

Philippine political crisis: Threats of assassination, military coup, and impeachment

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27 November 2024

An immense crisis grips the Philippines—a political war between President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and Vice President Sara Duterte, complete with threats of assassinations, military coups, and impeachment. Driving the crisis are Washington’s preparations for war with China, far advanced, that have riven the Philippine ruling class.

Vice President Duterte held a midnight press conference on November 24, saying there were threats against her life from the president and his political allies. Duterte announced that she had issued orders for the assassination of the President, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the first lady, Liza Araneta-Marcos, and House Speaker Martin Romualdez, first cousin of the President, in the event that she herself was killed. Her father, former president Rodrigo Duterte, issued an appeal to the military in a speech live-streamed on Facebook, to turn on Marcos and Romualdez, an obvious call for a military coup.

The Vice Presidency of the Philippines is not a lame-duck of merely symbolic office. The Vice President oversees a tremendous network of government offices and aides, constituting a sort of shadow presidency, a rival to the seated president waiting in the wings.

Sara Duterte is inclined to the same vulgar, unhinged political tirades as her father, former President Rodrigo Duterte. “We made a mistake with that f**** Marcos...” she declared to the nation. The Dutertes brought the thuggish culture of provincial warlordism, a culture of private armies and gangster families that has plagued much of the Philippines for over half a century, to the national and international stage.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr and Sara Duterte became political allies in the 2022 presidential election, forming a slate they called the “Uniteam.” It brought together the Marcos control of the Ilocano-speaking North, and Duterte’s control of the southern island of Mindanao. During the campaign period, Marcos pledged that he would continue outgoing president Rodrigo Duterte’s approach to international relations, orienting Philippine politics more closely to China and away from the United States. More than any other politician, Sara Duterte was associated with this orientation to China. She often concludes her speeches in Mandarin, an attempt to appeal not to Chinese Filipinos who are overwhelmingly Hokkien speakers, but to Beijing.

Shortly after taking office, however, under tremendous pressure from the Biden administration, Marcos began to reintegrate the Philippines into the camp of Washington. He opened up basing facilities under the auspices of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), resumed massive war games, and began aggressively prosecuting Manila’s claim to disputed islands in the

South China Sea. The Biden White House quietly buried outstanding warrants issued by US courts for human rights violations and theft against the Marcos family.

The open conflict between Marcos and Duterte erupted over investigations in the Philippine legislature. The House of Representatives, despite its representatives being split along numerous different party lines, is aligned in a supermajority behind Marcos. Under the leadership of Romualdez, it organised a four-committee investigation (Quad-Comm) panel to identify links between Philippine offshore gaming operators, known as POGOs, the illegal drug trade, extrajudicial killings, and the Chinese. At the centre of all of the allegations raised by the so-called Quad-Comm investigation are connections between the Dutertes and claims of Chinese subversion and infiltration of Philippine society.

POGOs are online gambling businesses catering largely to an international Chinese clientele. They began operating in the Philippines in 2003 under the Gloria Macapagal Arroyo administration. They were immensely profitable and received official sanction and government regulation in 2016 when Duterte took office. Like call centres and other forms of offshore globalised labour, POGOs sprang up in many semi-rural parts of the Philippines. The Chinese government issued repeated appeals to the Duterte administration to end the POGOs, which they saw as circumventing China’s ban on gambling.

After a bevy of wild accusations raised in the press of kidnapping and criminal syndicates through the POGOs, an investigation was launched in the Senate, headed by Sen Risa Hontiveros. An ugly anti-Chinese atmosphere gripped Philippine politics. Hontiveros alleged that the POGOs were a plot of the Chinese government to infiltrate Philippine society. She attempted to expose individuals as having been born in China, and stripped them of their Philippine citizenship. She has alleged mass infiltration of the country by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA), stores of Chinese military uniforms housed in POGOs, and denounced multiple people as Chinese spies. Two days ago, Hontiveros claimed that one of former President Duterte’s key economic advisers, Michael Yang, was an agent of Chinese intelligence.

In July, the Marcos administration banned POGOs. The Quad Comm investigation followed. The centre of its efforts, like those in the Senate, is the attempt to associate the Dutertes with alleged Chinese espionage by way of the POGOs and to strip them of their political power.

The House quad-comm investigation summoned the Vice President

for interrogation in mid-November, claiming that she had misused her allocated budget of confidential and intelligence funds for personal benefit, bribery, and to oversee red-tagging and extrajudicial killings. The budget of the Office of the Vice President for 2025 was slashed from P2 billion to P733 million. Duterte declared that she would need to close ten satellite offices, and lay off 200 staff members as a result.

The hypocrisy of the House and Senate investigations is staggering. Both branches of the Philippine legislature, most of the representatives of which are still seated, overwhelmingly supported Rodrigo Duterte's presidency and his war on drugs. Duterte had the largest supermajority support in the legislature in Philippine history.

Marcos has reoriented Philippine geopolitical ties back into the camp of Washington, however, and this has brought the Philippines to the brink of armed conflict with China. US medium-range missiles have been deployed to the northern Philippines targeting China. A joint US-Philippine military task force has been created to oversee confrontations with China in the South China Sea.

The investigations and accusations that have brought the Philippines to the current sharp political crisis originate in the consolidation of power around Marcos on the basis of this geopolitical reorientation. The lurid, racist accusations of Chinese espionage, all baseless, that run throughout the investigations express the political essence of the matter. The Marcos administration is isolating and cutting off the power of the Dutertes because they represent factions of the Philippine elite who are looking to secure better political and economic relations with China. Such improved relations can only come about if the Philippines distances itself from Washington's aggression.

During quad-comm proceedings, Zuleika Lopez, Sara Duterte's Chief of Staff, was charged with contempt. Arrest orders have been issued for other senior aides to the Vice President as well. Lopez was hospitalised for a panic attack. When the House ordered her transferred from the hospital to a detention centre, the Vice President and her head of security allegedly physically assaulted the police officer involved. The Quezon City Police District filed charges of direct assault against Duterte and the head of her security group on Wednesday. It was after these events that Duterte launched her midnight tirade threatening the assassination of President Marcos.

The charges were the pretext for Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff General Romeo Brawner to order the replacement of the entire Vice Presidential Security and Protection Group by a new contingent appointed by the AFP. Duterte, maintaining that there were threats against her life, refused the new contingent of twenty-five officers and said that she would rely on a private team she would put together herself.

The security teams of the President and Vice President, while they are special military and police detachments, function to a large extent as a private army. It is a form of warlordism. Seventy-five police officers on Duterte's team have already been removed. The military personnel will likely be removed today.

The National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) served a subpoena to Duterte for her declaration that she had hired a hit-man to kill the President, should an attempt on her life succeed. The NBI stated that it was considering filing charges against Duterte for violation of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020.

The Anti-Terrorism Act was enacted by Rodrigo Duterte in 2020 as a means of suppressing dissent. It authorised arrest without warrant, warrantless wiretaps and surveillance, and was the mandate for the creation of the murderous National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) that oversaw the

suppression of left-wing organisations.

Rumours of military coup are circulating widely, as they always do during an intense political crisis in the Philippines. General Brawner told the press he was confident of the loyalty of the whole Armed Forces of the Philippines to the constitution. History has repeatedly proven that the loyalty of the generals and ranking officers of the Philippine military is not to the constitution but to individual members of the political elite. It is these personal loyalties that have shaped the many coup attempts that have rocked the country over decades.

Former President Rodrigo Duterte on November 25 issued an appeal to the military. "Nobody can correct Marcos. Nobody can correct [House Speaker] Romualdez. There is no urgent remedy. It is only the military who can correct it." The Department of Justice said Duterte's remarks "bordered on sedition," and the Office of the Executive Secretary said it was treating them as "a blatant call for the military to launch a coup."

Most fundamentally, the loyalty of the Philippine military brass is to the United States. Many of the leading officers received training at American military institutions, where they were trained in the geopolitical interests of Washington, the politics of violent anti-communism, and the art of torture and repression. Both this training and the history of martial law incline them to a personal loyalty to Marcos. Former Senator Antonio Trillanes, his career based on being a military officer who attempted to stage a coup, called for the immediate impeachment of Sara Duterte.

The Philippine National Police (PNP), on the other hand, are not the instrument of coup attempts and power grabs, but of day-to-day repression, of dead bodies in the streets and disappearances. The loyalty of the police in the Philippines, fed by the impunity of mass murder under Rodrigo Duterte's so-called war on drugs, inclines to Duterte. Their perspective was articulated by Senator Ronald dela Rosa, former PNP chief, who told the press he agreed with Duterte's appeal to the military. The police are not a force to overthrow Marcos, but disgruntled they can create immense instability.

The political allies of the Dutertes are scurrying for cover. Former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo—immensely politically influential, a longtime ally of the Dutertes, and herself closely associated with the sections of the Philippine elite oriented toward China—seems to be moving to the Marcos camp. She posed for pictures in the legislature with Speaker Martin Romualdez two days ago, both of them giving the cameras a thumbs-up sign.

The political crisis in Manila is an acute expression of the tensions in ruling circles throughout the region, fuelled by the US-led war drive against China and worsening economic and social conditions, all of which will only escalate under the incoming Trump administration.



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