

Communist Party of the Philippines announces the opening of peace talks with the Marcos government

John Malvar

5 December 2023

On November 23, representatives of the Government of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), negotiating on behalf of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), held a secret signing ceremony at Oslo City Hall in Norway. Five days later, the Ferdinand Marcos Jr administration and representatives of the National Democratic Front living in political exile in the Netherlands staged separate press conferences and announced that they would be resuming peace talks to bring an end to the insurgency waged since 1969 by the CPP's New People's Army (NPA), the longest-running armed conflict in Asia.

The joint statement of the 23rd—signed by Luis Jalandoni, chair of the NDFP, and Antonio Lagdameo, a leading businessman and Special Assistant to the President—declared:

Cognizant of the serious socioeconomic and environmental issues, and the foreign security threat facing the country, the parties recognize the need to unite as a nation in order to urgently address these challenges and resolve the reasons for the armed conflict.

References to concern over socioeconomic and environmental issues have been the boilerplate of such announcements for decades. “The foreign security threat,” however, is new. The Marcos administration is integrating itself with Washington's drive against China and Manila is playing an increasingly prominent role in the preparations for war. China is the “foreign security threat” that both the Marcos government and the CPP present as the justification for “national unity.”

Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff Romeo Brawner made this point explicitly in remarks to Reuters, “If this conflict will finally end, the Armed Forces of the Philippines will be able to shift our focus to external or territorial defense. Our resources, efforts will be poured into defending our territory.”

The announced resumption of peace talks was the product of nearly two years of secret negotiations initiated by the Philippine military and adopted by Marcos with the singular motive of ending domestic armed conflict so the Philippine military could focus its energies on preparations for war with China. The CPP is lining up behind the anti-China campaign and presenting it as an “urgent” justification for discussing the end of more than half a century of armed struggle.

The armed struggle and peace talks

The CPP and NPA launched their armed struggle in early 1969. Ferdinand Marcos Sr was president of the Philippines. In September 1972 Marcos declared martial law and imposed a brutal military dictatorship on the country that lasted until his ouster in February 1986.

The CPP is a Stalinist party; it has a nationalist political perspective. Like Stalinist parties around the globe, the CPP claimed that the tasks of the revolution in the Philippines were exclusively national and democratic in their character and not yet socialist. They told workers and the toiling masses of the Philippines that the nationalist character of the revolution in the Philippines imparted a progressive role to a section of the capitalist class, the so-called national bourgeoisie. The task of workers, peasants, and youth was to ally with the section of the capitalist class and give them critical support in the carrying out of the national democratic revolution.

The CPP was founded as a breakaway from an older Stalinist party, the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP). While the PKP followed the political line purveyed by Moscow and allied with the Marcos dictatorship, the CPP adopted the perspective of Maoism, which is a tactical variant of Stalinism. Maoism claimed that the ends of the national democratic revolution and the alliance with the national bourgeoisie could only be secured by means of armed struggle waged by a peasant army in the countryside. The armed struggle would gradually surround the cities, and the victory of the armed struggle would culminate in the national democratic revolution and the formation of a coalition government of workers and progressive capitalists. In the words of the CPP, peace talks with the “reactionary government” were a means of achieving the victory of the armed struggle and the success of the national democratic revolution.

Stalinism, in both its Soviet and Maoist variants, is an anti-Marxist program of nationalism and class collaboration. The Bolshevik party led the Russian working class to victory in October 1917 on the basis of the perspective of the Theory of Permanent Revolution first put forward by Leon Trotsky in 1906. The tasks of the revolution in every country were determined by the world system of capitalism and not by individual national particularities. It was world capitalism that imparted to revolutionary struggles, regardless of where they first erupted, the necessity of adopting socialist measures in order to succeed. The national and democratic tasks of the revolution, long belated, could only be realized through socialist revolution. The capitalist class was the enemy of the working class in every corner of the globe.

On the basis of their Stalinist perspective the CPP launched peace talks with multiple successive administrations, including those of Corazon Aquino, Fidel Ramos, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Benigno Aquino III, and Rodrigo Duterte. The advance of the peace negotiations involved the leadership of the CPP cultivating in the minds of their followers and of the working class more generally the illusion that pressure brought to bear on

the government could culminate in the realization of a just society.

This took particularly grotesque form with Duterte in 2016. The CPP hailed the fascistic president as progressive, treated as good coin his claim to be “a socialist,” selected candidates to serve in his cabinet, and endorsed his murderous war on drugs. CPP leader Jose Maria Sison’s enthusiasm for Duterte was public and overwhelming. The CPP and the legal national democratic organizations that follow its political line campaigned for Duterte, propped up his administration in its first year, and sowed great confusion in the Filipino working class.

Under immense pressure from the military, which had been trained in anti-Communist counter-insurgency since the era of American colonial rule, Duterte broke off negotiations with the CPP in November 2017.

In the wake of the breakdown of talks, the CPP suffered tremendous setbacks. Their support for Duterte, whose “war on drugs” led to the murder of over 30,000 impoverished Filipinos, and the political exposure of their support published by the *World Socialist Web Site* led to a substantial loss of followers for the CPP. The political rallies staged now by national democratic groups are poorly attended, pale shadows of what they were a decade ago.

