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2024 Philippines Update

Abstracts

Beyond Geo-Politics: The Philippines in the
New Marcos Era

30 – 31 October 2024



ANU Philippines Institute

philippines.institute@anu.edu.au

The Australian National University

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Day One – 30 October 2024

Political Update - The Marcos Jr. administration: From populism to reformism?

Carmel V. Abao

Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science, Ateneo de Manila University

Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr, popularly known as Bongbong Marcos or BBM, won overwhelmingly as the 17th President of the Philippines in May 2022. This victory has been attributed largely to the Marcoses' alliance with the Dutertes during the election campaign. Sara Duterte, daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte, was equally successful in her bid for the vice presidency. Two years into BBM's term, the Marcos-Duterte alliance has collapsed, and relations between the two camps have been acrimonious, especially as both gear up for the 2025 local-national elections and the 2028 presidential elections. Borrowing from Mark Thompson's study of Philippine regimes as a cycle of populism, clientelism and bourgeois-led reformism, the presentation seeks to examine policy-governance shifts and continuities between the Duterte and BBM presidencies and determine the limits and possibilities of reform under the BBM administration.

Economic Update - Shaky recovery, misplaced priorities

Jan Carlo 'JC' Punongbayan

Assistant Professor III, School of Economics, University of the Philippines

The Philippines continues to navigate significant economic challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic scars left behind by the pandemic now seem permanent, and the Philippines is once more being left behind in ASEAN. In addition, the country faced a drastic surge of inflation in 2022-2023 and continues to be plagued by chronic underemployment, slow structural transformation, and anaemic human capital investments. On top of all these, enduring governance problems, including weak rule of law, chronic corruption, and misplaced budget priorities further constrain the country's growth and development potential in the coming decades.

Social and Environmental Update - Departures and continuities in Philippine environmental trajectories

Kristian Karlo Saguin

Associate Professor, University of the Philippines

Within the context of the uncertainties posed by climate change, the Marcos Jr. administration has declared climate adaptation, disaster risk resilience and addressing environmental challenges as top policy priorities in its development agenda. Marcos Jr. has somewhat departed from his predecessor's more populist, fragmented and inconsistent track record on the environment, through for example his support for the energy transition and decarbonization. However, he has also continued several of Duterte's contentious infrastructure projects that have generated strong opposition due to their significant social and environmental impacts on various communities. This presentation surveys recent developments on the environmental front in the Philippines during the first two years of the Marcos Jr. administration. It focuses on two sets of emerging environmental issues: the shift to renewable energy and the green economy, and the controversies over land reclamation and other big ticket mega-projects. It aims to paint a picture of the trajectories of the environment under Marcos Jr. and to assess whether these present a radical shift in approach or merely reinforce more of the same.

Keynote Speech - Unrequited Love: Duterte's China Embrace

Marites D. Vitug

Editor at Large, Rappler

Rodrigo Duterte was the first Philippine president in contemporary history to openly embrace China. Duterte changed the country's foreign policy unilaterally. Thus, it was difficult for Duterte to change the strategic thinking of the defense and security establishment and the foreign affairs department — and sway it towards China — because this has been moored in more than 70 years of a security alliance with the U.S.

Duterte regarded China as a rich and powerful friend who could continue to grow the Philippine economy. Equally important was the fact that China did not pass judgment on his bloody war on drugs which was Duterte's centrepiece program. On a personal level, he was comfortable with President Xi Jinping, traveling to Beijing to meet Xi five times during his six-year term. Other factors that contributed to his pro-China policy were his hatred of the United States; the milieu in which he grew up in Davao; and his claim to have socialist leanings. Duterte appeased China, refusing to use the 2016 legal victory of the Philippines in its maritime case against Beijing as leverage. Despite this, China continued its aggressive behaviour in the West Philippine Sea.

In the economic sphere, Duterte's love for China was unrequited. Of the US\$24 billion in loan pledges for infrastructure, only a fraction came through. Overall, Duterte's pivot to China had an impact on the national conversation, the rule of law, and politics.

Day Two – 31 October 2024

Memory, Community and Activism

Jocelyn ‘Joyce’ Martin

Associate Professor/ Maîtresse de conférences, Université Catholique de l'Ouest

Mapping the Marcosian Memory Machinery

Associate Professor Joyce Martin will discuss a “map of memory” that she draws from philosophy, sociology, psychology, media studies, history, and other disciplines to show that the Marcoses produce memory and forgetting on different fronts. Associate Professor Martin will argue that it is a combination of different forms of socio-cultural remembering and forgetting that feed the Marcosian mnemonic entrepreneurship and pose challenges and opportunities for the present and the future.

