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Invited Article:

The Marcos-Duterte Dynastic Regime in the Philippines: How Long Will It Last?

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Abstract

Philippine politics has traditionally been shaped by dynastic interests and patron-client relationships. When the Marcos dictatorship was toppled in 1986, the country saw a succession of liberal democratic regimes. However, the Marcoses and Dutertes, two major dynasties, have undermined this democracy while maintaining dynastic politics and clientelism. As with any opportunistic alliance between elite families, the Marcos-Duterte pact was expected to dissolve quickly. This paper examines key developments that led to the unraveling of their alliance, highlighting how the competing political strategies they employed for their survival reflect the dynamics of dynastic, patronage, and clientelist politics. In addition to this prevailing view of Philippine politics, the paper examines the role of civil society in negotiating and contesting national politics, influenced by their collective historical experiences and a culture that emphasizes obedience and individual survival over collective welfare.

Furthermore, the study links the breakdown of the Marcos-Duterte alliance to geopolitical tensions between the US and China. The Philippines' strategic location in the Pacific positions it as a crucial area of interest for both superpowers. While the Marcoses lean towards the US, the Dutertes favor China, thereby implicating their political survival in the escalating geopolitical tensions while also making Philippine politics a battleground for these competing influences. Ultimately, the dissolution of the Marcos-Duterte alliance raises important questions about the future of Philippine politics, emphasizing the need for ordinary Filipinos to reclaim and reshape their political landscape for a more inclusive future.

Key words: Dynasty, Patronage, Clientelism, Marcos, Duterte

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1. Introduction

The Philippines is identified with a long tradition of liberal democracy. It is also seen by many analysts as driven by family and dynastic politics. There is no contradiction between the two since the Filipino elites enthusiastically embraced the Lockean democracy that the US introduced after the bloody colonial pacification of the country at the turn of the 20th century. The attractiveness of this system lay in its enabling them to compete relatively peacefully for political power while at the same time uniting them as a class from challenges from below.

One of the “imports” to the Philippines was then Chicago-style machine politics that was built on the exchange of jobs and social security for the long-term loyalty of the voter to the “boss” and his party. When machine politics was transplanted to the Philippines, it was easily absorbed into the patron-client culture of the regional and local elites. But machine politics fueled by personal loyalties also became an avenue for political and social mobility for the lesser elites and middle classes. Indeed, in many parts of the country, machine politics translated, as in Mayor Daley’s Chicago, into virtual dictatorship periodically legitimized by votes that were mobilized, bought, or coerced by the superior organizational resources of *arriviste* members of the elite that owed their position to their mastery of mass electoral politics (McCoy, 2009).

Thus, representative democracy both strengthened elite rule while also serving as the mechanism for new families or dynasties to join the established elites (Gutierrez, 1994). While economic and social stratification remained rigid between the elites and the lower classes, political office provided a mechanism by which some sectors of the middle class could join the elite through control over the distribution of government resources. Thus, one might say that representative democracy Philippine style provided for a limited “circulation of elites.”

A related characteristic of the Philippine political system has been the prevalence of family or dynastic alliances. These alliances are conjunctural, and they are often made when the interests of two dynasties align for a specific electoral contest. But alliances, while being toasted as permanent when they are made, are expected to be broken once the alignment of interests disappears. Thus, the Philippine political system is driven by shifting alliances, where, to borrow the words of Lord Palmerston regarding the conduct of British foreign policy, there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies (Hollnsteiner, 1963).

Nowhere has this dynamic of alliance formation, alliance conflict, and alliance dissolution been more evident than in the relations between two powerful dynasties, the Duterte dynasty based in the south, and the Marcos dynasty based in the north, during the national elections of 2022 and its aftermath.

Despite policy safeguards that aim to regulate the concentration of power - such as the term limits set in the 1987 Constitution - elite families have devised ways to persist in or elevate their positions, especially during the electoral season. Public welfare programs have been instrumentalized by elites as patronage to expand their influence or sustain popular support. In effect, governance has been reduced to mere schemes for maintaining a stranglehold over constituents, thereby perennially undermining the peoples’ rights to public services.

Elite families also thrive in politics from alliance building and power-sharing agreements with other elites who also stand to gain in either preserving or changing the status quo. Over the last 50 years, the country has seen the rise, fall, and comeback of various dynasties. Most notable is the return of the Marcoses to the highest seat of power in 2022, 36 years after the Marcos dictatorship was overthrown by the 1986 EDSA Revolution. Times change, but the rules of the game as well as the players remain. As a popular Filipino saying goes, “weather-weather *lang iyan*,” a metaphor likening the cycle of political families in government posts to weather conditions: changing, but ever-constant.

A little over a year after the 2022 national elections, the alliance of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte show glaring cracks as the clans behind them scramble for power. As the 2023 *barangay* (village) elections came to pass, political families big and small are now moving towards firming up electoral machineries to prepare for the next big thing: the 2025 midterm elections, the 2028 national elections, and possibly a referendum for charter change.

As a case study of dynastic politics in the Philippines, the paper will examine some key developments that led to the breakup of the Marcos-Duterte alliance. This is largely a result of the different political strategies that both families have employed for their survival and which are emblematic of dynastic, patronage, and clientelistic politics. To complement the established characterization of Philippine politics which focuses on the institutions that enable the concentration of power and resources among the elite, this paper also will look into the role of civil society in negotiating, contesting, and shaping national politics based on their aspirations, and how these aspirations are in turn determined by their collective historical experiences as well as predominant cultures of authoritarianism and individualism that put premium on obedience, social order, and individual survival over collective welfare.

Outside the geographic scope of the Philippines, this paper will also look at the Marcos-Duterte dynamics vis-a-vis the hostilities between the US and China. The study posits that these geopolitical tensions have direct implications on the survival and persistence of the Marcoses and Dutertes, especially considering the differing partisanships of both clans in their approach to foreign relations as well as the alignment of their respective interests with those of the two superpowers.

To conclude, the paper reflects on what the persistence or dissolution of the Marcos-Duterte alliance would mean for the future of Philippine politics, and why it is relevant for ordinary Filipinos to reclaim, reimagine, and reinvent the political landscape.

2. The ties that bind Marcos and Duterte

Prior to the creation of the Marcos-Duterte alliance during the 2022 elections, the two dynasties have been exchanging political favors. At the onset of the partnership, each clan was able to provide support that the other needed to realize their political ambitions.

On the one hand, in 2015, when Rodrigo Duterte or “Digong” was running for president, his support base came largely from the central and southern islands of Visayas and Mindanao. He needed a power broker from the North, and that was what the Marcoses provided.

The Marcoses’ re-consolidation of the “Solid North”

Hailing from the northern province of Ilocos Norte, the Marcos dynasty first ruled the Philippines from 1965 until they were ousted by a People Power Revolution in 1986. Throughout Ferdinand Marcos Sr.’s 21-year rule—first as president, then as dictator—it is widely believed that he and his cronies orchestrated the detainment, torture, disappearance, and killing of hundreds of thousands of people that were critical or suspected of being critical of the Marcos regime. His administration was also hounded by plunder and corruption cases from their ill-gotten wealth amassed during the Martial Law years.

After being overthrown and exiled in 1986, the Marcoses were allowed to return to the country five years later by then President Corazon Aquino to face criminal charges. This however set the stage for them to regain provincial bailiwicks in the northern province of Ilocos Norte. Thereafter, the Marcoses made various attempts to re-enter the national political scene. However, they were mostly thwarted by their family’s association with thievery, corruption, nepotism, cronyism, as well as the people’s disgust with the dictatorship and the thousands of human rights abuses under their regime.

For the most part of their hiatus, the Marcoses kept to themselves in Ilocos Norte, but held tightly onto gubernatorial and congressional posts. Banking on the loyalty of their hometown constituents, the Marcoses then worked towards re-consolidating the “Solid North” voting bloc comprising three vote-rich regions. They also strived to court the Waray (Eastern Visayas) bloc through another prominent political clan: the Romualdez, family of former first lady Imelda Marcos.

In 2010, the national elections that seated Benigno Aquino III and brought back the Liberal Party into power also saw the comeback of the Marcoses, when Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. clinched a senatorial seat, while his mother Imelda and his sister Imee Marcos also won congressional and gubernatorial seats, respectively.