The leadership of the CPP and NDFP is ageing and dying off and they have not trained replacement cadre for leadership. None of the negotiators of the NDFP are under 75 years old. Fidel Agcaoili, leading negotiator of the NDFP, died of illness in 2020 at the age of 75.

The repressive Duterte regime that the CPP had supported turned its apparatus of murder against the followers of the CPP. A number of leading representatives of the NDFP, so-called “peace consultants,” were murdered by the police, military, and paramilitary forces, including Randy Malayao, Julius Giron, Randall Echanis, Eugenia Magpantay, Agaton Topacio, and Rustico Tan. Others disappeared and have not yet been found. Benito Tiamzon and Wilma Austria, for years the heads of the CPP in the Philippines, were killed by the military.

Most devastating of all, founder and lifelong ideological leader of the CPP, Jose Maria Sison, died in December 2022 in exile in Utrecht at the age of 83.

The remaining leaders of CPP and NDFP come to peace talks in 2023 in a position of unprecedented weakness, as the organization over which they have presided since its founding is collapsing.

New talks

During his six years in office, Duterte pursued a policy of conciliation toward China, hoping that by distancing Manila from Washington’s aggression in the region he could secure improved economic ties with Beijing. A section of the military brass, many of whom had been trained at facilities in the United States, opposed this policy. There were repeated rumblings of possible coups.

The peace discussions with the CPP were initiated by sections of the Philippine military brass demanding that the government prepare for war with China. At the center of this was retired Gen. Emmanuel Bautista.

Jalandoni told the press that the peace discussions had started at the “discreet initiative of the GRP [Philippine government] emissary” which was “positively welcome and highly appreciated” by Jose Maria Sison. The emissary was Bautista. Juliet de Lima, widow of Sison and head of the NDFP delegation, reiterated Jalandoni’s point. “The initiative of Gen Bautista was welcomed by Joma Sison. ... We are grateful for this kind of initiative.”

Jalandoni asserted there had been two years of discussions that culminated in the joint statement of November 23. This would mean, however, that discussions began before Marcos was elected. They were

certainly not launched by the outgoing administration of Rodrigo Duterte. They began with neither administration; they began in the military.

Bautista was AFP Chief of Staff under the Benigno Aquino III administration (2010-16). He was the chief architect of Oplan Bayanihan, the multi-pronged counter-insurgency strategy of the Aquino government, that was fiercely denounced for its bloody and repressive character by the CPP in numerous issues of its flagship publication *Ang Bayan*.

When Aquino nominated Bautista to head potential peace talks with the CPP in early 2015, Sison denounced the appointment as “an insult to the NDFP and the revolutionary movement.”

Bautista is a member of a shadowy organization, Advocates of National Interest, composed of generals and colonels and ex-ambassadors who published a statement in May 2021, in the final year of the Duterte administration, calling for an aggressive prosecution of the Philippine claim to the South China Sea. They called for “national unity” in preparation for “conflict with China.”

That same week, Jorge Madlos, spokesperson of the NPA, issued a statement denouncing Duterte for being “sickeningly subservient and loyal to his Chinese imperialist boss. ... We call on all patriotic soldiers to side with the people by withdrawing support for a traitor Commander-in-Chief. ... Defend national patrimony and sovereignty!” The statement made no mention, not a word, of US imperialism.

There was a clear alignment of interests and perspective between the CPP and the sections of the military that Bautista represented. The outlook of this layer was clearly articulated by Bautista in an interview in April 2023, when he told the press it is “impossible for the Philippines not to get drawn in a Taiwan or South China Sea conflict ... if you cannot deter war, prepare for war.”

Preparation for war is the motive behind the peace talks. In early 2022, in the midst of a fiercely disputed presidential election, Bautista secretly arranged to meet personally with Sison in Oslo. Press reports state that their meeting was coordinated by the Norwegian government, longtime mediators in the peace talks, during a visit by Bautista to Oslo, and thus we know that Sison and Bautista met in June 2022 before president-elect Marcos took office.

The initiative for the negotiations, in other words, began not with the office of the President but with coup-plotting sections of the military who were demanding that the country be firmly reoriented back into the camp of Washington. It is their voice that is expressed in the joint statement’s appeal for national unity in the face of a “foreign security threat.”

Lining up behind Marcos

Marcos entered office a political cipher, wavering between sections of the elite who sought to continue Duterte’s conciliatory policies toward Beijing and those who sought to reverse this policy. Within months, he oriented to Washington, resumed construction of basing facilities for US troops in the country, and secured support from the Biden White House for his administration.

The Philippine military is staging provocative joint patrols with both the United States and Australia in the disputed South China Sea. Some of the basing facilities authorized for Washington’s use by the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) are operational. Marcos has launched discussions to craft a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) for Japanese forces in the country. The preparations for war with China have never been more advanced and the Philippines has resumed playing a leading role as a proxy of Washington’s interests in the Asia Pacific region.

