

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## Marcos-Duterte Alliance: Of Broken Ties and Vows

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In the Philippines, political alliances are often driven by personalistic ties and mutual benefits rather than ideological alignment. The alliance between President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. and Vice-President Sara Z. Duterte-Carpio exemplifies this, with both camps leveraging their regional strongholds and familial legacies to maintain political dominance.

Heralded in 2022 as the “Uniteam,” the Marcos-Duterte tandem epitomized the strategic coalition-building often necessary in a fragmented political environment characterized by strong regional identities and political dynasties. This coalition can be analyzed through the lens of maximizing electoral prospects and consolidating power. The Marcos-Duterte alliance was a very strategic merger of the North (Ilocos Region) and the South (Davao Region), aimed at securing a broad electoral mandate.

The unusual strength of their tandem in 2022 stands now in stark contrast with the recent and increasing tensions between the Marcos and Duterte camps. Not only does this breakdown present an important case study in the fragility of political alliances, but also, more importantly, it will have significant implications for governance and economic stability in the Philippines.

### Marriage of Convenience

The historical context of the Marcos-Duterte alliance is crucial for understanding its current state of disarray.

The Marcos family’s triumphant return to power in 2022 marked a significant moment in Philippine political history (Buan 2022a). Following their ouster in February 1987 during the People Power Revolution, the Marcoses embarked on a long campaign of political rehabilitation, using a combination of authoritarian nostalgia for the purported “golden age” of the Marcos regime, as well as extensive disinformation campaigns to regain public support, aided by a strong social media machinery (Punongbayan 2023).

In contrast, Rodrigo Duterte’s presidency (2016-2022) was characterized by a populist appeal and authoritarian governance style, which deeply resonated with a significant segment of the Filipino population. Duterte’s high approval ratings until the end of his term (Mateo 2022)—despite his controversial war on drugs, widespread human rights abuses, and botched response to the COVID-19 pandemic—underscored a deep-seated appeal of strongman politics in the Philippines.

The formation of the Marcos-Duterte alliance can be understood as a marriage of convenience. For Marcos, aligning with the Dutertes provided access to the latter's strong voter base in the South, bolstering his electoral prospects. For Sara Duterte, a national position ensured the continuation of her family's political influence and offered protection against potential legal repercussions from her father's administration, especially in the wake of the war on drugs. The benefits for both sides were clear.

Another thing that unites Marcos and Duterte is that both are children of past presidents who have used undeniably authoritarian styles of governance. Interestingly, opinion polls show that Filipinos, on the surface, have a consistent desire for democracy. Data from the Social Weather Stations, a polling firm, showed that 89% of adult Filipino respondents in 2022 were "satisfied" with democracy. Tellingly, 60% said that they "always prefer democracy" and a sizable 26% said they "sometimes prefer authoritarianism" (Macasero 2023). These findings highlight a complex relationship between Filipinos' democratic aspirations and their tolerance for authoritarian measures. This duality suggests that many Filipinos prioritize effective governance and stability over democratic norms and processes.

## **Growing Rift**

The inherent tensions in the Marcos-Duterte alliance were evident from the outset. The divergence in their political ambitions and governance styles created a fragile coalition, susceptible to internal conflicts and external pressures. Such alliances formed out of convenience rather than ideological alignment are prone to fragmentation.

Just a few days after emerging victorious in the May 2022 polls, Marcos announced that Sara Duterte would be appointed as the education secretary (Buan 2022b). This was quite baffling, because Duterte never announced that she wanted such a post, nor was she an educator to begin with. By all indications, she was ill-fit for the job. Previously, Duterte indicated that she wanted the defense portfolio instead.

Another telling event was the denial of confidential funds to Sara Duterte's Office of the Vice President (OVP) (de Leon 2023). In 2022, Duterte was able to obtain PHP 125 million (equivalent to USD 2.175 million) worth of usually unaudited confidential funds for the Office of the Vice President. In 2023, she was able to secure an additional PHP 500 million (equivalent to USD 8.7 million) for the same office. For 2024, she aimed for confidential funds for the OVP and the Department of Education. But after severe public backlash, the House of Representatives (led by Speaker Martin Romualdez, President Marcos' cousin) dropped confidential funds including those in Duterte's agencies. Eventually, Duterte let go of her budget request.

