# Creeping martial law in the Philippines as poverty grows

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Ferdinand Marcos Jr was elected president of the Philippines in May. In his inaugural address, delivered on June 30, Marcos pledged that his presidency would be like that of his father, the country's brutal and corrupt dictator who ruled a martial law regime for a decade and a half. Citing his father's example, Marcos Jr vowed he would "get it done."

During the socially explosive years of 1970–72, Ferdinand Marcos Sr methodically deployed, tested, and prepared the legal apparatus of state repression prior to the full imposition of military rule in September 1972. The months since the election of Marcos Jr have been marked by the incremental tightening of the authoritarian rule.

On August 8, Walden Bello, chair of the political party Laban ng Masa [Fight of the masses], who ran for vice president in the May elections, was arrested and charged with cyber-libel. Bello is a former congressman with a prominent international reputation as a figure of the left and an opponent of globalization. He promotes reformist politics as if it were a type of socialism.

Bello famously called vice presidential candidate Sara Duterte, daughter of the previous president Rodrigo Duterte, a "coward" for her refusal to engage in public debates during the election campaign. When Duterte was elected vice president, her close aide filed libel charges against Bello for his campaign statements. Bello was dragged through the humiliating process of arrest and had his mugshot taken—barefoot—at a local police station before being released on bail a day later.

Bello is scheduled to be arraigned before the Regional Trial Court in Davao City in September. He has filed an appeal with the Department of Justice on the entirely justified grounds that the libel complaint constituted "political persecution."

The arrest of Bello is a direct attack on the right to free speech and an indication that the Marcos II government is preparing to crack down on all forms of dissent.

Sixteen priests, nuns, and lay persons, all members of the Catholic church organization, Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, were indicted on August 15 on charges of funding the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which is classified as a terrorist organization, and have been denied bail.

The sixteen are charged on the basis of testimony provided by two anonymous witnesses, who the government claims are defecting members of the CPP's New People's Army (NPA). The Marcos Sr dictatorship routinely employed secret witnesses in its military courts to label political opponents "Communists," and this practice is being brought back.

When Marcos Sr imposed martial law, he shut down all news, television, and radio broadcasts that he did not directly control, and only allowed them to reopen when they acquiesced to his dictatorship. Marcos Jr is shutting down the opposition media and banning alternative sources of news and political perspective.

On June 8, the National Telecommunication Commission ordered 27 websites blocked at the "request" of the National Security Council which cited the reactionary Anti-Terror Law passed under the Rodrigo Duterte administration.

The banned websites include those associated with the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines, as well as the personal page of CPP founder and ideological leader, Jose Maria Sison. Bundled up with the CPP in the ban were websites of legal political organizations, including BAYAN, and alternative news sites, such as *Bulatlat* and *Pinoy Weekly*. International publications, including *Monthly Review* and *Counterpunch*, which had in the past published material favorable to the CPP have been banned as well.

On June 29, the Security and Exchange Commission ordered the revocation of the certificates of *Rappler*, one of the country's leading news publications critical of the Duterte and Marcos administrations. The revocation is currently under appeal.

Fundamental to these authoritarian maneuvers is the rewriting of the past and the rehabilitation of the martial law regime. The Presidential Museum and Library, which contains valuable documents on the Marcos dictatorship, has

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been taken offline. The anti-Terrorist law is being used to ban a growing list of books, which are deemed "subversive" from libraries, schools and universities. The attack is sweeping. Among the authors listed is poet and National Artist for Literature Bien Lumbera.

Mandatory military training is being brought back. Vice President Duterte, who is secretary of education, announced that she intended to make Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) a requirement, rehabilitating a Marcos-era policy that only ended in 2002, and which was long associated with brutal hazings and indoctrination.

Unadulterated propaganda is being mass produced. A major film recently released, *Maid in Malacañang*, depicts the overthrow of the Marcos regime as the ouster of a wise and kindly presidential family by an ungrateful mob. Government announcements are now being routinely made over the television stations of Sonshine Media Network, headed by an anti-Communist cult leader loyal to Marcos and Duterte, Apollo Quiboloy, who is wanted for sex trafficking and who claims to be the Son of God incarnate.

We are witnessing a creeping martial law.

The repressive apparatus of the Marcos II administration builds upon the measures taken by the fascistic presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, but there is something qualitatively new as well. Duterte's rule was marked by the crudity and volatility of a provincial warlord vaulted to the heights of Philippine society. He unleashed police violence against the poor, in the name of a war on drugs, and oversaw the extrajudicial killing of over 30,000 people.

The Marcos II administration is less personalistic. There is a calculated "legality" to its systematic repressive measures that is starkly reminiscent of those taken by Marcos Sr.

Duterte expressed a global phenomenon: the turn by the ruling elite to authoritarian forms of rule in the face of mounting social crisis and unrest. Marcos Jr represents a significant further step in the open embrace of dictatorship.

Marcos Jr has the backing of a super-majority in both the Senate and Congress, which represents the support of a substantial majority of the bourgeoisie. The embrace by the ruling class of dictatorship, and the targeting of all forms of opposition for repression, expresses at the most fundamental level the political preparations to crush the emergence of mass opposition from the working class and oppressed masses. The ruling elite are keenly nervous as they confront immense crisis.

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported on August 15 that 20 million Filipinos live below the poverty line. That number has gone up by 2.3 million people since the last time data was collected in 2018. The poverty threshold is defined as an income of P12,030 ($US215) a month for a family of five. More than 18 percent of the country's population falls below this meager measurement.

An even more dire statistic is the proportion of Filipinos unable to meet basic food needs, defined as making P8,379 ($US150) a month for a family of five. Some 5.9 percent of the population could not afford adequate food on a daily basis, 200,000 more people fell into this category since 2018.

The average income of Filipino households declined by 2 percent since 2018 in absolute terms and fell by 10 percent when adjusted for inflation. Minimum wage has fallen even farther. Minimum wages in the Philippines vary throughout the country and are established by a regional wage board. B*usinessWorld* calculated that minimum wages, when adjusted for price increases over the past year, had fallen by somewhere from 10.7–16.9 percent since July 2021. For working families on the brink of poverty these figures are catastrophic.

Philippine society is a powder keg. An op-ed published in the *Philippine Star* following Marcos' election made clear that the Philippine ruling class shares the same fears as their counterparts around the globe: "Marcos must resist going Sri Lanka's way."

Marcos' campaign for presidency relied on lies about the past which were made possible by the historical ignorance of broad layers of the public, who have been systematically miseducated. He secured a good deal of support, however, through populist promises. In late April, in the final stages of the campaign, he pledged to lower market rice prices to P20 ($US0.36) a kilo through subsidies and price caps, a pledge that if implemented would have cut the price of the most basic food necessity in half.

The Marcos II administration, however, has not brought down food prices; it has shut down news organizations. There are no substantive palliative measures forthcoming. Like his father, Marcos Jr sees the solution to the growing unrest in repression and dictatorship.

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