

Meet the Philippines' Socialist Candidate for President

Wednesday 9 March 2022, by [BISCOTTI Angelita](#), [DE GUZMAN Leody](#) (Date first published: 7 March 2022).

From Ferdinand Marcos to Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines has long been ruled by an ultrawealthy, corrupt elite. Presidential candidate Ka Leody de Guzman, a socialist and former labor leader, tells *Jacobin* he wants to end the rule of political dynasties.

On May 9 this year, elections will take place in the Philippines. Under the country's constitution, president Rodrigo Duterte is ineligible to run again, but even though he is due to depart Malacañang Palace, overthrowing Duterte's legacy — not to mention the long shadow of authoritarianism — will be a harder task.

Duterte's daughter Sara Duterte is running for vice president on the presidential ticket of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr, son of the late, deposed dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Marcos came to power in 1965 and used martial law in 1972 to extend his dictatorship until 1986. Although his official salary never exceeded USD\$13,500, according to the Supreme Court of the Philippines, during this time Marcos amassed a fortune of [\\$10 billion](#). It was enough to earn him a place in the Guinness Book of World Records for the "[greatest robbery](#) of government." This, however, pales in comparison to the far bloodier price paid by the people of the Philippines. Amnesty International [reports](#) that during Marcos's rule, his forces imprisoned 70,000 people, tortured 34,000, and killed over 3,200.

Marcos was overthrown by the People Power Revolution in February 1986. Despite this, shortly after coming to power in 2016, Duterte ordered that Marcos be reinterred with full military honors in the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Cemetery for Heroes). At present, Marcos's son is leading the [presidential polls](#).

Although the 1987 Philippine constitution includes a provision prohibiting political dynasties "as may be defined by law," children and blood relations of former elected officials are overrepresented in Congress. Consequently, it has proven impossible to pass the enabling legislation required to give the prohibition of political dynasties force. As a result, the same names regularly feature in newspaper headlines and lawmaking sessions, often imitating their dynastic antecedents. While Ferdinand Marcos [lied](#) about being a World War II resistance hero, Marcos Jr faked his [Oxford degree](#). And like the dictator he idolizes, Duterte has the blood of people from marginalized communities on his hands. According to Human Rights Watch, in the first two years of the "war on drugs" launched by his government, authorities killed 12,000 people, including [children](#).

Among a lineup of familiar names and faces, one candidate stands out for his commitment to fighting for genuine reform for working-class Filipinos. Backed by Philippine trade unions and social movements, Ka Leody de Guzman is standing for president, as part of the Partido Lakas ng Masa (Party of the Laboring Masses). The son of farmers from Oriental Mindoro, Guzman is a former factory worker and labor organizer. As a socialist, he is campaigning to introduce laws allowing divorce and same sex marriage, and wants to tax the nation's wealthiest citizens to fund investment in self-sustaining local industries. Guzman is also fighting to reduce labor contracts that undercut

rights and conditions and to improve wages for workers outside urban areas. His vice-presidential running mate is Walden Bello, a public intellectual and author whose bylines have appeared in *Jacobin* and the *New Left Review* and who holds a PhD in sociology from Princeton.

AB | Can you tell me about the day you decided to run for president?

KLG | I accepted the responsibility of running for president three days before my party, the Partido Lakas ng Masa, held its convention. It was a big deal for me. No one from the Philippine labor movement has run for president before.

I read a study saying you need between three and five billion pesos (\$58-97 million) to fund a presidential campaign. I don't have that. I'm not a celebrity either. People don't know me — yet. So, I'm counting on the support of the majority of Filipinos who are working-class like me. Filipinos want alternatives to the revolving door of celebrities and billionaires. It's time.

AB | Can you tell me what it was like growing up as the son of farmers in Oriental Mindoro?

KLG | I was the seventh of thirteen children, and I grew up during the martial law years. We were so poor we didn't have matches. To give you a sense of what it was like, when we needed to light a fire, I figured out who in the neighborhood to ask by observing who was cooking rice. I would carry the lit ember in a dried coconut half-shell. I had to be sure to walk, not run, because a strong downwind would make the ember flare up into my hand.

Myself and my sister before me are the only ones among my siblings to receive a college education. When she started studying to become a nurse, it was scary for us because she had to live with someone we didn't know, who paid her board, lodging, and tuition. I graduated from high school at seventeen and went to work in a garment factory in Pasig. That's how I put myself through college. I graduated from college in 1983, around the time Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr (a former senator and a pro-democracy leader) was assassinated. That pushed me to join the movement against the dictatorship.

