

# Philippine Vice President Duterte impeached

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Vice President of the Philippines Sara Duterte was impeached on February 5 by a vote of 215 of the 306 members of the House of Representatives. The impeachment will go to trial in the Philippine Senate in the context of the country's heated midterm elections which are scheduled to be held on May 12.

This is the first time in Philippine history that a Vice President has been impeached. The office of Vice President in the Philippines is, in the performance of official duties, largely a symbolic position. The primary function of the office is to ensure a constitutional succession of power.

The Vice President works autonomously from the President, has her own substantial budget, and operates a sizeable network of government employees loyal to her office. Historically, during periods of tension between the President and Vice President, who are regularly rivals in Philippine politics, the Vice President wields what amounts to a shadow government waiting to supplant the President.

Three years ago, Marcos and Duterte were elected together on a shared "Uniteam" slate. Among the common positions of their campaign was that they would continue the geopolitical orientation of the outgoing administration of President Rodrigo Duterte, Sara Duterte's father. President Duterte, during his six years in office, had dramatically reoriented Philippine foreign relations away from the United States toward improved ties with China.

On taking office, facing intense pressure from both the Philippine military and the Biden White House, Marcos abruptly altered his stance, integrating the Philippines into the war plans of Washington. Under his presidency, the US has overseen and coordinated direct confrontations and collisions between Philippine and Chinese Coast Guard and naval vessels, has deployed a medium range Typhon missile system to the northern Philippines targeting China, and has been actively preparing a number of basing facilities to house US forces in the country.

Marcos' reorientation to the United States drove tensions between his political faction and that of the Vice President. The Dutertes represent sections of the Philippine elite who seek to improve ties with China by distancing the country from the aggressive policies of the United States.

It is the war tensions between the United States and China, and the question of the position of the Philippines in the growing conflict, that is being fought over in the election. The

impeachment of Duterte is the extremely aggressive opening salvo.

The decision to impeach Duterte was arrived at abruptly and late. Machinations toward her impeachment had previously been made beginning in August 2023. On several occasions representatives of the Stalinist Makabayan bloc had attempted to file impeachment charges, citing allegations of corruption, her complicity in the murderous 'war on drugs' conducted by former President Rodrigo Duterte, and her alleged failure to defend Philippine sovereignty in the South China Sea.

The final charge, regarding the South China Sea, raised by Makabayan and the right-wing Magdalo party, is the political essence of the matter, but it is a flimsy grounds for impeachment. The Vice President is responsible for neither foreign policy nor national defense. By late December 2024, three separate attempts to impeach Duterte had been made, but none succeeded.

With breathtaking rapidity, on February 5, the last day of the Congressional session before it adjourned for the duration of the election, a new set of impeachment charges were brought before the House. The first to sign on the new charges was Congressman Sandro Marcos, son of the President. This was the go signal. A political stampede followed. Some 215 representatives voted in favor, then the House adjourned.

Twelve of the country's 24 Senate seats are up for election. The Senators will sit as judges at the impeachment trial of Duterte. The outcome of the election will determine the fate of Duterte's impeachment. Her last-minute impeachment has turned the midterm election into an open battle between the rival factions of Marcos and Duterte, and through this conflict a struggle over the geopolitical orientation of the Philippines.

Why the last minute impeachment? Public tensions between Duterte and Marcos were, if anything, worse in December. Why did the President not greenlight charges then? Why wait until February? The fundamental political difference between two months ago and now is the beginning of the new Trump administration, which with its tariffs and openly imperialist aggression, has destabilized all of world politics. The question of how the Philippines will position itself in this new world, confronting tariffs and the mass return of over 350,000 undocumented Philippine immigrants from the US and economic warfare with China, has become unbearable. The ambiguity and the balancing of rival factions is turning to open

political warfare.

Duterte is charged with the misuse of funds, bribery and corruption, plotting to assassinate the President, and committing acts of sedition and insurrection. The charges of insurrection and plotting to assassinate the President stem from angry remarks made by the Vice President in late 2024 claiming that the President was trying to kill her and that she had ordered a contract killer, in the event of her death, to murder the president.

It is not yet certain when the Senate trial will convene. Senate President Francis Escudero stated that it was “almost a sure thing” that the trial would not finish before a new Congress took over on July 28. In other words, half of the Senators voting on the articles of impeachment would be those newly elected. Escudero anticipated convening the trial under the outgoing 19th Congress on June 2, when the legislative session resumes, and continuing it under the incoming 20th Congress.

Senator Tito Sotto stated that uncertainty over rules and conflicting legislative provisions regarding an impeachment trial, in particular whether the trial should be delayed until after the newly elected Senators took office, would likely see the matter raised to the Supreme Court.

The election season is just opening, but early polling showed candidates tied to the Marcos administration leading the Senate race for the so-called Magic 12, the twelve top vote-getters being those who elected to seats in the Senate. Political loyalties are fickle and the race remains close. At least five of the top 14 candidates are likely to defend Duterte.

The administration slate, assembled under the political umbrella Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas (Alliance for a New Philippines), kicked off its election campaign on February 11 in Ilocos Norte, long the regional base of power for the Marcos family. President Marcos told the rally that the candidates of Alyansa were distinguished from their rivals by their commitment to defend Philippine sovereignty over the West Philippine Sea, the name coined in the last decade for the portion of the South China Sea claimed by the country.

“None of them,” Marcos declared of the administration candidates, “applauded China and was happy when we were fired with water cannons, when the coast guard was hit, when our fishermen were blocked and when their catch was stolen from them.”

Despite the grandstanding, Marcos was openly declaring the fundamental question of the election for the Philippine elite: how the Philippines will position itself in a war with China.

Among those running for reelection on the Alyansa slate is Senate Majority Leader Francis Tolentino, the author of the Philippine Maritimes Zone Law and the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Law, both of which sought to codify Manila’s claims to the South China Sea against China, and both of which were signed into law by Marcos.

Also running for reelection is Sen. Imee Marcos, the President’s sister, but sharp political tensions over relations

with the United States run between the siblings. Sen. Marcos refused a position on the Alyansa slate, criticized the deployment of US Typhon missiles to the Philippines claiming it made the country a target for war with China, and publicly declared her opposition to the impeachment of Duterte.

The precedent for the impeachment of Duterte is the impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato Corona in 2012. The impeachment and trial, orchestrated by the Benigno Aquino III administration, sought to remove the Chief Justice on charges of corruption. Corona represented the political interests of the faction of the Philippine elite loyal to former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who had, to an extent, oriented the Philippine foreign policy towards China.

Washington played a critical role in the impeachment of Corona, supplying supposedly incriminating international financial records against Corona to the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC) for use in the trial. There is every indication that this pattern will be repeated in the trial of Vice President Duterte.

Eleven representatives from the lower house were selected to serve as prosecutors of the impeachment charges against Duterte before the Senate. Joel Chua, one of those designated, declared that the prosecution was filing subpoenas for Duterte’s bank records related to supposed “unexplained wealth.” This would be done in coordination with the AMLC.

Pammy Zamora, another of the prosecutors, stated that the collecting of financial evidence against Duterte would involve international assistance. The international assistance in question is without doubt that of Washington.



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