Another source of tension is the ongoing investigations of the International Criminal Court (ICC) on the Duterte-era war on drugs (Buan and Bolledo 2024). Although Marcos insists that he does not recognize the jurisdiction of the ICC on Philippine soil, the imminent arrests of Rodrigo Duterte and co-conspirators in the drug war is a trump card Marcos can conveniently use to get back at the increasingly critical Dutertes. (Incidentally, Vice President Sara Duterte was implicated as one of the people being investigated by the ICC.)

Fast-forward to January 2024, President Marcos launched the "Bagong Pilipinas" (New Philippines) slogan, which was met with skepticism and resistance from the Duterte camp. Sara

Duterte attended this event briefly, but later flew to Davao City where a “prayer rally” was organized by her father’s supporters. In that event, former president Rodrigo Duterte, his son Baste (currently the mayor of Davao City), and other allies heavily lambasted the Marcos administration. This marked the first significant public display of the rift between the two camps. (Interestingly, President Marcos’ sister, Senator Imee, also attended the Davao rally.)

The subsequent exchange of derogatory remarks between Bongbong Marcos and Rodrigo Duterte further escalated tensions. This public spat highlights the power struggle between both leaders as they seek to assert their dominance and legitimacy in the eyes of their supporters.

Yet another source of cracks concerns foreign policy, specifically on the West Philippine Sea (WPS). To many people’s surprise, President Marcos has adopted a more assertive stance in defending the Philippines’ territorial claims against China’s incursions, strengthening alliances with Western powers and emphasizing international maritime law (Tomacruz 2022). This marks a departure from Rodrigo Duterte’s pro-China approach, which prioritized economic engagement over territorial disputes. Duterte’s “gentleman’s agreement” with Chinese President Xi Jinping aimed to maintain the status quo in the WPS, but has recently faced criticism for undermining Philippine sovereignty.

Vice President Sara Duterte’s deafening silence on the WPS reflects her alignment with her father’s China-friendly policy (Magsambol 2024b). Marcos, meanwhile, expressed horror at the concessions made by the previous administration, indicating a strategic reorientation towards a more balanced and assertive foreign policy (de Leon 2024b). This divergence highlights a broader ideological and strategic rift within the Philippine leadership, with Marcos favoring traditional security alliances and Sara Duterte maintaining a pragmatic engagement with China for economic gains.

This foreign policy split has significant implications for the Philippines’ geopolitical positioning and domestic politics. A unified stance is crucial for national security and economic stability, and the current discord may weaken the country’s international position and create uncertainty among allies and investors. Navigating this complex landscape requires balancing national security interests, economic benefits, and public sentiment. In addition, this foreign policy discord further tests the already tenuous ties of the once-strong Uniteam.

## **Distractions**

The worsening breakdown of the Marcos-Duterte alliance will have profound implications for governance in the Philippines. The infighting undermines the stability and predictability essential for good governance. The use of populist rhetoric and personalistic attacks also detracts from substantive policy debates, eroding the quality of governance discourse.

Amid the political tensions, statistics point to a weakening of the economy on many fronts. Economic growth in the first quarter of 2024 was weaker than expected, owing to slower spending by private households, investors, and the government itself (Rivas 2024b). Inflation is within target, coming down significantly from a 14-year high in January 2023. However, sky-high prices are one reason for the slower growth of consumption spending. The dire spell of El Niño in 2024 has also jacked up rice prices, a significant contributor to food inflation (Rivas 2024a).

The Philippines also faces many other economic risks besides slower growth and stubborn inflation. For instance, the country’s astonishing 90% learning poverty rate (World Bank 2022), if unabated, is set to drag down the future productivity of the labor force, and also the country’s growth

rate in coming decades. The Marcos administration's pseudo-sovereign wealth fund, called the Maharlika Investment Fund, is also posing risks to the banking sector by, for example, taking away capital from state-owned banks—and even the central bank itself (Abrenica et al. 2023).

On top of all these, the Marcos administration and its allies in Congress are also aggressively pushing for amendments to the 1987 Constitution, specifically amendments to provisions restricting foreign investments in select sectors, namely higher education, advertising, and public services. However, analysts warn that lawmakers may be pushing for amendments in contravention of the legal procedures allowed by the Constitution itself. Economists, including those at the University of the Philippines, have also warned that there's very weak empirical evidence in support of economic charter change, insofar as it is being painted by proponents as a means of attracting foreign investments and boosting the economy (Monsod et al. 2024).

It is against these pressing economic challenges that the Marcos-Duterte feud is happening. There is a strong case to be made that the Philippine government (and the Filipino people) will do better to focus their time and energies on these issues rather than petty politics.