AB | What is the biggest problem in Philippine politics today?

KLG | I'd say it's elite rule and the dominance of political dynasties in Congress and in the executive branches of government. Roughly 78 percent of elected officials are from political dynasties. Political dynasties accumulate wealth through corruption, and elections are won on money. A fifteen-second TV ad costs 900,000 pesos (\$17,541). What about three ads on three different TV stations? That's three million pesos (\$58,470) for a single day. Billboards on EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue) highway in Manila? They cost 300,000 pesos (\$58,470) a month. A single poster costs 40 pesos (seventy-eight US cents) — and how many villages do you have to reach during a national election? If you're a billionaire, you're automatically in the running.

That's why the people who end up running the country come from the elite classes. Marcos, Aquino, Macapagal-Arroyo, Estrada — these are the names of dynasties funded through intergenerational corruption or with the support of billionaire corporations.

AB | What kind of campaign coalition are you assembling?

KLG | My supporters are people like me, people who I can relate to, who have been through similar things. Walden and I didn't make up our political programs when we decided to run. These are programs that the labor movement has fought for the past thirty years. Our platform has been shaped by workers, women, environmentalists, farmers, fishers, teachers, health workers, members of the public service, socialist organizations, and other grassroots campaigns. We've made these

demands before — but a government of elites won't listen.

I'm not counting on gimmicks or money. I'm trusting that people will vote for a solid reform program they've been calling for, that stands up for their interests.

AB | According to the [International Labour Organization](#), 53 percent of Filipinos live on \$5.50 or less each day. Why do over half of Filipinos live this way? And how do you plan to address this?

KLG | The neoliberal policies of the Marcos era have been maintained by successive governments, including Duterte's current administration. That's what has enabled this sordid state of affairs. Supporters of these policies claimed that if we invest in big business, there would be a trickle-down effect, lifting up citizens in lower-income brackets. The past fifty years have shown this doesn't work. The wealthy got wealthier, but it wasn't distributed throughout the rest of the economy. The wealth stayed within the elite classes and never reached working people.

Policies that coddle big business make the rich richer while keeping workers poor. For instance, workers are being pushed onto contracts that pay low wages and offer no benefits and that give business the power to fire older workers or those who demand better conditions. Many of these jobs are contracted through labor-hire agencies, making it more difficult to organize unions.

The 1988 Wage Rationalization Law allows businesses to pay lower salaries in the provinces than in Manila. This gives big business an incentive to set up branches in the regions where they can hire cheaper labor. Workers in the provinces earn less as a result and work on contracts that offer no benefits or career progression, and which can be terminated at a moment's notice.

I'm a worker from a family of workers. My platform is pro-labor. I'm for labor regularization, which means protecting workers' rights and raising regional wages to match city wages. Big business sees this as going against their interests — I don't expect big business to support my campaign.

AB | According to a [report I read](#), you want to impose a 20 percent wealth tax on the 500 wealthiest Filipinos — is that right?

KLG | Yes. The Philippines is buried in foreign debt. When President Duterte assumed his post in 2016, our debt was 5.9 trillion pesos. After six years, that debt has risen to 13.7 trillion pesos.

During the pandemic, politically prominent members of the elite class became even wealthier. Real estate mogul and former presidential candidate Manny Villar saw his net worth increase by 28 percent. He's now worth 350 billion pesos (\$6.8 million). Lucio Tan, who owns interests in airlines, tobacco, spirits, and banking, saw his fortune grow by 94 percent. The money's there — it's just concentrated in the hands of a few capitalists.

This is why Walden Bello and I thought of imposing a wealth tax on the nation's richest. The pandemic exacerbated existing health and economic crises. So many factories have closed down, and many have lost their jobs and livelihoods. And when it comes to climate change and global warming, the Philippines is one of the world's most vulnerable countries. We are hit by over twenty typhoons [every year](#) — and they're getting stronger. They disrupt people's lives and damage homes, property, and local industries. We need revenue to support our people throughout these realities and to provide disaster relief and beyond.

You've heard of corporate social responsibility, yeah? The nation's most privileged already owe a duty of care to the communities that allow them to have so much wealth and power. With the wealth tax, we're simply increasing the responsibility they owe to society.

