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Philippines

# Continuity of Violence in the Philippines

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**IN 1986, MASS protest overthrew Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Thirty-six years later, his son was elected president. The 2022 elections have crowned a decades-long project aimed at returning the Marcos dynasty to power and shown the support for Rodrigo Duterte's authoritarianism.**

A late surge in the campaign of Marcos' main rival, the liberal candidate Leni Robredo, was not enough to turn the tide. Over 31 million people cast their vote for Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., twice as many as for Robredo. It is true that fraud influenced the results of the general elections, which also saw members of Congress and Senate elected, but such irregularities cannot explain the gap between Marcos and Robredo.

The mass support for Bongbong is real — what needs explaining is how the son of the dictator became so popular. Since the overthrow of Marcos Sr. almost all Philippine presidents came to power as opponents of the incumbent. But Bongbong represents an unusual level of continuity. Those who wanted a continuation of the incumbent regime cast their vote for Bongbong and his running mate, Sara Duterte, Rodrigo's daughter.

## Duterte's Lethal Presidency

During his six-year term, Duterte maintained a high level of popularity. The bloody mayhem of his "war on drugs," the president's seemingly unpredictable behavior, violent misogyny and contempt for bourgeois respectability were not expressions of political incompetence, as some liberal critics thought. Rather the opposite: Duterte styled himself as an outsider to the establishment, coming to power by riding the dissatisfaction over thirty years of nominal liberal democracy in the Philippines and its inability to address concerns ranging from mass poverty to poor infrastructure.

Duterte successfully marginalized his opponents by branding them as representatives of a failed and hypocritical system that for decades failed to live up to its promises. In the words of three Philippine socialists, decades of neoliberal policies left millions "economically struggling and politically disillusioned," prompting disenchantment with the 1986 "People Power Revolution:"

"From the mid-1990s onward, a tide of resentment slowly emerged among the lower classes. Many became more sceptical of the version of events promoted by liberals, before eventually turning their back on them." [\[1\]](#)

After coming to power in 2016, Duterte was described by some as a "Bonapartist" figure — a political leader during, in the words of Friedrich Engels, an "exceptional period," "when the warring classes are so nearly equal in strength that the state apparatus, as apparent mediator, acquires for the moment a certain independence from the immediate (or, indeed, indirect) control of these classes." [\[2\]](#) Early on, it could seem as if Duterte, who engaged in populist rhetoric about the rights of working people and support for "the masses," did not represent established capitalist circles.

Duterte was even allied with the main current of the Philippine Left, the National-Democratic (ND) movement. This movement includes the underground, Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) as well as above-ground, legal social organizations and political groups.

Long before 2016, the ND movement already cooperated with Duterte when he was mayor of Davao City. In mid-2016, Renato Reyes, the general secretary of Bayan (a coalition of ND mass organizations) referred to the newly elected Duterte as an “ally,” based on “his track record and long-standing relationship with the revolutionary forces.”

“It is the first time that we have this kind of an alliance with a sitting president,” Reyes added. [3] The CPP used similar terms, referring to Duterte as a “friend” of the National-Democratic movement, with whom it was “forging an alliance” with great potential. [4] According to Luis Jalandoni, chief negotiator of the movement’s diplomatic wing, “the relationship between the revolutionary movement and President Duterte” was “excellent.” [5]

In a moment that seemed charged with symbolism, Duterte invited leaders of the ND bloc to the presidential palace where, their fists raised, they together posed for pictures. On Duterte’s invitation, several prominent leaders of the movement served as members of his cabinet.

But this was not a situation in which the “warring classes” were “nearly equal in strength.” Labor did not threaten capital. Since the crisis in the early 2000s, the number of Philippine workers covered by collective bargaining agreements has decreased by over 50 percent. Unionization rates have gone through a similar decline.

## False Promises

Duterte capitalized on dissatisfaction over increasing precarization by (falsely) promising to take measures against short-term contracts. Of the employed population, almost 40 percent work in the vulnerable, difficult to organize “informal” economy.

The most popular leftist candidate for Senate in 2016, National-Democrat Neri Colmenares, won almost 6.5 million votes — to win a seat, he would have needed over twice that number.

The Maoist guerilla movement in the meantime is far from threatening state power. After half a century, it is in its own words, still in the first, “defensive” phase.

It did not take long before Duterte’s alliance with the ND-left started to fray. Previously, Duterte had profited from the alliance. But once in power, he dropped his erstwhile allies, preferring to establish good relations with a stronger force: the notoriously anti-communist military.

