

Politics

Philippines: Joe Biden, Donald Trump, and the Marcos-Duterte Feud

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The clash between the Philippines's dynastic duo is an entertaining political soap opera. But this spat has the potential to turn violent very fast.

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Masked protesters act in front of the effigy of President Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte at Commonwealth Avenue during the demonstration.(Ryan Eduard Benaid / SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Manila—Here in the Philippines, we're famous for political soap operas. So it is not surprising that Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte's [threat](#) to have President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., assassinated made headlines globally. In a few weeks, Duterte went from imagining herself [cutting off Marcos's head](#) like a samurai executioner to [announcing](#) to the world that she had already hired a killer to bump off Marcos, his wife, and one of his cousins "if I get killed." And she added for emphasis, "[No joke. No joke.](#)"

Return to Form

To those who have followed the vice president's career, the last few weeks have witnessed her return to form after a spell of presenting a relatively pacific demeanor in public. The daughter of former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte first came to national attention in 2011, when as mayor of the southern city of Davao, she repeatedly [punched](#) a city marshal carrying out an eviction order on national television.

I myself have faced Sara Duterte's ire—not physically, as in the case of the poor Davao marshal, but politically—when I was running against her for the vice presidency in 2022. For calling attention to likely cases of corruption during her tenure as Davao's mayor, I received what is called a *sanbon zuki*, or triple punch, in Japanese martial arts: I was declared a "narco-politician," a label that carried the implicit threat of being extrajudicially executed; declared [persona non grata](#) in Davao by the City Council; and rewarded with a charge of [cyber-libel](#), for which I was arrested and am still on trial in that city.

Even as Sara Duterte was threatening Marcos Jr, his wife, Lisa, and his cousin Martin Romualdez

(the speaker of the Philippine House of Representatives), her father, the former president, was himself making headlines, suggesting that the country's military "do its duty to the country" in the face of what he denounced as "[fractured governance](#)" under the current regime. What many interpreted as a call for the generals to stage a coup d'état followed on the heels of his defiantly admitting, during expletive-ridden [testimony](#) in the Senate, that he ran a death squad targeting criminals while he was mayor of Davao City.

In other words, it's now total war between the Marcoses and the Dutertes.

End of the Affair

It seems only yesterday that the country thrilled to the political romance between Sara and Bongbong (Marcos Jr.'s nickname), culminating in the triumph of their ticket in the May 2022 national elections. The pair ran on a platform with a single word, "unity," without taking a stand on any issue. While Sara and Bongbong tried to convey national unity above political differences, jaded observers of the country's dynastic politics pointed out that unity in this case actually meant an agreement to share power between the most powerful family in the north of the country and the most powerful from the south, with little regard for the national interest. Given this alliance of convenience, the betting among political analysts was not on *whether* the current split would take place but *when*.

The political wedding was not the elder Duterte's idea; he had little respect for Marcos and had [denounced him](#) as a cocaine user prior to the elections. Duterte père was convinced that if his daughter were to run for president, she would win, and in late 2021, preelection [polls](#) showed her winning 20 percent of the vote, with Marcos Jr. trailing at 15 percent. But his headstrong daughter listened instead to her friend Senator Imee Marcos, Bongbong's sister, who had described the projected political union with the Marcos dynasty as a "[marriage made in heaven](#)" and eventually convinced Sara to take the subordinate role in the partnership.

The former president's primary concern was that, once in office, his daughter would be outmaneuvered by the Marcoses. After the election, his fears seemed to be confirmed by a series of developments. First, Marcos decided to give the vice president not the post of secretary of defense (that she had publicly hankered for) but the relatively toothless one of secretary of education. Then the House of Representatives—which has been run as a fiefdom by Romualdez—denied Sara a "confidential intelligence fund" for 2024 after her office could not account for how it spent an earlier slush fund of 125 million pesos (\$2.2 million) in just 11 days.

The final provocation, as far as the patriarch was concerned, was when the president and Romualdez endorsed amending the Constitution, which Duterte interpreted as a way to make Romualdez prime minister and derail Sara's plan to succeed Marcos Jr. via the presidential election in 2028. The constitutional changes would make the Philippines a parliamentary system, abolishing the presidency or turning it into a ceremonial position and making the head of the ruling party in the lower house of parliament the head of state. Such a move would [favor Romualdez](#), who does not have enough popularity to win a presidential election but has the loyalty of the majority of members of the House.

At that point, the former president could no longer hold back. In late January of this year, at a rally in Davao City, he called Marcos a [bangag](#), a slang word for "drug user," and denounced his plan to change the Constitution, warning that, like his father, Ferdinand Sr., he could be ousted if he pushed through with it. Rodrigo Duterte's younger son, Sebastian, the mayor of Davao, duly called on Marcos Jr. to resign.

Instead, it was Sara who gave up her position as secretary of education a few months later to protest what she saw as a concerted effort to oust her as vice president and discredit her family.

Deus Ex Machina

As of a few weeks ago, it seemed that the Marcoses held the winning cards. Then a *deus ex machina* materialized in the form of the results of the US elections: Kamala Harris lost to Donald Trump. This deprived Marcos Jr. of the chosen successor to his strongest ally, Joe Biden.

Since Marcos Jr. came to power in 2022, Biden has embraced him fully and rehabilitated him and the Marcos family on the global stage, despite the fact that his late father's name is still a synonym for unbridled corruption and his mother, Imelda, is mostly remembered as the last word in feudal extravagance owing to her fabled [3,000 pairs of shoes](#).

