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## Philippines at the Crossroads: 2025 Midterm Elections and the Battle of Dynasties

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RISHAB RATHI, MAY 21 2025

On 12 May 2025, Filipinos participated in a crucial midterm election, widely seen not only as a referendum on the leadership of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. but also as a defining moment for the future of Vice President Sara Duterte. The stakes were remarkably high as over 18,000 national and local positions were contested, including seats in the House of Representatives and the influential Philippine Senate. However, beyond the numbers and formal processes, this election exposed deepening fault lines within the political establishment, largely embodied by the growing rift between two of the country's most powerful dynasties. The disintegration of the Marcos-Duterte alliance, which had delivered a landslide victory in the 2022 general elections, set the stage for a highly charged electoral atmosphere. Their split has transformed what was once a seemingly invincible coalition into a bitter political rivalry, reshaping alliances, political strategies, and the broader democratic landscape of the Philippines.

In May 2022, a unique and unsettling political alliance emerged in the Philippines: the heirs of two presidents paired up in a historic bid to run the country. Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., joined forces with Sara Duterte, daughter of President Rodrigo Duterte, in the national election. Taking full advantage of their family prominence, the Marcos-Duterte tandem showcased the continued dominance of political dynasties in Philippine governance. Experts on Philippine politics point out that between 70% and 90% of elected offices in the country are controlled by influential families.

Richard Heydarian, a specialist in Philippine politics, observes that the erosion of democracy is worsening due to the merging of political dynasties with the celebrity elite, which consists of former actors, TV figures, and sports personalities. He argues that these elite groups monopolize national office, effectively barring ordinary Filipinos who may possess the merit and passion to serve from fully participating in governance due to systemic exclusion. Among the dynasties shaping the country's political landscape, the Marcos family remains one of the most controversial. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is the son of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., whose rule from 1965 to 1986 was marked by martial law, rampant corruption, and widespread human rights abuses. Despite this legacy, Marcos Jr. has employed a strategic media campaign to reframe his family history. Using social media platforms, particularly TikTok and YouTube, Marcos Jr. narrates well-produced videos portraying his father as a nation builder and his mother, Imelda Marcos, as a generous patron. These portrayals emphasize infrastructure development, agricultural innovation, and national unity, all presented as hallmarks of a supposed golden age.

Scholars and critics, however, reject this revisionism. Paul Hutchcroft of the Australian National University describes Marcos Sr.'s rule as characterized by patrimonial plunder. He identifies land grabbing, bank grabbing, and the use of dummy corporations as tools through which the Marcoses concealed their vast accumulation of wealth. Human rights organizations and independent investigators estimate that the family embezzled up to \$10 billion during their time in power. On the other hand, the Duterte family represents a different trajectory into dynastic politics. Rodrigo Duterte rose to prominence from the southern city of Davao, shaping his political career around a brand of strongman populism. His son, former Davao governor Vicente Duterte, became the first Mindanaoan president by tapping into local resentment against "Imperial Manila" and colonial legacies. His tenure as Davao mayor, marked by tough, often extrajudicial crime-fighting methods known as "penal populism" earned him a reputation as a no-nonsense leader.

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His presidency from 2016 to 2022 was infamous for its violent anti-drug campaign, which led to the deaths of 7,000 in just six months and drew condemnation from international human rights bodies. Though he positioned himself as a political outsider, the Duterte family actively engaged in traditional political practices such as patronage, vote-buying, and leveraging business interests to secure and expand their influence. Far from dismantling elite power structures, Duterte oversaw the consolidation of his family's political dominance with his children rising to key positions at both local and national levels, reinforcing the family's grip on power.

Rodrigo Duterte also cultivated a legislative supermajority through extensive coalition-building, a practice known in the Philippines as turncoatism. He opposed efforts to pass anti-dynasty laws, claiming such reforms violated democratic freedoms, even as his family's political dominance deepened. Financial records and media reports also indicated a dramatic increase in the personal wealth of Duterte and his children during their time in office, reinforcing critiques that Duterte was less a disruptor of elite politics and more a continuation of it.

The Philippines is an example of a presidential or executive-centric party system. Once seen alongside the United States as a model two-party democracy, its political landscape shifted after the authoritarian period. Scholars note that the power of the presidency and changes to electoral rules contributed to the rise of a fragmented multi-party system during the democratic transition. Amid this dynamic environment, the Philippine Senate holds a unique and influential position. Composed of 24 members elected at large by the national electorate, plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Senators hold office for six years, with elections conducted every three years to fill half of the seats in the chamber. This system, as outlined in the 1987 Constitution, gives senators a broad national mandate and positions the Senate as a key platform for potential future leaders, including presidential candidates. Senators are elected through a plurality-at-large voting system, with voters selecting up to 12 candidates. The twelve candidates receiving the highest number of votes are declared winners.

In addition to individual Senate races, the party-list system plays a significant role in the House of Representatives. Groups that receive at least 2% of the total vote are guaranteed one seat, and the highest-performing ones may receive up to three. However, even those falling below the 2% threshold may be awarded seats to fulfill the 20% quota for party-list representation. For instance, in the 2022 elections, only six out of 55 winning party-list groups surpassed the 2% mark, but others like ALONA Partylist, which garnered just 0.65%, still secured a seat. Political dynasties continue to dominate both the House and Senate, with 60 – 80% of Congress members in 2022 coming from political families. The high cost of running electoral campaigns and the dominance of elite networks make it difficult for candidates without family connections or financial backing to succeed, reinforcing a system where lineage often outweighs policy platforms.

The political landscape in the Philippines is currently shaped by dramatic legal and electoral developments. In March, former President Rodrigo Duterte was arrested by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of crimes against humanity linked to his controversial war on drugs. Meanwhile, his daughter and political heir, Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio, faced impeachment by the House of Representatives on multiple charges, including corruption and allegedly threatening President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. with assassination. She is expected to stand trial in the Senate later this year, which could impact her eligibility to hold public office. Despite these legal challenges, the Duterte family's political influence remains strong. Rodrigo Duterte, though detained in The Hague, won the mayoral race in his hometown of Davao City by a landslide, securing over 660,000 votes, eight times more than his nearest rival. The Senate race has drawn national attention, as the newly elected senators will play a crucial role in Sara Duterte's impeachment trial. The outcome could shape her political future and influence the 2028 presidential election.

Key political parties continue to shape the current landscape. Partido Federal ng Pilipinas (PFP), led by President Marcos Jr., promotes federalism and decentralization. Since Marcos's 2022 victory, the PFP has expanded its reach through alliances with the Nacionalista Party and the Nationalist People's Coalition. The Alyansa para sa Bagong Pilipinas, an electoral coalition formed by Marcos's allies, includes the PFP, Lakas-CMD, NUP, NPC, and the Nacionalista Party. On the other side, the Duterte Youth Party-List, aligned with the former president, champions conservative policies like mandatory Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) programs and strong defense. The DuterTen coalition, led by Partido Demokratiko Pilipino with support from *Partido para sa Demokratikong Reporma*

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and *Pederalismo ng Dugong Dakilang Samahan*, was a major opposition force in the 2025 Senate race. Marcos Jr.'s Senate endorsements yielded mixed results, with only 5 of his candidates winning seats. In contrast, four Duterte-backed candidates were victorious, including Bong Go in first place securing the highest number of votes in the Senate race with over 27 million and Bato dela Rosa in third. The Dutertes also dominated local politics in Davao City, with Rodrigo and his son Sebastian winning the mayoral and vice mayoral posts.

With the 2025 midterm elections concluded, the political landscape in the Philippines enters a volatile new phase. The outcome of the Senate elections has shifted the political landscape in the lead-up to the 2028 presidential race, intensifying the rivalry between the Marcos and Duterte factions. The performance of Duterte-backed candidates, despite the legal troubles facing the family signals that their influence remains potent. This outcome could strengthen the hand of Duterte-aligned forces in shaping the opposition narrative. They may also be able to field a viable presidential contender, should Sara Duterte survive her impeachment trial or an alternative figure emerge from the same bloc."

Foreign policy will be one of the defining issues in the run-up to 2028. A continuation of Marcos-aligned leadership would likely preserve the current strategic alignment with the United States. This will include deeper defense cooperation under agreements like EDCA, sustained military modernization, and efforts to boost foreign direct investment through stronger ties with Western allies. However, if a Duterte-aligned candidate gains ground, the country could witness a pivot back toward a more China-friendly stance. This would introduce significant uncertainty in regional diplomacy, defense strategy, and economic policy. The Duterte administration's earlier attempts to court Chinese investment yielded limited results, and a revival of that approach may strain existing partnerships with Washington while complicating the Philippines' role in regional security frameworks like the Quad or AUKUS. In the meantime, the country remains politically polarized, institutionally fragile, and deeply influenced by the actions of two powerful families whose legacies continue to define its democratic evolution.

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