

Washington's war drive against China fuels political conflict in the Philippines

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Tensions between rival factions of the ruling elite in the Philippines—headed by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, on the one hand, and Vice President Sara Duterte, on the other—have reached a fever pitch. They are fueled by Washington's aggressive preparations for war with China.

On Friday, Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr delivered a warning to the troops against taking part in an ongoing coup d'état plot. During a changing of command ceremony in Zamboanga City, Brawner told the assembled soldiers that the military would act “swiftly and judiciously” against any active duty personnel who would join in the destabilization plots being hatched by former officers. Brawner added that these plotters believed that “the president should be replaced” and that the Philippines “should have another coup d'état.”

The Philippine *Daily Inquirer* reported that the group targeted by Brawner included retired generals and colonels, former cabinet secretaries, and bankers and businessmen. Among those it listed was Gen. Eliseo Rio Jr who stated that there was a “serious split between the Marcos and the Duterte camps” and that the reports of destabilization were the result of the issues in this conflict.

The next day, National Security Advisor Eduardo Año tried to downplay the significance of Brawner's remarks, saying that Brawner had been “misquoted or misinterpreted” by the press. This is not true. Brawner was quoted precisely. The tensions between rival factions of the ruling elite in the Philippine government are sharp and may be reaching a breaking point.

The tensions run between two rival factions, the camp of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, on the one hand, and the camp of Vice President Sara Duterte, with the backing of two former presidents—her father, Rodrigo Duterte, and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo—on the other.

What drives the animosity between these camps is geopolitics. Since taking office in May 2022, Marcos has come to represent the interests of sections of the Philippine elite who are looking to fully integrate the country into Washington's aggressive drive against China.

Arroyo and the Dutertes, father and daughter, represent a growing portion of the elite who see Philippine economic growth and their profit interests bound up with increasing ties

with China. This camp recognizes that full commitment to the US offensive against China—which includes the prosecution of the Philippine claim to the South China Sea and the basing of US forces in the country under the auspices of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)—will sabotage their hopes for expanded economic relations with Beijing.

These two camps are united in many things. Both Marcos and Duterte back the increased use of political repression to deal with the threat of social unrest. There is no liberal side to this dispute. Duterte represents openly thuggish police rule and fascist vigilante violence. Marcos represents the rehabilitation of his family's legacy of military dictatorship and preparations for its re-implementation.

Within each of the camps there are rivalries and tensions. Rodrigo and Sara Duterte personally detest each other and have publicly betrayed each other in the past.

But it is Washington's war drive that is decisive here and it is this that is fueling the instability and the elite plots in the Philippines.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr and Sara Duterte were elected in May 2022 having run on an alliance known as Uniteam. It brought together a powerful collection of political parties, including those of former presidents Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Joseph Estrada.

In the lead up to the election Marcos had issued multiple statements that he intended to continue the foreign policy orientation of the outgoing administration of Rodrigo Duterte, meaning the attempt to improve relations with China. The mantle of support for Washington's aggression rested with the presidential candidate Leni Robredo.

When Marcos took office, he turned with breathtaking speed to Washington for backing. President Joe Biden scrapped the ban from entering the United States imposed by US courts on Marcos for the crimes of his parents' dictatorial regime in which he had played a leading role in the 1980s. Biden welcomed Marcos to the White House. Marcos restored the joint war games scrapped by Duterte and accelerated preparations for the basing of US forces in the country.

Arroyo has been a kingmaker in Philippine politics for over a decade, at times the most influential politician in the country. She wielded immense clout in the legislature and in backroom

negotiations. Arroyo also has been the leading representative of the Philippine elite oriented to China, an orientation which began as early as 2006 during her second term as president.

When the plots began is not yet clear, but Arroyo, now a member of Congress, moved against Marcos in the legislature in May 2023. Rumors circulated widely that she was attempting to orchestrate the impeachment of Marcos, installing Sara Duterte as president and herself as Speaker of the House. Her plot failed and on May 17 she announced that she was being demoted from senior deputy speaker to deputy speaker of Congress.

Two days later, Sara Duterte abruptly resigned from her political party, Lakas-CMD. The party had until that point held members loyal to both Marcos and Duterte. The resignation represented the retreat of the Duterte-Arroyo faction.

Things sharpened in September.

Sara Duterte is both vice president and secretary of education. She is also the vice-chair of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), the official government body of anti-Communist witch-hunting and repression.

In her capacity as secretary of education, Duterte was allocated P125 million (\$US2.5m) in confidential funds. These are discretionary monies earmarked for intelligence gathering and surveillance that are not subject to government audit. Duterte was to use this money to arrange the surveillance of students and student organizations that were accused of being Communist inspired. The money could also be used to provide rewards for informants. The existence of this fund in the Department of Education is unspeakably reactionary.

In mid-September, a corruption scandal erupted against Duterte surrounding the use of her confidential funds. France Castro, representative of the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) party list organization, confronted Duterte in the legislature with the fact that her P125 million in confidential funds had been spent in eleven days.

ACT is a member of BAYAN, the umbrella organization of political groups that share the nationalist political perspective of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The CPP, BAYAN, and its affiliated organizations tailend petty bourgeois sentiment in the Philippines and seek to bring the support of the working class to a section of the ruling elite. As Washington's war drive against China has escalated, BAYAN and company have lined up behind the growing anti-Chinese sentiment in the narrow layers of the Filipino middle class and have sought to whip up an anti-Chinese hysteria among the working class and poor.

It is this anti-Chinese orientation that has brought BAYAN, despite its longstanding hatred for Marcos, behind the interests of his faction.

ACT did not challenge the existence of confidential funds, but alleged rather that these funds were being corruptly misused. Castro called for confidential funds to be limited to

the military and intelligence agencies and to be restricted from disbursement to civilian government agencies, such as the Department of Education.

Rodrigo Duterte weighed in, responding in an interview on national television, "Let me tell you the first target with intelligence funds. You, you France [Castro], you are the Communists that I want to kill. Tell her that." Castro filed a criminal case against the former president for his murderous threat and then thanked House Speaker Martin Romualdez, head of the Marcos faction in the legislature, for leading support for her against Duterte.

Not backing down, Rodrigo Duterte threatened to call out businessmen and the military against Congress, citing pork barreling—both sides alleging corruption against their opponents.

In another session of the legislature in September, Castro grilled the secretary of defense and the AFP chief of staff about the loyalty of the Vice Presidential Security and Protection Group. Would the military forces tasked with protecting Sara Duterte be loyal to the president or to the vice president, she asked, in the event of "strained relations."

Sara Duterte had been allocated P500 million in confidential funds in the 2024 budget. The pseudo-left political party Akbayan, with the support of BAYAN's affiliated parties, arranged a vote to strip Duterte of her funds and to transfer them to Philippine military forces in the "West Philippine Sea," i.e., in the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

While the legislature has stripped the vice president of her confidential funds, the current proposed budget for 2024 allocates P4.5 billion (\$US257 million) in confidential funds to President Marcos. This money will be used to accelerate integration with Washington's war drive and prepare the apparatus of military repression.



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