

On the Left: The challenges of building a united resistance in Duterte's Philippines

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Three decades after the People Power revolution [1] ended the bloody regime of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, Asia's oldest republic is at a crossroads. Since Rodrigo Duterte became president of the Philippines in June 2016, he has led an extrajudicial killing campaign that has taken over 12,000 lives. Officially cloaked as an anti-crime policy, his "war against drugs" has nevertheless failed to address the genuine roots of the country's narcotics crisis. It has instead only worsened the situation by victimizing the urban poor at a staggering rate.

In recent months, there has also been a particularly bloody escalation of hostility against the progressive movement under his regime. Over a dozen activists from left-wing groups were executed in December [2], among them religious leaders and indigenous farmers from the south of the country in Mindanao. The island has been under martial law for nine months, due to the war between government forces and jihadist militants in the city of Marawi, which ended in October. Duterte's congressional and judicial allies did not hesitate to extend military rule in the region despite the actual absence of rebellion.

Moreover, Duterte's order to declare the Communist Party of the Philippines, or CPP, and its armed wing, the New People's Army, terrorist organizations [3] has created more incentives for the military to accelerate its aggressions against the militant left. This has provided a pretext to oppress the CPP's affiliates on the legal front, a development that has already occurred in recent weeks, when the president publicly vowed to extend his crackdown against these organizations [4].

More recently, after the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor announced she was opening a preliminary investigation for crimes against humanity surrounding the "drug war" killings [5], Duterte did not tone down his brutal rhetoric. He explicitly called for summary executions of rebel fighters [6] and incited sexual violence against female rebels [7], acts that are tantamount to war crimes.

Yet the government's increasingly authoritarian tactics are a symptom of its lack of popular support. By targeting the country's "undesirables" first, he may have provided a useful pretext for today's broader repression, but the campaign's brutality has also helped crystallize opposition to his government.

This opposition was on full display during the last week of February, with the nationwide commemoration of the People Power revolt that was celebrated through protests against Duterte's

tyrannical policies [8]. The youth-led demonstrations [9] were one notable event that demonstrated a growing trend of radicalization among the young generation. Considering Duterte's crackdown is now encompassing dissenting voices from schools and universities, this is a welcome development since it is more important than ever to empower and organize the youth.

The force of this maturing resistance began to blossom last fall when Filipinos all over the country took to the streets to mark the 45th anniversary of Marcos' declaration of martial law. The "National Day of Protest" on Sept. 21 didn't just memorialize the suffering that occurred under the Marcos dictatorship. It provided an opportunity for the opposition to flex its popular support against the government. Those who came to speak out against the regime vastly outnumbered Duterte's supporters.

These oppositional forces represented a broad and popular force in the making. It further proved that even though Duterte has the tools of a repressive state at his disposal, he cannot count on a mass base to come to his defense.

Regrouping the opposition

One of the major formations that surfaced was the Movement Against Tyranny [10], led by the traditional militant left, the National Democrats, under the Maoist umbrella of the CPP. The CPP allied with Duterte at the beginning of his term, but this coalition became strained as the president neglected to support their comrades in cabinet appointment hearings. Renewed popular outrage gave them a chance to distance themselves from Duterte through the late-August launch of the Movement Against Tyranny. However, they only "officially" severed parliamentary ties weeks later after an ally at the Department of Agrarian Reform was rejected. Such a broad coalition might not have even come into being had their cabinet appointments been approved.

Indeed one of the greatest sins ever committed by the militant left was giving Duterte the benefit of the doubt [11], despite the signs that his government's policies — backed by demagogic rhetoric and authoritarian methods — would only prolong a neoliberal economy and marginalize the masses even further. Duterte's candidacy served as a litmus test [12] for the National Democrats' commitment to progressive principles — one that they failed.

