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The New Terror Bill in the Philippines

Another Front in the Worldwide Struggle against Tyranny

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Yesterday, a new “anti-terror” law went into effect in the Philippines, marking another stage in the worldwide rise of autocracy. The law enables authorities to warrantlessly arrest and detain anyone for two weeks or more on the sole suspicion of inciting terrorism “by means of speeches, proclamations, writings, emblems, banners or other representations,” even “without taking any direct part in the commission of terrorism.” What constitutes terrorism is defined at the whims of the Anti-Terrorism Council, a group comprised almost entirely of members of authoritarian president Rodrigo Duterte’s cabinet.

Similar laws in Egypt and Turkey, among the world’s most authoritarian governments, indicate what the likely effects of this law will be. Already notorious for pursuing a “war on drugs” that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands, Duterte—like other despots including Hungary’s Viktor Orbán—has taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to consolidate his grip on power. The latest government policies include calling on neighbors to inform on those they suspect of contracting the virus, warrantless house-to-house searches for infected persons, and forced relocation to isolation facilities. In short, COVID-1984.

Considerable attention has focused on the courageous movement in Hong Kong resisting authoritarian control from the government of mainland China. But the struggle in Hong Kong against the Chinese Communist Party is only one of many such struggles taking place around the world against governments of many different political persuasions. Stepping back, we can see that the problem is not a specific authoritarian political party or ideology, but the way that new technological and economic developments have concentrated tremendous power in the institutions of governance while rendering the lives of ordinary people expendable from the perspective of those who rule.

In this context, it is naïve for human rights groups to decry the policies of specific administrations. The issue is that the old social contract is defunct. Indeed, in many parts of the world, including the Philippines, it barely ever applied. Post-industrial capitalism has less need of workers to staff the machinery of production; this is why people are being locked by the million in slums or prisons to die of COVID-19 or the bullets of the police, while entire regions are reduced to sacrifice zones. The state-sponsored rights and social safety nets that we are familiar with today were just partial concessions that served to co-opt and pacify a century of uncompromising labor struggles. History only moves one direction; the comparative comfort and stability of the early neoliberal era are gone for good, because they were only stages in the climax and consequent self-destruction of capitalism itself. Rather than begging to turn the clock back a few decades, we have to organize on a worldwide basis, across all borders and dividing lines, in order to

become ungovernable and thereby liberate the tremendous untapped potential of all humanity.

The recent victory in Minneapolis shows what people are capable of in a single city. We have to replicate this on a worldwide basis.

In the following report from an author in the Philippines, A.S. Sakdal spells out what the terror law means for people in the Philippines and why they are fighting it.

#JunkTerrorBill

On Labor Day 2019 [which is to say, May Day, in the Philippines], hundreds of people from across different sectors marched on the highways of Manila amid sweltering heat and exhaust fumes. Protesters bore colorful banners and placards as they filled the city with chants, fists pumping the air. Traffic was brought to a standstill.

As the march crossed a thoroughfare, a brief verbal tussle ensued between a motorist and a protestor. The motorist honked his car horn and yelled at the protestors crossing in front of him. The protestor, a jeepney driver on strike, planted his feet in front of the SUV and screamed,

“Magtiis ka! Kami araw-araw nagtitiis!”

Endure this minor inconvenience—God knows we endure every single day.

It’s been more than a year since that day. Moments like that one have been lost in the shuffle for some people, but they continue to reverberate in my head. This is what we take to the streets for. This is why we fight.

For the past four years of his six-year term, authoritarian President Rodrigo Duterte has filled our gutters with the blood of the marginalized; he continues to do so to this day. Police raid shantytowns and slaughter supposed drug personalities on suspicion alone. Not even children have been spared.

Activists, human rights defenders, and community leaders are routinely harassed and murdered as well. By September last year, 113 environmental activists had been killed since Duterte assumed presidency. In March 2019 in Negros Oriental, 14 farmers were killed in police operations. When asked, police branded the slain farmers as communist rebels and insisted that their operations were legitimate.

All of these atrocities occurred under an anti-terrorism law that government officials called “toothless.”

The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 came into effect yesterday on July 18. This piece of legislation will allow police to wiretap, warrantlessly arrest, and detain for up to 40 days any person suspected of engaging in “terrorism” or acts related to it. A safeguard included in the previous anti-terrorism law, which slaps erring police officers a hefty fine of P500,000 for each day a suspect spends wrongfully detained, has been removed in the new law. The police essentially get to decide whom they brand as terrorists; even if they are if proven wrong, they enjoy impunity.

Make no mistake, they will use this legislation as a weapon.

The country is facing rapid militarization amid the pandemic. Groups of fatigued-clad police officers armed with assault rifles crowd the Metro. In Cebu City, imported Israeli tanks patrol empty streets. Police, who are supposedly civilians in uniform, are starting to resemble their military counterparts in both form and disposition.

On June 2, police arrested 72-year-old Elmer Cordero along with five fellow jeepney drivers. The six staged a peaceful protest against government policies banning traditional jeepneys on the road during the lockdown period. They were hungry and unemployed.

Three days later, plainclothes policemen kidnapped eight people who were holding a peaceful protest against the previous Anti-Terror Bill at the University of the Philippines — Cebu. Seven of the arrestees were protesters; one was simply a bystander who had stopped to inquire. Two unidentified men visited the home of one of the protesters a few days later to threaten his family.

Even government troops were not spared police violence. Later in the month, police officers shot dead four army officers on board an SUV in Sulu. Upon investigation, the shooting was found to be unprovoked.

The enforcement of the Anti-Terror Law will be placed in the already bloodied hands of this violent institution, which is eager to heed the tyrant’s calls. Can the people truly trust the Philippine National Police—government pawns whose body count in Duterte’s drug war already numbers in the hundreds of thousands—to wield this power fairly?

The narrative used to justify authoritarianism has developed over the past few years. If the drug war served as a pretext to fill narrow alleyways and shanties with the blood of the poor, the Anti-Terror Law will see the blood of dissenters mingle with theirs next. The Duterte regime is seeing patches of resistance rise across many different sectors as more and more disgruntled individuals join in the clamor for real systemic change.

Duterte and his cronies have intensified repression, but these are not the actions of a regime that is confident of its power. These are the actions of a crumbling dictatorship cornered, desperately lashing out against budding resistance movements.

The past few years have seen the rise of authoritarian populist leaders across the globe, chauvinistic “strongmen” who always cower behind uniformed goons when they face genuine opposition. Striking down these despots is not a task we can approach on a country-by-country basis—it is the challenge facing all oppressed peoples across all nations, and it must be understood as a single unified project, not many different ones. We must plant our feet and confront tyranny head on.

We freedom fighters ask you to help make our situation further known to the international community. With the Anti-Terror Law in place, we expect state forces to begin cracking down on all dissenters in the Philippines. This is why we need you to help us spread our message however you can: on social media platforms, by word of mouth, through print. All these will help our cause in building momentum against the repressive Anti-Terror Act of 2020.

History has never been kind to tyrants. We must prove this once more. We will fight tooth and nail. Stand with us.