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Philippines: a nation divided – the political fault line deepens

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Introduction

The Philippines is deep into a period of political uncertainty in which the country's internal divisions could end up proving more consequential than its confrontation with China. The political alliance that delivered Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte to power in 2022 has disintegrated into an increasingly bitter struggle between rival political networks. With economic confidence weakening dramatically and the 2028 presidential election approaching, the conflict threatens to undermine institutional and public stability as well as complicate the country's foreign relations.

Executive summary

The political fault line between the Marcos administration and the Duterte political movement is widening. What began as a dispute between former allies has developed into a confrontation involving impeachment proceedings, corruption investigations and competing claims of political persecution. The importance extends beyond personalities and managing relations with Washington and Beijing. Continued economic pressure is increasing dissatisfaction among ordinary Filipinos, making the political confrontation considerably more volatile.

The Marcos–Duterte political fracture

The collapse of the Marcos–Duterte alliance has fundamentally altered the Philippine political landscape. The arrest of former President Rodrigo Duterte and his transfer to the International Criminal Court intensified the dynastic confrontation to boiling point. Duterte has blamed Marcos for her father's arrest, transforming an already deteriorating political situation into an intensely personal dispute. The impeachment proceedings against her are now the political battleground.

On 13 October, House prosecutors withdrew three of the four impeachment charges against the vice president, concentrating on allegations involving unexplained wealth and undisclosed

business interests. Prosecutors argued that narrowing the case would accelerate proceedings, while Duterte's defence questioned the fairness of the decision. A conviction would obviously disqualify Duterte from seeking the presidency in 2028 but does not just remove a problematic opponent from politics it disenfranchises around half the population. Consequently, the impeachment process carries implications extending far beyond individual accountability.

The struggle is also exposing divisions within the legislature. Disagreements over Senate impeachment procedures and allegations that corruption investigations are being used selectively have increased distrust between competing political factions. The proceedings surrounding the flood-control corruption scandal have added yet another dimension. Allegations have reached senior political figures, including former House Speaker Martin Romualdez, a cousin of President Marcos.

Although Marcos insists that investigations demonstrate his determination to confront corruption, opponents question whether accountability is being applied consistently. The broader danger is that legal institutions become increasingly associated with factional competition, irrespective of the merits of individual cases.

Public opinion and the 2028 election

Recent opinion polling illustrates the political divide. Pulse Asia's September survey recorded approval ratings of 54% for Sara Duterte compared with 30% for Marcos. Trust ratings were similarly divided, at 55% and 29% respectively. A separate presidential preference survey placed Duterte ahead of other prospective candidates. However, polling remains a snapshot rather than a reliable prediction of electoral outcomes.

Nevertheless, the numbers show the vice president retains substantial public support despite the continuing controversy, perhaps even because of it. Importantly, Philippine political divisions are not restricted to Marcos and Duterte. Former Vice President Leni Robredo and other potential candidates represent additional political constituencies capable of influencing the eventual electoral landscape. The danger is an increasingly polarised political environment where voters already appear to judge allegations primarily through existing political loyalties rather than on the evidence.

Economics and corruption

The economic outlook is merely adding pressure to the political environment. The International Monetary Fund projects the Philippine economy will grow just 3.4% in 2026, following second-

quarter growth of just 2.3%. Inflation and currency weakness are clearly worsening the cost-of-living crisis for Filipinos.

The flood-control scandal has particularly damaging implications because allegations of extensive public-fund diversion coincide with recurring destructive flooding. Investigations have raised serious questions about government procurement and political patronage, which has negatively impacted Marcos' image as well. The controversy has also damaged confidence in the ability of established institutions to prevent corruption. For ordinary Filipinos, this issue alone deepens dissatisfaction with the political establishment.

Beijing, Washington and the domestic divide

The political fracture is a microcosm of the wider geopolitical divide. Marcos has strengthened defence co-operation with Washington, expanding military activities near Taiwan and disputed South China Sea territories. China, meanwhile, continues challenging Philippine maritime operations. The Duterte political movement is associated with the previous administration's more accommodating approach towards Beijing, although that policy also encountered substantial difficulties. For China, the approaching election creates an opportunity to distinguish between the present administration and potential future Philippine leadership. Washington similarly has an interest in preserving military co-operation beyond the Marcos presidency. Philippine domestic politics are becoming increasingly entangled with competing external strategic interests.

Medium-term forecast

The principal concern is whether the political confrontation can remain contained within constitutional institutions, but it could well expand. A conviction in Duterte's impeachment proceedings would alter the presidential election but also ignite serious street protests, while an acquittal could become an important political rallying point for her supporters. The 2028 election will therefore test not only competing political dynasties but also public confidence in the legitimacy of Philippine institutions.

Conclusion

The Philippines faces a potentially destabilising political confrontation at a time when economic conditions and external strategic pressures are already straining national resilience. The Marcos–Duterte rupture has exposed longstanding weaknesses involving political dynasties, institutional independence and competing networks of patronage. The central issue is whether the country's constitutional institutions can manage this confrontation without becoming

instruments of political rivalry. Ultimately, the Philippines must determine its political direction domestically rather than allowing the contest between Washington and Beijing to dominate its national priorities.

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