



Mid-term Elections in the Philippines: The Clan War Reaches New Heights

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► Key Takeaways

- The opposition between the Marcos and Duterte clans emerged as the main fault line of the campaign, testifying to the influence of political dynasties in Philippine electoral life.
- Despite its dominance in Parliament and in the polls, the presidential alliance is disappointing, while the pro-Duterte and progressive opposition are defying forecasts.
- The arrest of former president Rodrigo Duterte and his extradition to The Hague galvanized his electoral base and breathed new life into the campaign of his daughter, Sara, the current vice-president.
- Pro-Duterte networks orchestrated a vast digital disinformation campaign, amplifying political tensions and arousing suspicions of Chinese interference.
- Sara Duterte's impeachment proceedings and the internal fractures within the Marcos camp herald a period of political reshuffling between now and the 2028 presidential elections.

Introduction

Three years after the last general and presidential elections, Filipino voters once again went to the polls on May 12, 2025, to elect their municipal and parliamentary representatives. While more than 18,000 positions were at stake at all levels of government, it was the senatorial election – 12 out of 24 positions were up for grabs – that attracted most of the political and media attention. The upper house plays a strategic role in determining the partisan balance in the run-up to the 2028 presidential elections.

The Philippine political system is dominated by dynastic and oligarchic logics, in which power relations between families prevail over ideological cleavages and substantive debates. The two “ruling” families, represented by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (son of the former dictator of the same name) and Vice President Sara Duterte (daughter of the previous President Rodrigo Duterte), have been in open conflict since the implosion of the opportunistic alliance they formed for the 2022 presidential elections. In this context, the mid-term elections have become a referendum in disguise for the domination of one camp or the other.

From the very first days of the campaign, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who enjoys a solid partisan base in Congress but limited popular support, dramatized the electoral stakes by presenting it as a choice between the “dark days” of Rodrigo Duterte’s regime (2016-2022) and the promise of a “new Philippines”, and called on voters to reject his predecessor’s authoritarian and divisive style of government.¹ The latter quickly counter-attacked, denouncing the government’s inability to contain inflation, while accusing the president of being a heroin addict.²

The campaign quickly moved into a critical phase following Sara Duterte’s impeachment vote on February 7 in the House of Representatives, which will have to be confirmed by the Senate, followed by Rodrigo Duterte’s arrest on March 11 and extradition to The Hague, where he now awaits trial on charges of crimes against humanity, committed as part of his war on drugs.

The presidential administration has presented a list of 12 senatorial candidates,³ united under the banner of the *Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas* (Alliance for a New Philippines). Formed in May 2024 with a view to the 2025 elections, this alliance brings together Marcos’ *Partido Federal ng Pilipinas* and Romualdez’s *Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats* (Lakas-CMD), as well as three other parties also controlled by powerful political dynasties. *Alyansa* thus brings together the country’s dominant forces, and at the

1. “China Is Set to Be an Election Issue, and There Are Pitfalls Ahead”, Rappler, March 25, 2025, available at: www.rappler.com.

2. “Election Campaign Begins in the Philippines with Marcos-Duterte War of Words”, *The Diplomat*, February 16, 2025, available at: <https://thediplomat.com>.

3. Reduced to 11 after the defection of Imee Marcos.

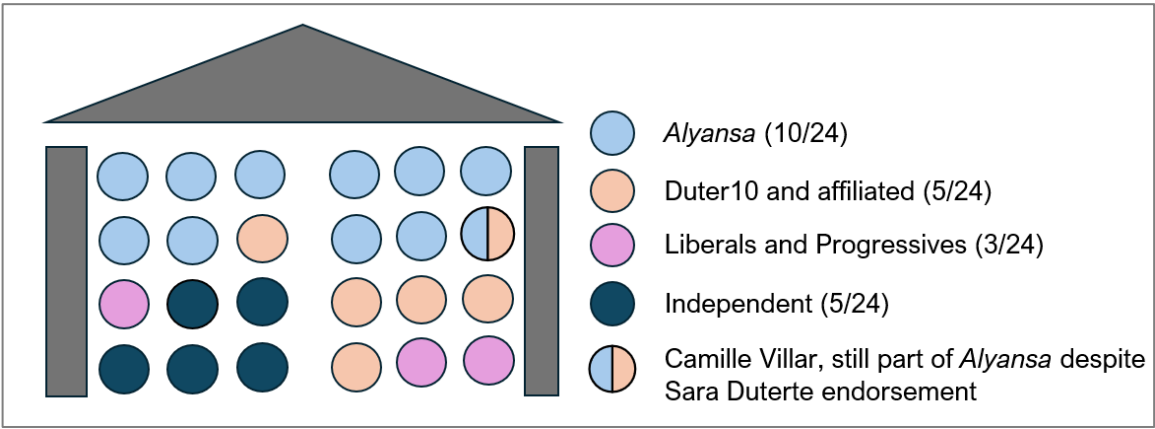
start of the campaign, it established itself as a hegemonic player on the Philippine political landscape.

In opposition, the Duterte clan has put forward a senatorial list of ten candidates, the “Duter10”, including two pillars of the former regime: Bong Go, Rodrigo Duterte’s close advisor and right-hand man, and Ronald “Bato” dela Rosa, a central figure in the repressive apparatus during the war on drugs.

Results that went against forecasts

While pre-election polls predicted that *Alyansa* would win nine seats, it secured just six of the twelve at stake, including the victory of Camille Villar, officially a member of the presidential party, but who joined the Duterte camp late in the campaign. While this does not in itself constitute a defeat for the presidential camp, which retains a majority in the Upper House, the result bears witness to a reversal in public opinion, going against the hegemonic dynamic that prevailed during the campaign.

Composition of the new Senate according to the provisional results of the Electoral Commission



Source: Figure realized by Ifri © Ifri, 2025.

Conversely, the rival “Duter10” list performed better than expected, winning three seats. Unsurprisingly, Bong Go enjoyed a triumphant re-election, winning more than a third of the votes cast against 65 rivals. More unexpectedly, Ronald “Bato” dela Rosa, whom the polls were predicting to lose, came third, consolidating his political foothold while temporarily shielding himself from possible prosecution for his central role in the war on drugs. Imee Marcos and Camille Villar, two candidates who were not on the “Duter10” list but who joined the Duterte camp at a late stage, also managed to win a seat, despite unfavorable campaign dynamics. At the local level, the Dutertes consolidated their

dominance in their fiefdom of Davao City: Rodrigo Duterte was once again elected mayor⁴ and his sons Sebastian and Paolo, respectively, Vice Mayor and Representative for the first district in the House of Representatives.

The election also brought surprises from the progressive opposition. Two figures close to former Vice President Leni Robredo, Bam Aquino and Kiko Pangilinan, made a remarkable entry into the Senate: coming second and fifth, they beat the polls and illustrated the persistence of a reformist electorate in search of credible alternatives to the

The competing “Duter10” list performed better than expected

Marcos-Duterte duel. A poll conducted in February by the Social Weather Stations institute revealed that almost 90% of respondents were prepared to support candidates with concrete proposals for agricultural development, strengthening the healthcare system, job creation, equal access to education and improving workers' rights,⁵ considerations rooted in the day-to-day reality of Filipino voters, at a distance from the power struggles between Manila's elites. Yet these social priorities are

also the ones on which the Marcos administration scores negatively according to a Pulse Asia poll in April: Filipinos expressed strong disapproval of government action on several issues deemed urgent, starting with inflation control (79% of respondents), poverty reduction (48%), wage increases (48%) and the fight against corruption (53%).⁶

Duterte's arrest, the campaign's tipping point

The influence of Rodrigo Duterte's arrest on campaign dynamics and suffrage results cannot be overlooked. The Pulse Asia poll published in April showed that President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s popularity rating fell sharply after March 11 (-17 points). At the same time, Vice President Sara Duterte's approval rating rose slightly (+8 points), showing renewed support in her camp following the event.⁷

Rodrigo Duterte's arrest also put a strain on the cohesion of the presidential coalition. Nearly half the candidates on the list had publicly opposed the International Criminal Court's action, forcing them to perform a difficult balancing act for the rest of the campaign, between denouncing the Duterte administration's record and remaining silent about the forthcoming trial. Two candidates have even chosen to distance themselves from the alliance. Imee Marcos, the president's elder sister, who has never hidden her closeness

4. From a legal point of view, the chairman of the Electoral Commission pointed out that only a final conviction can disqualify a candidate. In other words, Duterte's arrest prevents neither his candidacy nor his victory, since the temporality of the trial far exceeds that of the elections, with the next hearing scheduled only for September 2025.

5. “Local Campaign Period for 2025 Midterms Begins in Politically Polarized Philippines”, Rappler, March 28, 2025, available at: www.rappler.com.

6 “Pulse Asia: Marcos Trust, Approval Rate Down; Sara Duterte Up”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 17, 2025, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net>.

7. Ibid.

to Sara Duterte, appeared alongside the Vice President in a campaign spot openly critical of her brother's policies.⁸ Camille Villar, Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives and heiress to an influential political dynasty, has also made a tactical rapprochement with the Duterte clan, seeking to reverse an unfavorable campaign dynamic.

Sara Duterte's revenge

The opportunistic partnership forged between Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte for the 2022 presidential elections soon gave way to open conflict between the two clans, as it became apparent that Marcos was working behind the scenes to oust his former ally, in favor of the rise of his cousin Martin Romualdez. Denouncing a "toxic" political climate and "execrable political power play",⁹ Sara Duterte left Romualdez's majority party in May 2023 and resigned from her position as Secretary of Education in June 2024. Sara Duterte paid dearly for this defection, which exposed her to the relentless attacks of parliamentarians in the majority camp, seeking to seize this opportunity to oust the Duterte family once and for all. She was first subjected to a parliamentary investigation for misuse of public funds, and then to impeachment proceedings, validated by the House of Representatives in February 2025. The final decision will be handed down at the end of a trial to be held in the Senate from June onwards. In addition to this institutional pressure, legal proceedings are imminent: the National Bureau of Investigation has recommended the opening of criminal proceedings against the Vice President for alleged assassination threats against President Marcos Jr., made during an impromptu press conference the day after her resignation as Secretary of Education.

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Despite these attacks, Sara Duterte managed to maintain a relatively high popularity rating and naturally established herself as the central figure in the "Duter10" campaign following her father's arrest. In the month leading up to the election, she crisscrossed the archipelago, meeting with local elected officials, reactivating her territorial networks and mobilizing her clan's characteristic populist rhetoric. Unsurprisingly, she opted for a posture of confrontation with the administration, capitalizing on the emotion aroused by Rodrigo Duterte's arrest to denounce a "politically motivated maneuver" designed to "demolish the opposition"¹⁰ and going so far as to turn her rallies into tribunes against the parliamentarians who voted in favor of his impeachment in the House of Representatives.¹¹

8. "#ITIM Inday Trusts Imee Marcos", Youtube, April 15, 2025, available at: www.youtube.com.

9. "VP Sara Resigns as Lakas-CMD Member", *Philippine News Agency*, May 19, 2025, available at: www.pna.gov.ph.

10. "VP Sara: Arrest of Rodrigo Duterte Done to 'Demolish Political Opponents'", *GMA News Online*, March 20, 2025, available at: www.gmanetwork.com.

11. "Sara Duterte's Revenge Tour? VP Slams Reelectionist Impeachment Backers in Their Turf", *Rappler*, April 26, 2025, available at: <https://www.rappler.com>.

Sara Duterte's efforts were matched by an intense communication campaign by her supporters on social networks. Spontaneous expressions of indignation and anger following her father's arrest quickly gave way to a large-scale disinformation operation, revealing the degree of organization of pro-Duterte networks online and their ability to react quickly. Reuters reported that around a third of the X accounts involved in the conversation were fake accounts, activated immediately after the arrest.¹² In addition to this disinformation campaign, harassment of the families of drug war victims and their legal representatives has intensified online.

This digital raid was denounced by the Marcos camp, which did not hesitate to add a geopolitical reading to activate the anti-Chinese sentiment already widespread in public opinion. He thus evoked possible Chinese foreign interference, facilitated by the Dutertes. On April 25, outgoing Senator Francis Tolentino claimed that Beijing was seeking to "control" the Philippine Congress in the run-up to the 2025 elections.¹³ Without naming names, his remarks were clearly aimed at candidates associated with Duterte. Marcos Jr. had made China a central focus of his campaign rhetoric, accusing the previous administration of turning the Philippines into a "province of China".¹⁴

Recomposition and repositioning: uncertain prospects for 2028

In the very short term, the outcome of Sara Duterte's impeachment trial could profoundly reconfigure the Philippine political landscape. For the time being, the balance of power resulting from the elections is unfavorable to the Vice President: only three candidates

from the "Duter10" list were (re)elected, and the rallies of Imee Marcos and Camille Villar remain fragile, while the rest of the Senate remains largely aligned with the executive. However, Sara Duterte has reaffirmed her determination to remain in office and defend her mandate, refusing to resign, which would enable her to avoid a lifetime of ineligibility. The gamble is risky, but not impossible: the mixed results recorded by the presidential camp in the senatorial elections show that the Filipino electorate remains sensitive to the treatment of the Duterte

family and does not hesitate to "punish" the administration, perceived – probably wrongly – as responsible for the former president's estrangement. This realization could encourage the majority camp to show restraint in the use of parliamentary and legal tools.

Marcos will have to navigate between strengthening his security alliance with the US and trade negotiations

12. "Exclusive: Fake Accounts Drove Praise of Duterte and Now Target Philippine Election", Reuters, April 11, 2025, available at: www.reuters.com.

13. "Alyansa Bets Warn Beijing Wants 'Pro-China' Senate in 2025", Rappler, April 25, 2025, available at: www.rappler.com.

14. "Marcos Targets Duterte's China Policy Ahead of Mid-Term Elections", *Voice Asia News*, February 15, 2025, available at: <https://voiceasianews.com>.

On the domestic front, Marcos Jr. will have to deal with Duterte's populist electorate and respond to increasingly pressing social demands, particularly on the economic front. He will have to navigate between strengthening the security alliance with the United States (US), the main bulwark against China, which is seen as a threat, and trade negotiations with the US to escape the customs duties imposed by Washington.

The next three years are shaping up to be a period of intense partisan tension and the recomposition of elite balances in the run-up to the 2028 presidential election. On the Duterte side, Sara appears to be the natural heir to the clan, but her position could be challenged by Bong Go, whose presidential ambitions have long been assumed.

On the Marcos side, the defections of Imee Marcos and Camille Villar show that the directions taken by the President, notably his efforts to oust the Dutertes and impose Martin Romualdez as his successor in 2028, are not unanimously supported. In the years to come, we can expect intense negotiations by the current administration to ensure that all families rally behind the Marcos-Romualdez axis in the run-up to the next presidential election.

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