Figure 1 Marcos clan poses for a photo in front of late dictator Ferdinand Marcos’ portrait in Malacanang Palace
Source: ABS-CBN News, (2019)

In the same year that Duterte decided to run for president, Imelda Marcos announced his son’s bid for the vice presidency. Although Duterte and Marcos Jr. did not officially become running mates, many still latched on to the tandem. Based on the results of an exit poll conducted by TV5 and Social Weather Stations, political analyst Miguel Reyes said that the unofficial pairing was beneficial to both Marcos and Duterte. Citing a report by Mahar Mangahas, Reyes said that of Duterte’s 40 percentage points of the vote, “only 13 came from voters of his co-candidate Alan Peter Cayetano; the bulk of 18 came from Marcos voters.” As such, “[if] the exit poll was representative of the actual vote, then of the 16.6 million or so votes obtained by Duterte, about 45 percent, or nearly 7.5 million, came from those who also voted for Marcos” (Reyes, 2019).

At the same time, both the Marcoses and the Dutertes largely benefited from the growing public disillusionment with the Aquino administration. Representing the Liberals or the “yellow” movement, the Aquino regime at the time was in hot water for mismanaging various crises that earned public ire. These include various corruption scandals involving elites while the entire nation suffered in poverty and destructive climate disasters, the drastic mismanagement of a police operation that saw one of the highest fatalities in government forces, and the implementation of economic policies that only benefited the rich. Consequently, the Aquino administration became widely perceived as “elitist,” detached from the realities

and struggles of ordinary Filipinos. This was further reinforced by the Aquinos' oligarchic ties. All these have put into question the legacy of the 1986 EDSA revolution, which brought the Aquinos and the Liberals into power while promising inclusive democracy and better living conditions for Filipinos.

Aquinos, the poster child of elite politics

While the Aquino family is celebrated for their role in fighting the Marcos dictatorship and helping restore democracy in the 80's, their political influence and legacy have also been a subject of debate and criticism due to their oligarchic ties. Their prominence in national politics can be traced back to Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Sr., who was a renowned journalist, political opposition leader, and a staunch critic of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. Ninoy Aquino's assassination in 1983 triggered widespread outrage and eventually played a pivotal role towards the realization of EDSA People Power Revolution in 1986 against the Marcoses. Ninoy's widow, Corazon "Cory" Conjuangco-Aquino became the first President under the 5th Republic, which signaled the beginning of the post-EDSA reign of liberal democracy.

But while Ninoy Aquino was criticizing the Marcos regime, his wife's cousin Danding Cojuangco was amassing massive lands and wealth as one of Marcos' most powerful "cronies." Danding was also involved in the Coco Levy Fund scam, where Marcos and his cronies conspired to impose additional taxes on coconut farmers, under the pretense of developing the coconut industry and giving farmers a share of the investments. However, the funds collected were used by Marcos, Cojuangco, and others for personal profit.

The Cojuangcos weathered the regime change brought by the EDSA Revolution and saw further expansion of business interests during the Aquino administration. Despite influencing landmark policy reform that challenged oligarchic power, Corazon Aquino drew flak as heir to Conjuangco-owned Hacienda Luisita, one of the largest sugar estates in northern Philippines. A little over a year in her presidency, the Mendiola Massacre happened, where military and police forces gunned down several peasant leaders protesting the government's inaction towards agrarian reform.

Less than two decades after Cory's regime, the country would vote for another Aquino into power. The resurgence of nostalgic democratic fervor following Corazon Aquino's passing in 2009, and the public's discontent with the corruption scandals under the preceding Arroyo and Estrada administrations cemented a presidential win for Benigno "PNoy" Aquino III in the 2010 elections.

PNoy's term, however, was hounded by various inefficiencies and controversies. These include the alleged corruption in rehabilitation efforts after the devastation of Typhoon Haiyan, which led to more than 6,000 deaths, more than 1,000 disappearances, and more than USD 2 billion-worth of damages. Another notorious corruption scandal was that involving the Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP), where cabinet members reallocated public funds without congressional approval to certain "big ticket" projects. Another critical issue was the PNoy government's mishandling of "Oplan Exodus," the police operation in Mamasapano Municipality against the Jemaah Islamiyah and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front that resulted in the death of 44 government forces. At the same time, the PNoy administration's hyperfixation on economic growth and its persistent adherence to the tenets of neoliberalism have exacerbated inequality and poverty. Growth rates were not directly felt by the people as jobs remained insecure, wages were paltry, social services were inaccessible, and land reform was undermined.

Altogether, the Aquinos' historic ties with oligarchs, the corruption scandals that hounded PNoy's administration, and their failure to uplift the lives of ordinary Filipinos gave rise to anti-liberal sentiments. The Aquinos—and by extension the Liberals—were perceived as having failed to fulfill the promise of inclusive democracy and equality that emanated from the 1986 EDSA Revolution. These sentiments were further fueled by the Marcoses and the Duterte to bolster their campaigns towards the 2016 elections.



Figure 2 Corazon Aquino and Benigno Aquino III, sworn into the Presidency 24 years apart
 Source of photo on the left: Office of the President and Presidential Museum and Library, (1986)
 Source of photo on the right: Office of the President and Presidential Museum and Library (2010)

3. Duterte aids Marcos revisionism

Despite the crisis of legitimacy that hounded the Liberals, Marcos still lost the vice presidency to Liberal Party standard bearer Leni Robredo, albeit by a very small margin. On the other hand, Rodrigo Duterte - who strongly projected an anti-liberal and anti-establishment rhetoric that resonated well with public sentiment against oligarchic rule - won a landslide victory for the presidency.

The Dutertes: from obscurity to bloody infamy

Rodrigo Duterte's political career ironically started in 1986 when he was appointed as the OIC vice mayor of Davao City at the height of the 1986 EDSA Revolution, by the incoming revolutionary government of Corazon Aquino. He eventually served consecutive Mayoral terms from 1988 to 1995 under PDP-Laban, from 2001 to 2007 under the Nacionalista Party, and from 2013-2016 under the Liberal Party. In 2015, when Duterte was prodded to run for president, he was courted incessantly by PDP-Laban to become their standard bearer, something that he repeatedly declined due to "lack of enthusiasm". After some dramatics, Duterte agreed, and became the underdog candidate that challenged the "imperial Manila" brand of governance, representing various Visayan and Mindanaoan political blocs.

Duterte, however, is by no means a conventional mayor. He was known for extra judicial killings and employing death squads to combat illegal drugs in Davao. During his presidential campaign, Duterte vowed to elevate his violent approach to the drug problem at the national level. He also capitalized on the growing public discontent against the Aquino Administration and the Liberal Party, as well as the anti-EDSA narratives being propagated by Marcos supporters at the time (as Bongbong Marcos was also vying for the vice presidency). Come May 2016, Duterte won by a landslide of 16 million votes, cementing this claim to the presidential seat.

Tapping into people's frustrations with elite politics and liberal democracy, Duterte ushered the wave of propaganda narratives that demonized the opposing "yellow" (liberal) forces. The liberals were criticized for being hypocritical, as they failed to establish participatory governance and better living conditions despite giving primacy to democracy and human rights. Duterte also undermined the concept of human rights, portraying it as being contradictory to peace, order, and development. Development, in Duterte's playbook, will not be realized by respecting human rights but by enforcing social order with an iron fist. This narrative resonated with a lot of Filipinos, whose everyday lives have been entangled with chaos and violence (crimes, wars, resource conflicts)

and for whom the concept of human rights has been rendered meaningless, whether in times of liberal democracy or dictatorship. For these people, a strongman leadership was necessary to correct what they perceived as the inherent “lack of discipline” and “unruliness” among Filipinos.

This narrative also paved the way for Duterte’s bloody “war on drugs” and the state policy of “red-tagging” and “terror-tagging”, which involved the often unfounded and malicious labeling of human rights defenders as government destabilizers. Institutions necessary for a well-functioning democracy—such as the Commission on Human Rights, the separation of state powers, the media, and civil society—were also repressed or captured.



Figure 3 President Rodrigo Duterte (L) sworn in as President in 2016, with Sebastian Duterte (M), then Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte and Vice Mayor Paolo Duterte
Source: Reuters for Philippine Daily Inquirer, (2021)

The demonization of human rights and democracy provoked by Duterte provided fertile ground for the whitewashing of the Marcos-led Martial Law era. Activists who fought for democracy and bore witness to or experienced atrocities during the Marcos dictatorship were discredited and labeled as “rebels.” The unspeakable brutalities they faced were justified on the grounds that they were destabilizing peace and order under the Marcos regime. This allowed the Marcoses to conjure up a “Golden Age” image for the Martial Law years, disseminating it through the same social media channels that propped up pro-Duterte propaganda. Over the last three decades, the Marcoses have been wanting to reinvent their family’s history and reclaim political power after the shame brought about by the ouster of the Marcos patriarch in 1986.

