

A reign of terror: Extra-judicial killings in Duterte's Philippines and prospects for Left unity

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Dorothy Guerrero from Global Justice Now discusses the brutal history of extra-judicial killings under Duterte's watch.

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Since Rodrigo Duterte began his term as the 16th president of the Philippines in 30 June 2016, Filipinos and the international community have watched in horror at accounts of dead bodies found nightly in the country's streets, linked to extra-judicial killings (EJKs). What is more appalling is that the police force, supposed to protect and serve people, are themselves involved in or directly doing the killings. Those familiar with the Philippine's recent history, especially the heroic struggle by anti-dictatorship and democracy movements that toppled the brutal authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 wonder what is going on in the country.

The *Real Numbers Update* [1] report from the website of the Philippine National Police (PNP) listed a total of 81,919 anti-drug operations, resulting in 119,361 arrests and deaths of 3,987 suspected drug users from 1 July 2016, to 17 January 2018. The Human Rights Watch *World Report 2018* [2], said more than 12,000 drug suspects were already killed in the same period. In a speech delivered to the Philippine Senate in 21 February by Senator Antonio Trillanes, he pointed out that there is also 16,355 drug-related homicide cases that are still under investigation from July 1, 2016 to September 30, 2017 in the PNP *Real Numbers Update* report. He claims that it means the real number of deaths related to the drug war is at least 20,322.

Despite the big variation in numbers, one thing is clear – tens of thousands have already already killed by his 'war on drugs' policy. The dead were denied justice and killed like animals in their homes or in the street. Among the dead are innocent minors and children who are considered "collateral damage" of the senseless killing.

The history of extra-judicial killings in the Philippines

EJKs are not new in the Philippines. Suspected communists and activists were killed, involuntarily disappeared and tortured while in police and military custody under two decades of Marcos' regime. It also happened under successive post-Marcos governments. What is new, is the way the police's role in the mass killings and Duterte's cruel, aggressive and unapologetic stance about his

government's intention to continue killing Filipino citizens is normalised. Much worse, no one has been punished and the impunity by which the law is blatantly disregarded daily is unprecedented.

Even if the number of EJKs so far under Duterte is indeed what the PNP claim, a low 3,800, it already equals the number of people reportedly killed in the 14-year record of the Marcos dictatorship. It would be about three times the number of EJKs (1,200) recorded during the nine-year watch of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo from 2001 to 2010. No one was tried and punished for those crimes.

Duterte's killings

According to a feature article in the website of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) [3], extra-judicial killing seems to be Duterte's hallmark campaign against criminality if his 19 years of service as mayor of his home city of Davao in southern Philippines is anything to go by. The CBCP article is worth noting for the similarity between Duterte's methods then as a city mayor and what is happening nationally now that he is the Chief Executive.

The article described the operations of the dreaded Davao Death Squad (DDS), a vigilante group that Duterte founded. It allegedly killed 1,424 people from 1998 up to the end of 2015. From this number, the report listed that 132 were children under 17 years old, the youngest was 12 years old.

The DDS, is believed to be responsible for summary executions of street children and individuals suspected of petty crimes and drug dealing in Davao. An article from *The Guardian* also described a hearing held by the Philippine Senate in March 2017 [4], wherein Arturo Lascanas, a retired police officer and former leader of Duterte's first DDS hit squad claimed under oath that the president personally gave them orders to kill in 1989 when he was still mayor. The article further quoted Lascanas' admission that he personally killed about 200 people. Lascanas also alleged that Duterte's son and current Davao vice mayor, Paulo Duterte, had links to the drug trade. However, the Philippine Senate closed the hearing, for "lack of further proof".

First they came for the drug addicts

When Duterte campaigned for presidency, he promised that if elected his means to stop drug use in the country "will be bloody" and that "there will be no need for more jails - just funeral parlours." [5] The term "*tokhang*", from the Visayan language meaning "to knock and plead" became the most feared word. It is because when a Police Operation Tokhang, goes to one's neighbourhood, it practically means someone will get summarily executed or hauled to police station on mere suspicion of drug use.

In February 21, the Department of Justice filed a motion in the Manila Regional Trial Court Branch 19 seeking to declare the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA), terrorist organizations [6]. It also sought to tag a UN special rapporteur, a former lawmaker, four former priests and at least 600 individuals as terrorists. Included in the list of 600 is the UN special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, and Joan Carling, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and currently co-convener of the Indigenous Peoples Major Group on Sustainable Development.

The motion to tag activists as terrorists blur the lines of legitimate dissent and terrorism. It is doubly alarming because of the recently passed law granting subpoena powers to the police despite their implications in summary executions. This could lead to more impunity or it could also signal that

activists will be the next target of *tokhang* operations.

International human rights organisations already warned that indigenous leaders and environmental defenders are killed in the Philippines in an alarming rate.

Prospects for Left Unity?

After the ousting of Ferdinand Marcos, The Philippine Left was divided into various factions. The big question at this juncture in the country's deeply worrying situation is whether the Left can unite in the fight against Duterte. Joshua Makalintal's article about the challenges of building unity against Duterte [7] offers a very good glimpse about the very crucial, difficult, and inspiring possibility of building a new Left in the country at this historic juncture.

Makalintal identified three groupings. The first is the traditional militant left, the National Democrats, under the Maoist umbrella of the Communist Party of the Philippines that worked with Duterte at the beginning of his term. However, the coalition did not survive as the Duterte did not support prominent leaders from left-wing movements that he initially appointed to cabinet position in appointment hearings. The leaders came from left mass based organisations that work in close partnership with the National Democrats. The groupings recently launched the Movement Against Tyranny.

Secondly, there is Tindig Pilipinas or "Rise Up Philippines", a broad coalition that includes minority parties in the Philippine's legislative branch and their affiliated organisations. This grouping range from members of the Liberal Party, the social democratic party Akbayan, and the nationalist, anti-communist Magdalo group. The Liberal Party is the most established party in this grouping, while Akbayan has the second largest left organizational base next to the National Democrats. Magdalo is composed of former junior officers of the armed forces led by Antonio Trillanes mentioned earlier here.

The "third force", the newly organized Laban ng Masa, or "Struggle of the Masses," is a coalition of socialist-oriented groups who have been consistent in their opposition to Duterte's presidency from the beginning. The coalition's leader is activist-academic Walden Bello. Bello ran a senate campaign supported by many progressive organisations and NGOs in 2016. He is known in the international anti-globalisation movement.

The Philippine Left and the pluralist progressive movement is much smaller now compared to its strength when Marcos was ousted. The work ahead in opposing Duterte will be difficult and there is that challenge of winning back the masses that became disappointed for the lack of structural changes after 1986. Many of them voted for Duterte. Earlier this month, the International Criminal Court based in The Hague opened an inquiry on possible crimes against humanity committed by Duterte since he started his term of office.

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P.S.

* "A reign of terror: Extra-judicial killings in Duterte's Philippines". Red Pepper. March 19, 2018:

<https://www.redpepper.org.uk/extra-judicial-killings-authoritarianism-and-the-challenges-of-building-left-unity-in-the-philippines/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.pnp.gov.ph>

[2] <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018>

[3] ESSF (article 43669), [Philippines \(Mindanao\) – The Victims of the Davao Death Squad : Consolidated Report 1998-2015](#).

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/02/philippines-president-duterte-drugs-war-death-squads>

[5] <https://www.pressreader.com/philippines/manila-times/20160515/281621009557565>

[6] <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/973949/govt-seeks-terrorist-tag-for-600>

[7] ESSF (article 43670), [On the Left: The challenges of building a united resistance in Duterte's Philippines](#).