

# Philippines: President Marcos continues the “war on drugs”

Dante Pastrana  
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For nearly a decade, the working class in the Philippines has been subjected to a campaign of terror under the “war on drugs.” Initiated by the previous president, Rodrigo Duterte, who came to office in 2016, it has continued throughout the first three years of current President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.’s term.

The overwhelming victims are impoverished workers and youth, whose conditions have worsened as the crisis of capitalism deepens in the Philippines and internationally. Under the guise of combating drugs, extrajudicial killings have been meted out by both the police and state-backed death squads. Despite the infighting taking place between the Marcos and Duterte factions today, the bourgeoisie is united on the use of state terror to suppress the class struggle.

Poverty is widespread throughout the Philippines, with social anger growing over food prices, particularly for rice, the chief staple, which reached a 15-year high in 2024. Currently, the market price per kilogram is approximately 40 pesos, or double the price Marcos pledged to cut it to when he was elected in 2022.

According to an April survey by Social Weather Stations, a Philippine research institute, 55 percent of Filipinos self-reported they were poor. Another 12 percent considered themselves “borderline.” While the self-reported poverty figure was down slightly from 63 percent in December, hunger has risen. In March, 27.2 percent of Filipino households experienced involuntary hunger, an increase from 25.9 percent in December. In 2023, the annual hunger rate was 10.7 percent.

Workers face long hours and low wages. In Metro Manila, the capital region, the minimum wage is a paltry 645 pesos (\$US11.50) per day for non-agricultural workers. It is lower across other regions and industries. Workers in the informal sector earn on piece rates by the hour. Comprising as much as 42 percent or 20.7 million of all employed, this sector included street vendors, family farm hands, porters, and those forced into prostitution.

Many workers are forced to turn to drugs to stay awake

through their shifts just to make ends meet. A cheap and easily obtained methamphetamine, known as *shabu*, proliferates in slums where unemployment and starvation wages prevail, conditions produced by decades of austerity and capitalist plunder by both national and international companies.

Rather than address these social crises, Duterte and then Marcos declared war on the poor, scapegoating them to divert anger away from the ruling class.

By the end of Duterte’s term in 2022, a total of 6,252 so-called drug suspects had been killed according to the official government count. Human rights organizations, however, estimated nearly 30,000 were killed by the police and vigilantes. Subsequently, Marcos, son of the US-backed dictator who ruled the country from 1965 to 1986, was elected to a six-year term through an alliance with the Duterte clan.

Marcos continued, and in some cases, intensified the “war on drugs.” In comparison to Duterte’s first three years in office, from 2022 to 2025, the Marcos administration conducted 122 percent more raids in largely poor urban and rural areas and arrested 114 percent more alleged drug users.

However, the alliance between the Marcos and Duterte camps collapsed in 2023, driven by the former’s orientation to the US and the latter’s preference for closer relations with China. This led to Marcos arranging for Rodrigo Duterte’s arrest and extradition to The Hague in March this year to stand trial before the International Criminal Court on charges related to the drug killings during his term.

While Duterte is unquestionably guilty of the crimes of which he is accused, his arrest was a theatrical gesture supposedly meant to deflect attention from the Marcos administration’s ongoing “war on drugs” and clear the political field of a rival ahead of mid-term elections this month.

The Marcos government cynically distanced itself from Duterte’s *Tokhang* death squads. A day after Duterte’s arrest, Claire Castro, the presidential press officer, stated at a press briefing, “War on drugs, with *Tokhang*, with murder,

without due process ... shouldn't be the government's policy in the first place." She continued: "It [extrajudicial killing] is against the law. Killing is against the law. We don't even have the death penalty."

In reality, the Marcos government has simply refined this campaign of state terror by removing Duterte's crudity and open relish for state violence, while retaining its lethal core and the impunity of the police and other state security forces. After three years in office, according to the Dahas Project, Marcos has overseen at least 928 drug-related killings as of March, including an increasing number committed by "unidentified gunmen."

The Dahas Project tracks killings in the drug war and is run by the Third World Studies Center at the University of the Philippines. According to its figures, 364 people were killed in 2024 compared to 331 the previous year. Of these, 76 were murdered by those identified as non-state agents and 142 by unidentified assailants. Police agencies were responsible for killing 112.

The barbarity of the campaign is epitomized by the killing of children. On October 28, 2024, 13-year-old Kenie de Jesus in Cebu City was executed by masked assassins, who shot the boy outside his home days before his 14th birthday. Police, stationed less than a kilometer away, labeled him a "drug pusher." De Jesus was one of 29 victims killed that month alone.

This repression also coincides with the Marcos regime's deepening integration into US imperialism's war preparations against China, including millions of dollars in US military aid, the US military's expanded access to Philippine bases, and joint drills between the Philippines and Pentagon forces.

The Marcos government, functioning as a puppet for Washington, is putting the Philippines on the frontline of a conflict with China. The Philippine military, trained and armed by the Pentagon, will use workers and youth as cannon fodder. The drug war's escalation serves to militarize society while suppressing working-class resistance to war.

Marcos and Duterte are not aberrations amid an otherwise unsullied history of bourgeois democracy in the Philippines. Successive governments have long conducted extrajudicial killings by state security forces or state-sponsored death squads against the working class.

Under the US-backed dictatorship of Marcos Sr., an estimated 3,257 people were "salvaged," a Filipino term referring to forced disappearances and execution. In addition, 2,520 were tortured before being killed.

President Corazon Aquino, installed by the 1986 uprising that ousted Marcos, unleashed the military and anti-communist vigilantes against workers and farmers who

surged forward after the downfall of the dictator to demand increased wages and the dismantling of the haciendas (large estates). In his book, *Rebellion and Repression in the Philippines*, Richard Kessler estimated that during her six-year term, an average of 244 were killed and disappeared annually.

From 2001 to 2006 under President Gloria Arroyo, the non-governmental organization Karapatan documented 819 victims of "extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary execution," averaging 137 non-judicial state killings each year. From 2010 to 2016, under President Benigno Aquino III, whose own father was murdered in broad daylight by the Marcos dictatorship, at least 300 leftists, human rights activists, and alleged supporters of Maoist rebels were killed.

As in other countries wracked by the crisis of global capitalism, the installation of Duterte as president in 2016 signaled a turn by the ruling elites to a more fascist form of rule. In conjunction with the "war on drugs," the government launched the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict to oversee a "red tagging campaign" against leftists and workers that resulted in their incarceration or disappearance and even death. The government passed the Anti-Terror Law and, in a major attack against freedom of speech, shut down ABS-CBN, a major television network aligned with the bourgeois opposition against Duterte.

Against the backdrop of systemic extrajudicial violence, the March 2025 arrest of Duterte on charges of "crimes against humanity" is a cynical farce. Calls for "accountability" and "reform" only perpetuate illusions in the state, which exists solely to defend the interests of landlords, foreign monopolies, and the military elite. Meanwhile the crimes against the working class and poor continue in a ruthless bid to suppress opposition to declining social conditions and war.



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