

Exit, Voice and Loyalty: The 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections

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On 12 May 2025, over 68 million Filipinos cast their ballots in the country's midterm elections. Voters chose candidates for half of the 24-member Senate, district and party-list seats in the House of Representatives and a range of local offices. Typically, these interim elections serve as informal referendums on the incumbent administration's popularity and whether the president has successfully consolidated power in the legislature and across the provinces. For example, at the 2019 midterms, endorsed candidates of then-President Rodrigo Duterte swept the senatorial contests, marking the first time no opposition senator was elected.¹ Midterms can also forecast contenders for the next presidential race.

The 2025 campaign unfolded in a very different political climate from past cycles. Three years earlier, Ferdinand Marcos Jr.—the namesake son of the late dictator, Ferdinand Sr.—and Sara Duterte, daughter of Rodrigo Duterte, had forged the UniTeam alliance and won an unprecedented majority in the 2022 presidential and vice-presidential elections. They ran on national unity, economic recovery and ending the gridlock that stalled progress.² Yet within two years, deep tensions fractured their partnership.³ President

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Marcos Jr. distanced himself from Duterte's hardline drug war, anti-communist crusade and pro-China foreign policy. In turn, the Dutertes accused the president's camp of plotting constitutional changes to seize power. Personal attacks escalated. Allegations of drug addiction flew between Marcos Jr. and Rodrigo Duterte, while Vice President Sara Duterte threatened to dump the remains of Marcos Jr.'s late father at sea, and she even admitted hiring an assassin to kill the president, First Lady Liza Araneta Marcos and House Speaker Martin Romualdez, Marcos Jr.'s cousin.⁴

Two historic events further shaped the midterms. In February 2025, the House of Representatives impeached Sara Duterte on charges ranging from misuse of funds and bribery to corruption and conspiracy to murder.⁵ The following month, the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrested Rodrigo Duterte on crimes against humanity, seeking to hold him accountable for a drug war in which between 5,000 and 10,000 people were extrajudicially killed between 2016 and 2019.⁶ Taken together, these developments cast doubt on the Duterte dynasty's standing and threaten their political future.⁷

As for the midterm results, they can be analysed through Albert Hirschman's framework of "Exit", "Voice" and "Loyalty".⁸ If the senatorial election results revealed one clear message from the Filipino electorate, it was their overt dissatisfaction with candidates from Marcos Jr.'s Alliance for a New Philippines (Alyansa) slate. Of the twelve seats in contention, the administration coalition won only five, far below the nine that polls had projected a month before voting.⁹ Moreover, four of those five senators are seasoned politicians—either incumbents or former senators—who relied on their personal popularity rather than the administration's campaign machinery. Voters used the ballot box to punish Marcos Jr.'s allies for a perceived lack of responsiveness. In a final twist, two successful senatorial candidates—incumbent Imee Marcos (Marcos Jr.'s sister) and Camille Villar—defected to the Duterte camp from the Alyansa ticket just a week before the election.¹⁰ While many incumbent politicians allied with the president managed to secure re-election in limited-constituency races, such as those for the House of Representatives and local governments, the broader, national-level elections (such as for the Senate) reflected a withdrawal of support for the incumbent chief executive. In these contests, both candidates and voters effectively exercised their right to exit.

Two pre-election trends are critical to understanding the slate's poor showing. First, dire socioeconomic conditions weighed heavily

on voters: just 20 per cent felt their quality of life had improved over the past year, while 32 per cent believed it had worsened. Second, an overwhelming 79 per cent disapproved of the government's handling of inflation, and Marcos Jr.'s approval rating plunged to a record low of 25 per cent in March 2025—making him one of the least popular Philippine presidents since 1986.¹¹

The evidence of voter remorse is unmistakable, signalling that Filipinos want a new direction. This “exit” theme recurs across three articles in this Roundtable. Ruth Lusterio-Rico notes that, despite Alyansa's Senate losses, incumbents and dynastic candidates dominated the House race, likely because district voters did not blame them for Marcos Jr.'s shortcomings. However, she welcomes the defeat of several government-backed dynasts by fresh faces, viewing it as a break from patronage politics. Maria Ela Atienza examines how the looming impeachment trial of Sara Duterte shaped campaign dynamics. She finds signs of discontent with the Duterte dynasty, especially in northern regions, where many of Sara's endorsed candidates lost. Although her approval remains higher than Marcos Jr.'s, most Filipinos support holding her accountable in the impeachment process.¹² Jan Robert Go highlights a third form of “exit”: the withdrawal of candidates from once-competitive local races dominated by dynasties. In 2025, elections for over 1,000 (6 per cent) local offices went uncontested. Go warns that such uncontested elections, concentrated in dynastic strongholds, pose serious challenges for Philippine democracy.

The Marcos-Duterte alliance's 2022 victory dealt a heavy blow to pro-democracy forces. Under Rodrigo Duterte's presidency, assaults on opposition figures and civil society, amplified by digital disinformation, narrowed civic space.¹³ After 2022, opposition leader Leonor Robredo, having been beaten by Marcos Jr. to the presidency, stepped back from national politics to focus on local matters. (She was elected mayor of Naga City in eastern Luzon in the 2025 elections.¹⁴) In the 2025 midterms, because of the lack of a unified leader, opposition parties fielded only two former senators—Bam Aquino and Kiko Pangilinan—against both dynastic blocs. Pre-election polls had written them off, yet Aquino finished an astonishing second, and Pangilinan sixth, becoming lightning rods for “protest votes” against an establishment fixated on the Marcos-Duterte feud.¹⁵ Young voters, who account for more than 60 per cent of the electorate, possibly drove this surge, helping to lift turnout to 82.2 per cent, one of the highest midterm participations

in decades. According to the Chair of the Commission of Elections, the youth played a big role in the high turnout as “they want their voices to be heard”.¹⁶

This youth-led rebellion used their “voice” to score surprising wins for progressive, pro-democracy party-list groups. In his article, Emmanuel Alba explains that the party-list system, which decides 20 per cent of seats in the House of Representatives, gave the Akbayan and other liberal-democratic party-lists a chance to reshape the chamber, even as traditional and dynastic groups retained many slots. Likewise, women’s representation rose in provincial governor races. Rogelio Alicor Panao observes that female winners shattered a male-dominated arena yet cautions that many owed their victory to familial dynastic ties, as wives, sisters or mothers of established politicians. Whether these women will champion truly progressive policies remains to be seen.

The final narrative of 2025 was the astonishing mobilization of Duterte loyalists, especially in Mindanao. Since 2016, this bloc has reliably delivered electoral victory for Rodrigo and, in 2022, for Sara as vice-president. In 2025, their “loyalty” propelled Bong Go and Bato dela Rosa to first and third in the Senate tallies, and joined by Rodante Marcoleta, Camille Villar and Imee Marcos, they will likely become a solid pro-Duterte Senate bloc. Despite Rodrigo’s ICC detention in The Hague, the Dutertes swept Davao City: he reclaimed the mayoralty, his youngest son, Sebastian, won vice-mayor, and his eldest son, Paolo, and grandson, Omar, secured House seats—cementing the dynasty’s local stronghold and illustrating their unwavering base.¹⁷

In his article, Aaron Abel Mallari argues that affective polarization between the Marcoses and Dutertes turned the midterms into emotionally charged spectacles rather than sober judgements of competence. Loyalty to the Dutertes and resentment towards Marcos Jr., who was blamed for Sara’s impeachment and Rodrigo’s detention, fuelled voters’ choices. Maria Elize Mendoza’s study of social-media disinformation shows how campaigns like #DefendSara and #BringHimHome, led by influencers and cybertroops, dominated the online sphere, drowning out criticism of the Dutertes. Finally, Danilo Reyes tackles political violence as both a tactic and a narrative. He finds that some pro-Duterte candidates leveraged Duterte’s drug-war legacy to rally supporters, while those aligned with Marcos Jr. steered clear of the issue, mindful of the administration’s sharp rebuke of extrajudicial killings.

Far from a mere prelude to the 2028 presidential contest, the 2025 midterms reshaped Philippine politics. Defined by the Marcos-Duterte schism, a rising third force of pro-democracy youth and progressives, voter exit from the administration and unyielding loyalty to dynasties, these elections laid bare the electorate's deepest sentiments. By applying Hirschman's concepts of exit, voice and loyalty, this article (and the Roundtable that follows) demonstrates how Filipinos wielded their ballots not only to register discontent or allegiance but also to chart their nation's course for years to come.

NOTES

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Entrenched Dynastic Power with Progressive Political Momentum: The 2025 House of Representatives Elections in the Philippines

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Two of the most enduring features of Philippine politics are the dominance of political dynasties and the fluid alliances and shifting loyalties of political actors. This is best seen in the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of Congress, where nearly 80 per cent of lawmakers belong to political dynasties.¹ For decades, they have monopolized electoral competition through a masterful blend of patronage, clientelist linkages with voters and money politics—a formula that continues to win local elections.²

The results of the 2025 midterm elections indicate that political dynasties remain in control, yet there were notable breakthroughs in certain areas where dynastic candidates were defeated by politicians who departed from the familial brand. While these upsets may not dismantle dynastic power across the board, they offer a glimmer of hope for Philippine politics.

According to some observers, the 2025 midterms could have provided momentum to politicians offering more progressive, policy-

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oriented leadership in select localities.³ However, this promising prospect must be reconciled with the lingering reality that, in many places across the country, dynastic rule at the local level remains the norm. Despite the poor performance of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s senatorial candidates at the national level, the Marcoses maintained their dynastic grip on their political bailiwick in northern Luzon, known as the "Solid North". Marcos Jr.'s eldest son, Ferdinand Alexander, won the seat for the first district of Ilocos Norte Province after running unopposed. Likewise, the second legislative district seat went to another Marcos family member, Angelo Marcos Barba. Members of the Marcos clan also held onto the governorship and vice-governorship in the province.

Elsewhere in Luzon, familiar political names secured congressional seats without facing strong opposition. In Pampanga Province, former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo won another term as representative after running unopposed. In Eastern Visayas, the Marcos-Romualdez family and their allies prevailed overwhelmingly in Leyte Province. House Speaker Martin Romualdez, the president's cousin, won the first legislative district seat in Leyte after running unopposed. According to the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), in central Philippines—Western Visayas, Central Visayas, Eastern Visayas and the Negros Island Region—candidates positioning themselves as alternatives to political families failed to gain sufficient voter support in the local elections.⁴

The Duterte family dominated the local contests in Mindanao, the second-largest island. Former president Rodrigo Duterte's eldest son, Paolo, was re-elected as the first legislative district representative of Davao City, while Paolo's son, Omar Duterte, won the second legislative district seat. Thus, a father-and-son tandem from the same city will serve in the twentieth Congress. Political families flourished elsewhere in Mindanao. Despite boxer Manny Pacquiao's failure to return to the Senate, the Pacquiao clan secured five local positions. In the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, election results confirm that dynasties remain firmly entrenched.⁵ Dynastic families also maintained their hold on local territories in the National Capital Region, where every city elected representatives from political dynasties.⁶

According to Ronald U. Mendoza and Miann S. Banaag, dynasties in the Philippines can be classified as "thin", "fat" or "obese".⁷ In recent years, dynasties have not only become "fat" (occupying multiple positions) but have grown "obese" (expanding in number

across various offices). Indeed, the 2025 midterm election results indicate that political dynasties succeeded in perpetuating their power and consolidating legislative representation across many parts of the Philippines. Incumbent clans' access to resources gave them a significant advantage over their closest rivals, who are often dynastic themselves. Beyond retaining elective posts, dynasties expanded in number. Political families have also recruited more members from their ranks, particularly from the younger generations.⁸ In Batangas Province, the youngest member of the Recto family, Ryan Christian—the son of former senator and current finance secretary Ralph Recto and the newly elected governor of Batangas, Vilma Santos-Recto—won the sixth legislative district seat. Another example is the Legarda clan: incumbent senator Loren Legarda's brother, Antonio Agapito Legarda, was elected representative of Antique's lone district, while her son, Leandro Legarda Leviste, won Batangas's first legislative district seat.

Although political dynasties have squeezed out alternatives in many localities, a few significant breakthroughs occurred in the 2025 midterms. One of the most unexpected upsets was the failure of Cynthia Villar, a former senator and matriarch of the economically powerful Villar clan, to win Las Piñas City's lone congressional seat. She was beaten by long-time city councilor Mark Anthony Santos, who ran as an independent and won convincingly by nearly 30,000 votes.⁹ This result was a major upset for the Villar family, even though two of Cynthia Villar's children (Mark and Camille) won seats in the Senate, making them one of four pairs of siblings who will now serve in the upper chamber. According to some observers, Villar's defeat may signal growing dynasty fatigue among voters.¹⁰

Another notable breakthrough occurred in the Dinagat Islands. Human rights lawyer Arlene Bag-ao, who had previously served as governor and representative of the legislative district, made a successful political comeback by defeating Allan Uno of the influential Ecleo family for the province's lone congressional seat. The Ecleos had long dominated politics on the Dinagat Islands but suffered a significant setback with Uno's loss and the defeat of their gubernatorial and vice-gubernatorial candidates.¹¹ While the long-term impact of electing non-dynastic politicians to the House of Representatives remains to be seen, there is hope that these newcomers will join progressive party-list members in pushing for necessary political and social reforms. Yet, apart from these isolated

cases, the continued dominance of many political dynasties in the lower chamber remains clear.

The twentieth Congress will likely mirror its predecessor. The majority party in the House of Representatives remains Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats (Lakas-CMD), which won 104 seats. It is led by Speaker Romualdez, who has said this outcome is a public affirmation of support for President Marcos Jr.'s administration.¹² In coalition with Lakas-CMD are the National Unity Party, the Nationalist People's Coalition, the Nacionalista Party, the *Partido Federal ng Pilipinas* (Federal Party of the Philippines) and the Party-list Coalition Foundation, Inc.¹³ According to reports, more than 240 representatives have already signed a manifesto endorsing the "supermajority" coalition under Romualdez, making any challenge to his speakership unlikely.¹⁴

Despite this broad support, rumours suggest that Romualdez may be replaced. According to some critics, the impeachment of Vice President Sara Duterte, decided by the House of Representatives just before it dissolved itself ahead of the midterms, harmed the administration's senatorial slate and displeased President Marcos Jr.¹⁵ Whether this controversy will unseat Romualdez remains uncertain. Still, it underscores ongoing tensions within the ruling coalition.

The twentieth Congress can be expected to be a highly homogeneous lower chamber. In one sense, this benefits the incumbent administration, since President Marcos Jr. will need substantial support for his legislative agenda as he enters his final three years in office. However, that agenda remains unclear. For now, the focus is on the impending impeachment trial of Sara Duterte in the Senate in June, which will influence the 2028 presidential elections. She is widely expected to run for president to reclaim power for her family, while Romualdez is perceived as the likely presidential candidate from the Marcos side.

On the surface, the 2025 midterms seem to have changed little. The supermajority coalition from the previous Congress remains largely intact, and district representatives have little incentive to alter their positions. Aligning with the supermajority is clearly advantageous for securing pork and patronage from the presidency. According to Jae Hyeok Shin, in a country like the Philippines, the government dispenses resources under the president's control, so politicians align with whoever holds the presidency to access those resources.¹⁶ This dynamic validates the "presidential bandwagon" phenomenon that has persisted in the post-authoritarian era.¹⁷

Thus, any prospects for change in the House of Representatives are more likely to emerge from party-list seats rather than district races. In the 2025 midterms, the *Akbayan* group garnered the highest number of votes ever for a party-list, earning three seats in the House. It drew strong support from the home base of its first nominee, Manuel Diokno, who had an unsuccessful Senate bid in 2022.¹⁸ Additionally, there are signs that public support generated by former vice president Leonor Robredo's presidential campaign has endured in certain areas: surprise winners in the Senate race, such as Paolo Benigno Aquino and Francis Pangilinan, seem to confirm this trend. In other words, there may be a growing liberal-democratic and progressive momentum in parts of the country—momentum that could influence the 2028 elections.

NOTES

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Not Everything Is About Her: The Impeachment of Vice- President Sara Duterte and the 2025 Midterm Elections

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If Rodrigo Duterte's presidential victory in 2016 ushered in a period of democratic backsliding, halting the liberal democratic order established after the 1986 People Power Revolution, then the election of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice-President Sara Duterte (Rodrigo's daughter) in 2022 consolidated two dynastic families with authoritarian and populist tendencies. But in a country where political parties are weak, personalities dominate and alliances rarely survive beyond election day, observers quickly wondered how long this new partnership might endure.¹ Unsurprisingly, cracks started to appear immediately after the 2022 elections, and by 2024, the UniTeam alliance had unravelled.

Rodrigo Duterte criticized Marcos Jr.'s leadership style as well as his administration's firmer stance against China in the South China Sea and its return to a traditional alliance with the United States. The House of Representatives initiated investigations into suspicious budgetary spending by Sara Duterte. In November 2024, she angrily accused President Marcos Jr., First Lady Liza Araneta-

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Marcos and House Speaker Martin Romualdez (Marcos Jr.'s cousin) of weak leadership, corruption and plotting to remove her from office ahead of a potential 2028 presidential bid. She also admitted to hiring an assassin to kill them should they succeed in plotting against her life.

In February 2025, the House of Representatives, mainly composed of the president's allies, impeached Sara Duterte, although her political trial must occur in the Senate. It was decided that this would happen after the May 2025 midterms, meaning the election of 12 new senators (half of the chamber) would be instrumental in deciding whether she is impeached or not. Naturally, the question of Sara Duterte's potential impeachment featured prominently in the election campaign.

The 1987 Constitution lays out several provisions for the impeachment process, which is intended to ensure accountability from government officials and remove from office those proven to have violated "public trust".² However, according to Jan Robert R. Go and Jean Encinas-Franco, because impeachment is political in nature, it "has been both used to prosecute allegedly corrupt officials and abused by some for political ends".³

Sara Duterte's family and supporters were quick to call the proceedings a political witch hunt. Her brother, Representative Paolo Duterte, called it "a clear act of political persecution".⁴ Their message was somewhat helped when Rodrigo Duterte was arrested on 11 March and sent to The Hague to stand trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of crimes against humanity. While Marcos Jr. sought to distance himself from both cases, his eldest son, Sandro, a representative, was the first to sign the impeachment complaint in the House. Yet, the president's sister, Senator Imee Marcos, publicly disagreed with the move to impeach Sara Duterte.

It is important to remember that the House of Representatives impeached Sara Duterte for several accusations. These included plotting to assassinate Marcos Jr. and his family, large-scale corruption, particularly misuse of US\$10.5 million of funds by her offices,⁵ and failing to strongly denounce China's aggressive behaviour against Filipino troops and fisherfolk in the disputed parts of the South China Sea. She was also accused of unexplained wealth and failure to declare it. At first, she attended the House hearings, although she was often combative, uncooperative and disrespectful of legislators, refusing to answer questions. As the hearings proceeded, she refused to attend.⁶

The Senate is set to act as an impeachment tribunal starting in June, although this will likely be pushed back until late July, when the next Congress convenes. Any conviction requires two-thirds (16) of senators to vote in favour of it. If they do, Sara Duterte will be removed as vice-president and permanently banned from holding any other public office. To avoid this, she needs nine senators to vote against her conviction. However, even if she avoids censure from the Senate, she could be charged in other courts. She also faces charges of incitement to sedition. Charges can also be brought against her in the Sandiganbayan, a special appellate collegial court with jurisdiction over graft and corruption, as well as in other courts for administrative, civil and criminal cases.⁷

Ahead of the mid-term elections, Sara Duterte actively campaigned alongside senatorial candidates (known as the DuterTen) and the congressional and local contenders endorsed by her family's slate. She also endorsed friends or turncoats, such as Senator Imee Marcos, who was initially on her brother's Alliance for a New Philippines (Alyansa) slate but left over complaints about Sara Duterte's impeachment in the House. In one interview with the press, Sara Duterte said she was campaigning hard for the DuterTen senatorial candidates but also against her family's political opponents.⁸ After her father's arrest in March 2025 and incarceration in The Hague to face charges of crimes against humanity in the ICC, the Duterte camp pushed the narrative at rallies and on social media that the former president had been "kidnapped", not arrested. According to one commentator, she "went all-out against some candidates who pushed for her impeachment at the House of Representatives, especially those designated as prosecutors in the trial".⁹ Part of this included using personal, slanderous attacks on opponents, reminiscent of her father's tone.¹⁰

By comparison, Marcos Jr.'s slate, which was expected to win the majority of contests,¹¹ did not focus on the Sara Duterte controversy during their campaigning. Perhaps this was because his administration was not innocent regarding spending, making it hard to press accountability concerns.¹² They did not even physically campaign in Mindanao, the Dutertes' political bailiwick.

Midterm elections are usually considered an informal referendum on the sitting president and his administration. Then-President Rodrigo Duterte went into the 2019 midterms with high approval ratings and, naturally, his senatorial ticket won a landslide against the political opposition. According to Aries A. Arugay, Jean Encinas-Franco and Justin Keith A. Baquisal, the 2019 midterms were "a

convincing referendum on the legitimacy of Duterte's government" and an indication of "the political power" of his daughter, Sara, who served as his campaign manager.¹³

In the 2025 senatorial race, Marcos Jr.'s slate considerably underperformed, especially when compared to pre-election surveys that proved to be a bit off.¹⁴ It won just five of the 12 Senate seats up for grabs. This poor performance can be interpreted as a sign of the electorate's dissatisfaction with his administration, particularly its response to problems like poverty, inflation, unemployment and the cost of living. However, many pro-Marcos Jr. candidates won congressional districts and seats in local government. Nine of the 11 House members appointed in February to act as prosecutors in the looming impeachment trial of Sara Duterte were re-elected. House Speaker Romualdez offered the vacated two positions to liberal opposition figures—former Justice Secretary and Senator Leila De Lima, who the Duterte administration imprisoned for six years, and human rights lawyer Chel Diokno—who won the party-list elections. Moreover, most House legislators who signed the impeachment complaint against Sara Duterte were re-elected, and Romualdez will seemingly retain his position as speaker. In local elections, many candidates whom Sara Duterte endorsed lost their contests.¹⁵

Only three Senate candidates from the DuterTen slate won their contests. The incumbent Bong Go, Rodrigo Duterte's former aide, received the greatest number of votes of the three and topped the race. This could have been due to his efforts to identify himself with a rebranded health assistance programme. In addition to the three DuterTen candidates, the other two successful candidates whom Sara Duterte endorsed, Camille Villar (who officially remained in the Alyansa slate) and Imee Marcos, were among the winning senators who received the lowest percentage of votes.

In one sense, the midterms were a draw between the Marcoses and the Dutertes. This could have been because some pro-Marcos Jr. candidates ran unopposed, and local candidates had systemic advantages in being identified with the incumbent president. However, in a country where party discipline is weak, local candidates and incumbents may have also endorsed a mixed Senate slate in exchange for support and endorsement from other influential groups. Some voters may have felt that holding public officials to account is an important election issue, yet voters normally consider a mixed bag of concerns, from candidates' personalities to their qualifications, performance and the issues they champion.¹⁶

Sara Duterte's impeachment case, muddled by her father's arrest, was probably not the most decisive factor in the midterm elections, although it does appear that most Filipinos favour a trial. According to a recent survey by Social Weather Stations, some 68 per cent of respondents said that Sara Duterte "definitely should", and 20 per cent said "probably should", address the "impeachment charges, answer all allegations pertaining to corruption, and clear her name".¹⁷

In a country afflicted with a weak and volatile party system, neither Marcos Jr. nor Sara Duterte has been able to dominate the Senate. The midterm results mean that she has some breathing room, and opinion polls suggest she is the frontrunner for the 2028 presidential elections. However, she has also proved that she can make costly political mistakes that influence public opinion.¹⁸ She has a highwire act to defend her family on two fronts: her own impeachment trial and her father's incarceration and ICC trial.

Even if Marcos Jr.'s allies picked up five seats in the Senate, there is no assurance that they will vote to convict Sara Duterte. Indeed, Rodrigo Duterte held a supermajority in the Senate after the 2019 midterm elections, but his apparent allies would not support his idea to alter the Constitution.¹⁹ Senators tend to act based on personal interests, not alliances, loyalties or parties, and they are very attuned to public opinion. Indeed, the live coverage of the impeachment trial will put more spotlight on them, especially on social media. More recently, majority of the outgoing Senate voted to remand the impeachment case to the House in an attempt to delay the trial in the guise of technicalities; and they were met by relentless barrage of statements and criticisms from constitutionalists, legal experts, academics, civil society, media, netizens and other interest groups. Some may recall that during the impeachment trial of then-President Joseph Estrada in 2001, the pro-Estrada majority in the chamber suppressed crucial evidence, sparking nationwide street protests. This culminated in Estrada being removed from office and many pro-Estrada senators losing in the subsequent midterm elections.²⁰ Thus, it is not only the one impeached that is on trial; the concerned representative institutions and accountability mechanisms are also on public trial.

NOTES

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- ¹⁴ According to Social Weather Stations' founding president, Mahar Mangahas, their pre-election surveys were not statistically far off the results. For instance, in its May survey, of the 12 senatorial candidates it projected would win seats, nine went on to win their contests. See more in Mahar Mangahas, "Three Types of Election Surveys", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 17 May 2025, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/183290/three-types-of-election-surveys>.
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The Rise of Uncontested Races: Understanding the Dynamics of the 2025 Midterm Local Elections

JAN ROBERT R. GO

For many Filipinos, local government is *the* government. Local officials are the ones whom the public can approach directly and daily; they are the ones who decide the policies that affect most people. According to the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), 18,180 local offices were at stake in the 2025 midterm elections.¹ This included 254 district representatives,² 82 provincial governors and 82 vice governors, 840 provincial board members, 149 city mayors and 149 vice mayors, 1,690 city councillors, 1,493 municipal mayors and 1,493 vice mayors, and 11,948 municipal councillors. The average voter had to decide 15 local positions.³ As such, voters must carefully weigh which candidates are best suited for each office. But what if a position has only one candidate?

Over the past four election cycles (see Table 1), the number of uncontested positions at the local level has been increasing.⁴ In the 2025 midterm elections, there are 1,068 uncontested seats, almost 20 per cent more than in 2022.⁵

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Table 1
Uncontested Seats, 2016–25

Election Year	Total Seats	Uncontested Seats	Percentage of Uncontested Seats
2016	17,984 ⁶	802 ⁷	4.45
2019	17,999 ⁸	548 ⁹	3.04
2022	18,023	845 ¹⁰	4.68
2025	18,180	1,086 ¹¹	5.97

Source: See endnote.¹²

What does this trend imply for Philippine electoral politics, which assumes free and fair competition? How should we interpret the persistence and growth of uncontested races in relation to the country’s democratic quality?

A common argument by candidates who run unopposed is that the absence of challengers reflects their strength and quality. Indeed, they say, the fact that no one wants to compete with them is also a sign of public satisfaction with their specific brand of leadership, suggesting that their administration was effective, responsive and attuned to the needs of their constituents. In 2016, while on the campaign trail, one mayoral candidate running unopposed reflected, “When things like this happen, no contest, no election, no opposition, it only means that the mayor is really very good.”¹³

Naturally, this “brand of leadership” narrative privileges the politician more than the electorate. It may be the case that in communities where the incumbent is widely seen as competent (*magaling*) and approachable (*madaling lapitan*), the electorate may see little reason to support an alternative, leading to the continuation of leadership without contest. However, it is also the case that many politicians who run unopposed do not think this reflects a democratic deficit. Instead, they celebrate the idea of the lone candidate as a victory for the electorate and good leadership. This narrative deserves critical examination and should not be accepted at face value.

Mirroring national politics, local elections often hinge less on clear platforms or ideological commitments and more on the interplay of resources, machinery and networks.¹⁴ Candidates for mayor or councilor require substantial funds or patrons willing to bankroll their campaigns. And so, in many cases, the election results hinge

on who can mobilize the most money, manpower and logistical support. This author's earlier research found that many defeated mayoral candidates in fifth-class municipalities were not unpopular or incompetent; they were significantly overwhelmed by their opponent's campaign infrastructure and financial capability.¹⁵ Indeed, their opponents' access to extensive patronage networks, funding sources and political alliances made them virtually unbeatable. In such a scenario, potential challengers are discouraged from running from the outset. They know the contest is not a fair competition, but as a preordained struggle heavily tilted in favour of the wealthy and well-connected.

A particularly troubling development in recent local elections is the increasing dominance of political families, especially in uncontested races. While political dynasties have long been a fixture of Philippine politics,¹⁶ the sight of a single family monopolizing positions without any opposition underscores scholarly arguments that elections often pit entrenched family networks against one another. In the 2025 local elections, many uncontested races were monopolized by political families.¹⁷ This suggests that political authority in numerous areas remains closed off to broad democratic participation, circulating and consolidating within a select group of elites.

In some municipalities during the 2025 local polls, members of the same family even competed against each other for the same position. For instance, in the Makati City mayoral race, Nancy Binay squared off against her brother-in-law, Luis Campos. There was also an uncle-nephew feud between Will and Caesar Dy in Cauayan, a city in Isabela Province. Such intra-family contests reveal that, in certain areas, real political competition occurs within the dynasty itself, as branches vie to retain control of local power. This reinforces the idea that political parties often exist merely on paper, serving as vehicles for personal ambition rather than as institutions that organize ideas or represent the electorate's interests.

Another emerging phenomenon related to political dynasties is the convergence of uncontested races, entrenched political families and electoral coalitions presenting themselves as unified "teams".¹⁸ These so-called "teams" dominate local elections, projecting an image of unity, strength and political stability, as reflected in their self-assigned names, such as Team Performance in Mandaluyong City and Team United in Makati City. In reality, these coalitions recycle the same personalities across election cycles, sometimes rotating

positions among family members to comply with term limits. This entrenched structure makes it nearly impossible for independent candidates or reform-minded individuals to gain traction, as the playing field is already heavily tilted in favor of those within these ruling circles.

Finally, uncontested races often result from political co-optation, where potential challengers are absorbed into the dominant coalition before an election even begins. Rather than engaging in open competition, these individuals are persuaded (or pressured) to align with the incumbent or dominant group. Co-optation may involve offering rivals positions within local government, promises of future electoral support or access to resources and patronage. This strategy neutralizes opposition without a formal contest, creating the illusion of widespread support—echoing the “brand of leadership” narrative—while suppressing genuine democratic competition.

Potential challengers, especially those lacking strong machinery or financial backing, may find it more practical or even necessary to join the dominant camp rather than risk isolation and defeat. In Mandaluyong City, Danilo de Guzman, a contender for the Abalos family, was co-opted into the incumbent’s slate and offered a guaranteed councillor seat.¹⁹ In many cases, these alliances are branded as coalitions or “teams for development” or “teams for continuity”. In reality, they reinforce existing power structures and preclude meaningful alternatives. Thus, co-optation becomes a survival tactic for dominant political families and their former rivals, ensuring mutual benefit while eliminating competition.

The persistence and growth of uncontested races in the Philippines raise critical concerns about the state of its elections and the health of its democracy. While elections are meant to offer voters genuine choices, the increasing prevalence of unopposed candidacies suggests a profound erosion of democratic principles. Rather than reflecting broad public consensus, these uncontested races often reveal a political landscape shaped by dynastic entrenchment, elite bargaining, resource inequality and strategic co-optation—not the “brand of leadership” politicians tout. In this context, local elections risk becoming symbolic exercises that affirm existing power structures rather than challenge or renew them.

The rise of uncontested races signals a shift from competitive electoral democracy to a system dominated by networks and alliances, where political participation is limited to those already within (or willing to be absorbed by) the dominant bloc. Although there

were instances in 2025 where non-traditional politicians challenged established names, the system continues to undermine the notion that anyone, regardless of background or resources, can seek office and contribute to public service. More critically, it reduces voters to passive spectators in a political game largely played behind closed doors.

In the end, one must acknowledge that a democratic form does not always guarantee a democratic substance. The Philippines may hold regular elections, but when those at the local level are uncontested, orchestrated or predetermined by elite interests, their democratic value diminishes. Addressing this issue requires reforms that engage COMELEC, local government units and civil society to promote fair competition, strengthen political parties, regulate campaign financing and create space for genuine opposition and citizen-led movements. Absent these measures, the trend of uncontested races will continue to highlight the widening gap between democratic ideals and political realities in the country.

NOTES

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Elite Capture of the Party-List: Analysing the 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections

EMMANUEL L. ALBA

The 2025 Philippine midterm elections unfolded against the backdrop of an intensifying rivalry between the Marcos and Duterte dynasties.¹ Portrayed by media and political institutions as a high-stakes drama, it diverted public attention away from substantive policy debates, turning the elections into a contest for dominance between two entrenched political families. As the Marcos camp worked to consolidate its institutional power and the Duterte bloc resisted what it saw as persecution, the elections effectively became a referendum not only on President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration but also on the fractured UniTeam alliance that had propelled it to power.²

Beneath this polarized backdrop, the party-list (PL) elections revealed a more nuanced picture of democratic health and dysfunction. Accounting for 20 per cent of the seats in the House of Representatives, the PL system was conceived in the late 1990s as a way of curbing elite domination in the legislature by institutionalizing proportional representation and granting historically marginalized sectors a direct voice in national policymaking.³ The PL system's proportional representation model was also intended to correct the

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structural biases of majoritarian systems, allowing for a legislature that better reflects the electorate's diversity.

From the outset, a debate emerged over whether the PL system should be exclusive to marginalized sectors or open to all parties. Initially, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) adopted an inclusive interpretation, allowing any political group to participate unless explicitly disqualified under Section 6 of the PL Act.⁴ In 2001, however, the Supreme Court overturned this, ruling that only groups representing marginalized sectors could run, thereby honouring the Constitution's intent.⁵ However, in *Atong Paglaum v. COMELEC* (2013), the Supreme Court abandoned the requirement that PL groups exclusively represent disadvantaged sectors, instead permitting national, regional and even political parties without ties to marginalized communities to compete in the PL elections.⁶ Critics argued this decision opened the floodgates to traditional politicians, dynasties and elite-affiliated groups, effectively turning the PL system into a "backdoor" for established interests.⁷ Indeed, the entry of these actors has led to the co-optation of what was intended as an emancipatory political innovation.⁸ Rather than counterbalancing elite politics, the system has come to replicate the very inequalities it was meant to correct.⁹

This erosion is evident in recent election cycles. In the nineteenth Congress elected in 2022, nearly half of the 61 PL representatives had obvious ties to political families.¹⁰ According to Kontra Daya, a civil society watchdog, over half of the 156 PL groups that competed in the 2025 midterms were linked to political families or business interests rather than grassroots constituencies. These patterns point to a troubling trend: instead of levelling the playing field, the PL system is being exploited as a vehicle for elite entrenchment.

The 2025 midterms marked the highest PL vote participation in over a decade. Some 73 per cent of voters cast ballots for PL groups, up from 58 per cent in 2019 and 65 per cent in 2022. Still, over 12 million PL ballots were left blank, and more than 3.3 million were invalidated due to overvoting—a sign of confusion or disillusionment with the system.¹¹ According to some electoral analysts, voter turnout spiked because certain PL groups improved their ability to connect with voter interests, although scepticism towards the system's value continues to suppress full engagement.¹²

Some 54 PL groups won seats in the House in the 2025 polls. However, Duterte Youth faces an unresolved disqualification case, casting a shadow over its legitimacy and highlighting weaknesses

in implementing electoral regulations.¹³ While Bagong Henerasyon (BH) was initially included among the groups with pending legal issues, COMELEC eventually dismissed the disqualification petition and proclaimed BH weeks after the elections.¹⁴ COMELEC's failure to resolve these legal challenges before the elections nonetheless cast a shadow over the results and undermines public trust in the process.

Despite elite power struggles, the 2025 PL results reveal a dual narrative of continuity and disruption. Of the 54 successful groups, 34 already held seats in the Congress and 19 were newcomers. Notably, 18 of the 19 new entrants claim to represent sectoral constituencies, but seven had links to political dynasties, reinforcing critiques of PL co-optation by elite interests. Some 27 of the 34 PL groups that held seats before the 2025 elections are connected to dynastic networks, underscoring how entrenched interests continue to dominate the PL arena. Dynastic players often adopt sectoral language without substantive grassroots ties, resulting in symbolic sectoralism.

The International Criminal Court's arrest of former President Rodrigo Duterte and the looming Senate impeachment case against his daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte, were significant fault lines heading into the midterms. Among the victorious PL groups, 21 publicly supported the impeachment, an act of notable political courage given the risks involved. For example, the Akbayan group, which won the most votes and secured three seats in the House of Representatives despite minimal recent political activity, supported the House's impeachment of Sara Duterte in early 2025. This suggests that its victory resulted from the public's renewed appetite for progressive platforms and a broader push for accountability, democratic governance and principled opposition within the PL system.¹⁵

In contrast, 14 PL groups did not sign the impeachment petition against Sara Duterte in early 2025, underscoring how political loyalty and alignment remain key survival factors. Duterte Youth, despite ongoing legal controversies around its representatives' age qualifications, finished second in the PL race and secured three seats.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the ACT-CIS group, once closely tied to the Duterte family, dropped in ranking after backing impeachment and aligning with the Marcos administration. The 1-Rider party, another impeachment supporter, fell from second place in 2022 to 29th in 2025, reducing its seats from two to one. Of the groups that opposed

or avoided the topic of impeachment, five improved their positions, eight picked up fewer votes and one maintained its ranking. These shifts suggest that factors such as perceived sectoral authenticity, national visibility and localized campaign machinery weighed more heavily in voter decisions than impeachment positions alone.

Regional shifts also emerged, particularly in Mindanao. Six new Mindanao-based PL groups were elected, including three that endorsed the impeachment against Sara Duterte. This signals a gradual departure from monolithic loyalty to political clans as voters in Mindanao increasingly reward issue-based performance over familial affiliation.

Ultimately, the presence of both returning and new PL groups reflects the system's enduring paradox: it accommodates entrenched dynasties while still offering space for emergent actors. Nonetheless, dynastic appropriation of the PL space reflects a systemic erosion of its original purpose. What was envisioned as a mechanism for democratizing representation has largely become a vehicle for consolidating elite power. While increased voter turnout signals renewed engagement, the fundamental challenge remains safeguarding the system's integrity and restoring its core mission of empowering the genuinely marginalized.

The 2025 PL elections offer a revealing lens into the broader state of Philippine democracy. Although the Marcos-Duterte rivalry dominated headlines, a quieter but equally consequential story unfolded in the evolution of the PL system, a mechanism originally intended to amplify marginalized voices but now increasingly drawn into the orbit of elite power. The surge in voter turnout and the success of progressive and independent groups point to enduring hopes for reform and accountability. Yet, these gains sit uneasily alongside the persistence of dynastic influence, symbolic sectoralism and institutional lapses that continue to dilute the promise of proportional representation.

Rather than serving purely as a space for empowerment, the PL system has become a contested arena where genuine advocates, opportunistic elites and politically ambiguous actors coexist. This uneasy coexistence marks a critical juncture: either the system evolves to reclaim its emancipatory potential, or it drifts further into becoming a mere extension of traditional power. That paradox cannot be resolved without structural reforms. Central to any solution is the urgent passage of an anti-dynasty law, a long-overdue mandate of the 1987 Constitution. Without such a law, the PL system will

remain vulnerable to manipulation by established power blocs that exploit legal loopholes and judicial reinterpretations to entrench their influence. The co-optation of a mechanism originally designed to democratize representation exposes a broader crisis of political inequality in the country. If the state is serious about restoring public trust, amplifying marginalized voices and deepening democratic governance, then dismantling dynastic foundations must become a priority.

The 2025 elections are more than a snapshot of political competition; they serve as both a warning and an opportunity. Whether the PL system continues its slide into elite rivalry or reclaims its transformative promise depends on the political will to reform it at its core. Passing an anti-dynasty law is not simply a legislative necessity; it is a democratic imperative.

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Do Political Dynasties Make Space for Women? Evidence from the Philippines' 2025 Midterm Elections

ROGELIO ALICOR L. PANA O

Something unprecedented happened in the May 2025 Philippine midterm elections: entire provincial races were dominated by women candidates. In Ilocos Norte, Guimaras, Zamboanga Del Sur and Samar, every candidate for provincial governor was female.¹ Nationwide, more women were elected governors than ever before. On the surface, it appeared to be a milestone for Philippine democracy.² In a nation where men had long shaped local politics, more doors appear to be opening for women. But are they?

While the trend appears empowering, these women did not rise from grassroots movements or climb the ranks of strong, programmatic political parties. Their ascent was not driven by bold social policy reforms or ideological shifts among voters. Instead, they were convenient substitutes for male members of their dynasties or force multipliers of their political clan. For example, wives stepped in for term-limited husbands; daughters filled their fathers' shoes; mothers and sisters carried on the family name. Rather than

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disrupting the old order, their victories were carefully orchestrated continuations of traditional Philippine politics.

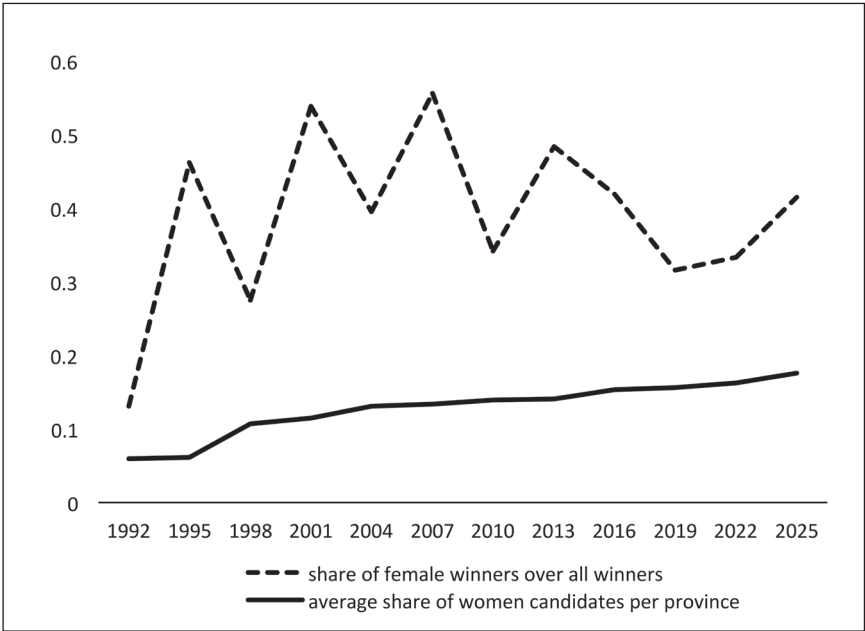
Political dynasties, long criticized for blocking merit-based leadership and choking democratic competition, have had to turn to female relatives to keep their grip on power.³ Paradoxically, they have unwittingly created one of the most effective, albeit limited, pathways for women to enter public office. While these circumstances may not be a genuine triumph for women's empowerment, they create opportunities when few other choices are available. Arguably, as the 2025 midterms show, dynasties have become one of the few informal institutions in the Philippines capable of enabling women to run viable campaigns, particularly at the local level, where elections are expensive, competitive and personality-driven.

This pattern is not unique to the Philippines. Globally, studies show that women are more likely to enter politics through family connections, especially in countries with low gender equality. In Indonesia, nearly half of the female parliamentarians elected in 2019 had dynastic ties.⁴ In Thailand, most female lawmakers since 1975 have been related to former male politicians, contributing to family-based rule.⁵ A study of a dozen democracies found that dynastic connections benefit women, especially those new to politics, by minimizing informational inequalities,⁶ giving them access to crucial insider knowledge and connections and an understanding of the unwritten rules otherwise unavailable to political outsiders. Meanwhile, highly qualified women without dynastic ties often find themselves at a disadvantage.⁷ Despite having strong academic, professional or civic backgrounds, they struggle to gain traction in the electoral arena because they lack the symbolic value of a well-known family name.

In the Philippines, women are more likely to get elected if they are from political families, as constitutional term limits lead political dynasties to nominate female relatives.⁸ This was evident long before the gubernatorial races of 2025 (see Figure 1). The average share of women running for gubernatorial elections has been consistently rising, starting at a low of just under 6 per cent in the first post-martial law local elections in 1992 and reaching nearly 18 per cent in 2025. Despite the gradual increase, there was, on average, only one female for every 10 gubernatorial candidates in local elections held between 1992 and 2022. While there were years when women candidates did well (2001 and 2007), there

have also been sharp drops (1998 and 2019). The success rate of women candidates in 2025 indicates a slight improvement, but it is not record-breaking.

Figure 1
Share of Women in Philippine Gubernatorial Races, 1992–2025



Source: Programme on Social and Political Change of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies.⁹

The dominance of dynastic women was clearly visible in the 2025 gubernatorial races. For instance, Sharee Ann Tan ran unopposed for re-election in Samar Province, which her family has dominated since the 2022 elections. In Ilocos Norte, incumbent vice governor Cecilia Araneta Marcos, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.’s cousin-in-law, changed places with the incumbent, Matthew Manotoc, for the position of provincial governor.¹⁰ In Guimaras, incumbent Representative Ma. Lucille Nava swapped positions with incumbent Governor Joaquin Carlos Nava. In Zamboanga Sibugay, the incumbent governor, Dulce Ann Hofer, daughter of a former governor, George

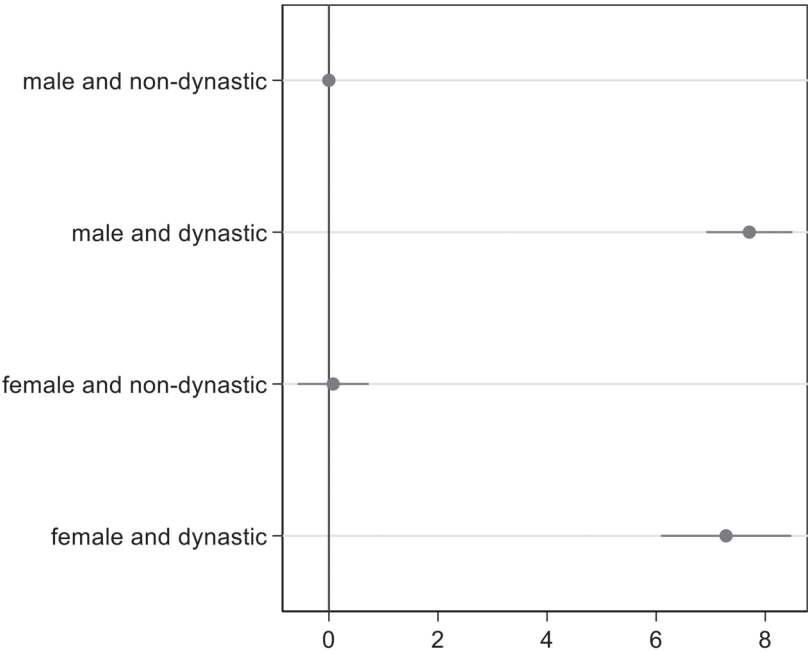
Hofer, won her second term. Meanwhile, in Zamboanga del Sur, former First District Representative Divina Grace Yu became the new governor after running in place of her husband, Victor Yu, the former governor. She beat Junaflor Cerilles, the wife of the former vice governor, Ace William Cerilles.¹¹ Additionally, her children, Joseph Yu and Jeyzel Victoria Yu, also won congressional seats.¹² In Quezon, the incumbent Angelina Tan ran unopposed and secured a second term. Before winning the seat in 2022, she had served as a three-term representative of the province's fourth district. Tan's 2022 victory was framed by some in the media as a triumph against political dynasties, yet her congressional seat was filled by her son, Keith Micah de Luna Tan, who ran unopposed in the May 2025 elections.¹³ Angelina's eldest son, Keith Mikhal D.L. Tan, is also slated to win a provincial board member's seat for the province's second district.¹⁴

These women did not win due to programmatic parties or voter preference, but because of pedigree. In most cases, they are the wives, daughters or sisters of male politicians who had reached their term limits or stepped aside for legal or strategic reasons. In other words, the family name remains the brand, and the woman candidate is simply a new face of the dynasty.

An analysis of electoral data between 1992 and 2022 shows that the probability of winning is significantly higher for women in political families. Figure 2 is a simple visual representation based on a logistic regression showing the factors determining the electability of a gubernatorial candidate. Controlling for dynastic entrenchment (how long a family has held office continuously) and political competition (number of candidates), female dynastic candidates have roughly the same probability of winning as male dynastic candidates. In Figure 2, the vertical line at zero is the base group: male and non-dynastic. All other groups are compared to this base group.

Figure 2 shows that belonging to a political dynasty is strongly connected to a higher electoral success rate for both men and women. Noticeably, the electability of a "female and dynastic" candidate is also very close to that of a "male and dynastic" candidate. This suggests that a woman from a political family typically achieves a similar level of political success as men from political families. In both cases, political pedigree seems to open many doors. As for "female and non-dynastic" politicians, the line showing the typical

Figure 2
Determinants of Electoral Success



Source: Programme on Social and Political Change of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies.

range of values touches the vertical line corresponding to zero. This indicates that the usual level of political success for women who do not come from established political families is statistically no different from that of male candidates who are non-dynastic. In other words, compared to a politician who is part of a dynasty regardless of sex, non-dynastic women face considerably more obstacles, meaning their chances of political success are effectively indistinguishable from a male contender without political pedigree. Therefore, having a political pedigree is very important for achieving political success, especially for women.

What explains these trends? One significant factor may be tied to the entrenchment of political families. When a dynasty has been politically established for a significant period, over time, it becomes difficult for male candidates from those families to win elections.

According to several studies, voters seem to experience weariness when they consistently see the same family name carried by male candidates.¹⁵ Interestingly, this dynasty fatigue does not seem to hurt female candidates in the same way, perhaps because voters see women as potentially more inclined towards reform or less deeply involved in traditional power structures. This perception enables political families to present female family members as a new face to the public, despite their family connections. As a result, powerful political clans may strategically choose women to run for office to maintain their hold on power, particularly when male candidates are experiencing declining support. This situation can, sometimes unintentionally, create pathways for women to enter influential political roles.

The competitiveness of elections appears to be another factor. A deeper analysis of electoral data suggests that women candidates face considerably greater disadvantages in elections where many individuals compete for the same position.¹⁶ In these highly contested races, success often depends more heavily on having significant financial resources, broad name recognition and strong backing from established institutions—areas where women traditionally encounter structural gaps. Moreover, in races crowded with contenders, voters perhaps instinctively rely on familiar gender stereotypes when making their choices, often favouring male candidates who are perceived as more traditionally authoritative or simply more electable.¹⁷ Additionally, the support base women candidates manage to build may be more vulnerable to being split by rivals, making it harder for them to gather a winning number of votes. This suggests that electoral environments with numerous contenders can inadvertently reinforce existing gender inequality in political competition.

What can be done to move beyond these conditional openings for women in politics? Reform efforts must focus on reducing structural barriers and building a more inclusive political pipeline. Strengthening political parties, promoting voter education and supporting leadership development programmes for women are crucial first steps. Institutionalizing gender quotas—either within political parties or through corrective legislation, such as the amendment of the 1991 Local Government Code¹⁸—may offer the most direct route to broader female representation, although it may not necessarily guarantee female retention.¹⁹ Notably, electoral quotas for women seem effective at increasing women's chances of winning elections

even after the quotas are withdrawn.²⁰ Gendered gatekeeping can also significantly shape who gets to run for office.²¹ When women hold positions of clout and control candidate recruitment, evidence suggests they are more likely to encourage and nominate other women. Conversely, male gatekeepers may inadvertently or directly discourage female candidates.

Political dynasties, which stifle accountability and competition, are anathema to democracy. Their grip on power distorts competition and weakens accountability. However, as the article has shown, they also serve as one of the few effective ways for women's entry into politics. The inconvenient truth at the core of Philippine politics is that political dynasties are simultaneously a major hindrance to reform and, unexpectedly, a pathway for change. If the long-term goal is to dismantle elite domination, the short-term challenge is to recognize and work within the political realities of the present. That means acknowledging, and perhaps even capitalizing on, the complicated role of dynasties in shaping who gets to lead and how. For many women in Philippine local politics, the door to power remains narrow. For now, however, it swings widest through political dynasties.

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Betrayal, Loyalty and Affective Polarization in the 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections

AARON ABEL MALLARI

Ahead of the 2022 Philippines presidential elections, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son and namesake of the country's late dictator, and Sara Duterte, daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte, joined forces. This alliance between two of the country's most powerful political dynasties promised unity and stability, and their ticket won a landslide. But the UniTeam pact quickly unravelled. Heading into the 2025 midterm elections, some commentators argued it was not so much a plebiscite on the incumbent administration's performance as a referendum on this high-stakes, dynastic battle.¹ This article explores how the UniTeam's break-up stoked "affective polarization" in society, making it an us-versus-them battleground in which voters were inundated with emotional rhetoric and in which both camps could leverage notions of betrayal and loyalty to strengthen their support and antagonize their rival.²

As a union of two of the country's most powerful political dynasties, the UniTeam promised to merge the Marcos family's bailiwick of northern Luzon (the "Solid North") with the Dutertes' southern strongholds, especially Mindanao. It was a formidable pairing, winning almost 59 per cent of the vote at the 2022

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elections. Marcos Jr. became president, returning his family to the top of Philippine politics decades after the patriarch, Ferdinand Marcos, was ousted in a national uprising in 1986. Meanwhile, with Sara Duterte becoming vice president, the Dutertes cemented their dominance in the political arena.

However, cracks began appearing soon after the 2022 polls. At first, these were mainly over policy differences, including Marcos Jr.'s attempts to distance himself from his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte.³ For example, whereas Duterte had tried to build friendly relations with China, Marcos Jr. restored the Philippines' traditional alliance with the United States.⁴ By late 2023, tensions escalated as Marcos Jr. hinted at rejoining the International Criminal Court (ICC). In 2018, Rodrigo Duterte withdrew the country from the court because of its preliminary examinations into his deadly "war on drugs". Membership of the ICC would soon become an inflection point.⁵

By early 2024, the feud had reached a point of no return. In January, Rodrigo Duterte called Marcos Jr. a cocaine addict, to which Marcos Jr. responded by accusing Duterte of taking fentanyl.⁶ Two months later, Sara Duterte attended a rally calling for the president's resignation. The protest was organized by Apollo Quiboloy, Rodrigo's spiritual adviser and close ally, who was the subject of congressional hearings over alleged human trafficking.⁷ Soon after, she resigned as education secretary, leaving Marcos Jr.'s cabinet.⁸ By this point, it was clear that their political alliance had always been based on convenience, not the shared vision they had successfully sold to the Filipino electorate in 2022.

As 2024 progressed, the House of Representatives, dominated by Marcos Jr.'s allies, launched a series of parliamentary hearings over Sara Duterte's alleged corruption and misuse of public funds.⁹ In response, she took to social media to accuse the Marcos camp of political harassment. She even publicly claimed to have hired an assassin to kill Marcos Jr., his wife and Martin Romuladez, his cousin and the speaker of the House of Representatives.¹⁰ At this point, the UniTeam was in "open warfare".¹¹ In February 2025, Sara Duterte was impeached by the House of Representatives. (Her formal impeachment trial is scheduled to take place in the Senate in June, after the midterm elections.) Then, in March, Rodrigo Duterte was arrested after returning to the Philippines from a campaign visit abroad and was sent to The Hague to stand trial for crimes against humanity at the ICC.

As the split widened, both camps backed rival slates in the midterms. Marcos Jr. endorsed a senatorial ticket called the Alliance for a New Philippines (Alyansa), while the Dutertes backed the DuterTen slate composed of ten senatorial candidates under the Philippine Democratic Party-Laban party. In the end, of the 12 newly elected senators, six were from Marcos Jr.'s Alyansa ticket (although Camille Villar later sided with Sara Duterte), four were from the Duterte slate (including Imee Marcos, Marcos Jr.'s sister), and two were from the liberal democratic opposition that is critical of both dynasties.¹²

Elite-led polarization has been a feature of Philippine politics since the restoration of democracy in 1986. While it has been characterized as pernicious, it has also been described, somewhat counterintuitively, as “polarization without poles”. Unlike many democracies where polarization is anchored in entrenched cleavages, such as class, ethnicity or religion, political conflicts in the Philippines are driven by elite power struggles rather than ideological differences.¹³ The existing literature further attributes this to the lack of party institutionalization, which has led to the lack of ideological and programmatic grounding at every election cycle, as well as candidates jumping from one party to another or establishing new ones.¹⁴ Political dynasties have exploited this polarization because strong personalities, not ideological cohesion and policy vision, are the true measure of loyalty and supporter mobilization.¹⁵ Indeed, when ideological ties are weak, as in Philippine politics, loyalty becomes rooted in personal ties.

Because of this political polarization, politicians appeal to the emotions of the electorate, reinforcing an “us-versus-them” divide in which the identity of the average voter is grounded in whether they are loyal to one camp and view the opposing politicians not as mere rivals but as members of an out-group that warrants disdain. For instance, the 2025 midterm elections were dominated by a discourse of betrayal and loyalty.

Once the UniTeam's demise was apparent in 2024, affective polarization manifested in several ways. For starters, political factions began to test supporters' loyalty and framed elite politics as a drama of betrayal and backstabbing. The arrest of Rodrigo Duterte in March 2025 was a critical moment. Duterte loyalists accused Marcos Jr. of disloyalty, especially after he was alleged to have colluded with the ICC. Rodrigo's son, Sebastian Duterte, said in the wake of his father's arrest, “Mr. President Marcos, you will never

be loved, especially [by] us who are calling out [Rodrigo] Duterte's name. You will never be loved."¹⁶ Things became more complicated when the president's own sister, senatorial aspirant Imee Marcos, flipped to the Duterte side and openly appeared in a campaign advertisement with Sara Duterte. The advertisement portrayed the Philippines as cloaked in darkness due to the continuing woes of the Filipinos and the supposed injustice in the administration's political harassment of their opponents, alluding to the arrest of Rodrigo Duterte in March 2025.

Marcos Jr. publicly maintained a calm and measured approach to the feud, markedly different from Sara Duterte's emotive stance.¹⁷ In a rally for the Alyansa senatorial candidates, he called on the people to vote for the coalition that does not want to spill the blood of the innocent, an obvious allusion to Rodrigo Duterte's deadly "war on drugs".¹⁸ Regarding Duterte's arrest, Marcos Jr. said his government was merely doing its job.¹⁹ Reacting to Imee Marcos's allegations that there was a concerted effort to bring down the Dutertes, the president merely remarked that "everyone's entitled to their opinion, I disagree".²⁰

One consequence was that Marcos Jr.'s approval ratings fell by 17 percentage points, while Sara Duterte's rose by seven points.²¹ While the arrest of Rodrigo Duterte and the impeachment of Sara Duterte appear to have been the primary causes, with Duterte supporters becoming more vocal,²² other factors also influenced this drop. Opinion surveys show that Filipinos also disapproved of Marcos Jr.'s performance in addressing inflation and corruption and in poverty reduction.²³ Other observers also pointed out the possibility of the impact of disinformation campaigns. The combination of social issues, the rupture of the dynastic alliance and the emotional ties of supporters converged to reveal the tensions through the surveys leading up to the elections.

Moreover, the unbridled affective polarization began to obscure the national debate, and instead of focusing on the real-life, practical visions of the candidates, the public conversation revolved around an "us vs them" contest of where the candidates stood in the Marcoses-Dutertes feud. For example, after the Alyansa candidate Camille Villar appeared in an advertisement with Sara Duterte, her campaign received stronger backing from Duterte supporters in Mindanao, the family's stronghold.²⁴ In essence, campaigning came down to picking a side, meaning policy questions fell to the wayside.

Furthermore, the Marcoses-Dutertes rivalry muted alternative voices, marginalizing progressive groups. The *Makabayan* bloc, a coalition of progressive candidates dubbed the “real opposition”, fielded grassroots leaders who championed causes like anti-political dynasty legislation, expanded health programmes and wage increases. However, they barely got a mention in the opinion surveys before the elections.²⁵ Although the liberal, democratic candidates Bam Aquino and Kiko Pangilinan won seats in the Senate in the midterms, their victory, according to some pundits, may have been a protest vote against their dynastic rivals.²⁶

Affective polarization also altered how the political camps thought about engaging with certain voters. According to Representative Toby Tiangco, the campaign manager of the Alyansa senatorial slate, the dynastic feud resulted in Marcos Jr.’s camp focusing on Luzon and Visayas—the provincial base of the Marcos family—and less time campaigning in Mindanao, the Duterte stronghold.²⁷ The heightened rivalry, he noted, led to an emotionally charged electorate, making it harder to appeal to them once they had identified with one side of the competing camps. As such, increased affective polarization also resulted in increased tribalism.

Lastly, affective polarization emboldened polarizing rhetoric and behaviour. Sara Duterte’s comments, especially those about plans to kill Marcos Jr., opened a Pandora’s box of physical violence. Brazen language once again became normalized, with some candidates deploying misogynistic and vulgar language during campaign sorties.²⁸ The candidates (especially senators) who won seats at the midterm elections have emerged from an atmosphere of intense, personal grievance, and this could profoundly impact the second half of Marcos Jr.’s administration.

While Marcos Jr. says he is open to reconciliation with the Dutertes, he had also quipped, rather insensitively given his family history, “I want to be respected but maybe fear is better”.²⁹ Whether the Dutertes and the Marcoses can patch up their differences or will continue to fight it out until the 2028 presidential elections remains to be seen. However, the outcome of the 2025 midterms, as well as the Senate’s vote in June on Sara Duterte’s impeachment, could prove decisive. What’s clear is that the unravelling of the once formidable UniTeam has intensified affective polarization in the Philippines. The path ahead would likely hinge on whether state institutions can withstand this feud.

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“UniTeam” No More: Changing Social Media Narratives in the Philippines’ 2025 Midterm Elections

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At the 2022 presidential elections, the “UniTeam” alliance of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte relied heavily on social media to amplify their vague yet disciplined message of “unity”, a strategy that proved instrumental in securing their landslide victory. Once in office, President Marcos Jr. then leveraged online platforms to recast his family’s narrative and shine a better light on his late father’s dictatorial rule. Pro-Marcos Jr. vloggers and influencers, many of whom campaigned for the UniTeam ticket in 2022, dominated feeds in the early months of his administration.¹

However, the Marcos-Duterte partnership always seemed to be an “alliance of political convenience”,² and the cracks emerged quickly after Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte took office. Tensions escalated in 2024 after the House of Representatives began probing Sara Duterte for allegedly misusing confidential funds. In response, she publicly accused House Speaker Martin Romualdez, Marcos Jr.’s cousin, of orchestrating the witch hunt.³ In November that year, she issued apparent death threats against Romualdez and the Marcos family.⁴ She was impeached by the House in February

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2025, with a Senate trial scheduled for June, which could potentially ban her from politics. A month later, her father, Rodrigo Duterte, the former president, was arrested by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged crimes against humanity committed during his infamous “war on drugs”.

As this dynastic feud intensified, social media became a battleground for both camps. According to an investigative report published in December 2024, social media accounts that previously supported the UniTeam split their affiliations, although they ended up siding with the Dutertes.⁵ While the Marcoses versus Dutertes was the prevailing narrative on social media heading into the May 2025 midterm elections, many senatorial candidates tried to distance themselves from this political rift. This was more the case for Marcos Jr.-backed candidates, who ran under the Alliance for a New Philippines (Alyansa) senatorial slate and attempted to be programmatic in their campaigns. In contrast, the ten Duterte-backed candidates, dubbed the DuterTen, focused on the emotional campaigning around Sara’s impeachment and Rodrigo’s arrest by the ICC. The Dutertes and their supporters, online and offline, sought to frame the midterms less as an evaluation of the incumbent administration’s policies and more as a question of loyalty and influence to the family.

A defining feature of Marcos Jr.’s presidential campaign in 2022 was the strategic use of disinformation to whitewash his family’s past—his father had ruled the country as a dictator until being overthrown by a popular revolution in 1986—and to promote “unity” and national healing.⁶ During the campaign, Marcos Jr. also regularly posted YouTube vlogs on his official channel, and a surge of pro-Marcos influencers disseminated content, often grounded in historical distortions, that made him the primary beneficiary of election-related disinformation.⁷ His most-viewed video, focusing on his mother Imelda Marcos’s projects as former first lady, has attracted over 4 million views since 2021.

Yet since taking office, Marcos Jr. has been reluctant to give media interviews or address the rift with Sara Duterte. Moreover, post-election, the number of vlogs posted on Marcos Jr.’s official YouTube channel dwindled to an average of one a month, and the number of views per vlog significantly dipped.⁸ On Facebook, his weekly posts became mostly one-minute video compilations of official government events, with most lacking the personal touch of his pre-election posts. This noticeable decline in Marcos Jr.’s online presence after the 2022 elections may reflect complacency

or a lack of compelling material to sustain engagement. Either way, his diminished visibility ceded the digital spotlight to the Dutertes.

In stark contrast, since 2022, Sara Duterte has maintained a robust social media presence, posting at least one personal video per week on Facebook and staying active on TikTok.⁹ She has also granted numerous interviews, held frequent press conferences and posted countless social media videos defending herself against corruption allegations and criticizing the Marcos administration. That high volume of raw material fuelled a wave of viral content. For example, in August 2024, she sparred on camera with opposition Senator Risa Hontiveros during a congressional hearing over alleged fund misuse.¹⁰ Social media clips of that exchange portrayed Duterte as bold and unflinching, with a TikTok post by user “@yourstrulyamor” garnering over 8 million views.¹¹

With the breakdown of the Marcos-Duterte alliance, many former UniTeam vloggers pivoted to the Dutertes, likely because content creators gravitate towards issues and figures that drive views and engagement. Even steadfast pro-Marcos Jr. supporters now struggle to promote the administration online. For instance, YouTube creator “Sangkay Janjan”, who has posted pro-Marcos Jr. content since 2017, saw his most popular pre-2022 video reach 3 million views in 2021, with other campaign videos averaging around 500,000 views. But now his videos about the Marcos administration attract significantly lower engagement.¹² Because Marcos Jr. campaigned on a vague platform of “unity”, his early years in office produced no marquee policies that could galvanize viral content, unlike Rodrigo Duterte’s all-consuming “war on drugs” that dominated news cycles and social media after he became president in 2016.

Online support for the Dutertes has often been accompanied by disinformation targeting the Marcoses. In April 2024, for example, government agencies were forced to debunk an audio clip—widely circulated on social media—that allegedly captured Marcos Jr. ordering a military attack on China; Manila confirmed it was a “deepfake”.¹³ In August 2024, former UniTeam content creator “Maharlika” faced backlash after posting a video of someone resembling Marcos Jr. sniffing a white powder,¹⁴ recalling long-standing (and unproven) allegations of cocaine use, accusations echoed by Rodrigo Duterte in a 2024 speech.¹⁵

After Rodrigo Duterte’s March 2025 arrest, social media platforms were flooded with users questioning both the arrest’s legitimacy and the ICC’s jurisdiction over the Philippines. Multiple viral posts accused Marcos Jr. of allowing the ICC to “kidnap” his predecessor.

The hashtag “#BringHimHome” was used in over 200,000 Facebook posts, portraying both Rodrigo and impeached Sara Duterte as victims of political persecution.¹⁶ “Bring him home” also became a rallying cry for Duterte-backed senatorial candidates. That surge of pro-Duterte content also introduced a new political figure into the public eye: 21-year-old Veronica “Kitty” Duterte, Rodrigo’s youngest daughter and Sara’s half-sister. Sara and Kitty Duterte frequently appeared as speakers, and Kitty’s speeches—particularly a TikTok video by “@duterte.dailyupdates” calling her the “Tiger of Mindanao”—also went viral, garnering over 2 million views and 200,000 likes.¹⁷

Before Rodrigo Duterte’s arrest, online criticism of Marcos Jr.’s administration mostly centred on its underwhelming policy record, such as failing to deliver on the promise of 20-peso-per-kilo rice. After the arrest, however, Duterte supporters pivoted to a narrative of “loyalty and betrayal”, prioritizing personal attacks over policy arguments.¹⁸ Several viral clips highlighted the Marcoses’ perceived ingratitude, reminding viewers that Sara Duterte agreed to be Marcos Jr.’s vice president in 2022, despite her father’s apparent desire for her to run for president herself.¹⁹ One Facebook post, shared over 700,000 times and attracting over 38,000 reactions, underscored the sentiment: “If it weren’t for Sara [Duterte], there wouldn’t be a President Marcos today.”²⁰

However, a Reuters investigation found that one-third of the Twitter/X accounts driving conversation about Rodrigo Duterte’s arrest were fake. According to the report, the accounts “posted simultaneously, with coordinated activity spikes, identical content, and promotion of the same hashtags and narratives”.²¹ This resurgence of disinformation tactics, reminiscent of those deployed during Duterte’s own administration, demonstrates that the Philippines’ disinformation problem remains unresolved since Duterte weaponized it in 2016. It also underscores the Dutertes’ continued ability to shape online narratives to their advantage.

Midterm elections in the Philippines are typically viewed as a referendum on the incumbent administration’s performance. In 2019, Duterte-aligned candidates swept all 12 available Senate seats, buoyed by his overwhelming popularity and the war on drugs.²² In contrast, only five out of ten Marcos-backed Alyansa candidates won seats in 2025, indicating waning trust in Marcos Jr.

Alyansa candidates tried to emphasize policy platforms at their rallies,²³ and Marcos Jr. continued to invoke “unity” after the elections.²⁴ However, their efforts to stay silent on the dynastic rift and be more programmatic in their campaigns paled compared to

the emotionally laden campaigning of the Duterte camp, whose narrative dwelt on two issues: Sara Duterte's impending Senate impeachment trial (which is due in June 2025) and Rodrigo Duterte's ICC arrest. The DuterTen candidates capitalized on the emotional resonance of impeachment and the ICC arrest, successfully steering public conversations. At campaign stops, they explicitly urged voters to back them to defend Sara and "bring Rodrigo Duterte home".²⁵ One key ally was Imee Marcos, the President's sister, who left the Alyansa slate after criticizing her brother's handling of Rodrigo Duterte's ICC arrest.²⁶

Marcos Jr.'s vague slogan of "unity" worked in 2022, but it failed to translate into concrete policies or programmes that could sustain political momentum for the president online or offline. That shortcoming is reflected in the tidal wave of disinformation targeting Marcos Jr., the exodus of former UniTeam vloggers to the Dutertes and the underperformance of the Alyansa slate in the midterm elections. Meanwhile, the collapse of the UniTeam, Sara Duterte's impeachment and Rodrigo Duterte's ICC arrest elevated the Dutertes' visibility on social media—and shaped the pre-election discourse in 2025. In the aftermath of those elections, Marcos Jr. reshuffled his cabinet, citing "public frustration over delays in meeting immediate, day-to-day needs" as justification.²⁷

Yet despite Marcos Jr.'s efforts to focus on policy and ignore the Dutertes, public discourse—both on social media and in traditional outlets—remains dominated by issues that favour the Dutertes. Senator Imee Marcos has seized on public sentiment around the ICC arrest, meeting with Rodrigo Duterte's lead defence counsel and vowing to "bring him home". Incumbent senators are now clashing over whether to dismiss Sara Duterte's impeachment trial due to scheduling delays; if she is found guilty, she could be permanently barred from running for public office. Opposition figures decry these delays as "unconstitutional" and an affront to the public's right to transparency and accountability.²⁸ Ultimately, the Senate's decisions may bolster the Dutertes' political survival at the expense of institutional integrity and accountability for public officials.

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Violence and Changing Drug War Rhetoric in the Philippines' 2025 Midterm Elections

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At the 2025 midterm elections, Rodrigo Duterte, the former president, was elected mayor of Davao City despite having been arrested by the International Criminal Court (ICC) over alleged crimes against humanity and sent to The Hague for trial just months earlier. His eldest son, Paolo, was re-elected to the House of Representatives, and his youngest son, Sebastian, became Davao City's vice mayor. During their campaigns, Duterte's children projected themselves as upholding their father's propensity for violence. Sebastian Duterte talked tough on drug users and criminals, declaring in March 2024, "If you don't leave [Davao], I will kill you."¹ Within a week of this threat, seven drug suspects were killed. (Between 12,000 and 30,000 people were killed in Duterte's drug war from July 2016 to March 2019.²) CCTV video showing Paolo Duterte assaulting a businessman shortly before midterms had echoes of his sister, Vice President Sara Duterte, assaulting a court sheriff in front of cameras in 2011.³ Duterte's strategy of leveraging violence as a political tool continues to endure, with many pro-Duterte candidates mimicking his tough-on-crime, "violent populist" persona.⁴ But how has the political discourse on Duterte's drug war changed?

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As Duterte's single term in office came to an end in 2022, numerous political aspirants capitalized on the popularity of his signature policy at that year's elections. On the campaign trail, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who went on to win the presidency, promised to "continue the fight against illegal drugs".⁵ However, Marcos Jr. also set himself apart from Duterte's violent approach by arguing that criminals and drug addicts should be treated as "patients in need of cure".⁶ (In contrast, Duterte often called them "subhuman".⁷) Thus, Marcos Jr. was clear about continuing Duterte's war on drugs, albeit in a less violent, humane and reformative manner.

On the other hand, candidates such as Senators Allan Peter Cayetano and Robin Padilla, two of Duterte's political allies, and the incumbent Sherwin Gatchalian were successful in 2022 by capitalizing on the drug war and echoing Duterte's violent message.⁸ Moreover, in 2022, several candidates who distanced themselves from the drug war's violence were unsuccessful. These included defeated presidential contenders Panfilo Lacson and Manny Pacquiao, as well as vice-presidential hopeful Vicente Sotto III. In other words, opposing Duterte's drug war rhetoric was a poor political strategy in 2022.

In 2025, however, the context shifted. Marcos Jr. was at pains to stress that his electoral slate, the Alliance for a New Philippines (Alyansa), was not "tainted by blood". When launching his administration's senatorial candidates, he told a crowd in his home province of Ilocos Norte, "Look at the record of our candidates. None of them are tainted with blood because of *tokhang* [drug war]. None of them are involved in stealing sacks and sacks of money."⁹ This was a direct attack not only on former president Rodrigo Duterte for his war on drugs but also on Sara Duterte for her alleged involvement in the misuse of millions of confidential funds, over which the House of Representatives impeached her in February 2025. (She will stand political trial in the Senate.) Days after Rodrigo Duterte was arrested in March 2025, Marcos Jr. spoke again about the drug war. "In our fight for illegal drugs", he said, "we don't need to go through a bloody solution."¹⁰ This position was somewhat paradoxical, since Marcos Jr.'s father and namesake ruled as a dictator (1972–86). In one way, Marcos Jr. has attempted to recast himself as the "champion of human rights" by rejecting the drug war.

Not everyone in Marcos Jr.'s Alyansa slate kept to this line. For instance, incumbent Senator Pia Cayetano was part of Marcos

Jr.'s alliance but refused to participate in its campaigns following Duterte's arrest in March 2025. A few months earlier, she had called the war on drugs an "effort [that is] a matter of great importance to our people".¹¹ Her neutrality may have been why she was re-elected to the Senate in the midterms. Other members of Marcos Jr.'s alliance, such as Lacson, Sotto and Pacquiao, who ran for the Senate in 2025, took differing positions on the drug war. Lacson, for instance, told his supporters that, while he was opposed to Duterte's violent drug war, the government "should still accord [Duterte] all the legal means as a former president and a Filipino citizen", referring to the former president's arrest.¹² During the campaign period, Lacson and Sotto revived their 2022 campaign messages for a "holistic, focused on prevention, non-violent, reformed, and rules-based war on drugs". However, they did so without openly attacking Duterte himself.¹³ Lacson and Sotto's political comebacks were successful, with both winning seats in the Senate. Some Alyansa candidates, such as Erwin Tulfo, Abigail Binay and Benhur Abalos, also adopted Lacson-Sotto's political strategy. While Tulfo won the senatorial seat joining his brother, incumbent senator Raffy, Binay and Abalos were defeated.¹⁴

In contrast, Pacquiao shifted by making anti-corruption, not the drug war, the central theme of his senatorial campaign. In 2022, when running for president, Pacquiao was staunchly in favour of the drug war. In fact, he played a key role in ousting then-Senator Leila de Lima as chairperson of the Senate's Justice and Human Rights Committee because of her role in investigating Duterte's war on drugs in its early days.¹⁵ In 2025, Pacquiao's stance softened. He did not speak out against Rodrigo Duterte's arrest, nor gave a "definitive opinion" on whether he would vote to impeach Sara Duterte if he was elected to the Senate.¹⁶ This change of position may have been why Pacquiao lost in the midterms. Pacquiao's party-list organization, 1Pacman, failed to win a single seat in the House of Representatives.

Some Duterte loyalists remained stalwarts in their commitment to the drug-war cause. For instance, incumbent Senator Ronald Dela Rosa, Duterte's close ally and former police chief, said on the campaign trail that he was willing to sacrifice himself in defense of the drug war, and that he has "been through many battles and is no longer afraid to die".¹⁷ Although not running in the 2025 midterms, Senator Allan Cayetano lent his voice to other Duterte-backed senatorial and local candidates. He defended the drug war

as a way of protecting human rights and getting people “out of poverty”.¹⁸ This was not a new narrative. Duterte has consistently framed his signature policy as benefitting “our children and nation”, arguing that it was meant “not to kill, but to preserve life” and that it was “pro-poor, not anti-poor” because a family that has a drug-dependent member “cannot pull themselves out of poverty”.¹⁹

Other contests saw drug warriors go up against those who had changed their minds. For instance, in Tagum City, Davao del Norte Province, the mayoral race was between Rey Uy, the incumbent, and Allan Rellon, a former mayor. Uy had been charged for allegedly creating a death squad in Tagum City, while Rellon had previously talked tough on criminals and drug dealers.²⁰ However, in his 2025 campaign, Rellon shifted from the drug war to “bringing God back to the city” and warned of Uy’s “ungodly link to Tagum death squads”.²¹ However, Rellon’s image change did not pay off; he lost to Uy by 40,804 votes. In Cebu, incumbent Governor Gwen Garcia, a former Duterte ally, lost to Pam Baricuatro, a member of Duterte’s party, the Philippine Democratic Party. After winning the 2022 elections, Garcia had declared that the “all-out war on drugs” should continue.²² However, in 2025, she distanced herself from Duterte and took a neutral position between the Marcoses and Dutertes, which turned out to be a losing strategy.

Still, defending Duterte was not a fail-safe option. Franklin Quijano, a long-time Duterte ally and former mayor of Iligan, a city in Northern Mindanao, framed Duterte’s arrest in March 2025 as an attack on democracy.²³ Despite standing up for the Duterte cause, he was defeated. Michael Rama, endorsed by Sara during the campaign, also failed in his re-election bid as Cebu City’s mayor.²⁴ Meanwhile, Duterte critic Tommy Osmena was elected Cebu’s vice mayor.

The results of the 2025 midterms indicate that capitalizing on the popularity of Duterte’s drug war only worked if Duterte himself was at the centre of a candidate’s discourse. Those who succeeded consistently aligned their persona with his and expressed loyalty to the Dutertes throughout the campaign. Opposing Duterte’s drug war was not necessarily a hindrance, but most successful candidates did not make Duterte the object of their criticism and, thus, avoided antagonizing his base. This nuanced campaign strategy will likely guide political elites in subsequent local and national electoral contests in the Philippines.

NOTES

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