Pushing the envelope even further, Duterte intervened to have the former dictator, Ferdinand Marcos Sr, buried at the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Heroes Cemetery) within the first 100 days of his presidency. The Marcoses have long yearned for this since their return from exile, as it gave them ground to revise history in their favor. For Duterte, this was a fitting recompense for the electoral support mobilized by the Marcoses through the “Solid North” vote bloc.

As such, despite Marcos Jr. losing the vice presidential race in 2016, the Marcoses still benefited greatly in their alliance with the Dutertes. In 2019, Imee Marcos won a senatorial seat largely owing to the revisionist propaganda that Duterte paved way to.

4. Building the “Uniteam” of dynasties

When the end of his term approached, Duterte knew that he needed to maintain his foothold in national politics. Though enjoying high trust ratings for most of his term, a landslide victory against the opposition was needed to cement the legitimacy of his governance. Duterte also needed protection from the International Criminal Court (ICC), which authorized an investigation on reported crimes against humanity committed under his administration’s “war on drugs.”



Figure 4 Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte during massive campaign sorties in 2022

Source: Al Vicoy for Manila Bulletin, (2022)

As talks of the 2022 elections first came to the fore, many were expecting Rodrigo Duterte’s daughter, Sara, to run for president. Sara topped the presidential preference polls, and her father had the resources to support her campaign. But mimicking Digong’s tactics in 2015, Sara also defied people’s expectations by not filing her candidacy for President and instead pursuing a reelection bid as mayor of Davao City.

But everyone knew that Sara was just playing the “substitution game” like her father did in 2015 to dramatize his candidacy. People expected that Sara would withdraw her candidacy for Davao mayor and substitute another political party’s “placeholder” presidential candidate. Pursuant to Section 77 of the Philippine Omnibus Election Code, substitution of candidates is allowed only in cases of death, withdrawal or disqualification of the original candidate. In cases of withdrawal of the original candidate, the substitute can only file their Certificate of Candidacy within the period fixed by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC).

But perhaps Duterte’s camp miscalculated the Marcoses’ eagerness to retake the presidency. They must have thought that the Marcoses would be willing to give way to Sara’s ambitions given her popularity in the polls. But on October 6, 2021, Marcos Jr. filed his presidential candidacy.

Despite this, Rodrigo Duterte had then still urged Sara to pursue the presidency as standard bearer of his party, Partido Demokratiko Pilipino (PDP-Laban). But to his dismay, Sara announced her decision to run for vice president on a joint ticket with Marcos Jr. and as the candidate of Lakas–Christian Muslim Democrats (Lakas-CMD), the party of the infamous former president and now Congresswoman Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. In November 2021, the “Uniteam” coalition was formalized, bringing together the most prominent and notorious dynasties in Philippine politics, who threw their support behind the Marcos-Duterte ticket. One of the most influential clans that pledged support for the Uniteam was the Estradas, despite their bitter history with Arroyo. The Estradas brought with them the *Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino* (PMP) or Force of the Filipino Masses, the political party headed by former President Joseph Ejercito Estrada.

The Estradas and the masa (masses) vote

The Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino (Force of the Filipino Masses), is a prominent political party in the Philippines founded by actor-turned-politician and former President Joseph Ejercito "Erap" Estrada who, by winning the 1998 National Elections, also cemented his enduring influence in the country's political landscape. Through the PMP, Estrada has seated his wife and progeny in various local and national positions, including the Senate, during the last two decades.

Erap, who won popular support, saw a sharp decline in trust ratings as his administration quickly became mired in various corruption scandals, particularly in the form of illegal gambling payoffs and kickbacks. The growing public discontent culminated in the Second EDSA People Power Revolution in January 2001, where mass protests demanded Estrada's impeachment/resignation. In this event, the military and state police withdrew its support for the administration, and along with the Supreme Court, declared the presidential seat vacant. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, then Vice President, was sworn in, effectively ousting Estrada from power. Arroyo then ushered a series of investigations on Estrada's alleged corruption scandals, placing him under house arrest.

In the 2004 national elections, capitalizing on the steadily declining public trust on the Arroyo administration, the Estrada family and the PMP played a vital role in consolidating the political opposition. Gloria Arroyo eventually won the said elections, but the Estrada-influenced opposition continued with a barrage of corruption scandals, exposés, and destabilization attempts against Arroyo.

In the 2010 elections, Estrada was allowed to run for the presidency as the standard bearer of PMP. He was bested by Benigno Aquino III and the Liberal Party, but only by a small margin, attesting to the party's strength. In the 2016 National Elections, Estrada and the PMP endorsed Duterte's candidacy and helped consolidate a broader base of supporters particularly in Metro Manila, which is considered the PMP's core bailiwick. He also endorsed Bongbong Marcos' Vice Presidential bid.

In 2019, the Estradas and the PMP suffered a total defeat, with Erap losing his mayoral bid for the city of Manila, and his sons Jinggoy and JV losing their senatorial bids by a small margin, causing a rift between the siblings. In the 2022 National Elections however, Jinggoy and JV, though running under different political parties, won senatorial seats through their connections to, and support of the Uniteam.



Figure 5 Jinggoy Estrada (L), and JV Ejercito (R), both sons of former President Joseph Ejercito-Estrada (M) simultaneously became members of the Philippine Senate in 2013 and 2022

Source: Agency France-Presse, (2018)

5. First crack in the alliance

Rodrigo Duterte was not ecstatic over the creation of the Marcos-Duterte tandem. It bewildered him that Sara settled for the vice presidency when she was the most popular presidential choice. Expressing his frustration, Digong made derisive attacks against Marcos Jr., publicly calling him a “weak leader with baggage” (Matthew, 2022). The former chief executive even fueled controversies regarding Marcos’ alleged cocaine use. These remarks signified the first crack in what Imee Marcos referred to as the “marriage made in heaven.”

Despite Digong’s tirades, the Marcos-Duterte tandem garnered an unprecedented 31.6 million and 32.2. million votes respectively, marking the highest number of votes ever recorded for the Presidential and Vice-Presidential seats and claiming a landslide victory against their rivals. More than just preempting any potential challenges to the tandem’s legitimacy that might be mounted in the form of electoral protests—something Bongbong Marcos is familiar with after incessantly protesting former Vice President Leni Robredo’s electoral win in 2016 and alleging fraud—the landslide win was a statement by the UniTeam against political detractors and the opposition and a testament to the people’s mandate for their leadership and the tremendous power they wield.

Behind the accolades, however, some things cannot simply be overlooked. One is the absence of the Duterte patriarch’s blessing, something that the Marcos camp needed to clutch at the time. Duterte Sr., despite issuing statements to support the incoming president, treated Marcos blandly during the turnover ceremonies at Malacanang Palace. Second was the fact that Sara Duterte had more votes than Bongbong Marcos, which attested to the magnitude of Duterte’s influence and the power of their electoral machinery. Overtime, this stirred up hushed narratives that the Marcoses owed the Presidency to the Dutertes.

6. Lines drawn and crossed

The waning of the election season traditionally marks the commencement of another equally significant political event: the appointment of key government officials, particularly into cabinet and bureaucratic posts.

Among Marcos’ campaign promises (especially to the Dutertes) was the continuation of the previous administration’s programs. This however did not mean the continuation of Duterte’s political appointees in various government agencies, though some of these officials had hoped that they would be retained in their positions. Within the first few months of his presidency, Marcos called for the “rightsizing” of bureaucracies. Subsequently, a number of government posts have been vacated, floated, and entire divisions and programs de-budgeted. Marcos’ first act as president was to decommission the Presidential Communications and Operations Office and the Presidential Anti-Corruption Commission, which were populated mostly by Duterte’s political stalwarts. Duterte appointees in the Commission on Audit, Civil Service Commission, and the Commission on Elections were bypassed in the senate commission on appointments hearing, allowing Marcos to fill in these positions with his appointees. A few months down the line, Marcos’ newly appointed interior and local government chief Ben Hur Abalos compelled numerous generals and high-ranking officials under the Philippine National Police to submit their courtesy resignations.

Apart from these however, the most crucial appointments are cabinet positions which are often offered as a means for political patronage or to square debts with political allies during the elections. For her part, Vice President Sara Duterte eyed the Department of Defense post as early as the electoral campaign period, which Marcos nodded to, in line with her (and the previous administration’s) anti-terrorism and counter-insurgency agenda and push for mandatory military service. But when Marcos consolidated his cabinet, Sara Duterte was instead positioned as Department of Education Secretary.