In advance of Marcos Jr.'s first visit to the United States as president in 2022, Biden assured him that a standing order calling for his arrest for [contempt of court](#) should he step on US soil would not be enforced. That contempt order had been issued by a Hawaii district court in 1995 owing to Bongbong's refusal to pay \$2 billion worth of civil damages awarded to victims whose human rights had been violated by his father, Ferdinand Marcos Sr.

The quid pro quo came when Marcos granted Washington four more bases—in addition to the five it already had in the Philippines—and the virtual outsourcing of the country's defense policy to the United States in the latter's effort to make the Philippines a [forward base](#) for the containment of China.

Kamala Harris became especially close to Marcos when, at Biden's bidding, she visited Palawan, the "front line" of the Philippines' territorial conflict with China, in November 2022, after which [she declared](#) that an "armed attack on the Philippines Armed Forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the South China Sea would invoke US mutual [defense commitments](#)."

What is important in this context is that a Harris succession was Bongbong's insurance policy, since the Armed Forces of the Philippines—a colonial creation of the US that has been armed and supervised by the Pentagon since its inception—has never gone against Washington's preference as to who wields power in the country.

With Trump's election, all bets are off. While Trump is likely to escalate the trade and technology war he initiated [against China](#) during his first term, his proto-isolationist goal of building an economic and security wall around Fortress America might make him [less inclined to continue](#) the dangerously aggressive military containment of China that Biden began—in which game the Philippines is a critical pawn.

Pulling back from Biden's open-ended global engagements, a Trump administration is likely to tell Manila not to count on Biden's "ironclad" guarantee of an automatic US military response under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty in support of Manila in the event of a major confrontation with China in the South China Sea (like the sinking of a Philippine vessel). Clarita Carlos, Bongbong's former national security adviser, has warned her ex-boss [on television](#) that Trump has said he would not "waste one American life for what he called 'rocks' in the South China Sea."

Trump takes everything personally, and he is unlikely to preserve the close friendship that Marcos Jr. had with his predecessor and Harris. On the other hand, although as a rough-edged populist Trump was often compared to Rodrigo Duterte—whose presidency lasted the whole of Trump's first

term—the US president never developed more than a friendly relationship with his Philippine counterpart.

But the uncertainty of the Washington transition may provide the Dutertes with a great opportunity to fish in troubled waters. The prospect of a major change in the relationship between Washington and Manila might, in fact, have been a factor in Duterte's recently thinly veiled appeal for a coup against Marcos.

The Dutertes continue to have a sizable base of popular support. Though recent surveys register a [decline](#) in Sara's trust and satisfaction ratings, they also show her approval ratings to be virtually tied with Bongbong's. Moreover, Marcos Jr.'s poll performance in his two and half years of office has been far below that of the elder Duterte, who left office with a 75 percent [approval rating](#) despite blunders in his administration's response to the Covid 19 pandemic and his own grisly war on drugs, whose excesses cost as many as [27,000 lives](#) and made him the subject of an investigation by the International Criminal Court.

To counter the presidential propaganda machine machine that now regularly pumps out news about Sara being corrupt, unstable, and violent, the Dutertes have highlighted the administration's failure to deal with inflation, Marcos Jr.'s alleged cocaine addiction, and his image as a "weak president" manipulated by his wife, Lisa, and his cousin House Speaker Romualdez. Having served along with Marcos Jr. in the House of Representatives in 2009, I can attest that criticisms of Bongbong as an "airhead" with little interest or capacity for effective governance have some basis in fact. Bongbong lacks the elder Duterte's ability to combine Machiavellian maneuvering with a populist appeal.

From Entertaining Soap Opera to Violent Reality?

As the country's dynastic war intensifies, partisans of both sides are busy rallying people to take sides in the conflict. Particularly prominent has been a former senator, Antonio Trillanes III, who has urged the liberal opposition and the left to drop their long-standing distrust of the Marcos family and come together in a united front to prevent the Dutertes from returning to power, invoking the principle of uniting against the lesser evil. Indeed, [some sectors](#) have already withheld or reduced their fire on the Marcoses and focused it on the Dutertes.

Others have cautioned against such an approach. To Herbert Docena, a respected independent voice on the left, this strategy is a mistake—one that will simply allow competing elites to use progressive forces for their own ends but eventually leave them high and dry. In a [recent post on Facebook](#) that calls attention to past examples of alliances with rival dynasties that merely served to marginalize and discredit progressives, Docena warned:

There are those, neither pro-Marcos nor pro-Duterte, who are goading us to effectively side with the Marcoses first now and help them as they crucify the Dutertes, thereby attempting to mobilize the working class in favor of one dynasty against another, as if nothing was learned from the disastrous tactic of siding with the Aquinos against the Marcoses in 1986, with the Arroyos against the Estradas in 2001, with the Aquinos against the Villaroyos in 2010, or with the Dutertes against the Roxas-Aquinos in 2016. There is a way to escape this vicious cycle: support neither the Marcoses nor the Dutertes and concentrate on building up the autonomous power of the working class and other oppressed groups so we will never again become cannon fodder in the bloody, internecine games of our country's corrupt dynasties.

It remains to be seen if a critical mass of citizens will eventually heed such calls for a “plague on both your houses” stance. In the meantime, most Filipinos appear to have fallen into their usual roles as spectators or bettors in a high-stakes ruling-class conflict that increasingly has the potential to turn from soap opera into violent reality.

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P.S.

- The Nation. December 6, 2024:

- <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/trump-philippines-marcos-duterte-feud/>

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