In the United States, the failed government drug policies are a common source of outrage among politically progressive people. The Rockefeller Drug Laws of New York, eventually turned into a national policy with the “War on Drugs” of the Reagan era, have done very little to combat the scourge of addiction. Prison sentences have gotten longer, the number of people locked up has grown astronomically larger, and the budgets of police departments have increased -- all while the drug cartels just keep getting bigger.

In the mind of many Americans, calls for action against narcotics are associated with neoconservative political forces. Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan rose to power by denouncing campus anti-war activists, many of whom embraced a counter-culture lifestyle and recreationally used marijuana and hallucinogens.

Despite statistics showing that drug use is a problem throughout all strata and ethnic groups in the United States, the media has made the word “drug dealer” synonymous with “African-American male” in the mind of millions of people. Calls from politicians to “get tough on crime” and wage a “war on drugs” often serve as innuendo for a fascistic appeal to “lock up those dangerous Black people” and “keep white people safe.”

There is plenty to criticize about the manner in which the US government has responded to the problem of drug use and addiction. However, the American situation and the way the drug issue lines up in US political discourse should not taint the way global issues are understood, and how political forces around the world are viewed.

Narcotics and Neoliberalism

While US political leaders publicly oppose narcotics with ineffective policies here at home, their international policies point to something completely different.

In both Colombia and Nicaragua the United States government has worked closely with drug dealers. In Colombia, drug trafficking served as a primary source of funding for paramilitary organizations. Starting in the 1970s, non-governmental armed groups were directed by the CIA and other US agencies as they waged an ugly, human-right-violating counterinsurgency war against the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC). The CIA-trained and -directed paramilitaries sold cocaine to pay for their campaign of terror.

In Nicaragua, the US-sponsored “contras” who sought to depose the Sandinista government also sold cocaine and transported it to the United States. The US Central Intelligence Agency worked closely with them, knowing full well that they were shipping drugs to Los Angeles, Miami and other urban centers in the United States -- while at the same time slaughtering entire villages and assassinating left-wing priests and nuns.

Decades later, Central and South America are still plagued by the gangs of drug dealers known as “narcos,” who have made life unlivable in many parts of Guatemala, Colombia, and Mexico. These forces are primarily armed with weapons manufactured in the United States. In many instances, weapons provided to the Mexican government, supposedly for the purpose of fighting drug cartels, have ended up in the hands of criminal organizations.

The history of US and British intelligence operations in Asia is not much different.

There were no poppy fields in Afghanistan until the British Empire planted the first ones during the 1800s. The
country was heavily deforested in order to build ships for the Queen’s Navy during approximately the same historical period.

When the People’s Democratic Party took power in Afghanistan in 1978, the response of the US Central Intelligence Agency was to begin cooperating with drug dealers as a means of destabilizing the country. After the US-NATO invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the poppy fields grew exponentially. In the late 90s, a crackdown from the Taliban drastically reduced the poppy harvest, but as a result of the US invasion, today 90% of the world’s heroin comes from the poppy fields of Afghanistan.

Prior to Afghanistan’s poppy boom, the undisputed heroin capital of the world was Hong Kong. While it was still a British protectorate, the city served as a base for western intelligence agencies on the Chinese mainland. Throughout the Vietnam War, the Kampuchea War, and other conflicts in which the United States was intimately involved, US-aligned forces funded themselves by transporting and selling heroin. Many rank-and-file soldiers in the US military became drug addicts during the Vietnam War after receiving narcotics from aligned forces in Southeast Asia who were deeply involved in drug trafficking.

Narcotics played a big role in the history of colonialism in Asia. Millions of Chinese people were worked to death as slaves after becoming addicted by British and American capitalists. Britain waged two “opium wars” to force China to accept continued heroin imports. US marines were sent to China in 1900 to put down the nationalistic Boxer Rebellion, in which vigilantes were lynching drug dealers whom they saw as enablers of western economic domination.

Not surprisingly, the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949 was followed by a huge crackdown on drug dealers and a massive anti-addiction campaign. The Chinese government wages a constant struggle to prevent narcotics from once again becoming an epidemic. The majority of those sentenced to death in contemporary China are somehow associated with drug smuggling. The communist parties of Vietnam and Laos waged similar campaigns after coming to power.

The Islamic Republic of Iran faces a constant danger from drug cartels that operate on its Afghan border. Like China, Iran has been forced to use harsh methods to combat them, often executing the leaders of narcotic smuggling operations.

While anti-imperialist states are forced to vigilantly resist the narco-terrorists, the peoples of Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Malaysia, and many other US-aligned Asian countries live in terror of drug cartels and the violence associated with them. The recent election in the Philippines must be examined in this context.

**Opposing Drug Cartels and Imperialism**

The president-elect of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, has been endlessly compared to Donald Trump in the US media. Duterte was the mayor of the Filipino city of Davao, and made a point of publicly aligning himself with anti-narcotic vigilante organizations. Duterte’s united front with the anti-drug vigilante groups resulted in drastically improving the lives of people in the city, making it one of the most crime-free and economically prosperous places in the region.

Duterte ran a very populist campaign during the presidential election, condemning corruption in the government, criticizing the role of the United States and its military, and acting as a champion for the common people against the rich and powerful. His campaign rhetoric is far more comparable to Bernie Sanders than Donald Trump. However, unlike Sanders, Duterte has a streak of ultra-masculinity and violent rhetoric to accompany his economic populism.

