

## Philippines Election

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March 2022

**As the season of election campaigning begins again in the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte's time draws to a close. However, while he might spend some of the last weeks in office reflecting on his term and what the consequences of it will mean for the country going forward, he is far more invested in, and concerned with, who takes over from him in May than the rest of the population.**



To an outside Western observer of the Philippine political landscape, one might imagine the people will be happy to finally see the back of Duterte and that the new elections will enable them to draw a line under this error of judgement. Yet, if the approval rating in the latest Social Weather Stations (SWS) quarterly poll - one of the more reputable polling companies - is anything to go by, matters are not so clear cut. Duterte will apparently leave office almost as popular as he was when he arrived.

Not following up on the Hague-based International Arbitration Tribunal ruling in favour of Filipino fishing rights in the South China Seas, was a major flash point for Filipinos, as was Duterte's decision to pursue a foreign policy that brought China closer at the expense of the country's long-term relationship with the U.S. Yet these issues seem to have cooled in importance somewhat despite Filipinos anger at the time. For them, Duterte's term in office has created a massive reduction in crime on the streets - especially against women - and his *handling* of the COVID crisis has been considered good. They have not, it would appear, been deterred by the harsh national and international media criticism of him. The people's opinion will not be Duterte's concern.

What will be of real concern is when the shield of protection afforded to the office of president falls away, a multitude of litigations will begin against him. It 'was' perhaps the reason his daughter, Sara Duterte-Carpio, despite long protestations to the contrary, was running for the vice-president's role. Duterte had said publicly that he was going to run for the role while Sara, his daughter, would run for the top job. He was quite clear that the purpose of the plan would be for Sara, as president, to pardon him. That plan has obviously not materialised, and the reason may well stem from the most polarising name in the country's history; Ferdinand Romualdez (Bongbong) **Marcos Jr.**

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### **This will be no ordinary election cycle**

The Marcos name is both loved and hated within the country as a consequence of 'Bongbong's' father's dictatorship, which came to an end in 1986. Some Filipinos clearly view that time as a form of 'golden era' when Ferdinand Marcos stopped the Communists from taking over the country, while others see it as a very dark shadow hanging over Philippine history.

Duterte himself disapproves of the alliance between his daughter and Marcos Jr., going as far as to imply that a particular presidential candidate "*who might win hands down*" has been using illegal substances – something he has provided no evidence for. He went further in describing the candidate suggesting that he "*comes from a rich and powerful family*" but is "*a very weak leader*". Given that Marcos Jr. led the Asia Pulse poll in late December by a healthy margin (53% approval), it should be clear as to whom Duterte was referring. His comments would appear to suggest that an agreement has not been reached on pardoning the outgoing president or that he has no confidence Marcos Jr. will honour it, despite a possible agreement in place.

Some political observers suggest that if one were to look back six months ago, Marcos Jr. lay in 3<sup>rd</sup> place among the likely voter base and that the huge uptick-change in polling strength came directly as a result of the alliance with Sara Duterte-Carpio's "solid" South Mindanao-base, gifted by her father's popularity in the region. Cited as evidence for this, is the fact that Sara is currently the mayor of Davao City and that the largest support-base for Marcos Jr. at this time comes from Mindanao (66%).

In the last weeks, rumours have begun to grow implying that a rift has developed between father and daughter. As a result of her father's escalating attacks on Marcos Jr., and a new rumour suggesting that fractures are developing within the Sara/Marcos Jr. UniTeam, Sara has released a statement on social media denying this and making it clear that the political relations within the UniTeam are "*unbreakable*". If nothing else, Sara's public statement indicates that Duterte's outspoken remarks against Marcos Jr. are designed to have an impact and sway the elections in a manner last seen when he himself ran for office. While careful, well-chosen attacks aimed solely at Marcos Jr. would have no negative impact against his daughter's chances of election (the presidential and vice-presidential offices are voted for separately), the fact that Sara Duterte-Carpio has felt the need to refute what was more than likely a rumour spread by her father, does rather imply that it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy if further responses are not handled carefully.