Duterte’s populist rhetoric, such as his promise to end short-term contractual labor and his support for peace talks with the Maoist guerilla forces, disappeared.

As a relatively unknown figure on the national level, Duterte could seem to be a “mediator” in a more limited sense — not between capital and labor, but between different capitalist factions. However, it became clear that the supposed “outsider” in fact had strong relations with powerful representatives of the political establishment such as former president (and current member of Congress) Gloria Macapagal Arroyo as well as with the Marcos dynasty.

A few weeks after Duterte’s election, charges of fraud against Arroyo were dismissed, and a few months later Ferdinand Marcos was buried at the national cemetery, fulfilling a long-standing wish of his family.

Duterte’s regime was in many ways similar to that of previous presidents, rather than a “Bonapartist” regime or a

dictatorship in the mold of that of Ferdinand Marcos Sr.

Not only do Philippine presidents already have extensive powers, Duterte's continuing high approval ratings meant he had no use to institutionalize a dictatorship or raise the autonomy of the executive branch to unprecedented new levels, a Philippine socialist remarked.

One thing that distinguished the dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. from Duterte, historian Vicent L. Rafael writes, "was the former's penchant for imprisoning his political enemies." [6] There were about 70,000 recorded incarcerations under Marcos Sr. The number of political prisoners under Duterte was much lower.

Rather than mass arrests, Duterte used intimidation. The arrest of a high level critic, as Senator Leila de Lima, was an exception that was successful in intimidating others. And rather than closing down news-outlets like Marcos Sr. had one, Duterte used targeted legal harassment against a prominent journalist, like Maria Ressa. Walden Bello's arrest in early August shows that the new Marcos regime will use similar methods.

Many of the techniques that Duterte used to strengthen his hold on power were similar to those of previous presidents. The left, the ND movement prominent among them, was targeted for repression. Duterte denounced legal activists as members of the underground CPP and hundreds of progressive activists have been killed.

Supporters of the Philippine section of the Fourth International also became targets, and several comrades were killed. [7]

The use of "red tagging" was not unique to Duterte nor was his use of death squads. During her presidency in the early 2010s, Gloria Arroyo used such tools when her position seemed to be threatened.

To maintain power, law expert Tony La Viña remarked, Duterte "weaponized the law and Congress, using legal instruments to justify moves to stifle critics. Duterte has also succeeded in packing both the House of Representatives and the traditionally independent Senate with his allies, who voted on bills and resolutions based on his wishes." His predecessors used similar techniques; "Duterte, obviously, did it better by being more ruthless. That's really the difference." [8]

Of the promises he made, Duterte only really held to one; to organize large-scale killings. This is the essential difference between Duterte and his predecessors. There were some 3,257 extrajudicial killings during the Marcos dictatorship. The number of such killings under Duterte is much higher — the victims of the "war on drugs" number in the tens of thousands.

The first victims were supposedly drug-users and dealers, but it did not take long for activists and government critics to also become targets. The threat of being included on one of the public lists of so-called "drug personalities" became an effective tool of intimidation.

It is a sign of the state of bourgeois democracy in the Philippines that these levels of state-sanctioned violence did not require Duterte to make radical institutional changes, let alone declare a dictatorship.

## Transferring Power

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In an article published shortly after the elections, Philippine scholar and activist Walden Bello also pointed to disappointment with liberal democracy as a driving force behind the elections of Duterte and Marcos.

“Though probably inchoate and diffuse at the level of conscious motivation, the vote for Duterte and the even larger vote for Marcos were propelled by widespread resentment at the persistence of gross inequality in a country where less than 5 percent of the population corners over 50 percent of the wealth.

“It was a protest against the extreme poverty that engulfs 25 percent of the people and the poverty, broadly defined, that has about 40 percent of them in its clutches.” [\[9\]](#)

This resentment is an important part of the explanation, but also raises especially the question why many of the poor, who have little to gain from the continuation of neoliberal policies, voted for Duterte and Marcos specifically.

Structural, constant poverty and the lack of a credible progressive alternative can lead to widespread feelings of resignation, and the search for an outside force, such as a benevolent leader, that can provide help to people whose back is against the wall. Hopes for such aid are often coupled with fear of instability that would upset an already precarious balance.

For an under- and unemployed sub-proletariat, which lacks reserves or means to defend to itself, and without experiences of collective power, any kind of instability first of all appears as a threat. Duterte and Marcos played on such feelings of despair and lowered expectations by promising a paternalistic, caring leadership.

The election of Marcos Jr. was hardly his own, personal achievement. It was not the election of a person “but a clan that has regained power,” as Pierre Rousset writes. [\[10\]](#) The election was the outcome of a project that lasted for decades.

The first steps of the Marcos dynasty back towards the presidential palace were taken in the nineties when the widow of the former dictator, Imelda Marcos, ran for president. Imelda, a skilled political operator, lost but her campaigns ensured that the Marcos name remained visible.

Respectable bourgeois politicians joined Imelda’s well-financed campaigns, helping the Marcos dynasty to rid itself of the stigma associated with the dictatorship.

With the help of billions looted during the dictatorship, the Marcos dynasty rebuilt its powers as members of the family were elected to regional and national seats.

Even the ND left played a small part in enabling the political career of Marcos Jr. In 2010, Marcos Jr. successfully ran for Senate as part of a coalition that also included the ND movement. [\[11\]](#) The campaign provided the picture of Marcos Jr. sharing a platform with people who had been political prisoners under his father.

On Facebook and Twitter, bots, influencers and trolls harass critics of Marcos & Duterte, spread incredible stories about their accomplishments, and present the dictatorship as a golden age of the Philippines. The scale and reach of this disinformation machine shows there is considerable money and organization behind it.

Related to the role of the wealth of the Marcos dynasty is also the role of patronage. A practice rooted in the colonial past, patronage “provides an idiom for articulating demands from below” with “clients of whatever social class having

traditionally called upon those in power to live up to their obligations.”

These “patron-client ties, bound by reciprocal obligations but also prone to disruption, reinforce social hierarchy and ongoing inequality between the two parties, narrowing the chances for popular democracy.” [12]

As the highest ranking patrons in the country, Philippine presidents use such ties to maintain the support of politicians by doling out jobs, positions, money.

Usually, these ties fray as a presidents near the end of their terms and clients look for new patrons. Duterte did not escape this dynamic, but much of his network was transferred to the new top-patron.

As Philippine socialists pointed out, “local leaders would not have risked their own positions had they not sensed that the ground was already shifting beneath their feet and that Bongbong was on course for a landslide.” [13] Duterte opened the door for Marcos Jr. His violence and intimidation helped further marginalize the opposition. Patronage, disinformation, widespread social despair and his association with Duterte brought Bongbong to power.

## The Left and its Options

A majority of the left-wing forces, from progressive liberals to socialists (including the ND-bloc), supported the campaign of Robredo. Robredo, who has a background as a human rights lawyer and whose personal integrity is recognized by many, was seen by some as someone who could not just be a “lesser evil” but be pushed towards some progressive reforms. For other left-wing activists, supporting the liberal candidate was a necessary emergency response to the prospect of a Marcos returning to power.

For yet others, most prominently the ND-movement, supporting one bourgeois candidate against another is their standard approach. The NDs and their activist networks are useful for candidates looking to mobilize people in the streets, and the mass-meetings of Robredo’s campaign would probably not have been so successful without them.

Still, it seems that the liberal camp had not forgiven them for their earlier support for Duterte and the ND candidates were treated rather coldly. In the 2022 elections, the ND bloc lost over half of its seats.

Only one opposition candidate was elected to the senate: Risa Hontiveros of Akbayan, a social-democratic group that has become closely associated with Robredo’s Liberal Party.

A part of the radical left took a different approach. The 2022 elections saw the first openly socialist presidential campaign in the Philippines, that of trade-union leader Leody de Guzman, with Walden Bello as his running mate. [14] Their campaign also endorsed a number of senatorial candidates, including Neri Colmenares and Risa Hontiveros.

The goal of the campaign was to bring “a revolutionary perspective to public attention” and build “the political and organizational infrastructure that will be needed to make such initiatives sustainable.”

Considering the difficulties facing such an initiative, there were some positive signs. In 2016, running for Senate, Walden Bello gained a little over one million votes (2.41 percent). This year, socialist Senatorial candidate Luke Espiritu won almost 3.5 million votes (6.21 percent), while Neri Colmenares retained most of his support. It should be taken into account, however, that voters can choose 12 different senatorial candidates.

The campaign did bring socialist ideas and proposals for structural change to a national platform. But the results of 0.17 of the vote for De Guzman, and a similar result for Bello's vice-presidential candidacy must have come as disappointments for many of their supporters.

To move forward, there needs to be an open debate on what strategic orientation socialists should take. In any case, many of the forces that came forward to support Robredo will be essential to building a credible left-wing opposition.