7. Shortchanged or golden goose?

Many political observers say that Sara's appointment as Education Secretary was a deliberate ploy to undermine her influence. The defense secretary position which she had been vying for would have given her a direct line with the military. The defense portfolio would have been more strategic for the Dutertes, given how Sara's father had already nurtured positive relationships with state forces during his presidential term. Duterte had significantly increased salaries of soldiers and policemen and appointed a number of ex-military men to his cabinet. Marcos knew this and probably did not want to give Sara the privilege of coddling one of the most powerful state instruments that his family had relatively less influence in.

Meanwhile, the position of education secretary can perhaps be considered the polar opposite of the defense secretary, as far as the Dutertes' agendas are concerned. For one, compared to the military, the Dutertes have relatively weaker footing in the education sector. During his term, Rodrigo Duterte's special treatment of the military was often contrasted by critics with the deplorable working conditions that teachers had to endure, including low wages, paltry allowances and benefits, and a grueling workload. As such, Sara needs to work her way up from a negative standing in order to build relations with her primary constituency as education secretary. Second, during Duterte's presidential term, a huge corruption issue in the Department of Education (DepEd) was exposed involving the DepEd's procurement of overpriced and out-dated laptops worth PHP 2.4 billion (USD 43.1 million) for public school teachers. Sara is therefore handed the difficult task of cleaning up after the mess and regaining public trust.

In this light, Sara might have been shortchanged. But on the other hand, the DepEd historically has the highest budget share among all other agencies, which had an astounding 11% increase from Php 801 billion in 2022 to Php 895 billion in 2023 (USD 1.6 billion increase), while the Department of Defense saw a 7% decrease this year, to Php 201 billion (USD 3.5 billion) (Department of Budget and Management, 2023).

8. The point of no return

The most consequential development that has created a chasm in the Marcos-Duterte alliance is the controversy surrounding Sara Duterte's request for confidential funds in the 2024 national budget. When deliberations for the budget began in August 2023, Sara had initially requested Php 500 million-worth (or USD 8.9 million) of confidential and intelligence funds for the Office of the Vice President (OVP) and another Php 150 million (USD 2.7 million) for the Department of Education (DepEd). Confidential and intelligence funds are much more difficult to audit as they are exempted from standard procedures of the Commission on Audit (COA).

During the budget hearings in the Lower House, it was exposed through a COA report that the OVP had actually spent Php 125 million-worth (USD 2.2 million) of confidential funds in just 11 days in 2022. This is equivalent to spending Php 11.3 million (USD 200,000) per day. Apart from the lightning speed depletion of the funds, critics have also questioned the constitutionality of the process by which Sara procured confidential funds in 2022, as these were not programmed in the budget she inherited from her predecessor, Leni Robredo, when she assumed office in June 2022.

It was discovered that Sara had made a request to the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) for an additional Php 403.46 million (USD 7.2 million) funds on top of the funds from her predecessor. Of this amount, the DBM through the Office of the President (OP) granted Php 221.4 million, of which Php 125 million were confidential funds.

Justifying their approval of the OVP's request for additional funds, the DBM said that these came from the Php 7-billion contingent fund under the 2022 General Appropriations Act, which is meant to "cover the funding requirements of new or urgent activities or projects...that need to be implemented or paid during the year" by national government agencies (Department of Budget and Management, 2022).

But critics said that a government agency cannot simply transfer funds to another agency because the power to appropriate lies in Congress.

Despite this, the Lower House decided to scrap Sara's request for Php 650 million confidential funds amid the controversies involving the OVP. They reallocated the funds to security agencies in light of the "escalating tensions with China" in the West Philippine Sea.

The response of former president Rodrigo Duterte to the House's decision and the developments that ensued thereafter created a point of no return in the political relations of the Marcoses and the Dutertes.

9. The gloves come off

Frustrated by the House's denial of her daughter's request, the older Duterte in his television program referred to the House as the "most rotten branch of government." He insinuated that House Speaker Martin Romualdez, cousin of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., was distributing discretionary or pork barrel funds to lawmakers. In light of this, Duterte demanded the Commission on Audit to probe Romualdez's alleged misuse of public funds and to audit the House's extraordinary and miscellaneous funds.

Duterte also singled out ACT Teachers Partylist Representative France Castro, one of the lawmakers that led the questioning of Sara's request and use of confidential funds. Duterte shared how he told his daughter that Castro should be the "first target" of the confidential fund expenses: "You, France—the first target of [her] intelligence fund[s]... you, France, I want to kill all you communists."

In response, Castro sued Duterte over grave threats, which could result in a prison term of between six months and six years for the former president if found guilty. House leaders also released a joint statement urging Duterte to stop threatening incumbent legislators. The statement lamented the former chief executive's malignment of "the very institution that for years supported many of his own legislative priorities." With regard to Duterte's demand for an audit, the statement said that an official audit had already been done and that the House passed all levels. The statement was signed by six political parties, including PDP-Laban (Duterte's own party) and Lakas-CMD (the party of Congresswoman Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, one of the Dutertes' staunchest allies), showing how Duterte and their allies have lost influence over their own political parties.

Around three weeks later, the House of Representatives adopted a resolution upholding its own "integrity and honor" and defending the leadership of Speaker Romualdez. However, the resolution did not explicitly mention the threats made by Duterte. It took the persistent interpellation of Albay Province Representative and Liberal Party President Edcel Lagman for the sponsor of the resolution—Senior Deputy Speaker Aurelio Gonzales—for Duterte's threats to actually be pinpointed as the reason for the resolution. But before naming Duterte, Gonzales resigned on the spot as officer of PDP-Laban, perhaps in deference to Duterte as party chairperson.

The interpellation was followed by manifestations of support made by representatives of the various parties in the House that are supportive of Romualdez's speakership. Meanwhile, out of the nine deputy speakers in the House, only Arroyo and Davao City 3rd District Representative Isidro Ungab did not sign the resolution. This prompted the House to oust both lawmakers as deputy speakers. Explaining the reason for the impeachment, House Majority Leader Manuel Jose Dalipe said that it is important "to have leaders who fully support and uphold the collective decisions and directions set forth by the leadership."

Sara Duterte, who has developed a close relationship with Arroyo similar to her father, refused to comment on the removal of Arroyo and Ungab from the House leadership. However, she had a sympathetic message for them. "In politics, we always say there are no permanent friends and enemies. As a politician, it is truly heartwarming if you find another politician who is a true friend. That is why congressman Ungab and congresswoman Arroyo have my full support as a politician and as a friend," Duterte said.

Even before being removed as deputy speaker, Arroyo had already been demoted from the position of senior deputy speaker last May. This was triggered by Arroyo's alleged involvement in a coup plot against House Speaker Romualdez. Back then, Sara did not take the demotion lightly. She announced her resignation as chairperson of Lakas-CMD, the party that served as her vehicle to the vice presidency and where Romualdez serves as president while Arroyo is chair emeritus. In a statement that accompanied her resignation announcement, Sara said that her stay in office "cannot be poisoned by political toxicity or undermined by execrable political powerplay" (Galvez, 2023).

Meanwhile, Romualdez, as President of Lakas-CMD, had signed an "alliance agreement" with some of the biggest power blocs in the House. In total, 234 lawmakers constituted the membership of the political parties that swore allegiance to Romualdez and Marcos Jr.

Arroyo, an indispensable Duterte ally

Arroyo's relationship with the Dutertes runs deep. When he was still Davao Mayor, Rodrigo Duterte was one of Arroyo's staunchest supporters during her presidency. In 2006, there was strong public clamor to have Arroyo ousted for her alleged involvement in the 2004 electoral fraud and multiple corruption cases. In response, Digong threatened to lead a separatist Mindanao rebellion, as he believed that unseating Arroyo would lead to more chaos and government breakdown.

Following her nine-year presidency, Arroyo was placed under hospital arrest during the term of Benigno Aquino III from the Liberal Party. But as many Filipinos became disillusioned with the Liberals, Arroyo saw her chance for vindication. She had publicly rallied support for the presidential bid of then Vice President Jejomar Binay in 2015. However, Binay was being outpaced by another candidate, Grace Poe, who was on bad terms with Arroyo. It was Poe's late father, Fernando Poe Jr, that Arroyo allegedly cheated during the 2004 presidential elections. Arroyo was thus desperate to have Binay win, as he seemed to be her only escape plan from her five-year-long arrest. That was, until Duterte came into the picture.

A latecomer to the presidential race, Digong's ranking in opinion polls quickly rose, eventually surpassing his contenders by a huge margin two months before the elections. Digong, for his part, also courted Arroyo's support. In one campaign rally, he said that if elected President, he would order the release of Arroyo. And as it happened, on July 19, 2016, a few weeks after Digong was sworn in as President, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the dismissal of a plunder case against Arroyo.