Moreover, this is not the only action Duterte is taking in order to affect the elections. His faction of the PDP-Laban party is also trying to offer an endorsement to Manny Pacquiao, but only with certain conditions. Those conditions appear to publicly require the ex-boxer/current senator to follow Duterte's so-called 11-point agenda for continuity. However, were that the case, it seems odd that Manny's response was, "*If you*

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*start covering up sins, how are you different from the corrupt?"* Perhaps, the real condition being demanded for the party's support is that pesky pardon.

Yet, as much as can be determined from the Marcos Jr. camp's soundbite policy proposals (he has chosen wisely not to engage in the majority of presidential debates on the basis his father's past will be discussed by the other candidates and would therefore be biased), they appear to follow on from Duterte's own, so it is potentially just the *noise* of negotiations taking place, albeit on a public level.

### **The only real competition – Aside from Duterte**

Political experts always believed that it would be an almost impossible task for Marcos Jr. to get beyond the baggage his name brings, citing the lack of public apology from him or the family over his father's past rule, the fact that he did not file tax returns from 1982 to 1985 and has not, it is claimed, ever paid estate taxes. Yet, none of those experts mention that Marcos Jr. has in fact paid the back-tax due and the fines related to them, as had been ruled by the regional trial court in 1995 and confirmed by the Court of Appeals in 1997.

This, as well as other disqualifying points that would ordinarily render him ineligible to run for president, seem to be falling away with the judgements given from Comelec (Philippines Election Commission) so far, which stated that the non-payment or filing of taxes was not punishable legally under the prevailing law at the time (the original 1977 NIRC). Nevertheless, four Comelec commissioner positions are becoming vacant due to retirement this month and it is the responsibility of Duterte to fill them. In total, it would mean that 13 commissioners would be Duterte-appointed.

With some of the outgoing president's selections yet to be filled, the effect on the disqualifying issues is undeterminable at this stage. However, if the path remains clear, Marcos Jr. faces just one real competitor – aside from Duterte's machinations - to the seat of president: the current Vice President, Leni Robredo. Although she is currently sitting at around 39% and polling across the board shows Marcos Jr. ahead by a wide margin, it should be noted that in 2016, she and Marcos Jr. squared off for the vice-president's role. While Marcos Jr. won in Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur decisively (a so-called solid North), it was Robredo that finally took the office. But it was a very close-run result.

This time, they will challenge each other again but for a seat in Malacañang. The U.S. has tacitly endorsed Robredo, which should of course be self-evident as nearly all her domestic policy proposals mirror those of the U.S. Administration, which is eager to draw the Philippines back into its embrace. This support comes due to U.S. concerns over Duterte's foreign policy engagement with China, especially as Marcos Jr. has himself said he wishes to continue to engage in peaceful negotiations regarding fishing rights for

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Filipinos in the disputed South China Sea without setting any pre-conditions to talks. He believes that China is only concerned with developing a strong forward defence for itself.

That the U.S. is still a very popular country for Filipinos is certainly clear. They have responded recently with a super-majority over several large surveys that they want the country to be protected against further Chinese expansion. They also want their sovereign rights protected in the West Philippines Sea and fear a renewed rise of the Communists. This puts voters in somewhat of a quandary. On the one hand, they have a potential president that will be seen as a continuation of the firm 'right' hand on the tiller of leadership in the Marcos Jr./ Sara Duterte-Carpio team, which they appear to like. However, this pairing will also push towards a closer relationship with China, a communist super-power that Filipinos don't trust.

One the other hand, Robredo is supported by the U.S., which is seen in a positive light by many, and is claiming that she will push forward using all the country's advantages in negotiations over its sovereign rights to fish in the West Philippines Sea and has been picking up endorsements left, right and centre over the last couple of weeks. All of which voters claim they like. Nevertheless, each endorsement is only attractive to the groups directly connected to them from an enticement standpoint, but they do have a value - a dollar value - and one does not need to think too hard as to where such financial aid maybe coming from. In addition, she is seen as decidedly left wing, which the voters really do not like.

Politically, Duterte and Marcos Jr. are both naturally right wing. Robredo's political stance is therefore her weakness. Large parts of the Filipino public see this as a potential avenue for the return of Communism and see her as personally responsible for much of the political disagreements that arose during Duterte's term in office.

So, setting aside the out-going president's meddling, what this election will decide is whether the Philippines continues its current course moving closer to the Chinese sphere of influence or begin a lurch back towards the U.S. If it is the latter, expect great political tensions to develop with China over the next year.

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