Duterte represents an army of angry, impoverished, working class Filipinos in the slums and countryside who are willing to take drastic action in order to change their living conditions. Some of them are even organized into armed groups. Because of his links to popular struggles, Duterte is a much bigger threat to the global “one percent” than Sanders could ever be.

Since winning the election, Duterte has announced that he is appointing members of the illegal Communist Party of the Philippines to positions within his cabinet, and re-launching negotiations with the New People’s Army. Meanwhile, Duterte has announced that he intends to re-open negotiations with China in order to resolve the conflict in the South China Sea.

In every respect, Duterte is a progressive political figure. He is anti-corporate and anti-imperialist. In at least his words, he is a champion of greater independence and nationalism in a country that, economically devastated by the
west, has long functioned as a base of US military operations in the Pacific.

The anti-drug vigilante groups with which Duterte has aligned himself have certainly engaged in problematic, human-rights-violating actions. However, these atrocities pale in comparison to what has been committed by the drug cartels themselves, as well as by the Philippine police and military that often cooperate with them. During his presidential campaign Duterte infuriated the police and military by calling them out for their corruption and involvement with drug dealers.

**Fascist or People’s Champion?**

The US media’s attempts to portray Duterte as a “fascist” and “totalitarian” because he has fought US-linked narco gangs, and often uses colorful, emotionally loaded anti-drug rhetoric, are way off the mark. What kind of fascist openly challenges the police and the military? Donald Trump would never appoint members of a communist guerrilla group to his cabinet, and no true fascist would do this either.

Duterte’s character may shift once he takes office. There is no guarantee that he will live up to his campaign rhetoric -- but at the moment, he has taken office in a wave of hope, populist outrage, and anti-imperialist sentiments. Progressive forces in the Philippines and throughout Asia are celebrating the election results as a step forward. Voices within China are also optimistic about new possibilities.

Duterte’s association with anti-drug vigilantes is seen by many people in the Philippines not as fascistic and conservative but as a progressive credential. The impoverished people in the countrysides and urban slums of the Philippines -- like those in Indonesia, Mexico, Guatemala, and other parts of the world -- live with the horror and chaos of organized criminal organizations.

When the above-ground economy is destroyed by neoliberalism and the forced monopoly of western corporations, an ugly, underground one usually emerges in its place. Narcotics trafficking is often associated closely with the trafficking of human beings, forced prostitution, paid assassinations, protection schemes, kidnapping for ransom, and other horrific crimes.

The rise of Duterte is a response to the horrific living conditions faced by millions of Filipino people. The economy of the Philippines has been ruined by neoliberal economic domination by US corporations, preceded by years of colonial exploitation and a US-backed military dictatorship.

In a recent illustration of global economic links, labor activists associated with the striking Verizon workers in the United States recently visited the Philippines, and saw the kind of conditions call center workers in the country face at the hands of their shared employer. Puppet forces in the Philippine police forces were quickly dispatched to threaten the Verizon workers on behalf of the Wall Street-owned telecommunications giant.

**Re-Examining “Cultural Leftism”**

Even in western countries, it is time to re-examine the relationship between drugs and progressive politics. The 1960s and 70s and the political dynamics rooted in the uprisings of that time period ended a long time ago. The themes of middle class alienation and social nonconformity which defined dissent among the white middle class of that era were based on a booming industrial economy in the United States, the Cold War, and military conscription.

While white “New Left” radicals glorified drug use, the Black Nationalist organizations often fought them with guns, much like the Filipino vigilantes aligned with Duterte.

It has been proven that Timothy Leary, the guru of Harvard origin who coined the phrase “tune in, turn on, and drop out” was a paid government informant, who directly communicated with the FBI about his activities promoting the use of hallucinogens among young radicals.

In fact, the hallucinogen “LSD,” which became a beloved staple of 1960s counterculture, had long been experimented on by the US Central Intelligence Agency. Years before it was found among civilian populations, intelligence agencies worked with LSD hoping to weaponize it against enemies around the world. They ultimately ended up unleashing it on dissidents at home.

Released documents now show that the “Cultural Left” of hippies and “New Age” radicals was intentionally cultivated by the US Central Intelligence Agency. As early as the 1950s, the CIA was looking for a way to distance progressive movements in the western world from their obvious allies in the Soviet Union and China. The CIA created something called the “Congress for Cultural Freedom,” which funded art galleries, novelists, musicians and
other seemingly “leftist” cultural endeavors that were anti-communist and supported US foreign policy goals. In the hopes of fomenting “Cultural Leftism” that opposed the Soviet Union and the global anti-imperialist movement, the CIA funded things as diverse as the Trotskyist magazine Partisan Review and the Iowa Writers Project.

While the racist crimes against the Black community in the USA, waged in the name of a “war on drugs,” must absolutely be opposed, there is nothing progressive about narcotics. Black nationalists in groups like the Nation of Islam have been highly successful in combating drug addiction. In Mexico, entire regions of the country are now protected by anti-drug vigilante groups who espouse leftist politics.

With the rise of Duterte in the Philippines, it is now time for progressive people in the United States to see the issue of narcotics through a contemporary and global lens. Drug addiction and the brutal criminal organizations associated with drugs must be smashed, and the forces within the US government who enable and strengthen both must be removed.

Leaders who rally their people against foreign domination, which often comes in the form of narco-chaos, should not be dismissed as “fascists.”

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