

Opinion

Philippines: The unraveling of a corrupt enabling system

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When, against all expectations, Rodrigo Duterte won the presidential elections in 2016, people wondered how long the former Davao mayor could maintain the sudden surge in popularity that had propelled him to the nation's highest office.

His parochial experience as the autocratic political boss of a Mindanao city barely prepared him for the immensely complex tasks of managing the affairs of an entire country, especially in a time of geopolitical tensions. Analysts expected the Duterte myth to swiftly unravel after he assumed office.

But, as it turned out, the Duterte regime did not only survive; it also emerged with the highest approval and trust ratings at the end of its six-year term. This was unprecedented. In the absence of a constitutional provision allowing reelection, the continued popularity of the Duterte political brand presaged the rise of the outgoing president's daughter Sara as his logical successor.

But for the fact that the younger Duterte lacked the self-assurance and bravura of her father, she could have been president in 2022. In any case, she could have garnered more votes than Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in that election.

Yet, Sara Duterte agreed to step aside and run as vice president to Marcos, despite topping the pre-election polls. Her dream political marriage to Marcos Jr. was shrewdly brokered by two powerful women—former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo who has sought to magnify her political clout by acting as Sara's mentor, and Sen. Imee Marcos, Marcos Jr.'s elder sister and friend to Sara. While the Duterte patriarch did not approve of the partnership, he decided it was futile to impose his will on his headstrong daughter.

The tacit understanding behind this partnership was that, in exchange for Sara's gracious collaboration in the Marcos family's single-minded quest to retake Malacañang 50 years after being driven out of power, the Marcoses would support her run for the presidency in 2028. By then, it was expected that she would have gained sufficient experience in leadership at the national level to be worthy of the presidency.

As expected, this north-south coalition of the country's two most powerful political dynasties could not outlive the limited purpose for which it was forged. If the Dutertes were looking to get their share of power as befits a real political partner, they could not have been more wrong. Vice President Sara did get appointed secretary of education, a position from which, her supporters hoped, she could strategically project her presidential ambitions.

But, outside the education department, she remained a political non-entity. Her father's appointees, who for six years inhabited the juiciest and most powerful sinecures in government, were summarily removed from their positions as soon as the Marcos team took over.

At the House of Representatives, Duterte's key ally, Arroyo, failed in her bid to re-assume the all-powerful position of speaker, after Malacañang made it clear that it preferred Martin Romualdez, the President's first cousin, to head the House.

Arroyo's return to the speakership, an expected reward for her role as matchmaker, would have enabled her to control key appointments to the chamber's most crucial committees. But the new administration had other plans, and these did not require her participation. The final blow came with her unceremonious ouster as senior deputy speaker.

Perhaps nothing is more emblematic of the changing of the guards at the House than the expulsion from the corridors of power of the acid-tongued Rodante Marcoleta, the Sagip party list representative who was one of the Duterte regime's most feared hatchet men. It was Marcoleta who led the assault on the ABS-CBN network to deny the renewal of its franchise and compel its closure as a broadcast company. The other day, the mighty Marcoleta was relieved of all his positions in major House committees, which had been the source of his outsized influence.

A worse fate than merely being fired or marginalized had befallen another Duterte stalwart—the vociferous Harry Roque, former party list representative and former Duterte spokesperson. Today, Roque faces possible prosecution for various kinds of criminal offenses in connection with the dubious services he provided to illegal offshore gaming operators and the allegedly unexplained wealth he accumulated during the Duterte years.

Like the cult leader and Duterte spiritual adviser Apollo Quiboloy of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, who was recently captured after a massive police search of his Davao stronghold, all of Duterte's enablers and perpetrators have become potential targets of congressional investigations.

This apocalyptic process is what we are seeing unfold in both the Senate and House hearings. Never has the cause of justice depended more on a rift within the ruling class than on the strength of the political opposition.

Deprived of the material resources (e.g., confidential and intelligence funds), political clout, and access to political patronage (e.g., Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office and Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corp. funds) to keep their enabling system going, the Dutertes are finding themselves deserted by their allies.

Given how rapidly the world of Dutertismo is collapsing, if Sara Duterte does not become president in 2028 or sooner, father and daughter and their legion of enablers may all likely end up in jail.

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P.S.

• The Inquirer. Opinion. September 29, 2024:

<https://plus.inquirer.net/opinion/the-unraveling-of-a-corrupt-enabling-system/>

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