

Midterm Philippine elections destabilized by advent of Trump administration

John Malvar
29 January 2025

The Philippines is holding its midterm election in May. All 318 seats in the House of Representatives and 12 of the 24 seats in the Senate are being contested. Regional and local elections for governors, mayors and city council members are also being held.

The global volatility and the bullying of the new Trump administration, a palpable fascist menace the world over, has fundamentally destabilized Philippine politics, as it has every country. This is finding increasingly sharp expression in the election, which is becoming a referendum between elite factions over Manila's geopolitical ties.

The election period opened on January 12. Campaigns for national offices will officially commence on February 11 and for local positions on March 28. Billboards and posters for candidates are already everywhere on display.

For the past three years, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has exercised control of a supermajority bloc in the legislature. However, political tensions in the elite sharpened into two rival camps, that of Marcos on the one hand, and that of former President Rodrigo Duterte on the other. The rival factions expressed the geopolitical tensions stoked by Washington's rapid preparations for war with China. Marcos has lined the country up behind Washington's war drive; Duterte expressed a growing tendency among sections of the elite to reorient the country's ties toward China. Improved ties with China require a break with Washington's warmongering.

The social constituency in the Philippine elite for the pro-China sentiment expressed by Duterte and his daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte, is largely provincial, those whose base of economic and political power is the country's vast hinterlands, long excluded from global markets by the Philippines' deeply underdeveloped infrastructure. They see in Chinese investment and relations a chance for economic freedom from what they term 'imperial Manila.' These layers of the elite are in a real sense the most Trump-like section of Philippine politics, marked by a volatile, fascist populism, but their geopolitical interests run athwart those of Washington.

Open political warfare between these two camps erupted in 2024, including the public discussion of assassination attempts and impeachment. The balance of political power is currently overwhelmingly behind Marcos, who himself has dictatorial aspirations. The Alyansa para sa Bagong Pilipinas (Alliance for a New Philippines), the Marcos-aligned electoral alliance, was formed in May 2024. It controls 283 of 318 seats in the legislature and 15 of the 24 senate seats. Of the contested twelve Senate seats, nine are currently controlled by the Marcos aligned coalition.

Such alignments express in part an alignment of political interests, but for many such alliances are but part of the craven game of Philippine politics, as the legislature lines up with the dominant political faction largely out of financial interests. Should the winds of political circumstance shift away from the political leaders of the pro-US faction, a great many of the congressmen now in Marcos's supermajority would rapidly reorient to the rival camp.

The Duterte camp is currently politically hobbled, but a subterranean pro-China sentiment in the elite is growing, born above all of fear of the implications of Washington's relentless drive to war and volatility.

The election will be a referendum between these two camps and more than any other factor will be shaped by speculation over relations with Trump's America. Trump's tariffs, suspension of government grants and loans, and mass deportation have already fundamentally altered the election and their impact is the subject of intense speculation.

HSBC reported at the beginning of January that the Philippines was the most insulated country in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from economic risks posed by Trump's tariff threats. The alleged resilience of the Philippine economy stems from a series of trade agreements whose lineage dates back to the formal granting of independence by the United States to its colony. The terms of the agreements always served Washington's interests, hobbling Manila's economic development as source of raw materials for US corporations and market of US commodities. While Vietnam and Thailand, as HSBC

reports, may be more vulnerable to Trump's tariffs, Trump could well scrap the Philippines vaunted Most Favored Nation trading status and Generalized System of Preferences on a late-night whim.

The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs reported that it had contacted the US Embassy in Manila for clarification on what programs' funding were halted and being subject to review by the Trump administration. The Embassy referred the Philippine government to the website www.foreignassistance.gov. *Business Mirror* reported that \$US184 million in assistance considered obligations based on binding agreements concluded in 2023 and 2024 were now suspended and subject to review, including \$11 million in USAID operations, funding for biodiversity and forest protection, tuberculosis mitigation, HIV/AIDS control, and education funding.

The Philippine Embassy in the United States set up a network of 24-hour consular hotlines for Filipinos in the country at risk of mass deportation by the Trump administration. According to the US Census Bureau more than 300,000 undocumented Filipinos live in the United States; the Philippine Ambassador Jose Manuel Romualdez estimated the number at 350,000. The actual figure is likely much higher than either estimate.

The Embassy issued instructions on Facebook to Filipinos in the United States, under the heading "Kabayan, May Karapatan Ka!" (Fellow countryman, you have rights!), informing them of their right to remain silent, to be paid a minimum wage, to refuse an illegal search and to have an attorney.

Among those exercising the right to remain silent was the Marcos administration, which has said not a word against the threatened mass deportations! According to the Department of Foreign Affairs, Marcos is attempting to arrange a face to face meeting with Trump to discuss, not deportations, but regional security and defense modernization.

Washington did everything possible prior to the inauguration of Trump to instigate anti-Chinese sentiment in the broad Philippine population, including systemic online disinformation, promoting baseless allegations of Chinese spies.

A mass deportation of Filipino nationals from the United States on whom extended families and entire communities rely for remittances, with the deportees perhaps chained to their seats on cargo planes, would do much to shift public sentiment against the country's former colonial ruler.

The growing fear is that the United States will embroil the Philippines in a shooting war with China and then leave the country to its own devices. The memory of the fall of Bataan, of America's retreat and the brutal Japanese

occupation—MacArthur's egotistical declaration of his intended return was made from the safety of Australia—these remain core political memories and shape discourse around a possible war with China.

In a call with Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo on January 22, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio denounced China for its "dangerous and destabilizing actions" in the South China Sea. The Trump administration, launching a week-long blitzkrieg bent on establishing a presidential dictatorship in the United States, denounces China for destabilizing the world. Rubio spoke of Washington's historic ties to the Philippines and affirmed its ironclad commitment to the country.

Rubio's phrases are moth-eaten, as tired and overused as the word "ironclad." Every visiting American official for decades has used the same two words—ironclad and historic. They were likely first scrawled on a three-by-five card by Governor General of the Philippines William Howard Taft. The aphorisms cannot contain the enormity of geopolitics on the brink of a new world war.

A clearer assessment of US-Philippine relations was expressed by Pete Hegseth, during Senate confirmation hearings for Secretary of Defense proved unable when asked to name a single member country of ASEAN. The primary school stupidity of the fascist now at the helm of the massive US military has been much commented upon throughout Southeast Asia.

The volatility at the heart of US imperialism is destabilizing the globe. The elections in the Philippines are caught up in this process and may shape the country's geopolitical allegiances in the coming year.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact