

# **Terror and Tyranny in Duterte's Philippines - The Marawi Crisis and the main dividing line for the left**

Wednesday 28 June 2017, by [CHANCO CJ](#) (Date first published: 26 June 2017).

*"The objective of ISIS is to kill and destroy. I will also kill and destroy."* —Rodrigo Duterte

In mid-May, fighting broke out between the army and the ISIS-aligned "Maute group" in Marawi, a city in the southern Philippines. Citing terrorism as a pretext, Rodrigo Duterte has declared martial law over all of Mindanao, a major island inhabited by roughly a quarter of the national population. The clashes have taken place during the term of a president with a fancy for obscene jokes that come true—this time suggesting that members of the Philippine army would be free to rape and pillage in areas under martial law.

Since the fighting started, more than 300,000 civilians have been displaced and at least 226 killed, with the government insisting that the majority of the casualties—some 380 dead so far—are terrorists. The actual figures are difficult to make out in the fog of war and the possible inaccuracies of government statistics. What is clear is that "precision missiles" and airstrikes have been used against civilian targets, and some have even killed members of the Philippine military. Meanwhile Maute rebels are said to be holding hostage a Catholic priest and dozens of civilians, mainly Christians. Sandwiched between the military and the Maute group, thousands of civilians remain trapped in Marawi city or in evacuation centers.

*"I could flatten the place in 24 hours . . . if I wanted to,"* Duterte has boasted repeatedly on national television.

He already has. Recent reports out of Marawi detail the fate of civilians callously labeled collateral damage in a war that has provided another outlet for Duterte's blood thirst. Children carry white flags to school so they aren't shot dead by either the military or any number of rebel groups involved in countless skirmishes over their communities. But there have also been some heroic instances of the city's Muslim community protecting Christians from both Islamist rebels and the military. Many have hidden them in their basements, which offer still little protection from either sniper fire from rebels or aerial bombing by the government.

Grim as the last month has been, none of this is new in southwestern Mindanao. Rather, these coping mechanisms are the result of constant outbreaks of conflict—rarely about religious strife, as they are so often portrayed, but of competing interests between local warlords and the national government.

In terms of the cost to human lives, terrorism and tyranny are difficult to tell apart. Duterte's nihilistic brand of politics is ISIS's mirror image. With more than 9,000 dead across the Philippines in less than a year, the violence unleashed by the Duterte presidency far exceeds the civilian death toll of the two decade-long Marcos dictatorship. It also exceeds that of all terrorist incidents in the country over the past twenty years combined.

What is happening in Marawi is only an extreme example of a policy of extermination and urban warfare waged elsewhere. The rise of ISIS in Mindanao can only reinforce the mass support Duterte unnervingly maintains, giving further legitimacy to murderous crusades against the targets he's identified. First targeting mostly poor and working-class meth addicts in the country's teeming slums, his scorched-earth tactics are now equally directed against ethnolinguistic minorities in the country's south. These include Christians, Muslims, and over a dozen other indigenous communities of neither faith, known as the Lumad.

This is not to suggest that ISIS doesn't pose a significant threat, nor to downplay real fears of terrorism felt by people on the ground. But it is important to draw attention to the complexities of a region cloaked by Duterte's overheated rhetoric. In Marawi and much of southwestern Mindanao, feuding warlords, paramilitary groups, vigilantes, terrorists and transnational criminal networks have, for decades, wrought havoc on communities caught in the crosshairs of overlapping conflicts.

The region is also host to major armed insurgencies, from separatist groups like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Leading figures of both parties have gravitated around Duterte, with some even endorsing him during his presidential campaign. Both were lured in by his offer of peace negotiations, and various promises of economic and political reform, including a transition to a federal system. Duterte has been all but inconsistent in his approach toward the rebel groups, waxing hot and cold, restarting and canceling peace talks, whenever he has seen fit.

Yet it is in the overtures of the Communist party, despite all this, that we see the paradoxes of Duterte's Philippines. In the wake of the Marawi clash, the Maoist leadership encouraged its armed wing, the New Peoples Army (NPA), to work alongside the military in the hunt for terrorists—an offer Duterte promptly rebuffed. Communist leaders have meanwhile portrayed the attacks of the Maute group as a conspiracy concocted by the CIA and "anti-Duterte groups": a campaign of destabilisation "for the purpose of overthrowing . . . the Duterte regime."

So in the name of an impulsive anti-imperialism, they have joined the war on terror. Oddly enough, the CPP's front groups in Manila have also issued statements condemning the declaration of martial law in Mindanao. This belies the strained yet enduring alliance cultivated between the CPP and Duterte, who was for decades a mayor of Davao city, where he played a mediating role between the NPA and the military.

While they issue occasional statements on human rights, leading party members remain in Duterte's cabinet. In the departments of land reform, labor, and social welfare, they have become willing pawns, providing a progressive face to an otherwise murderous regime. Writing late last year in the English-language *New Mandala*, Mong Palatino, a Maoist stalwart for the political party and CPP front Bayan (Nation), could still present Duterte's "accomplishments as a peacemaker, patriot and defender of labour and environment" as instructive for Trump.

Such views are now so transparently ridiculous that they would be comical if the CPP didn't hold so much sway in Philippine politics—but as things stand, the party's "leftist" stamp of approval has done much to consolidate support for Duterte's rule, and sown further confusion among the party's rank and file.

Trump has only poured fuel on the fire. As a Western world leader, he joins the chorus of Duterte's local supporters, who attack liberal human-rights critics as part of a Western conspiracy, an unnecessary intervention in the affairs of the Filipino state and in the global war on "Islamic" terror. Duterte, for his part, has expressed nothing but open contempt for international institutions like the United Nations and the international criminal court. He has received a boost from the shifting

geopolitics of Southeast Asia, and has been backed by member countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)—themselves far from being the paragons of human rights and democracy. ASEAN, despite rhetoric about being “people-centric,” no longer even purports to be a normative body similar to the EU, enforcing respect for human rights or rule of law across the region.