Since then, Arroyo and the Dutertes have been exchanging political favors. During the beginning of his presidency, Digong initially had a flimsy footing in national politics, coming from the position of provincial mayor who was suddenly propelled to the highest post. He badly needed a well-connected power broker, and that was what Arroyo provided, helping him build a supermajority in Congress. Arroyo also tapped her international linkages, including Beijing. This influenced Digong's pivot to China and resulted in the inflow of US\$ 1.7 billion worth of Chinese investments into the Philippines during his term.

Duterte's daughter, Sara, also became involved in the political affair. In 2018, after Sara had a personal feud with then House Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez, Sara teamed up with Arroyo to oust Alvarez, and Arroyo took his place as Speaker. During the 2022 elections, Arroyo adopted Sara in her political party, Lakas-CMD, when the latter rescinded the political support of her father. The consolidation of the "UniTeam" coalition of prominent dynasties that supported Marcos and Duterte was also widely attributed to Arroyo.



Figure 6 Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo meets with Pres. Rodrigo Duterte
Source: Philippine News Agency, (2020)

10. Shadows of the ICC

The sixth critical rift point between Marcos and Duterte is the Marcos administration's handling of the International Criminal Court's probe on Duterte's "war on drugs." Police records say that around 6,000 people have been killed under the campaign. However, human rights organizations put the number higher at 12,000 to 30,000.

After the ICC received a "mass murder" and "crimes against humanity" complaint against Duterte and 11 other government officials who orchestrated the drug war, the ICC began with a preliminary examination in February 2018 to determine if there is basis to proceed with an investigation. In March 2019, the Philippines withdrew from the ICC. The ICC Pre-Trial Chamber authorized the start of the drug war investigation in September 2021. Two months later, the investigation was suspended upon the request of the Duterte administration, which claimed that it was conducting its own investigation. In January 2023, the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber authorized the resumption of the ICC's drug war probe after finding the Philippine government's investigations unsatisfactory.

The government—by then under the leadership of Marcos—submitted an appeal to the ICC in March 2023, asking the Court (1) to reverse its January 2023 decision to resume the drug war probe and (2) to suspend the investigation pending the resolution of the main appeal.

In March 2023, the ICC Appeals Chamber rejected the Philippine government's request to suspend the ICC probe (De Guzman, 2023). Marcos' response was to say that the government had no other recourse but to disengage from any contact with the ICC, given that "the appeal has failed" (Gavilian, 2024).

After the confidential funds scandal broke out and the Dutertes and Marcos-controlled Congress engaged in a war of words, the Marcos administration suddenly changed its tune on the ICC case. Last November 20, several lawmakers filed a resolution urging the government to extend "full cooperation" in the ICC's probe. Congressman Bienvenido Abante, who authored one of the resolutions, said that allowing the ICC to investigate drug war killings during the Duterte administration will send a clear message to the world that in the issue of human rights, the Marcos government has no skeletons in the closet (Servillos, 2023). This is a complete turnaround from the House Resolution that Congresswoman Arroyo filed last February 2022 (before she was demoted and later ousted by the House leadership) that declared an "unequivocal defense" for Duterte against the ICC.



Figure 7 A woman sits and waits with her child amid police operations during former President Rodrigo Duterte's 'war on drugs' campaign
Source: Amnesty International, (2017)

Sara had previously kept mum on the ICC issue when the Marcos administration was still defending her father. But when the House did an about-face, Sara spoke up on the issue for the first time, asserting that allowing the ICC probe is “patently unconstitutional” and degrades Philippine courts. She argued that the House should respect Marcos’ decision last July to shut the doors on the ICC after the tribunal rejected the Philippine government’s appeal to close the probe (Magsambol, 2023).

But just a day after Sara gave the statement pinning her faith on Marcos’ support, the president also shifted his ground. Marcos said that the Philippines’ return to the ICC is “under study” (Manahan, 2023). This was echoed by Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla, who had previously maintained that it is an insult to the country’s justice system and sovereignty for the ICC to conduct a probe on Duterte’s war on drugs.

Up to this point, the palace denies any alledged intention to extradite Duterte to Hague nor to permit any investigations by the ICC. This may soon change however, if the Dutertes would not cease political disturbances and open criticism against the administration—such as the “prayer rallies” organized by the Dutertes, in Davao, Cebu and Metro Manila, supposedly against the administration’s plans for Charter Change, but more apparent as a political show of force.

De Lima, a Pandora’s Box for Marcos

Marcos is also said to be hesitant to release former Secretary of Justice and Senator Leila De Lima from prison. De Lima has been a staunch critic of human rights violations committed during Rodrigo Duterte’s term as mayor of Davao and as president. In 2017, she was arrested and detained for being implicated in the New Bilibid Prison drug trafficking scandal. This has been widely denounced by human rights organizations and other international bodies as being politically motivated.

In 2016, former president Duterte alleged that De Lima facilitated and benefitted from illegal drug trafficking in the New Bilibid Prison. Duterte’s accusations against De Lima came after De Lima initiated and led a Senate investigation into his administration’s campaign against illegal drugs. Even before becoming Senator, De Lima as former Justice Secretary had pushed for investigations on the alleged “death squads” in Davao during Duterte’s mayoralty. The Davao death squad has been described as a vigilante group that allegedly conducted summary executions of individuals (including street children) suspected of petty crimes and drug dealing.



Figure 8 Former Senator and Human Rights Advocate Leila De Lima
Source: Commission on Human Rights, (2022)

With De Lima's imprisonment being widely condemned by human rights groups as being politically motivated, her case has thus been repeatedly highlighted to illustrate political persecution under Duterte, with De Lima herself becoming a rallying figure for various human rights movements.

In February 2021, the first out of the three cases against De Lima was dismissed due to the lack of strong evidence by the prosecution. Subsequently in May 2023, De Lima was acquitted of her second case when state witnesses recanted their testimonies. It is also notable that a week after this acquittal, the ouster plot against House Speaker Romualdez was revealed to the press. Commenting on De Lima's acquittal, Marcos' incumbent Justice Secretary Crispin Remulla was quoted as saying that "the rule of law prevailed" (Damicog, 2023).

Initially, the Marcos administration was believed to be hesitant to release De Lima despite prodding from a number of US senators owing to its not wanting to incur the displeasure of the former president. However, in November 2023, De Lima was finally granted bail for her last criminal charge and was set free. This came a month after former President Duterte's tirades against House Speaker Romualdez and the Congress on the ongoing investigations of his daughter Sara's use of confidential funds. In the same month, the Congressional Human Rights Committee filed a resolution urging the administration to work with the ICC in its investigation of Duterte and his accomplices, alongside a revival of De Lima's complaints by the Court of Appeals against Duterte's Justice Secretaries Vitallano Aguirre and Menardo Guevarra—both were strong defenders of the War on Drugs.

11. Undermining the "Duterte legacy"

The preceding sections recounted key developments that have led to the breakup of the Marcos-Duterte tandem. While tensions have been brewing between both dynasties since the 2022 elections, it was Sara's disgraceful embroilment in the confidential funds scandal that made her a liability to the Marcoses. This prompted Romualdez and other Marcos allies to launch an all-out attack to finally boot out the Dutertes.

But out of all the offensive strategies in the Marcos-Romualdez arsenal, perhaps the three most critical are their plans to have the Philippines reenter the International Criminal Court (which is now investigating Duterte's war on drugs) and to resume the peace negotiations with the National Democratic Front (NDFP) of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

In the last two years, the Marcos administration has shifted the priorities of the NTF ELCAC, setting the stage for the resumption of peace talks, which compelled the resignation of Sara Duterte who was sitting in the task force as Co-Vice Chair. In the last quarter of 2023, the palace also issued amnesties to several armed groups linked to the CPP.

During his last State of the Nation Address (SONA), Marcos notably boasted that his administration's anti-narcotics campaign has been "bloodless" and has not involved "extermination". Despite media reports of the persistence of drug-related extrajudicial killings under Marcos, the statement itself is an attack on the political legitimacy of Duterte's War on Drugs, and a rallying call to congress to denounce the previous administration.

These moves by Marcos and his allies represent a complete subversion of Duterte's "legacy"—hinged on the bloody drug war and the equally bloody anti-insurgency campaign—that serve as the very foundation of the Dutertes' social capital. It was Duterte's violent approach to the narcotics problem and his vitriolic attacks against the left that largely contributed to his enduring popularity even beyond his presidency.

Sociologist Nicole Curato (2016) aptly described Duterte's thuggish charisma as "penal populism." It taps into people's latent frustration towards specific groups that have been relegated as second-class citizens, depicts these "othered" groups as threats to social order, and thereby manufactures social consensus for imposing brute force on the "other" in the name of preserving peace and order (Martinez, 2021).

