

Major protests against corruption in the Philippines

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On Sunday, September 21, massive protests against corruption were held in cities throughout the Philippines, crowds of tens of thousands assembling despite the rain. The protests were organized and took shape in response to recent revelations of widespread corruption surrounding flood control infrastructure projects, involving kickbacks to government officials and elected representatives, and the theft of billions by private contractors.

The protests were the largest seen in the Philippines in two decades—one hundred thousand people demonstrated in Manila, and tens of thousands rallied in other cities throughout the country. The protests occur in the context of other expressions of social unrest targeting corruption, including mass demonstrations in Indonesia, and rioting in Nepal that led to the ouster of the government.

2025 has been one of the worst years for flooding on record in the Philippines. Over 31 people died in the typhoon flooding in July. Particularly devastating was a record-setting rainfall in August, 4.8 inches fell in one hour, exceeding the record set by Typhoon Ketsana (Ondoy) in 2009. The deluge overwhelmed drainage capacity and produced widespread flooding in Quezon City.

Typhoons and catastrophic damage caused by flooding, particularly during the rainy season of June to August, have plagued the Philippines throughout the history of its post-war urbanization. The sprawling, densely crowded communities of urban poor, their homes built on the worst land, combined with an utterly unplanned and underfunded system of public infrastructure, produces an annual cycle of inundation and misery.

Scores of the impoverished residents of Manila and Bulacan die every year in the floods. Homes are washed away and children wade to school through stagnant floodwaters contaminated with human waste. Leptospirosis, a disease borne in rat urine, spreads through the communities of the urban poor.

Mass flooding and unaffordable rice prices have historically been the two recurring issues most likely to produce widespread social unrest in the country. It was partly to suppress the social anger at the catastrophic level of flooding in August 1972 that Ferdinand Marcos Sr declared martial law in September of that year.

The flooding, and the human misery that it causes, are fundamentally the fault of capitalism, not corruption. The unplanned and unregulated growth of Greater Manila, the complete absence of any system of public housing, the formation

of vast shantytowns along canals and riverbanks without sewage or running water, the profit-mad speculations of real estate developers, the immense chasm of social inequality between the mansions of Forbes Park and the inundated homes of Marikina—these are all the products of capitalism.

It is anger at the misery produced by capitalism that fuels the protests in the Philippines, but the protests have gathered behind banners targeting corruption. The emergence of the corruption charges over the past four months is bound up with the political volatility of the Asia Pacific region as it confronts the uncertainty and immense economic havoc of the Trump tariffs, and the increasingly imminent danger of war between the United States and China.

This volatility is sharply expressed in the Philippines, both because of the colonial legacy of its intimate economic ties with the United States and because, under the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the Philippines has been placed on the frontlines of Washington's preparations for war with China. The tensions in the Philippine elite take shape in two dominant factions: the Marcos camp, deeply integrated with Washington's war drive against China, and the camp of former president Rodrigo Duterte, which seeks to moderate Philippine ties to the United States in order secure greater economic investment from China.

The seismic tensions between these two camps has produced a series of earthquakes since Trump took office in January. Rodrigo Duterte was arrested and extradited to the Hague on charges of crimes against humanity. His daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte, was impeached in the House, but the impeachment charges were withdrawn in the Senate on grounds of unconstitutionality. The Marcos camp suffered a significant setback in the midterm election and Marcos responded by launching a sweeping overhaul of his entire cabinet.

The Duterte camp sought, above all through social media, to accuse the Marcos administration of corruption. In what seems to be a maneuver to preempt these attacks, and seize control of the corruption allegations as a political weapon, Marcos announced during his State of the Nation Address on July 28, that he was aware of kickbacks, rackets, and conspiracies to steal government funds, in the flood control projects. Marcos, the son and inheritor of the wealth of the most corrupt political figure in the nation's history, declared that those guilty should be ashamed: "Be especially ashamed to our children who will inherit the debts you created, from the money you pocketed!"

Marcos launched an investigation into corruption surrounding flood control projects that he is personally overseeing. The Senate Blue Ribbon Committee, headed by forces allied to Duterte, launched a parallel investigation. The outcome has been a political bloodbath.