For the Maoist far left, the retreat to the world of conspiracy and patronage politics signals a real vacuum in the Philippine political arena of anything to the left of this administration. The irony, of course, is that the CPP and its fronts regularly used the discourse of human rights and international law to criticise previous governments before Duterte, ironically describing the previous Aquino administration as “fascistic.” Over half a century since the beginning of its “people’s war,” the CPP’s dalliance with Duterte is perhaps the final act of desperation by a Maoist armed rebellion that is on its last legs. Born in resistance to the Marcos dictatorship, it is stuck in an era when guerrilla movements and nationalistic anticolonial movements held some promise of victory.

Likewise, the Moro nationalist fronts have for decades railed against an “Imperial Manila” in the name of a regionalist politics that is at best parochial in its implications, and at worst has led them straight into the arms of Duterte as someone who, like them, is “from Mindanao.” Years of failed peace negotiations and entrenched poverty have fueled the radicalization of the region’s youth. But ISIS in Southeast Asia is not ISIS in the Middle East. The Maute group, which claims to align itself ideologically with ISIS, is just the latest fallout from the often fractious politics of mainstream Moro separatist organisations.

Consistent with the clannish nature of Filipino politics, Maute has been financed through a wealthy family of the same name with business interests including real estate and construction as well as drugs and arms smuggling. Like the Ampatuans, who are largely held responsible for the massacre of journalists and political rivals in 2009, many of these families have their own private armies. They at times have the support of sections of the national government, the military, and various armed movements, who use them to exert control over local politics.

Duterte’s threats to refuse “negotiations” with Maute can only be understood in this context. In the Southern Philippines, the line between terrorist and rebel has always been ambiguous—as are the politics of resistance and cooptation.

The MILF, like the CPP, has offered to assist in the military’s “clearing operations” against ISIS in Marawi. In that effort, they join the U.S. military. And so we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation where two of the main targets of the Marcos regime, and the leading pillars of armed resistance to it—Maoists and Muslim separatists—have caged themselves in with a man who embodies, and proudly presents himself as, a Marcos redux—a revival of the most reactionary faction of the country’s ruling elite.

Yet even this is not an entirely accurate portrait. Duterte is not a run-of-the-mill populist that we have seen in the past, but rather a sign of an eerier descent to something akin to fascism. In turn, the schizophrenic politics of the far left repeats, as tragic farce, the worst of the twentieth-century’s Stalinist U-turns.

Buried beneath all this are the voices of those suffering most from the clash of extremes; in particular, the urban poor—the main target of Duterte’s war on drugs—and communities in Mindanao caught in the crosshairs of his new war on terror. The indigenous Lumad in particular have been marginalized, in times of both war and peace, by the failures of successive peace negotiations as well as decades of conflict between various armed groups.

For those abroad, especially in the United States, figures like Duterte occupy fleeting attention to the extent that they allows critics to score points against Trump. Otherwise there is a strange silence on the part of sections of the Western left, upon hearing the words “human rights” and “democracy” used to criticize Duterte or the parade of strongmen that have emerged in recent years. The suspicion is understandable, weighed down as these concepts are by their misuse for endless interventions in the Middle East or Latin America.

Yassin Al Haj-Saleh, speaking of Syria, describes the rise of a dehumanized or “depopulated discourse” on the left: a reverse Orientalism wherein Western progressives, hung up on Cold War-era divides, rally uncritically to the banner of nationalist or “anticolonial” movements in the global South, seeking a clean narrative of East vs. West that has few lessons to offer for the challenges we face today. This discourse is depopulated because like the murderous regimes that some of these movements support, the inconvenient fact of the human lives caught in the crossfire are all but erased. The slogan of anti-imperialism has substituted for any real analysis of the contingencies of class or history, which might offer the proper response to conflicts where actors play on a chessboard that is rarely black and white, but an unseemly grey.

The alternative is to approach conflicts by giving priority to the lives and voices of people on the ground. Advocates for peace, human rights, democracy, even democratic socialism, have always existed and still speak out, even in the circumstances that seem most hopeless. They are often in the minority, but it is these voices that those still committed to a meaningful politics of international solidarity should seek out and stand by.

It wouldn't hurt to remember as well that despite their flaws, human rights and democratic norms, enforced through international institutions, were bought dearly at the cost of two world wars, the struggle against both Soviet totalitarianism and fascism, and efforts to amend the weaknesses of liberal democracy and the violence of unchecked capitalism.

Meanwhile no amount of rallying around the nation can resolve the traumas and betrayals of Filipino society that have given birth to Duterte. If it was hell for millions long before his rise, Duterte's is only hell unmasked. Extrajudicial killings, an entrenched local elite, a neoliberal economy gone haywire, appalling levels of poverty and social inequality—these are nothing new in a country that was America's first Vietnam, and that lurks in the shadows of American public consciousness.

The destinies of democracies in the global North and those in the South are bound to one another by an umbilical cord—something the uncanny parallels between Trump and Duterte, or conversely the refugee crisis and the far-right backlash this has engendered in the West, have only made more painfully clear.

Today, the main dividing line for the left isn't between pro-imperialist and anti-imperialist, but between reactionary nationalism and an egalitarian internationalism, war and antiwar, the pursuit of a humanist politics at the global level and the retreat to barbarism. The left must not squander its moral high ground if it is to be a compass in these dark times. It must defend what is worth defending, without sowing illusions in a system that is once again revealing us the full horror that lurked below the surface.

**CJ Chanco**

---

