



Plantation workers cutting and carrying bundles of sugar cane to a truck in Kabankalan, Philippines .Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times

Philippine Peasants Were Promised Land. Staking a Claim Can Be Deadly.

Riding a populist backlash against the elite, President Rodrigo Duterte vowed to rescue landless peasants from poverty. Instead, he has reinforced the monopolistic grip of landowners.



By [Peter S. Goodman](#) Dec. 27, 2019

SAGAY CITY, Philippines — On the day the gunman murdered her husband, Elza Balayo was planning a treat for her five children, a fish to accompany the rice that was typically their sole lunch.

The couple was walking home from the market in the midday heat with their young son when a shot pierced the silence. She recognized the

attacker, she would later tell the police. He managed the sugar cane plantation at the northern end of the island of Negros, where her husband's family had lived and labored for more than 70 years.

She had no doubt why he pulled the trigger: To punish her husband for the audacity of seeking to own a patch of the soil.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/27/business/philippines-duterte-poverty-farmers.html>

“He gambled his life to own the land,” she says.

For decades, Philippine leaders have vowed to attack a glaring economic inequality framing life in this former American colony — the dominance of a handful of landowning families, and the landlessness of tens of millions of farmers who till the soil in near-feudal conditions. The current president, Rodrigo Duterte, took office more than three years ago promising to liberate rural Filipinos from poverty by distributing land to farmers.



The Balayo family waiting for public transport along a highway in Sagay City. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times

Although Mr. Duterte has fashioned himself a man of the people with a [bloody crackdown on criminality](#), he has evaded one crucial populist fight. He has not challenged the monopolistic grip of the landowners. He has instead fortified their control, reinforcing the conditions that gave him an opening to take power.

Those conditions are stark. More than 38 percent of rural-dwelling Filipino children suffer [stunted development](#), despite living on some of the most fertile land on earth. More than one-in-five people in this country of 108 million are officially poor, even as the national economy has expanded rapidly in recent years.

To be born into the ranks of the Filipino poor is to be condemned to the fatalistic knowledge of perpetual hardship, and the dangerous futility of seeking improvement. Landowners dominate

local governments, while deploying private armies to keep control.

Mr. Duterte vowed to attack this state of play. With his penchant for deriding opponents and proclaiming his own fearlessness, he has drawn comparisons to President Trump. Like right-wing populists around the world, his political fortunes have been lifted by rage toward the establishment.

In [Italy](#), Matteo Salvini’s League party has surged in popularity as an answer to globalization. In [Sweden](#), right-wing extremists have been propelled by anger over immigration. In [India](#), Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist party has demonized Muslims.

In the Philippines, Mr. Duterte has focused on criminals as the fundamental threat to daily life, exhorting vigilantes to “slaughter them all.” On his watch, the police have executed thousands of people Mr. Duterte’s government says are drug dealers — a characterization that human rights groups dispute.

But during his tenure, job growth has slowed while prices for commodities like rice have soared. The wealthiest regions of the country have pulled further away from the poorest.

More than a year after she was consigned to widowhood, Ms. Balayo has lost hope that she will ever see justice for her husband’s murder. Her report to the police has yielded no meaningful investigation, she says. No one has been arrested.



Plantation workers in Kabankalan. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times



A farm cart is used as a shelter at the plantation. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times



Farmworkers in Kabankalan. To be born into the ranks of the Filipino poor is to be condemned to the fatalistic knowledge of perpetual hardship. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times

She registers disgust at the mention of Mr. Duterte's name. "He just talks and talks," she

says. "It's been so long, and we still don't have our own land."

The president initially entrusted the cabinet-level job of overseeing land redistribution to Rafael V. Mariano, a former member of Congress and farmer's rights activist. But Mr. Mariano was soon dismissed. In an interview, he accuses the president of caving to pressure from landowners.

"He showed his true class position," Mr. Mariano says. "He is not really serious and sincere in addressing the fundamental problem of the Filipino peasant, which is landlessness."

Mr. Duterte remains extraordinarily popular, with approval ratings near 80 percent. Yet among poor farmers, he is increasingly viewed as a threat, especially as he intensifies a decades-old battle against a stubborn Communist insurgency, the New People's Army. The guerrillas have long drawn recruits from landless peasants, who have embraced armed struggle as the means of acquiring land.

In October, the Philippine National Police and military arrested 57 people in a raid on the island of Negros, later charging some with illegal possession of firearms. Among those detained were three teenagers from Hacienda Silverio, a sugar plantation. They had been rehearsing a play about a Filipino revolutionary who fought the colonial Spanish, the Americans, and the landlords.

Weeks later, a truckload of government soldiers arrived at the plantation, or hacienda, in fatigues, bearing assault rifles. They warned the farmers that participating in the play was tantamount to pledging allegiance to the guerrillas.

"When people continue to agitate for what Duterte promised them, he turns against them," says Dioscoro Andrino, a local farmer. "They look at us like we are the enemy."



A farmworker collecting sugar cane in Ilog. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times

Taking On the Landowners

When Mr. Duterte first took office, he expressed sympathies with the Communists, while promising to forge peace with the New People's Army.

He affirmed one of the insurgency's key aims — putting land in the hands of poor farmers.

To underscore his designs, he installed Mr. Mariano as Secretary of Agrarian Reform.

The son of landless farmers, Mr. Mariano had spent three decades campaigning for land distribution. As secretary, he instituted an order allowing transfers to proceed even as landowners pursued legal challenges.

In doing so, the new administration was confronting a potent historical legacy. For centuries, formidable interests had battled over the fruitful soils of the Philippine archipelago.

Commodities like sugar and coconuts were central to the colonial designs of the Spanish and the Americans.

As the Philippines claimed independence in 1946, Washington required that the fledgling country keep its currency strong against the dollar, ensuring continued imports of American-made manufactured goods.



Itinerant workers returning to their villages after spending two weeks working in Kabankalan. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times



Itinerant workers on the way back to their barracks in Kabankalan. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times

“The big Filipino families, the oligarchies, are not able to transition away from agriculture because they can't transition to manufacturing,” says Lisandro E. Claudio, a Southeast Asian historian at the University of California, Berkeley. “This is why they became so grubby about their landholdings.”

The American-backed dictator Ferdinand Marcos pursued land reform as part of a strategy to attack the Communist insurgency. But Washington urged him to respect property rights.

Notoriously corrupt, Mr. Marcos was swept into exile by the 1986 People Power demonstrations. His successor, Corazon Aquino, oversaw the

drafting of a new constitution that explicitly called for agrarian reform.

Ninety percent of the land was then controlled by 10 percent of the population. Under a law signed by Ms. Aquino in 1988, an area roughly the size of Portugal was to be distributed to farmers over the following decade.

On paper, the government achieved substantial progress. On the ground, landowners gamed the process, officially selling holdings while maintaining control.

At one of the largest plantations on Negros, Hacienda Balatong, which stretched over 1,400 hectares (nearly 3,500 acres), the landowner fended off a government-imposed transfer through legal creativity.

The land had been owned for decades by a Marcos crony, Eduardo “Danding” Cojuangco Jr. Some 2,000 families lived there. Farmers earned as little as 100 pesos per day (less than \$2).

In the late 1990s, the Cojuangcos persuaded farmers to agree to a so-called voluntary land distribution to pre-empt government action. The farmers received title, while immediately leasing the land back to the Cojuangcos in exchange for cash payments of 10,000 pesos a year.

For most farmers, this was too much to pass up.

“If we don’t work, we don’t eat,” says Maria Luisa Malvez, 51, whose husband’s family had lived on the plantation for at least four generations. “The Cojuangcos just wait for the harvest to earn.”

Her in-laws lived in a concrete block home where they had raised eight children, though five had died of various ailments not helped by abject poverty. Their corrugated aluminum roof was rusting through, even as their concrete floor was spotless.