The investigations revealed details of massive corruption, that are to anyone familiar with Philippine history and politics, utterly unsurprising. Over \$US2 billion dollars had been allocated in the past decade to so-called “ghost projects,” non-existent infrastructure projects, the money pocketed by contractors with massive kickbacks paid out both to elected representatives and to members of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH).

The allegations have hit allies of Marcos and of Duterte, and the political landscape is shifting rapidly, although in what direction remains to be seen. The Secretary of the DPWH resigned. Senate President Francis Escudero, who headed the majority pro-Duterte bloc, was ousted on September 8 by a new majority bloc of the Liberal Party and forces loyal to Marcos. With the ouster of Escudero, control of the Blue Ribbon investigation was handed to Sen Ping Lacson, a far-right figure who shares Marcos’ orientation to Washington. Speaker of the House Martin Romualdez, loyal to Marcos and responsible for orchestrating the ultimately unsuccessful impeachment of Sara Duterte, resigned his post on September 17. The political warfare being conducted behind the pretext of corruption charges is far from resolved.

The Liberal Party, long the political vehicle of the Aquino family, with a half-century old rivalry with Marcos, is increasingly forming a bloc with Marcos. While the Liberal Party presents its increasingly open support for the President as a tactical alliance against the Duterte faction, it is in fact fundamentally driven by their shared orientation to Washington.

Protests over corruption erupted on campuses, particularly at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, on September 12. Multiple coalitions staged announcements that there would be nationwide protests held against corruption on September 21, the 53rd anniversary of Ferdinand Marcos Sr’s declaration of martial law. The Taumbayan Ayaw sa Magnanakaw at Abusado Network Alliance (The People Opposed to Thieves and Abusers Network, known as Tama Na), is a coalition of various groups associated with the Stalinist organization BAYAN. They announced that they would head a rally in Luneta Plaza in Manila. Perhaps as many as 80,000 people attended that rally. While Tama Na stated that it would not support “destablization” in favor of either faction of the elite, it has led charges against Duterte, including the filing of an appeal to reinstate the impeachment charges against Sara Duterte.

A separate collection of organizations tied the pseudo-left Akbayan party and its allied Liberal Party announced that they would be staging a protest on EDSA Avenue in Metro Manila on the same day. Approximately 30,000 people joined this demonstration.

Marcos announced days before the events that he supported the protests as long as they were peaceful. This was more than political posturing; the ultimate orientation of the leaders of the various demonstrations, despite some anti-Marcos slogans and banners, is towards an alliance against the forces of Duterte.

BAYAN and Akbayan, which formed in the 1990s out of the

break-up of the front organizations of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines, have long been engaged in political warfare with each other. They are coming into ever closer alignment with each other out of their shared orientation to sections of the Philippine bourgeoisie hostile to China.

Pro-Duterte forces staged protests in some cities demanding the return of Duterte from the Hague, but these events were dwarfed by the anti-corruption rallies.

The political line of Sunday’s protests had a markedly middle-class character. The old, empty slogan of the Liberal Party under the Benigno Aquino III administration, 2010-16, “If there were no corrupt, there would be no poor,” was widely deployed. Celebrities, movie stars, and talk show hosts, were given the stage and the microphone, to curse corrupt politicians and corruption.

A great many of the tens of thousands who thronged the streets of Manila, Cebu, Bacolod, Baguio, and numerous other cities throughout the country were not drawn to the protests by an orientation to a particular faction of the bourgeoisie. There is a marked and growing social anger that fuels these demonstrations. The ultimate target of their hostility, whether they are conscious of it or not, is the social inequality and misery produced by capitalism.

But the banner of an anti-corruption campaign is a political dead-end. It is politically amorphous and can serve as an umbrella for bringing together a wide range of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties and organisations, including those of the far-right.

It was on the basis of an anti-corruption platform that the JVP in Sri Lanka exploited the overwhelming public hostility to all the traditional political parties to come to power last year for the first time and implement the IMF’s austerity diktats.

The mass protests in Nepal this month that brought down the government were exploited by the military in league with middle class protest leaders to sideline all political parties and install a technocratic interim government headed by the former Supreme Court Chief Justice.

The only means for ending corruption, and more fundamentally the vast social gulf between the obscenely wealthy few and impoverished masses, is to abolish capitalism. That requires the building of unified movement of the working class to lead the rural poor in the struggle for power and the refashioning of society on the basis of a socialist program.



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