For Duterte, the so-called "enemies of the state" are the drug users and peddlers "terrorizing" the streets, as well as human rights and social justice activists who are supposedly seeking to "destabilize" the government. Within this narrative, the systemic roots of the drug problem as well as the legitimate demands of activists for the government to address different forms of social injustice are erased. Instead, Duterte tapped into entrenched cultural values that promote strict obedience to authority even at the expense of freedom, that put individual needs above collective welfare, and that glorify self-reliance and tedious work in the name of personal upward mobility. But beyond narratives and propaganda, it was Duterte's ability to deliver brute force to contain these groups through his drug war and anti-insurgency campaign that allowed him to remain popular.

But with Marcos' allies undermining Duterte's "legacy" and preying on Sara's vulnerabilities, the Dutertes' political survival hangs in the balance. Apart from overturning the drug war and the anti-insurgency campaign, the Marcoses are also riding on anti-Chinese sentiments and directing these towards the Dutertes, who have openly assumed a pro-China stance on foreign relations. This has become more apparent with the recent string of investigations against Philippine Offshore Gaming Operations (POGO) by Chinese corporations, a flagship internal revenue generation program and apparent concession to broker the Duterte-China alliance. The POGO issue became an opportunity for the Marcos administration to gain higher moral ground, exposing slavery and other human rights violations, drug abuse, as well as the impunity enjoyed by Chinese operators within the POGO hubs. Effectively, the Marcos administration triggered a bandwagon of anti-POGO and anti-Chinese sentiments, which bolstered the administration's position in the WPS conflict. In Marcos Jr's recent SONA, his statements on the WP, the banning of POGOs, and the War on Drugs were spectacularly lauded in Congress, foregrounding the dominance of the Marcos political narratives, as against the shallow propaganda bases of the Dutertes.

12. Consolidating the Marcoses' power base

The Romualdez-led offensive against the Dutertes has proven to be effective, as Marcos has now managed to get ahead of Sara in their race for power and political survival (at least for the time being). Since the confidential funds controversy came to light, various politicians from PDP-Laban—the party chaired by Rodrigo Duterte—have switched to Marcos' ruling party ahead of the 2025 midterm elections.

From 120 lawmakers during the term of former President Rodrigo Duterte, the PDP-Laban is now down to just eight seats in Congress and the Senate.

It is also worth noting that even before Sara's fall from grace, the Marcoses' ace in the hole was to galvanize the supermajority blocs in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, which came only a month after Marcos' inauguration. Of course, at the onset, this was only made possible through the combined political capital of the "UniTeam", and along with the forces aligned with the Dutertes and Arroyos. This event however prompted a political rigodon in Congress, where party hoppers were compelled to align themselves with the sitting President, knowing full well the resources that he wields. In a display of power, an astounding 283 lawmakers voted for Romualdez as House Speaker, along with Presidential son and Ilocos Norte 1st District Representative Sandro Marcos who was voted as the House senior deputy majority Leader despite being a neophyte.

Furthermore, Romualdez has also managed to take hold of Lakas-CMD, the party that used to be controlled by Arroyo and that supported Sara's vice presidential bid in 2022. Under Romualdez' leadership, Lakas-CMD has forged alliance agreements with the biggest power blocs representing 213 congressmen in the Lower House.

Finally, another political party was also founded in 2023—the Kilusan ng Nagkakaisang Pilipino (KNP), which is made up of several powerful political parties under the united opposition that ran against Gloria Arroyo's slate in the 2007 midterms elections. The KNP party's leadership is formerly from Duterte's PDP-Laban and could signal further deterioration of party memberships.

With the vast influence that Marcos and Romualdez wield in Congress, they endorsed amending the Constitution in 2023. Although their pretext was to liberalize economic provisions in the Constitution, various critics noted that the real motive behind the agenda was political. Apart from pursuing further liberalization, the proposed constitutional changes also include transforming the form of government from a presidential to a parliamentary system. This would abolish the presidency or turn it into a ceremonial position, while making the head of the ruling party in the lower house of parliament the head of state. Such a move would largely favor Romualdez, who does not have the popularity to win a presidential election compared to Sara Duterte but has the support of the majority of members of the House.

13. Senate as battleground

The dampening of the Marcos administration's position on the ICC investigation into Duterte's war on drugs as well as its push for a parliamentary system of government through constitutional amendment were the final nail in the coffin of the Marcos-Duterte alliance. Both of these were seen as direct threats to the Dutertes' political survival.

In particular, the push for a parliamentary system, if successful, would derail Sara's plan to succeed Marcos Jr. via the presidential election in 2028. The Marcoses are already making headway on this front. Last March 2024, the House passed a bill that seeks to implement Resolution of Both Houses (RBH) No. 6, calling for the establishment of a constitutional convention ("Con-con") to amend the Constitution.

However, for Con-con to push through, the bill also needs to garner sufficient support in the Senate. There lies the rub. Since talks of charter change were brought up under the Marcos administration, the majority of the Senators have adamantly opposed it. In January, the Senate—under the helm of then Senate President Miguel Zubiri—even issued a manifesto rejecting House push for charter change via people's initiative—which requires 12 percent of the total registered voters to sign a petition in support of charter change—amid allegations of bribery involving some Congressmen in securing signatures for the campaign. The manifesto also slammed the Lower House's proposal for Congress to vote jointly on charter change, as this would drown out the vote of the 24 Senators against the 316 members of the Lower House.

Four months after the manifesto was issued, Zubiri was ousted as Senate President and replaced by Francis Escudero. Just a day after the Senate coup, the president and the first lady hosted a dinner for members of the Senate and their spouses, which shows that they welcome the change in leadership.

Apart from his opposition to the proposed constitutional amendments, another possible reason behind Zubiri's ouster was his authorization of the Senate probe on a leaked document naming Marcos Jr. as among the suspected drug users being monitored by government agencies. These dynamics reveal that the Senate remains prone to cooptation by dominant political dynasties and by the Office of the President. Furthermore, the fact that those who did not vote for Escudero as the new Senate President are not assumed to be switching to the minority or opposition reveals the absence of a strong critical bloc in the legislature.

Under the new leadership of Escudero, the Senate has yet to make a clearer position on the issue of amending the Constitution. But considering the Senate's vulnerability to cooptation from external forces, it would not come as a surprise if it suddenly changed its tune to charter change.

The 2025 midterm elections also present another opportunity for the Marcoses to solidify their hold over the Senate. If they could get more allies elected in the Senate, that means charter change could possibly push through with little to no opposition. The stakes are high for both the Marcoses and the Dutertes in next year's election, as the former's success would spell the derailment of latter's political plans.

14. Dutertes fight back

However, the Dutertes are not going down without a fight. Seeing the threat posed by the ICC investigation and the looming Senate probe on Rodrigo Duterte's alleged "gentleman's agreement" with Beijing on the West Philippine Sea, the former president decided to take matters into his own hands. In January 2024, the Dutertes decided to hold a prayer rally in their bailiwick, Davao City, on the same day as the Marcoses' "*Bagong Pilipinas*" or "New Philippines" campaign rally in Manila. This was a key moment for the Marcos administration as it laid bare their brand of governance and leadership as well as their plans for economic and social transformation. But the more important objective of the rally was to show the supposed formidable forces supporting the Marcos government. In fact, attendance was so critical that there were even reports of incentives being given away to attendees. That the Dutertes chose not to attend this critical rally and to even organize their own in their bailiwick is an implicit statement that they are no longer supporting the Marcos administration.

Rodrigo Duterte went even further. During their rally in Davao, he called Marcos "*bangag*," a slang Filipino term that refers to being high on drugs. This resulted in bad blood between First Lady Liza Araneta-Marcos and Sara, after the latter was caught on camera laughing when her father called Marcos "*bangag*."

For her part, Sara has now completely stripped herself of any pretense of being loyal and deferential to the Marcoses—an attitude that she feigned over the past two years of her delicate alliance with Marcos Jr. In June, she announced her resignation as the secretary of the Department of Education and vice chairperson of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC).

The Dutertes also issued statements rejecting the constitutional amendments endorsed by Marcos and Romualdez. Davao Congressman Paolo Duterte said that he is "against this people's initiative as this is not the people's voice but the voice of a few who wanted to perpetuate themselves in power. Vice President Sarah Duterte also released her statement against charter change.