Another major political force is Tindig Pilipinas [13], or "Rise Up Philippines," launched a few days before the National Day of Protest. It's a broad coalition that includes minority blocs from congress; figures from the previous Liberal Party establishment; the social democratic party Akbayan, which coalesced with the liberals in the previous administration of Benigno Aquino; and the nationalist, anti-communist Magdalo group, composed of former junior officers of the armed forces led by Antonio Trillanes, Duterte's most vocal critic in the senate and a former military man who staged a few failed coups against the presidency of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo during the 2000s.

When it comes to the influence of leftist parties in Philippine parliamentary politics, Akbayan has the second largest base of support after the National Democrats. Akbayan's rise was made possible by groups that broke away from the traditional militant left in the 1990s, a decade defined by left-wing setbacks [14], as the largest mass formation of the militant left fragmented into multiple blocs.

Since then, the party has had some success in getting people elected in both houses of congress and eventually became one of the leading voices behind progressive legislation. However, its social democratic values were called into question when it failed to take a more critical stance against the Aquino administration in its later years when issues of accountability came up, which ultimately led to the rise of Duterte. Akbayan eventually became the liberals' grassroots wing during the 2016

elections, when it decided to back the Liberal Party frontrunner and Aquino's designated successor.

The rise of a resurgent alternative

Fortunately for the country's vibrant democracy, the Philippines' diverse progressive movement includes various independent organizations. As with the social democrats, most of them were derived from breakaway organizations that resulted from the 1990s split. But unlike Akbayan, their success in recent elections have been almost non-existent, effectively sidelining them from the national political scene.

But this may change with the new creation of Laban ng Masa [15], or "Struggle of the Masses," the third oppositional force encompassing 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 [16], who in 2016 ran an unsuccessful independent senate campaign supported by many of the same groups that now make up Laban ng Masa. By running outside the sponsorship of the National Democrats and Akbayan, Bello sought to build a campaign without corporate backing or relying on patronage politics.

Laban ng Masa is the only bloc among the three that is openly positioning itself as a left-wing alternative. In his speech, at its first general assembly, Bello emphasized the movement's socialist vision of realizing a system of radical democracy and equality [17] — a future beyond capitalism that's worth fighting for.

There is no doubt that this alliance retains the moral high ground among the three. Yet it lacks the political capital and resources of the left-liberal factions making up Tindig Pilipinas and the mass base of the Movement Against Tyranny, whose backing by the militant left makes it part of the country's largest organized left-wing coalition. From this position, the National Democrats are confident in their ability to control the narrative. After all, the CPP has been waging an armed struggle against the Philippine state for almost half a century, which makes it Asia's longest running communist insurgency. Despite their dogmatic ideology stuck in Cold War-era rhetoric, they continue to mobilize mass support thanks to their grassroots fronts and sub-organizations, which refrain from actively promoting the armed struggle and primarily utilize nonviolent tactics.

A tactical alliance between these oppositional blocs would lead to a New Left in the Philippines. Its likelihood and character rests on the choices each force makes in the coming months. Long-term issues that touch on ideological boundaries need to be discussed intensively, especially on the part of the National Democrats. But surely, given their willingness to ally with an authoritarian strongman like Duterte, they should be inclined to show the same favor towards other groups. If they don't, they will be unable to radically shape a new political order.

The need for a unified project

The lack of solidarity among left-wing groups has plagued the country for decades. A fresh reformist project must reaffirm the importance of progressive pluralism.

For this project to be successful, the National Democrats need to take ownership for their past transgressions, in particular their continuing refusal to genuinely acknowledge their complicity and insist that their alliance with Duterte was a critical engagement in "principled unity and struggle," [18] a courtesy that was never extended to any previous president.

Opposition forces must also wrestle with whether to call for Duterte's ouster. Simply ousting the president will not address the structural problems that led to his rise. Even progressive activists who support ousting him, like Laban ng Masa's Herbert Docena [19], recognize that only through a broad and unified mass movement can an actual alternative emerge.

