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Counterinsurgency to counterterrorism?

Over the last 20 months of the Duterte government, we have seen Executive policy being drawn up from statements or remarks made by the President in his cuss-laden off-the-cuff speeches – more often than not expressed in anger, pique, or sarcasm in a mixture of Filipino, Cebuano, and English. Through the unfinished sentences abruptly cut or left hanging, the unexpected shifts in topics, and lengthy perorations, we have learned to read his mixed-up thoughts, at times snippets of rationality, and lately a tinge of humble acknowledgement of shortcomings.

A prime example has to do with Duterte's bloody "war on [illegal] drugs." Obdurately he pursues it vis-à-vis widespread criticism and condemnation, and the International Criminal Court prosecutor's announcement that she'll examine how the policy has been implemented. But now his objective has changed, he says. In a speech on Feb. 26, he admitted that it's "impossible" to get rid of illegal drugs. "But maybe," he said, "at the end of my term [we can] bring it to the barest minimum..."

In that same speech, Duterte talked of the problem, next to drugs, that he has vowed to wipe out – "terrorism" – to which he added, "*kasali na diyay ang NPA* (that includes the NPA)." He was referring to the New People's Army which, together with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), he had declared as a "terrorist organization" by issuing Proclamation 374 last Dec. 5.

Up till he issued the proclamation, Duterte had treated the CPP-NPA as a revolutionary organization that has sought, since 1986, a peaceable political settlement of the nearly 50-year armed conflict with the government, through

the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations. The components of such a political settlement are bilateral comprehensive agreements on the following: human rights and international humanitarian law, social and economic reforms, and political and constitutional reforms – all meant to address the root causes of the armed conflict.

But recently Duterte said, "I refuse to acknowledge that (the CPP-NPA) is a political body seeking [fundamental reforms]." He explained why rebellion has a "very low" penalty (12-year imprisonment for leaders), with all the alleged crimes committed in furtherance of rebellion – such as arson and murder – being subsumed by the offense of rebellion. "Only because people there (in the CPP-NPA)," he complained, "are telling the world that they want change because government is corrupt and abusive."

"We are willing to admit," he said, "that there has been really a lack of push [on reforms by the government], citing land reform as the example. But, he quickly added, "I am sticking to it. My program has acquired so many hectares [for distribution to landless peasants]."

As regards the Islamic State/ISIS as a terrorist organization, here's how Duterte depicted it and its alleged connections with Moro rebel groups in Mindanao:

"The ISIS is really the ISIS. ... (A)ll the rebellious factions in the Moro land are all affiliated with the ISIS. At the end of the day, they would regroup. I would not want to speculate about the MILF and the MNLF, but there is really a problem on the horizon, the darkening clouds of terrorism."

(By saying this, Duterte practically casts doubt about the MILF and MNLF, which used to be one entity until 1977 and which have separately signed

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peace agreements with the Philippine government – the MNLF in 1998, the MILF in 2014. Both agreements await implementation.)

Shifting back to the CPP-NPA, Duterte said, “So we will deal with them the same way. We have no choice. The way we treat the terrorists in the southern part, most of them, we will treat them the same way that we treat everybody as terrorist. I do not believe in (their) ideology anymore...”

“We will deal with (the NPA) the way we should treat every criminal,” he emphasized. “For after all, they go about extorting [read: collecting “revolutionary tax”] and the ISIS [Abu Sayyaf] kidnapping, making it hard for the Filipinos and making existence in Mindanao almost a compromise of whether or not you want to stay here or transfer to another place.”

What drove Duterte to abandon peace negotiations with the Left revolutionary movement (with which he had more than 20 years of friendly interaction as mayor of Davao City) and to declare the CPP and NPA as “terrorist organizations”? Was it, as he keeps on claiming, because they were “insincere” in seeking peace, continually attacking and killing government soldiers and policemen? Doubtful.

There’s a bigger factor behind his issuance of Proclamation 374. It’s the promise of continuing US military support – which started when (upon request by the military) US spy planes and drones guided the government security forces in conducting daily aerial bombings and artillery bombardments, for five months, against the Maute and Abu Sayyaf groups during the so-called siege of Marawi.

Quietly on Sept. 1, 2017, US Defense Secretary James Mattis formally launched a “contingency operation to support the Philippine government and military in their efforts to isolate, degrade, and defeat affiliates of the ISIS and other terrorist organizations in the Philippines (emphasis mine).” Mind that in 2002 the US government already included the CPP-NPA in its listing of “foreign terrorist organizations” that allegedly threatened America’s national security.

The contingency operation was named *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*. It’s the Trump administration’s version of *Operation Enduring Freedom*, which in 2001 George W. Bush launched globally against Al Qaida, the jihadist group that engineered the world-shocking aerial attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York. Then President Gloria Arroyo welcomed the US project, proudly accepting Mindanao’s designation as the “second front” of America’s “war on terror.” Up to now the war continues in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and in a number of African nations.

It’s also *deja vu* for the *Balikatan* joint military exercises that began in 2002, wherein fully armed US Special Operation Forces soldiers, acting as “advisers” and “trainers,” accompanied Filipino troops in “anti-terrorist” combat operations against the Abu Sayyaf. The difference now is that, at some point in the near future, the operations will also target the NPA nationwide.

And we note that a US Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress (Oct. 1, 2017-Dec. 31, 2018) states: “As with all US military operations in the Philippines, *Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines* is conducted at the request of the Philippine government.”