15. The populist "opposition"

The Dutertes have tactically capitalized on the divide between their followers and those of the Marcoses—who have been at each other's throats since the end of the electoral season—to erode the Marcoses' support base. Sara is well aware that she is more popular than Marcos, and that many of her followers had only reluctantly supported Marcos on the condition that he was allied with Sara. In fact, a significant part of the votes for Marcos during the 2022 elections was manufactured from the support that Sara mobilized from Southern Philippines. Some analysts even say that it was Marcos who benefited more from their alliance. Three pre-election opinion polls conducted by Pulse Asia in 2021 (February, June and September) showed that Sara was consistently the top choice for president nationwide as well as from the vote-rich island groups of Visayas and Mindanao (see table below).

Table 1 Presidential preference for the 2022 elections

Candidate*	Total (Philippines)			Metro Manila			Balance Luzon**			Visayas			Mindanao		
	Feb 2021	Jun 2021	Sep 2021	Feb 2021	Jun 2021	Sep 2021	Feb 2021	Jun 2021	Sep 2021	Feb 2021	Jun 2021	Sep 2021	Feb 2021	Jun 2021	Sep 2021
S.Duterte	27	28	20	12	16	12	17	13	8	21	30	23	60	62	47
F.Marcos Jr	13	13	15	18	22	28	19	18	20	4	6	5	5	4	8

*Some 10 to 13 other names of hypothetical candidates were included in the final survey results of Pulse Asia. This table only includes Marcos and Sara for the sake of comparison.

**Balance Luzon refers to the north-most island group, excluding the capital Metro Manila.

A more recent survey conducted by opinion pollster Pulse Asia in June 2024 also showed that Sara continues to enjoy higher approval ratings than Marcos. Sara obtained an approval rating of 69 percent, 16 points higher than the 53 percent approval score of Marcos. Compared to a similar survey conducted in March 2024, Sara's rating increased by two points from 67 percent, while Marcos' approval rating went down by two points from 55 percent (Pulse Asia, 2024).

Making sense of their respective popularities from a sociological perspective, one can say that while both Marcos and Sara's mass appeal are underpinned by an anti-liberal and anti-left rhetoric, the foundational narrative of Marcos' popularity is more abstract. Described by sociologist Walden Bello as the "politics of false nostalgia," it relies on the promise of a return to an imagined "golden era", popularized through a massive disinformation campaign that whitewashed the Marcos patriarch's bloody and corrupt legacy. Many of Marcos' young voters were not yet born during the so-called "golden era" more than three decades ago and therefore have no direct experience or recollection of it. Against the current backdrop of worsening inflation, job insecurity, unemployment, insufficient wages, and lack of access to basic services, persuading people of the merits of the Marcos legacy would thus be an uphill battle.

On the other hand, compared to the abstract "politics of false nostalgia" that underpins the Marcoses' popularity, Duterte's "penal populism" as described by Curato (2016) is more contemporary. The material conditions from which it emanates are felt more concretely by those who believe in it. For instance, many people claim to feel "safer" because of Duterte's drug war and anti-insurgency operations. Although these violent campaigns did not address the systemic roots of the phenomena they claim to solve, what matters for many of Duterte's supporters is the immediate perception of security.

Knowing that she has much more social capital, Sara has been weaving narratives that seek to mobilize her supporters against the Marcos-Romualdez alliance. When the questionably swift spending of her confidential funds first came to light, Sara appealed to the public zeal for peace and security, saying that "Anyone who attacks or undermines funds allocated for peace and order is naturally assumed to have insidious motivations. Such actions go against the protection and well-being of the citizenry. Those who seek to compromise the security and development of our nation jeopardize the very fabric of our society and hinder our progress."

When she finally announced that she would stop pursuing the confidential funds, she made it clear that she was sacrificing funds for "poverty alleviation," "general welfare of every Filipino family," "security of our children," and the "future of our country"—all in the name of preserving "unity." By inflating her "sacrifice," Sara had put herself on a moral high ground. The underlying message is that Marcos' allies who butchered her confidential funds are against all the virtuous undertakings that her confidential funds are supposedly intended for. Meanwhile, the speculation circulating among Duterte

supporters is that the Marcoses deliberately ensnared Sara with the Php125 million confidential funds, which became the root of the scandal that tarnished her reputation.

Last year, Sara issued a video statement calling on Marcos to rethink the government's decision to restart the peace negotiations with the National Democratic Front (NDFP) of the Communist Party of the Philippines. She cunningly cited anecdotes of victims of armed communists that hit on some of the deep-seated fears and prejudices espoused by Filipinos against communists. Children dropping out of school to join the armed struggle. Parents witnessing the death of their own children who have taken up arms. A victim of an improvised explosive device choking on his own blood. Sara insisted that the peace talks being pursued by the Marcos administration is not the way to serve justice to these victims. She stingingly described the peace negotiations as an "agreement with the devil" and insinuated that it is a capitulation to the enemy that dishonors "the memory of those who died in the senseless and bloody attacks of the NPA-CPP-NDFP", statement of Sara Duterte at the 5th NTF-ELCAC Founding Anniversary.

Following suit, many Duterte supporters, including social media personalities that have a huge following, have condemned Marcos' decision to resume peace talks with the NDFP. One said that they "do not support anyone who sleeps with the enemy of the state." Another commented that peace should not be used as a "stepping stone for the enemies to advance their agenda." One follower expressed gratitude to Sara for prioritizing people's welfare and assured her that retribution will come for those who have betrayed the nation. Yet another called on the president to not allow the people to lose their trust in him.

Knowing that they are more popular than the Marcoses, the Dutertes are capitalizing on their mass appeal ahead of the 2025 elections. In fact, they are now being portrayed as the "political opposition" to the Marcoses. Though Sara herself had shunned the title of opposition leader, her actions reveal otherwise. Two weeks after Marcos delivered his State of the Nation Address, Sara issued a lengthy statement where she did not mince words. She declared: "We are extremely tired of seeing our country being left behind, treated as if it has no value, unappealing, and submissive to other nations. We, Filipinos, deserve more than what we are hearing and seeing from the government right now. We, Filipinos, deserve better."

As early as last year, the Duterte-Arroyo camp had also hinted at having Rodrigo Duterte run for senator in 2025. Journalists observed how last August 2023, pro-Duterte accounts on social media with a huge following amplified a survey claiming that Duterte was the top senatorial bet for 2025. The narrative propagated along with the survey is that there is "widespread clamor" for Duterte's return to politics (Malasig, 2023).

Last September 2023, Arroyo met with Duterte and courted him to return to politics. They publicized the meeting and floated the idea of having Duterte run for senator. Days later, another survey commissioned by Publicus Asia came out, saying that the former president emerged as the people's top choice for senator. While it is too early to determine the outcome of the 2025 midterm elections, the repeated allusions to Duterte's supposed run for senator hint that there may be concerted groundwork as early as now to campaign for his return to politics. Finally, in July 2024, Sara confirmed that her father and both her brothers—Congressman Paolo Duterte and Davao City Mayor Sebastian Duterte—are all running for Senator in next year's election.

16. Intra-dynastic rifts

As loyalties shift and allegiances realign amid the Marcos-Duterte saga, one personality sticks out like a sore thumb: Senator Imee Marcos, sister of the president. While her cousin Romualdez and other congressmen embarked on an offensive against the Dutertes, Imee expressed support for the vice president and her father.

When several power blocs in the Lower House—which once supported Duterte during his presidency—named him as a threat following his tirades against Congress, Imee said that she would stand by former president Rodrigo Duterte "even if she is the only one left." In her statement, Imee recalled the

early days of the Marcos-Duterte alliance and how their “unity” allowed them to support each other’s political ambitions. Imee remembered how she was the first and only governor to support Rodrigo Duterte’s presidential campaign in 2015. In return, Duterte ordered the burial of the former dictator, Ferdinand Marcos Sr, at the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Heroes Cemetery).

In a chance interview with reporters on November 22, Imee said that Filipinos should be ashamed to allow the Netherlands-based International Criminal Court (ICC) to enter the country and investigate drug-related killings under the previous administration (Valderama, 2023). Imee also backed Sara’s position on Marcos’ plan to resume peace talks with the NDFP.

It is not new for the Senator to detract from her brother’s decisions and policies. The tension between the two first surfaced when the siblings took different stances on the occasion of the People Power Revolution last February 25, which marked the 37th year since their father was ousted from power. While Bongbong said he was “one with the nation” in remembering the period and offered his “hand of reconciliation” (Cupin, 2023), Imee said that she “can never stomach celebrating” the occasion (Abad, 2023).

Apart from this, the Senator had also raised objections on a number of policy decisions made by her brother, including Bongbong’s veto of a bill to establish an ecozone in Bulacan province, his push for the controversial “Maharlika” sovereign wealth fund, his handling of food imports and rising inflation, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Being an advocate of developing closer ties with China, Imee also disapproved of Bongbong’s decision to expand military cooperation with the US (Heydarian, 2023). In keeping with her penchant for political theatrics, Imee joined her “farmer and fisher friends” in a protest calling for the resignation of his brother’s finance chief, Benjamin Diokno, after Diokno proposed to eliminate tariffs on imported rice to curb surging rice prices (Magsambol, 2023). Last year, amid talks of constitutional amendments, Imee said that the time is not right to push for it given the various other problems hounding the country. Most recently, Imee defended Sara after she criticized the Marcos administration for its dissatisfactory performance in addressing key national issues, saying that “Sara’s sentiments are similar to the aspirations of all Filipinos.”

However, Imee’s constant defense of Sara is not so much genuine support as much as it is a way of getting back at her brother and cousin Romualdez for leaving her out of the family planning on their political future. Imee’s resentment towards Romualdez was made clear last year when she took a swipe at him and stirred up speculations about the alleged powerplay behind charter change, saying that “someone might want to be a prime minister because the person can’t win the presidency.”

Perhaps Imee thinks that she has every right to be resentful. After all, she had always seemed to be more politically cunning than her brother. She is a wild card, adept at playing different political sides and in various instances, even doing the unexpected. A clear example of this is when she joined the farmers’ protest against further liberalization of rice trade—a move that no traditional politician, much less the sibling of a sitting president, has ever done before.

Apart from her political adeptness, another possible root of Imee’s resentment are the speculations that she would have been chosen to succeed her father, had she been a boy. Historical accounts revealed that the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. had a soft spot for his eldest daughter. In his diaries, he even lamented, “I wish she had been a boy” (Ocampo, 2022).

17. The geopolitical equation



Figure 9 Continuing discussions about the trade relationship between the United States and China
Source: Tia Dufour, from Wikimedia Commons, (2019)

Beyond the realm of intra- and inter-dynastic tensions and shifts, one critical factor that could significantly influence the outcome of the power dynamics between the Marcoses and the Dutertes is the growing tension between the US and China in the West Philippine Sea. Indeed, the dynamics between these two superpowers have become a critical driving force for developments around the globe. The Philippines has perhaps been one of the most (if not the most) entangled in the geopolitical tensions, largely owing to the archipelago's strategic geographical location that could serve either the US or China's security interests.

The Philippine leadership and its foreign policy are thus of paramount importance to both the US and China. With the quickly escalating tensions between the two and their desperation to control the Philippines, the Marcoses and Dutertes' somewhat different foreign policy positions therefore becomes decisive in their respective pursuits for political survival.

During his presidency, Rodrigo Duterte was perceived as kowtowing to China as evidenced by his administration's inaction on China's territorial acquisitions and the many cases of harassment against Filipino fishermen by Chinese coast guard vessels. Beyond Digong's presidency, he has maintained good relations with China. Last July, he skipped Marcos Jr.'s second State of the Nation Address (SONA) to visit Chinese President Xi Jinping instead. Marcos subsequently commented that his administration was not informed of the visit, but Duterte later met with him to tackle his meeting with China's leader.

On the other hand, Marcos Jr. has moved dramatically closer to the US, away from Duterte's foreign policy pivot to China. For his Defense Secretary, Marcos shunned Sara Duterte despite her being vocal about wanting the post, given that she was friendly with Beijing. Instead, Marcos appointed Gilbert Teodoro, a known champion of joint military exercises with the United States. In February 2023, Marcos signed an agreement allowing the US to occupy four military bases in addition to five it already operates. By August 2023, more sites were being eyed by the Marcos administration for the expansion of US-Philippine joint military training sites, especially in strategic areas near the WPS.

Apart from the US' strong neo colonial influence in the Philippines, Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy direction—which foreign policy analyst Walden Bello aptly described as “blackmail diplomacy”—can also be attributed to his family's personal stake in maintaining good relations with the western hegemon. Marcos Jr. himself has a standing \$353 million contempt order (effective until 2031) related to a US court judgment awarding financial compensation from the Marcos estate to victims of human rights violations

under the dictatorship. Furthermore, being cross with the US could also have devastating financial consequences for the Marcos dynasty, according to Bello. Currently, they hold some \$5 to \$10 billion worth of assets spread throughout the world. Given the US' global influence, it could freeze these assets if the Marcoses become a liability, as it has done so in the past against people linked to regimes it considered undesirable (Bello, 2023).

It is no secret that the US has a well-documented history of meddling with national political affairs in countries where it has entrenched economic and political interests. The US has been notorious for being involved—directly or discreetly—in coups and coup attempts around the world against regimes it found to be detrimental to its interests and installing pro-American leaders in their place.

At present, between the Marcoses and the Dutertes, the former would perhaps be the US' preferred option. Although Digong poses no existential threat to US geopolitical interests as his anti-American posturing has been proven to be largely rhetorical, the US would strategically still want someone more predictable and controllable, and the Marcoses tick those boxes considering the leverage that the US has over them. In this sense, therefore, one could say that the Marcoses prevail over the Dutertes, as they have a more powerful backer and are depraved enough to exchange the Philippines' sovereignty and security for their own political and economic survival.

However, Marcos' decision to grant amnesty to communist rebels and reopen the peace talks—juxtaposed with Sara's position to continue her father's violent anti-insurgency campaign—might have implications on the US' position on Marcos' leadership considering its firm anti-communist position. For decades, the official policy of the US has always been to suppress and demonize communist and anti-imperialist thought especially in the Global South out of fear that it would destabilize the current world order where the US empire stands to benefit the most. The US has successfully done this by collaborating with elite governments to fund and facilitate propaganda, policies, and military/police operations that aim to delegitimize, silence, harass, or even exterminate revolutionary communist and socialist movements (and even reformist movements, for that matter) (Bevins, 2020). While it remains to be seen how the US will react to the resumption of the peace talks, its long standing record of violently repressing communists makes it important to monitor its position vis-a-vis the Philippine leadership, depending on how the peace negotiations will pan out in the coming months/years.

18. Conclusion

The persistence of political dynasties, fueled by patronage politics remains a pervasive issue in the country, despite the desire among Filipinos to usher in a different kind of leadership, untethered from traditional, feudal and familial political structures. At the end of the day, the "change" everyone seeks come election season remains elusive, and the people are left with the same political players albeit packaged/branded differently.

The emergence of the Marcos-Duterte Uniteam brings together two prominent families known for their divisive and authoritarian tendencies, and raises serious concern on the future of democracy and human rights in the country. Both Marcos and Duterte, by invoking authoritarian nostalgia as the solution to the prevailing political, economic and social issues (i.e corruption, inflation and poverty), have actually reinforced the style of politicking that has made such issues persist. The Uniteam's consolidation of power exacerbates further the erosion of checks and balances in government, and legitimizes the pursuit of personal/familial interests as the primary mover of political dynamism rather than pursuit of reform, leading the country towards a more oligarchic and exclusionary form of governance.

Political alliances are built and unraveled from the ambitions of players seeking entry into the ruling class. While the Marcos and the Duterte families, along with their stalwarts, supporters and factions mutually benefit from this alliance, both also possess considerable leverage over each other. Though they may maintain the status quo, when an opportune moment arises to elevate further or secure their

stranglehold over positions of power, the Uniteam alliance, like many others in history, may quickly dissolve and turn into episodes of endless bickering or worse, violent power grabs.

The wheel turns slowly, but it turns. Disillusionment is gradually growing among segments of the right wing, especially those who were not seated in their “expected” places in government and the ones pushed into the sidelines by the political accommodation game played by the Marcos Administration. On the other hand, with worsening economic burdens and living conditions, segments of the population too are questioning if the Marcoses can aptly deliver on their promise of another golden era. The price is steep for ordinary Filipinos who are often undermined and deprived of potential policy and program developments when these power blocs in government collide.

Hence the spotlight must be extended beyond feuding dynasties to promote a new framework of governance that transcends dynastic control, and focused on addressing deep-seated social issues rather than political personalities. Survival in politics “depends on the climate” for politicians. But for the people, especially the marginalized, survival entails a shift in the entire political landscape by pursuing systemic alternatives to traditional politics, by demanding greater accountability, and by learning from the lessons of recent history.

Just as the Marcoses, the Dutertes and other dynasties have tapped into popular frustrations to win elections, it is also possible to harness people’s aspirations, such as securing decent living wages, accessible healthcare, affordable housing, the right to food to emerge with a new paradigm of governance, or to organize and mobilize around people’s calls and demands, moving beyond the influence of political dynasties.

Author Contribution

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