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On Duterte's repeated termination of the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations

*Interview with Prof. Jose Maria Sison
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By UPDATES Philippines

Republic of the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte recently declared that he does not want any more peace talks with the National Democratic Front of the Philippines. In peace negotiations with the Manila government, the NDFP represents the entire revolutionary movement and the people fighting for national liberation and democracy in the country.

What are the implications and consequences of such declaration by Duterte? We sought out Prof. Jose Maria Sison for his views, on the basis of his long experience in leading the armed revolutionary movement from 1968 until his arrest in 1977, and in participating in peace negotiations since 1992.

1. Was Duterte ever serious about peace negotiations between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP)?

Jose Maria Sison (JMS): He was never serious about peace negotiations. When he was running for the presidency in 2016, he said that he would negotiate peace with the NDFP. But as soon as he became president, he started to wage all-out war against the revolutionary movement under the cover of continuing the *Oplan Bayanihan* counter-insurgency program of former president Benigno Aquino III and, in January 2017, he launched his own counter-insurgency program *Oplan Kapayapaan*.

He reneged on his promise to the NDFP to grant general amnesty and release all political prisoners, and sought the surrender of the revolutionary movement through an indefinite ceasefire without any guarantee of negotiating and agreeing on social, economic and political reforms. In his proclamation of May 2017 to impose martial law on Mindanao, he included the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and New People's Army (NPA) as targets of military suppression.

Ten days after he solicited and obtained the green signal and support of US president Donald Trump, he issued Proclamation 360 on 23 November 2017, declaring the termination of the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations. And he went further by issuing Proclamation 374, designating the CPP and NPA as 'terrorist organizations'. He also announced the unilateral junking of all agreements made by the GRP and NDFP since 1992 under the The Hague Joint Declaration.

2. He terminated the peace negotiations in 2017. But why does he keep on announcing the termination of the peace negotiations?

JMS: According to his own formal proclamation, he has ended the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations since 23 November 2017. But he has allowed his negotiating panel to engage in backchannel talks with the NDFP negotiating panel at least two times. But at certain points of these backchannel talks he backs out of the agreements to resume the peace negotiations supposedly upon the advice of the military generals around him.

Duterte seems to be mentally, politically and morally unstable and is addicted to quite irrational flip-flops. Many people think that he has been deranged physically and mentally by his addictive use of Fentanyl to counter his pains. But there is method in his madness. He is against the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations because he wants to scapegoat the CPP and NPA and realize his scheme of formally declaring nationwide martial law and imposing a fascist dictatorship on the people.

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He is emboldened to pursue his scheme at this time of the Covid-19 pandemic because he has been able to obtain from Congress emergency powers, the huge amount of PhP375 billion under his discretion and the authority to realign the 2020 budget. He is using loyalist military generals he appointed in the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict and in the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases to lay the ground for his fascist dictatorship, a dynastic successor or a ruling military junta in case of his death.

He has used the pandemic in order to impose more repressive measures on the people, steal huge amounts of taxpayers' money and escalate the campaign of military suppression. He slanders and scapegoats the CPP and NPA as "obstacles to the fight against Covid-19" in order to deflect attention from his own failures to provide food and cash assistance, mass testing and medical treatment.

3. How can Duterte aspire to be a fascist dictator for a long time like Marcos, considering his very advanced age, his deteriorating physical and mental condition and the worsening social and economic conditions that are now aggravated by Covid-19?

JMS: Lunatics have their relatively sane moments. It has seemed since the very start of his regime that Duterte is obsessed with ensuring his stay in power by criminalizing and corrupting military and police officers. He has ordered them to engage in extrajudicial killings in the bogus war on drugs and in the counterrevolutionary war, and gives them monetary rewards for every victim of human rights violation.

First, he wants to stay in power at least up to the end of the legal term of office in 2022 and even for some years as fascist dictator. Second, if his physical and mental condition no longer allows him to stand up and talk coherently, he can choose his own dynastic successor, like his own daughter Sara Duterte-Carpio. Third, he threatens the people with the imposition of a military junta in case of his death or disability and the failure of his dynastic successor to take over.

4. After four years of trying to crush the CPP and NPA, what makes Duterte think or believe that he can finish them off in the remaining two years of his term of office?

JMS: Duterte and his military minions do not just suffer from self-delusion. It is lucrative for them to keep on saying that they are in the process of destroying the revolutionary movement. They steal a lot of public money from the overpriced foreign military supplies, intelligence and discretionary funds, fake community development projects, fake surrenders and fake armed encounters against the NPA.

I do not think they believe that they can destroy the revolutionary movement of the people after failing for four years to accomplish their objective. Of course, without minding their arithmetic, they claim to have already destroyed several times over the size of the NPA with fake surrenders and fake encounters.

But they never declare that they have already finished off the NPA, because they wish to keep on gobbling up taxpayers' money and because they are being embarrassed by the continuing tactical offensives of the NPA. Besides, the people's support for the NPA has obviously been growing because of the extreme oppression and exploitation they are suffering from the Duterte regime.

5. Can the people stop Duterte from prolonging his rule beyond 2022 or choosing his successor?

JMS: The broad masses of the people can and should strive to stop Duterte from prolonging his rule beyond 2022, or choosing his successor to save him from prosecution for mass murder and plunder in the Philippines and for his crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Court. The people desire the ouster of Duterte. And the revolutionary forces such as the CPP, NPA and the NDFP, the democratic mass movement and the broad united front of patriotic and progressive forces are developing.

The development of the broad mass movement has accelerated in response to the rapid worsening of the crisis of both the domestic semicolonial ruling system and the world capitalist system. This crisis is further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic which has damaged economies on a wide scale and which has exposed the anti-social and inhuman character of the neoliberal policy and its grave consequences.

The drive of Duterte to impose fascist dictatorship on the people is still going on. No one can say for sure at this time whether he can stay in power up to 2022. But if he does and even succeeds in imposing a fascist dictatorship, the armed revolutionary movement will have far greater chances of overthrowing not only the Duterte fascist regime but the entire ruling system of big compradors, landlords and bureaucrat capitalists.

6. How much worse off is the Philippines now after four years of Duterte in power? Where are the current conditions likely to lead?

JMS: The Philippines has become far worse off than ever before after four years of misrule by Duterte. This has been characterized by treason and puppetry to both US and Chinese imperialism, mass murder and other gross human rights violations, systematic plunder, increased unemployment and mass poverty, aggravation of the drug problem under the Duterte drug empire, unabashed moral depravity and the accelerated deterioration of social and economic conditions.

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Filipinos protesting Duterte regime's Martial Law and other repressive measures.
Photo: bulatlat.com

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The people suffer from extreme oppression and exploitation. They are thus driven to wage all necessary and possible forms of resistance. Despite the escalating repressive measures, the people will become bolder to fight back against their oppressors and exploiters. The growing revolutionary forces ensure the advance of the broad united front and mass movement against the Duterte regime. They assure the activists of the legal democratic movement that there is a rural mass base for them to go to in case they face extreme threats from the regime.

7. The Duterte regime is increasingly abducting and killing social activists, human rights defenders, critics and opponents in the urban and rural areas. What can the armed revolutionary movement do to prevent or combat these criminal acts of the regime?

JMS: It is the policy of the Duterte regime to red-tag and slander as 'communist terrorists' the social activists, human rights defenders, critics and the political opposition in the urban and rural areas. The purpose is to intimidate them, mark them for assassination by the Duterte death squads and thus intimidate the masses. The psywar red-tagging and exemplary assassinations are supposed to complement the brutal campaigns of military suppression in the countryside, which include mass arrests, torture, murder, artillery fire, aerial bombings and forced mass evacuation.

With regard to such a policy of the Duterte regime, I can only make observations on what can happen in the course of the armed struggle. From half a century of people's war in the Philippines and comparable people's wars in other countries, the armed revolutionary movement can learn how to expand the range of soft targets for its tactical offensives in order to force its enemy to guard duty or defensive positions, thus reducing the number of enemy troops available for offensive operations.

The scheme of the Duterte regime to wipe out the legal opposition through red-tagging and assassinations can goad the armed revolutionary movement to deploy an increasing number of teams to intensify punitive measures against human rights violators and plunderers, and launch offensives against supply points and supply lines that are usually lightly guarded but vital to the operations of the reactionary military and police.

8. The Duterte regime has been mocking the CPP, NPA and NDFP for failing to seize political power in Manila in more than 50 years. How do you reply to this taunt? What has the revolutionary movement accomplished in terms of building political power and further advancing the people's war?

JMS: The taunting done by the Duterte regime is stupid and ignores the fact that through the protracted people's war and the combined efforts of the CPP, NPA, NDF and the revolutionary mass organizations, the revolutionary organs of political power have been established in the guerrilla fronts in the countryside. These revolutionary organs of political power constitute the people's democratic government, which is expanding.

There are now two governments in the Philippines, one is revolutionary, run by the workers and peasants, and the other is the counterrevolutionary one run by the exploiting classes of big compradors and landlords. There is now in the Philippines what Lenin called the existence of dual political power, as during the time when the Kerensky government was still standing but the Bolsheviks were already leading the soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers as the revolutionary government. A similar situation obtained in China for a long time prior to 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party built and led the revolutionary government of workers and peasants to fight and overthrow the Guomindang government.

What can be done by the revolutionary movement to advance and strengthen the rural-based people's government in order to eventually replace the urban-based reactionary government is well prognosticated by many observers: if only each one of the more than 110 guerrilla fronts of the NPA can launch three to five tactical offensives every month autonomously under national guidelines, it can wipe out nationwide so many enemy units monthly and can grow cumulatively with the weapons captured.

The NPA started in early 1969 in the second district of Tarlac with only nine automatic rifles and 26 other inferior firearms and grew to the level of 250 automatic rifles in 18 months. In the forest region of Isabela, the NPA started in late 1969 with only 20 automatic rifles and some 50 homemade shotguns. These grew to the level of more than 300 automatic rifles within two years. Now, the more than 110 guerrilla fronts of the NPA are better armed and have a far greater capacity for growth through tactical offensives. **UP**