The plan is to institute an annual 1-5 percent tax, depending on how much they make. If it's 100 million pesos, they are taxed 1 percent. If it's 200-300 million, 2 percent, 3 percent, and so on.

Taxation in the Philippines is regressive. You pay taxes on what you buy. Even beggars and unemployed people pay taxes. Walden and I will change that. Taxation should be based on how much you earn. The wealth tax ultimately reflects this.

AB | The wealthy have many ways to avoid paying taxes. Compared to the majority of Filipinos, the wealthy pay the least in taxes.

KLG | Before workers' salaries arrive in their bank accounts, they've already paid taxes that are withheld by their employers. The elites, however, have tax havens that allow them to avoid paying. They get tax holidays. The government gives them hectares worth of industrial parks and land for free, as incentives to do business. This is where neoliberal policies get you. They coddle businesses, and the wealth doesn't trickle down. It's time that we change this. The wealthy should see it as an honor to pay taxes that actually help the community.

AB | What is your program for agrarian reform? How do you hope to help the next generation of Filipino farmers, so they don't have to go through what your family went through, growing up under martial law?

KLG | I want to repeal the Rice Tariffication Law that allows big business to import unlimited volumes of rice, at the expense of local farm industries. Local farmers barely sell their produce at cost, which discourages farming and pressures them to sell their land to real estate developers. Incidentally, one of the main proponents of the Rice Tariffication Law was Senator Cynthia Villar, wife of former presidential candidate Manny Villar, who is a real estate developer.

My government would prioritize research and development to improve local farming and fishing and increase revenues for these producers. My vision is for the Philippines to generate economic growth by supporting local production. Empowering local suppliers is also a food sovereignty and food security issue, especially during times of global economic uncertainty.

AB | Do you think it's genuinely possible to get rid of elite rule and political dynasties in Philippine government?

KLG | Sure — if Walden and I win.

The constitution prohibits political dynasties. The problem is that these provisions require enabling legislation that has never been passed. The representatives in Congress from political dynasties won't allow it. It's against their interests.

If Walden and I win, we'll use a constitutional provision called the people's initiative. Under the people's initiative, a law can be passed without going through Congress, as long as it has popular support.

Our political and electoral reforms will also include laws that bar people with ongoing corruption cases from running in elections. I'll also push for laws prohibiting nepotism in political appointments.

I'll also pass laws that give fair airtime to candidates from outside the political elite. Government-owned radio and TV stations should give equal advertising opportunities to all candidates. Million-dollar ads run on private TV stations and billboards over highways should be prohibited.

Even if we build prisons for public officials convicted of corruption, so long as we have a system that protects political dynasties and corrupt politicians, we will remain stuck in the current state of affairs.

AB | So what you're saying is that it's not enough to blame corruption for bad governance. Corruption is the outcome of an unequal power structure that favors very wealthy, well-connected dynasties that have been part of the ruling class for generations.

KLG | Yes. Corruption is a massive problem, but not the only problem. The root cause of it all is a neoliberal policy framework that props up big business and weakens local industries.

We have so many natural resources, and yet our economy is dependent on imports, while our policies are export-oriented. We export raw materials at cheap prices and import finished goods — made out of our raw materials — for much higher prices. Even our basic everyday goods are imported: toothpicks, hammers, electric fans, shoes. We even import onions and ginger.

AB | Basically, we make national dishes like adobo and tapsilog using imported ingredients.

KLG | That's right. We have enough to consider building a self-sufficient economy. Our lands and waters are vast. There's no reason Filipinos should go hungry. Yet so many of us still go to bed without eating dinner.

We're resource-rich, only the resources end up elsewhere. Big businesses and other nations profit from what is locally available to us. We're [global leaders](#) in nickel, copper, and gold mining. But because we export cheap and import at market rates, we're left with deficits. We never make back the real cost of selling raw materials. That's how we've ended up with a huge foreign debt.

Instead of exporting our raw assets, let's deploy to produce our everyday needs domestically. Let's provide for our own communities first. Let's sustain our people — especially those who've suffered the most from the past half century of neoliberalism.

Leody De Guzman
Angelita Biscotti

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Jacobin

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2022/03/duterte-marcos-dictatorship-philippines-presidential-election-socialists>

A Tagalog translation of this interview is [available here](#).