The elite opposition to Marcos was mobilized to a significant extent on

the fear that he would uphold his pledge to continue the foreign policy orientation of the outgoing Duterte administration. Marcos's reorientation to Washington produced a seismic shift in Philippine political life. Marcos's allies in the elite camp of Duterte and Arroyo that is oriented to Beijing, including his Vice President Sara Duterte, came into open conflict with the President. And the erstwhile elite opponents of Marcos swallowed their displeasure and have increasingly embraced the son of the dictator.

There is a growing alignment, initially subterranean but now openly expressed, between the Liberal Party opposition forces of the last election and the Marcos administration. This finds its clearest manifestation in Leila de Lima, niece of Juliet de Lima, and Justice Secretary under the Benigno Aquino III administration. She had been unjustly imprisoned on trumped-up drug charges by Duterte, a reprisal for her conducting a Senate investigation into his drug war. De Lima was recently released by Marcos on bail and she has been made spokesperson of the Liberal Party and has, at the same time, aligned with the Marcos administration. It is widely mooted that she will lead a human rights campaign against Rodrigo Duterte with the backing of Malacañang presidential palace.

The NDFP, then aligned with Duterte, were part of the official lynch mob that put de Lima behind bars in 2017. Makabayan, a political umbrella coalition of groups that follow the nationalist line of the CPP, worked alongside the right-wing Volunteers Against Crime and Corruption (VACC) to bring corruption charges against the Aquino administration. The drug charges against de Lima were filed by VACC stemming from this initiative. Burying its own culpability, the NDFP issued a press statement on November 28 hailing de Lima's release from "unjust imprisonment."

Vice President Sara Duterte has emerged as the center of the forces plotting against Marcos. Speaking at the fifth anniversary celebration of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), a deeply reactionary body of which she is vice chair, Duterte announced that the government's agreement with the NDFP was "an agreement with the devil." Leila de Lima, now spokesperson of the Liberal Party, denounced the Vice President on behalf of Marcos and defended the administration's initiative.

Over the weekend, leading members of the national democratic organization, Bayan Muna, stepped in to defend the Marcos administration from any attempt at "destabilization." Bayan Muna chair Neri Colmenares, and Bayan Muna executive vice-president Carlos Zarate warned of reports to "destabilize" the government. Colmenares called on the military and police to remain loyal to the Marcos administration. Seven years ago, Colmenares campaigned to get Duterte elected and Zarate signed a public pledge of "full support" for Duterte. Now both line up to defend Ferdinand Marcos Jr from the Duterte wing of the elite. The orientation of the CPP has shifted, and so too has loyalty of the national democratic organizations it leads.

It is geopolitics that fuels the tensions in the Filipino ruling elite; it is this that drives the machinations and rumors of destabilization and coups d'état. The sharpness of these tensions is a concentrated expression of the advanced danger of war with China, which both factions seek to remedy by increasingly desperate measures to either ally with or gain distance from the United States.

The CPP is lining up behind, and giving voice to, the overwhelming sentiment of the thin layer that is the petty bourgeoisie in the Philippines which demands the nationalist prosecution of the country's claim to the "West Philippine Sea." These layers are engaged in the angry, insistent assertion of sovereignty over rocks and reefs—many submerged at high tide—against China, while American forces again tread Philippine soil, with the extraterritorial immunity they enjoyed throughout the 20th century.

This geopolitical orientation of the CPP has been growing for years.

While they still engage in their denunciations of US imperialism—although at times they forget to even mention this—their anger is reserved for China. The alignment of the nationalist orientation of the CPP with the agenda of Washington is increasingly open. In 2020, Sison gave an interview to the US government propaganda outlet, Radio Free Asia, in which he proclaimed that the NPA would be targeting Chinese firms blacklisted by Washington.

Prospects

The NDFP had always insisted in prior peace talks that the agreements reached with earlier administrations remained binding, including the Hague Joint Declaration, the Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG), and the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL). That is no longer the case.

Aged, weakened, and desperate, the leaders of the NDFP negotiating team repeatedly told the press that there are "no preconditions" to resumed negotiations and insisted that they were "making no demands." They listed four points, including the release of political prisoners, but repeated to the press that these were not demands; they were issues to be discussed.

Juliet de Lima declared that through the peace talks, "We envision and look forward to a country where a united people can live in peace and prosperity" and that they hoped to arrive at an agreement that will "provide solutions to problems that have long burdened the Filipino people." The problem that has long plagued the Filipino people is capitalism. No deal with the Marcos government, or any capitalist government, will solve this problem.

Hostility to the family name Marcos, and the brutal legacy that it represents, has to an extent been the defining feature, almost the *raison d'être*, of the CPP for the past 50 years. Now they are lining up, preparing to provide critical support to the son of the dictator, in furtherance ultimately of the geopolitical interests of Washington. One of the very last political acts of Jose Maria Sison was to welcome the architect of counter-insurgency warfare as the negotiator of a peace deal with the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The political decay of Stalinism has reached a stage of unimaginable rot.

Regardless of the outcome of the peace talks, the CPP stands utterly exposed as an agent and ally of the most reactionary social layers in Philippine society.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact