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Philippines

**Duterte is reactionary,
counter-revolutionary (to the
“EDSA revolution”), but not
fascist – On Walden Bello’s
definition of a “fascist leader”**

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- Debate - Fascism -

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1. Duterte is not a fascist. He is reactionary or, as Walden describes him, a counter-revolutionary (to the “EDSA revolution”). But he does not fit the bill of being a fascist.

Walden’s 4-point definition of a “fascist leader” [Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte Is a Wildly Popular Fascist – Now what?](#) only describes an authoritarian, extreme right-wing leader but misses what is unique to fascism. What is specific to fascism as a political phenomena is its ability or aim to organize a mass movement of the discontented middle class and semi-proletariat (ie, unemployed). It is this mass movement with a charismatic/authoritarian figure at its head which is used to intimidate and suppress, including by violent and armed means, its political enemies. Thus fascist movements are necessarily armed or, at the very least, advocate the armed repression of its political rivals.

This definition is by no means original. David Renton, author of *Fascism: Theory and Practice*, stated that “fascism was best understood as a specific form of reactionary mass politics.” The key notion here is the “mass” characteristic to fascism.

Gramsci too, summarizing his first hand experience of the rise and triumph of the very first fascist movement, argued that the novelty of Mussolini was the organization and mobilization of the dispossessed middle class into a mass movement to rival and destroy the labor and socialist/communist movement.

In Duterte’s case, there is no mass movement that advocates for his right-wing agenda. Unless you believe that the EJK’s [Extrajudicial Killings] are actually done by civilians who have armed themselves to salvage addicts because they were inspired by Duterte’s agitation that drugs are the principal scourge of society. But we all know that the killings are done by the police, whether in or out of uniform, wearing masks or not.

Duterte has a troll army but no mass movement. Mobilizing in the streets to defend “Tatay Digong” is qualitatively different from voting for him. We have not seen any of that. Unlike Walden, I don’t think Duterte won on the crest of an electoral insurgency but that is another point altogether. Organizing into a fascist DDS (the fans club not the death squad) is quite a level up from merely sharing Mocha’s posts on FB or bullying millennial students on social media. An ex-comrade friend opined that there is mass hysteria but no mass movement. Obviously mass discontent is a necessary ingredient to building a mass movement. Yet the hysteria has not led to any form of movement. It is worth remembering that before fascism came to power, it was a militant mass movement first that viciously fought its way to political supremacy.

Kilusang Pagbabago is clearly an attempt to organize a pro-Duterte people’s movement. KP can indeed be built but only on the basis of patronage politics. There is no critical mass that is willing to fight and die for Duterte. There is yet no social crisis that can generate such level of political polarization.

KP will have to contend with the same difficulties that progressives have been facing in organizing workers, the poor and peasants in a period of political ebb. Government funds will solve some organizational problems for KP but it will also create others like opportunism. Despite discontent among the working masses, their fighting mood has been dampened by the utter disappointment of people power uprisings and the failures of mass struggles to win decisive victories. Thus in recent years, there is hardly any spontaneous actions among working masses. And if it does arise, it will be spurred on by basic economic issues and not inspired by a call to defend Duterte.

In one article, Renton avers that it is better not to use the term fascist to describe the various authoritarian leaders of today like Trump and Putin since the context is vastly different from the world of the 1930’s. [1]

Whether we believe Duterte is a fascist or not, or which definition of fascism is correct, at the end of the day, what truly matters is the relevant and practical question of what is to be done.

2. If Walden, or anybody else, really believes that Duterte is a fascist then they must follow the logic to its conclusion. They must advocate for armed struggle against Duterte’s fascism. The only proper way to fight fascism is an armed response. Yet Walden is utterly silent on this urgent task, if indeed “fascism is already in power in the Philippines.”

An anti-fascist front is a necessary but insufficient strategy to combat the threat or reality of Duterte’s fascism. Armed struggle is a key component to fighting fascism, if this term is to have any practical meaning at all. At the very least, Walden, must propose the formation of armed self-defense units in the communities to fight the police and death squads. But again nothing about this.

So we can argue all day at Starbucks about Duterte’s fascism, but unless someone advocates for an armed answer to it, then we just enjoyed our coffee but nothing practical was reached.

To make it clear. I don’t believe Duterte is a fascist and thus I don’t advocate for armed struggle against him. The task at hand is the forging of the broadest possible front against Duterte and his policies, the war on drugs, the death penalty, lowering of the age of criminal liability, endo, etc. To organize an armed struggle now will just give Duterte a pretext to curtail civil liberties and even impose a dictatorial rule.

3. Arguing whether Duterte is a fascist matters less than the threat of a Duterte dictatorship. Is martial law or an outright dictatorship just mopping up operations or a walk in park for Duterte as Walden argues? This is the most contentious part of his article. Walden overestimates the breadth and depth of mass discontent and the level of ruling class unity for a Duterte dictatorship and underestimates the sources of support in defense of democratic rights.

A Duterte dictatorship is not a done deal. Indeed there is a clear and present danger that Duterte will swing to an authoritarian rule. He may want to impose one-man rule. But it does not mean he indeed will. Or that the balance of forces will permit him to do so. Materialism theorizes that history is the interplay and interaction of social forces and is not dictated by the will of heroes or villains. Duterte will have to unite the ruling class behind such an authoritarian project, sustain passive support from the people for it, and defeat all organized and spontaneous opposition.

While bourgeois democracy in the Philippines is really brittle and can easily be replaced by authoritarian rule, at this conjuncture there is no compelling motive for the ruling class to demolish the existing political system and replace it with a dictatorship. The costs of such a shift outweighs any possible benefit since there is no credible threat to the ruling system. Why would the elite rock the boat? Unlike the situation before 1972, the Philippines is not sitting on a social volcano.

Can there be a significant opposition to Duterte? It was hard to imagine that before. But since the outrage led by millennial students against the hero’s burial for Marcos, this has been settled. The burial protest has broken the terror of Duterte, barely six months into his rule.

There is in fact a reserve army that is able and willing to mobilize against Duterte. Walden acknowledges the opposition from civil society. In class terms, this is the petty bourgeoisie. So the petty bourgeoisie is split, one section passively supports Duterte, and another politicized section has shown it is willing to fight against his policies.

There is no reason that the spontaneous opposition to Duterte cannot be mobilized in a campaign against death penalty, lowering the age of criminal liability and EJK’s. These are in fact even more material and urgent issues for millennials compared to the crimes of Marcos. Surely, the politicized middle class will mobilize even more vigorously against any threat of restriction of civil liberties, declaration of martial law or imposition of a new dictatorship.

4. Walden and of course everybody on this side of the Facebook fence welcomes the mass protests against the burial of Marcos. There is probably agreement that it will serve as the starting force for building the broad front against Duterte.

I differ with Walden on his view that the progressives have hegemony over the millennials that participated in the protests. It is wishful thinking on Walden’s part to say that progressives are the leading force.

Instead the “yellows” – the liberal bourgeoisie – are the most politically influential among the crowd at People Power Monument. Even though Leni, PNoy, Mar were not at PPM, it is enough that the prevailing mood there is defense of liberal democracy against the threat from the Marcoses and Duterte. If opinions were canvassed at PPM, most protesters there would accept Leni replacing DU30.

Given the petty bourgeoisie’s vacillating character, it will either follow the lead of the liberal bourgeoisie or the radical proletariat. Unfortunately we have to honestly admit and not gloss over the fact, the left does not have the strength to compete for leadership. At least not for now. We don’t have to elaborate on the weaknesses of the different progressive groups, and the working class and other sectoral movements to make this point clear. The question is, how can the working class overcome its limitations so that it can compete for hegemony against the bourgeoisie over the petty bourgeoisie and win the people over to the slogan of system change not regime change? It is a herculean job that falls squarely on our shoulders.

So while the task is to build the broad front against Duterte and unite with the yellows in this, we fight them for political leadership. The tried and tested formula of course is to march side by side without merging. But there is no ready-made recipe for how we can shift from under the shadows of the yellows to the forefront of the struggle.

For the working class to have any chance of moving to the head of the fight against Duterte, it must concentrate on organizing, mobilizing and winning the struggle for urgent demands on jobs, wages, housing, etc. while participating in broader campaigns in defense of democratic rights. As Walden posits, Duterte is weakest on his promises on social programs which no doubt will all be broken on the altar of neoliberalism. The working class must take the lead in challenging Duterte on these demands and exposing him along the way.

It must also be said that we have a lot of house cleaning to do, to disabuse a significant number within our ranks of their lingering illusions on Duterte. It can’t be done by waging a war on Facebook with Mocha (although its part of it). The best way to educate our own mass base and the rest of the working class is by mobilizing them in struggles to challenge Duterte on his promises.

A frontal assault on the issue of EJK is too difficult at this time but must be waged nonetheless. But flanking maneuvers that target Duterte’s promises on ending endo, increasing SSS pension, tax reform and such must be pushed to its limits. And even as we want to expose and oppose Duterte on these campaigns, we must also aim to win and for the movement to claim those victories as the product of struggle. For too long, we have been fighting and losing, and that has been a major factor in the demoralization and disillusionment of the working class. Despite their discontent over the hardships of daily life, the baggage of past defeats weigh like an albatross upon the consciousness of the workers. Nobody can say if the workers can arise in time and in unison with the students. So here’s hoping we do a better job in 2017 than in previous years.

Tuesday 7 February 2017

[1] See [Renton](#) and also [Jacobin](#)