## What to Expect?

It is too early predict what a Marcos presidency will look like in detail but we can expect a "Dutertismo without Duterte." Going by recent statements, the "war on drugs," having fulfilled its function, will at least for now be dialled back. Any hope for justice for the victims or punishment of the perpetrators will be in vain, and the "war" can be re-started whenever the president deems it necessary. We can expect the repression of progressive activists to continue.

The economic re-orientation towards China of Philippine capitalism, started before Duterte but gathering speed during his term, will also continue. During Duterte's term, Chinese investments were encouraged, and China's importance as a foreign market as well as foreign investor in the Philippines is rapidly growing. [\[15\]](#)

The Philippines remains a peripheral capitalist economy, exporting raw resources, agricultural products and some low-value-added goods, while much foreign investment goes to land speculation and low-wage sectors.

The growing economic ties with China will for the foreseeable future be combined with military and political links with the United States. Maintaining such links is a priority for Washington, which will ignore human rights violations by Philippine presidents in return for their allegiance. Inside the Philippines, U.S. support is also still seen as the only credible counter-weight to China's deeply unpopular encroachments on Philippine rights in the South-China Sea.

In the article cited, Bello looks forward to "millions realizing they have not been led to the promised land of milk and honey" when they see that Marcos is unable to meet their expectations. But that Duterte similarly broke his promises was not held against him. Duterte successfully blamed his failures on bureaucratic obstacles and especially on obstruction by his political rivals.

Will Marcos, like Duterte before him, be able to turn disappointment into his advantage by directing it against his rival? Marcos has the advantage that compared to Duterte he made few concrete promises to begin with.

Will he succeed in keeping his capitalist allies united and rule through control of the existing institutions, or do away with the institutions of bourgeois democracy?

With such widespread support, a weakened opposition, and much of the capitalist class united behind him, the latter option does not seem necessary for Marcos Jr.

With a discredited political center, a left that is not seen as a credible alternative by many of the poor and oppressed, and widespread support for authoritarian politics, the Philippines offers a political landscape that is hardly unique in either the Global North or South. More peculiar for the Philippines is a tradition of widespread social resistance and extensive activist networks.

## Continuity of Violence in the Philippines

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The position of Marcos Jr. seems secure — just as that of his father in the late seventies. And yet, some years later, he and his father needed to be evacuated from the country by the U.S. Air Force.

The same structural problems that brought Duterte and Marcos to power could be their undoing. But for these problems to stop producing monsters like the Marcoses and Duterte, much work in political organizing and building a socialist alternative will be needed.

Source [Against the Current, No. 220, September/October 2022](#).

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[1] Herbert Docena, Maria Kristine Alvarez, Joshua Makalintal, "[By Failing to Transform the Philippines, Liberals Paved the Way for the Reactionary Right](#)," *Jacobin*.

[2] Frederick Engels, [Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State](#).

[3] Renato Reyes Jr, "[Left won't fold flags despite alliance with Duterte](#)," *Rappler*.

[4] *Ang Bayan*, July 7, 2016, 1 and *Ang Bayan*, June 7, 2016.

[5] Quoted in *Ang Bayan*, August 21, 2016, 3.

[6] Vicente L. Rafael, *The Sovereign Trickster. Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022, 98.

[7] RPM-M, "[Statement of Condemnation on the Murder of Comrade Ruben](#)" March 5 2017), "[Mindanao: Statement regarding the killing of Comrade Zandro/Tripón](#)", December 27, 2021.

[8] Mara Cepeda, "[Duterte crushes opposition, serves Marcos power on a silver platter](#)", *Rappler*.

[9] Walden Bello, "[Why the son of a hated dictator won the Philippine elections](#)" FPIP.

[10] Pierre Rousset "[Philippines: Ferdinand Marcos Jr. succeeds Rodrigo Duterte and his clan completes the reconquest of power](#)".

[11] See "[Philippine left backs Villar, Legarda](#)".

[12] Vicente L. Rafael, "[The Return of the Marcoses](#)," NYRB.

[13] Herbert Docena, Maria Kristine Alvarez, "[Pariah to President](#)", NLR Sidecar.

[14] Maria Kristine Alvarez, Joshua Makalintal, Herbert Docena, "[The Philippine Left Has an Opportunity to Break the Country's Political Mold](#)", *Jacobin*.

[15] Alvin Camba and Rongchen Jiang, "[Beyond Infrastructure: Chinese Capital in the Philippines Under Duterte](#)", *The Diplomat*.