, however right-wing or fascistic, with whom the party will not ally if the leadership believes that they can secure benefits from the relationship.

Elections in the Philippines are notoriously bloody, with death tolls frequently in the hundreds. The fight between the various factions of the ruling elite over how best to suppress the working class and how to negotiate between ties with Washington and Beijing is a murderous affair, and the victims are the poor, the peasants, and the workers.

There is no party of the so-called left in the Philippines fighting to break the working class free from this entire rotten affair and from every section of the capitalist class. The independence of the working class can only be secured through a struggle to secure its own interests on the basis of an internationalist, socialist program, not an alliance with the elite in the name of nationalism. This is the program of Trotskyism which is carried forward today only by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).



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