Plus, considering Duterte's durable popularity among many Filipinos [20], particularly from the middle and upper middle classes, such an action would deepen the divide among the populace and pave a fresh path towards another strongman citing the "golden age" of Marcos.

As for Tindig Pilipinas, the group's social democratic forces have yet to account for its association with the previous government and have so far shown no concrete plan for how to fix the country without going back to the failed elite-dominated democracy that led to Duterte's surge.

So far, they have also hesitated on calling for the president's ouster, and instead focused on vague goals like appealing to the government to take a "healing approach" to the drug war, which assumes that the country's institutions are capable of change without reforming them from the ground up.

Indeed, using the law to resist authoritarian abuse of power is essential, and resisting Duterte's dictatorial tendencies through the courts [21] is something that needs to be taken advantage of. But the struggle through administrative entities or legal battles can only triumph if they are reinforced by collective action.

And that is more needed than ever, since Duterte is slowly stepping up his game in railroading constitutional bodies as part of his blueprint of reforming the country's political system.

Struggling against Dutertismo and Marcos' legacy

After toppling the Marcos dictatorship, Filipinos have witnessed the gradual return of the Marcos family into politics. Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.'s 2010 senate victory was bad enough. Worse still was his near success in capturing the vice presidency in 2016.

Bongbong's bid for vice president was barely defeated by the liberal frontrunner. Yet he still succeeded in tarnishing the legacy of People Power. Duterte, despite having a different running mate, continuously acted as an apologist and sponsor to the family while on the campaign trail. The support was of course mutual.

As a token of gratitude, in November 2016, Duterte green-lighted a highly controversial hero's burial for the former tyrant, an issue that has divided the nation since the revolution and a subject that the Marcos dynasty has pushed for since their return to the country.

By putting the despot on a pedestal, Duterte catalyzed the first major protest wave against his presidency [22], less than five months after taking office. The anti-Marcos protests gathered various civil society organizations, such as the #BlockMarcos movement, to form an alliance not only against the Marcos burial but also as a stepping stone towards a more organized opposition against the presidency, which culminated last fall.

Now on the defensive, Duterte is trying to revive the strategy that brought him to power: using radical rhetoric to enlist popular support for his authoritarian agenda. In this effort, he has called for the establishment of a "revolutionary" government [23] to "hasten change."

It's not the first time that Duterte has tried to launch a kind of "people's movement" akin to that of

the National Democrats. In 2016, his cabinet secretary Jun Evasco, a former member of the CPP, formed but failed to develop the Kilusang Pagbabago [24], or “Movement for Change,” which aimed to build an insurgent group similar to Marcos’ New Society Movement, a right-wing vehicle for “liberating” the Filipino people that conveniently required the declaration of martial law.

In reality, Duterte’s “revolutionary” program consists of constitutional reform meant to consolidate the administration’s power, restrain key political institutions and legalized intimidation of dissident groups. His call for a federalist system of government has been seen as a mere maneuver to extend his term as president.

This program has not inspired widespread support. When government allies called for mass demonstrations last November, they expected to rival the September protests in size and force. Instead, they flopped [25], particularly in Manila where they peaked at a few thousand, far below their expectations of a few hundred thousand people. The mobilization showed that the government has failed to develop a critical mass to counter the rising opposition. Duterte has online trolls at his disposal, but not a grassroots movement capable of mobilizing aggressive demonstrations.

Resisting Rodrigo’s “revolution from above”

The spectacle of the failed “Revolutionary Government” rallies proved that Duterte’s appropriation of anti-establishment rhetoric cannot hold up under the reality of his regime. But that didn’t stop him from taking advantage of his allies in the legislature. The Philippine Congress has now taken the lead and decided to form a constituent assembly to reform the constitution.

Indeed, the current situation poses both opportunities and challenges. The next task for such a united front is to maintain the momentum that arose from the September rallies and the subsequent mass actions. Because if the progressive movement in the Philippines is to have a future, it will depend on its willingness to forge more strategic alliances.