The cash payments lifted their income by half. Twice a year, her father-in-law, Paulino Malvez, hopped on trucks the Cojuangcos dispatched to the hacienda to bring farmers to the payment

center — a cockfighting arena next to a mansion shrouded in forest cover.

Mr. Malvez had left school after the fourth grade. He could not understand the agreement he was required to sign. But when a human rights lawyer, Ben Ramos, read the terms in 1999, he urged the family to stop accepting the money. The arrangement was a sham, he told them. It undermined future claims on the land.

“The Philippines is still really a semi-feudal democracy,” says Leonardo Montemayor, a former secretary of agriculture. “We have a democratic veneer. We have judges, trials, and due process. But the longer the due process takes, the longer it takes for a farmer to secure substantial justice.”



A plantation encampment. “The Philippines is still really a semi-feudal democracy,” said one former secretary of agriculture. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times

Backlash To Reform

The arrival of Mr. Mariano at the Department of Agrarian Reform appeared to mark a new era. He put landowners on notice — especially on Negros, calling the island “the bastion of landlordism” where “farmworkers are still enslaved by hunger and poverty, and are being threatened, shot at and massacred by goons and soldiers.”

To advise him, he enlisted Mr. Ramos, the local human rights lawyer who represented the farmers at Hacienda Balatong.

Mr. Ramos advanced a petition seeking to annul the leasing arrangement and parcel out the estate to the farmers. The petition argued that the Cojuangcos had obtained the land illegally, through their association with Mr. Marcos.

Mr. Mariano says his department was moving to approve the petition. An executive committee convened by Mr. Duterte had already accepted his recommendation to break up the estate.

But in September 2017, less than 15 months after Mr. Duterte appointed him, Mr. Mariano was out. A congressional panel stacked with Duterte loyalists voted to deny his confirmation.

Over the course of a two-day hearing in Manila, Mr. Mariano found himself under sustained attack from the landowners he had been targeting — especially allies of Mr. Duterte in Davao, a city on the island of Mindanao, where the president had previously been mayor.

He was questioned about his transfer of land to farmers at a plantation owned by Lapanday Foods Corp., a banana exporter. A company lawyer was married to the president's daughter, Sara Duterte, the current Davao mayor.

She and other local officials as well as the secretary of national defense submitted a written statement claiming that Mr. Mariano had aided the New People's Army in area attacks, he says.

"There was a strong lobby of the big landlords, compradors, oligarchs and bureaucrats," Mr. Mariano says. A spokesman for Mr. Duterte did not respond to questions.

James Castricones, who had worked on the president's campaign, took over as secretary. He promptly overturned Mr. Mariano's order allowing land transfers to proceed in the face of court challenges. Mr. Castricones did not respond to questions about his appointment or the overall thrust of the land reform undertaking.

The following year, Mr. Ramos, the lawyer, was standing on the side of the road when two men on motorcycles [swept in and opened fire, killing him](#). He was the 34th lawyer killed since Mr.

Duterte became president. In a speech in 2017, the president exhorted the police to persevere in the face of human rights lawyers probing the killings of alleged criminals. "If they are obstructing justice, you shoot them," Mr. Duterte said.

Farmers at Hacienda Balatong complain that their petition has essentially disappeared.

"Duterte made these promises," says Maria Luisa Malvez. "Nothing has happened."



Plantation workers grabbing rice for dinner at their barracks in Kabankalan. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times

On the day the Malvez family recounts this, farmworkers at the hacienda stumble on a grisly sight as they hack away at the sugar cane: Two men lying in the dirt, dead. Two days earlier, another body had been fished out of a muddy river, bloated and bloodied.

As a half-dozen farmers gather in front of the Malvez home, everyone assumes they know what happened.

The men were migrant workers from southern Negros. They must have grown weary of meager pay and filthy living conditions. They must have bolted for home, leaving the contractor to answer to an angry farm manager about their disappearance before the harvest was done.

They must have been running for their lives.

On the local radio, an announcer briefly mentions that three bodies have been found at the hacienda

and adds the conclusion of a police report: The men died of “natural causes.”