## **Future Prospects**

Looking ahead, the prospects for the Marcos-Duterte alliance and Philippine governance are uncertain. The midterm elections in May 2025 will be a crucial test of the resilience of both camps and the broader system of governance, and will further distract away from social and economic issues that otherwise demand urgent attention. Early polls also show that Vice President Duterte is among the top choices for the presidency in the 2028 polls (Magsambol 2024a).

Political actors and pro-democracy forces must navigate the complex landscape of regionalism and populism to foster a more stable and inclusive governance framework. The challenge for pro-democracy groups in particular lies in presenting a compelling alternative to the Marcos-Duterte narrative. This involves not only articulating a clear vision for effective governance but also mastering the tools of modern political communication, including social media, to engage and mobilize a diverse electorate.

Belatedly, key opposition figures (who faced defeats in previous elections as they ran for national posts) have realized the importance of mastering social media—something that both Marcos and Duterte camps mastered years ago. This involves cultivating relatable personas that exude positive energies, and not being too antagonistic of government—the kind of content that garners views and likes in the internet age and the so-called attention economy. Whether their efforts will work remains to be seen in the 2025 midterm polls.

Recent turn of events may provide some hope. Amid their feuding, President Marcos and Vice President Duterte's popularity ratings have taken a hit (de Leon 2024a). From September to December 2024, Marcos' trust rating dropped by 16 percentage points (a whopping 32 points in Mindanao), while Duterte's also dropped by 7 points nationwide. Both their approval ratings have also dropped.

This means that the majority of Filipinos continue to trust and approve of Marcos and Duterte. However, there may be indications that Filipinos are growing weary of the ongoing political tug-of-war. Pro-democracy forces will want to take note of this sentiment and effectively respond. But how?

Pro-democracy forces must first focus on building a broad and inclusive coalition to challenge the entrenched political dynasties of Marcos and Duterte. This involves uniting opposition groups, civil society organizations, and grassroots movements under a common platform dedicated to transparent governance, social justice, and economic reforms. Organizations like Akbayan and the International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov) are already serving this purpose. But more groups need to step up and coalesce.

Next, leveraging digital and social media platforms is crucial. The opposition needs to adopt similar strategies as their rivals to disseminate their message, counter misinformation, and engage with younger (Gen Z) voters. Creating compelling content and establishing a network of digital volunteers can help sustain an active online presence and compete effectively. Here, pro-democracy forces will want to reconnect with the mass of young volunteers who helped in the 2022 campaign of Leni Robredo, the opposition's presidential candidate. That "Kakampink" movement (a blend of "Kakampi," which means ally in Tagalog, and "pink," the color of Robredo's election campaign) inspired a boom in volunteerism never before seen in Philippine electoral politics. However, the challenge is to reignite the spark and inspire that group into action once more, after many were pained and disenchanted by Robredo's defeat.

Grassroots organizing and community engagement will also remain vital. Pro-democracy forces should reach out to marginalized communities to understand their concerns and incorporate their voices into the political discourse. Focusing on issues such as inflation, stagnant wages, underemployment, poverty, healthcare, education, and livelihoods can build a strong support base among neglected voters. Investing in voter education and advocacy is also essential to ensure a well-informed electorate. Campaigns to raise awareness about democratic participation and the significance of voting for candidates who prioritize the public good can empower voters and encourage active civic participation. Through these concerted efforts, pro-democracy forces can challenge the Marcos-Duterte alliance and pave the way for more transparent, accountable, and effective governance in the Philippines.

Challenging political dynasties like Marcos and Duterte will be difficult, but not impossible. Strengthening civil society and encouraging civic engagement can empower citizens to support candidates based on merit rather than personality. But this needs to be complemented by stringent anti-dynasty laws (already embedded in the 1987 Constitution, but not acted upon by lawmakers), robust campaign finance regulations, and greater transparency.

In conclusion, the Marcos-Duterte alliance offers a stark lesson in the volatility of political coalitions built on convenience rather than principle. As the Philippines faces significant economic and social challenges, the nation's leaders must move beyond petty rivalries and focus on delivering stable, effective governance. The upcoming midterm elections will be a crucial test of resilience for both camps, but also a potential turning point for the country's political future. It is imperative for pro-democracy forces to seize this moment, mobilize the disenchanted electorate, and champion a vision of governance that prioritizes national interest over personal vendettas. Only by doing so can the Philippines hope to navigate its way out of this political quagmire and build a more prosperous, democratic future for all Filipinos. ■

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