The shift among the traditional militant left, away from Duterte’s government and towards coalition with a broad opposition, may be a step in the right direction. They must begin to recognize the reality of the plurality of the country’s grassroots movements. Ignoring the struggles of those who have staunchly and consistently fought and resisted Duterte’s brutal regime from the start will not help the cause for a better future.

Unless the National Democrats’ sectarian factions acknowledge that there is no future for a doctrinaire left, they will continue to pave their own path towards long-lasting marginalization. They should start realizing the impossibility of winning the armed struggle and that only through a veritable multi-sectoral political struggle can they solidify a true united front towards radical change.

As for the social democratic left, a fundamental step is to essentially distance themselves from the reactionary forces that constitute Tindig Pilipinas and rebuild their party by re-embracing the very principles that accompanied its foundation. Moreover, they must overcome the temptations to reinstate the elite democracy that blossomed following the Marcos era and instead join the broader left in advocating for its radical reform.

Unfortunately for the socialist forces comprising Laban ng Masa, building a huge mass base with their current resources remains an unlikely prospect, unless they lead the call towards building this unified project while sticking to their radical principles. This will not be an easy task, but if these emergent forces truly desire to deepen democracy in the country, they will need to come together

and build a more formidable coalition.

Such an undertaking must resist Duterte's creeping dictatorship, where violence and capital continue to reign supreme, while fighting for true democratic reforms based on social justice and equality. This is the true ongoing struggle of the masses — a struggle for a more genuine progressive alternative that is worth fighting for.

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P.S.

* March 14, 2018:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/united-resistance-duterte-philippines/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/the-people-power-revolution-continues/>

[2] <http://bulatlat.com/main/2017/12/05/10-activists-dead-48-hours-groups-hold-duterte-accountable-rash-killings/>

[3] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/190457-duterte-proclamation-communist-party-philippines-new-peoples-army-terrorist-group>

[4] <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/964057/lawyer-warns-of-wholesale-violations-if-govt-starts-crackdown-on-cpp-legal-fronts-duterte-cpp-basic-rights-nupl-mpa-legal-fronts>

[5] <https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=180208-otp-stat>

[6] ESSF (article 43168), [Philippines, Cash for Killing - Rodrigo Duterte: \\$384 bounty for every communist rebel killed](#).

[7] ESSF (article 43169), ["Just laugh" - Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte orders soldiers to shoot female rebels 'in the vagina'](#).

[8] <http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/02/25/18/protests-vs-cha-cha-mark-32nd-people-power-anniversary>

[9] <https://www.rappler.com/move-ph/196740-in-photos-nationwide-protest-february-23-duterte>

[10] <https://www.rappler.com/move-ph/180347-civil-libertarians-launch-movement-duterte-tyranny>

[11] ESSF (article 38075), [Rodrigo Duterte, The Philippines' New Strongman](#).

- [12] ESSF (article 38128), [Philippines - Duterte, the Filipino Elite, the CPP, and the Missing Piece: an Independent Labor Movement](#).
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- [17] <https://www.facebook.com/notes/laban-ng-masa/bakit-kailangan-ng-bayan-ang-laban-ng-masa-speech-at-the-first-general-assembly-/520941431600336/>
- [18] <http://www.manilatoday.net/left-enable-dutertes-deadly-regime/>
- [19] ESSF (article 43671), [Philippines: Why Duterte has to be ousted, and why even that won't be enough to defend ourselves](#).
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- [21] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-drugs-lawyers/filipino-lawyers-group-challenges-dutertes-war-on-drugs-idUSKBN1D20TB>
- [22] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/154018-millennials-anti-marcos-vigil-libingan-bayani>
- [23] <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/946267/duterte-threatens-foes-with-revolutionary-government>
- [24] <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/153167-kilusang-pagbabago-duterte-evasco>
- [25] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/190031-revolutionary-government-november-30-2017-rallies-provinces>