A Portal Out of Poverty

Plantation owners tend to dismiss land distribution as a failure. Farmers lack the money to tend their parcels, so they often sell land back to previous owners, resuming their jobs as farmworkers.

“They are happy enough to work for us,” says Gerro Locsin, who owns a sugar plantation in Negros. “There’s no problem.”

Eduardo Balayo had a problem.

His family was miserably poor. The only solution he could imagine was to own a piece of Hacienda Ubamos.

“He saw it as a way out of poverty,” says his widow. “The dream was that the kids could get an education and not follow what we are.”

Mr. Balayo earned about 800 pesos a week (less than \$16). The family ate meat only at Christmas. They fashioned their house from bamboo, palm fronds and plastic rice sacks. They had no electricity. The toilet was the surrounding fields. Keeping their children in school was a constant struggle.

“Sometimes they have to walk barefoot because we can’t afford shoes,” Ms. Balayo says, her voice halting as she swallows a sob. “They have assignments demanding things I can’t buy — colored paper, crayons, scissors.”

Mr. Balayo organized a local farmer’s association to pursue land distribution, submitting the paperwork to the agrarian reform department in 2013. He and his older brother, Welter, and seven other households had been cleared as qualified beneficiaries of the 12.3-hectare estate (about 30 acres).

Each was to receive 1.3 hectares, enough to yield more than 60 tons of sugar cane a year, Ms. Balayo says. After expenses, they could fetch at least 120,000 pesos (about \$2,350). Their income

would double, allowing them to keep their children in school.

But in seeking the land, Mr. Balayo was taking on local authority. The hacienda was controlled by Narciso L. Javelosa, the vice mayor of Sagay City, through a lease with the landowning family, according to the Department of Agrarian Reform. Mr. Javelosa did not respond to messages left at city hall.

The vice mayor regularly visited the property, driving through in a pickup truck, residents say. Men walked the rutted trails, their faces obscured by black balaclavas, and pistols tucked into their waist bands.

“I was very worried,” Ms. Balayo recalls. “But my husband said, ‘I will not stop until we get this land.’”



After a day of work, workers in Kabankalan watched gamecocks fight. Credit...Jes Aznar for The New York Times

Three times, the agrarian reform department dispatched surveyors to the hacienda, accompanying them with police officers. Three times, armed men turned them away.

“There are so many properties” the agency cannot enter, says Teresita R. Mabunay, who oversees the north of Negros for the agrarian reform department.

One day last year, as Mr. Balayo was walking on a muddy track through the plantation, the farm manager, Raymundo Jimenez, blocked his path in a menacing fashion, Ms. Balayo says.

Months later on Sept. 15, 2018, as they returned from the market with a fish, Mr. Jimenez opened fire, she says, an account she relayed to the Sagay City police, as confirmed by an official police report. The gunman pointed the pistol at his face and unleashed eight more bullets, she says.

When the police arrived, Ms. Balayo identified the gunman as Mr. Jimenez and told them where he lived, but he was not home, she says. She assumes the police are not trying to find him. “He works for the vice mayor,” she says.

As she recounts the experience, men appear on a hillside, peering down. “Those are the goons,” a villager says.

Mr. Balayo’s older brother, Welter, took up the mantle of seeking the land. On April 20, 2019, as he was working in a rice field just outside the hacienda, he, too, was shot dead.

In August, the regional office of the Department of Agrarian Reform ruled that the seven

remaining farmers were no longer qualified to take over the land. The order affirmed a motion from the landowners that accused the farmers of “forcible entry.”

The order cited an investigation conducted by the department’s Sagay City office, then run by Hannah D. Jubay. In an interview, Ms. Jubay, who was recently transferred to a nearby district, says she was powerless to question a police report concluding that farmers had entered a field they did not own.

A gold etching of Jesus hangs on her wall, looking down on her desk, next to a sign that says: “Vision: A Just Safe and Equitable Society that Upholds the Rights of Tillers.”

Hadn’t this case collided with that spirit?

Ms. Jubay looks pained.

“The landowners are very resistant,” she says.

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