Michael D. Pante

Associate Professor, Department of History, Ateneo de Manila University

Deadly Intersections: Historical Distortion, Fake News, and Red-Baiting in the Philippines

This paper aims to show the connections between the following insidious forms of disinformation that have been weaponized against ordinary Filipinos in recent years: historical distortion, fake news, and red-baiting. State and nonstate actors employ these acts not only to spread falsehoods but also to silence targeted individuals and groups. In certain incidents, these acts have served as opening salvos to lay the foundation for outright criminal activities, including kidnapping and murder. This paper provides an inventory of cases that show the impact of this climate of fear and assesses recent efforts to combat systemic disinformation in Philippine society.

Soliman M. Santos Jr.

RTC Judge (Retired); Independent Researcher

Some dance to remember, some dance to forget: empirical insights from working on books on activism, insurgency and martial law in the Philippines

This paper presents some notable empirical or practical insights and critical perspectives on issues of memory, forgetting, and history derived by the author from working on three particular books on activism, insurgency, and martial law (ML) in the Philippines, as may guide further relevant studies, work and action. This discussion on memory and forgetting is a little different from most relevant discussions of the Marcos martial law dictatorship and the systematic historical revisionism in its defense. As quite much has been said, written, and published about and against the latter by academics and progressive political actors, this paper pays more attention to some critical introspection on the part of political activists and revolutionary movements. It covers five particular sub-themes: [1] “The Struggle of Memory Against Forgetting”

at the Micro or Personal Level; [2] A Question of Victims, Martyrs, and Heroes; [3] Dealing with the CPP-NPA Connection; [4] Reflections, Questions on ML, EDSA, the Marcos Family Return to Power; and [5] Approaches to Historical Work, including recognition of the special contribution of the genre of oral history, memory studies and radical memoirs. The paper ends with some thoughts on what else, aside from defending democracy and history, is to be done, in terms of progressive change and generational challenges.

The Changing Nature of Oligarchic Politics

Cristina Regina Bonoan

Senior Lecturer, College of Law, University of the Philippines

Constitutional Change and Oligarchic Politics in the Philippines, 1987-2024

After adopting the 1987 Constitution to safeguard democratic governance post-Marcos dictatorship, the Philippines has seen numerous, albeit unsuccessful, attempts at constitutional change. This paper examines the relationship between oligarchic interests and efforts to amend the Philippine Constitution from 1987 to 2024. The study explores key moments and movements for charter change under each administration and how powerful political and economic families have shaped or responded to these initiatives based on the political context and powerholders of the time. Our analysis shows that support or opposition to constitutional change often reflects strategic goals and political alignments, raising concerns about the authenticity of reform efforts. Critical drivers behind the push for constitutional reform include a distinct political agenda to retain power bolstered by undue presidential influence over Congress to promote narrow economic and political interests. However, competitive-clientelist dynamics among oligarchic families offer a countervailing force, especially with each new election cycle, contributing to the current constitutional resilience. This paper enhances the understanding of the interplay between entrenched power structures and constitutional reform, offering insights into the persistent influence of oligarchic families in shaping the political landscape of the Philippines.

Antoinette R. Raquiza

Professor, Asian Center, University of the Philippines

Philippine Big Business and Oligarchic Politics

The paper focuses on big business, specifically, those who made Forbes' top ten list of the country's wealthiest Filipinos. In view of the greater liberalization and privatization of governance, the post-authoritarian period has seen their growing presence in the development policy arena. Today, the country's biggest conglomerates are in the forefront in the delivery of public goods, notably, infrastructure, utilities (power, water, transportation), and social services – many of which are organized around their family businesses.

The paper will discuss the involvement of big business in oligarchic politics in two ways: one, their direct involvement in the making and implementation of policies, especially those related to their core businesses; and, two, their massive investments in the provision of public goods. I will trace the key policies since the restoration of representative institutions that opened the floodgates to private sector participation in the public sphere. Noteworthy, the increased presence of the

country's richest conglomerates in the running of the country also saw the tripling of their wealth. The paper concludes with a discussion on the convergence of interests between elected officials and the captains of industry – a convergence that studies have referred to as “oligarchic democracy” that thrives in neoliberal settings.

Marianne Juco Rodriguez

Senior Researcher, BSP Research Academy

Family ties between firms and politicians in the Philippine corporate sector

This paper measures the extent of family relations between businesses and government, and provide the quantitative evidence for the rich anecdotal literature on Philippine politicians and their firms. Using a sample of around 18,000 Philippine corporations, she estimates that in 2017, 22 percent of corporations are connected to incumbent politicians, and more than half maintain connections to incumbents and old political clans. Applying a nuanced typology that delineates between connections with business-oriented goals from those with politics-oriented ones, Marianne finds that more than 70 percent of these connections originate from political clans. Using descriptive analysis, she illustrates the pervasiveness of these corporate political connections across the different Philippine regions and industries. This paper examines some common assumptions about their effect on local economic growth, competition, and employment, and find consistent results with the literature.

Economic Resilience and Inclusive Growth

Joseph ‘Dockoy’ Capuno

Professor of Economics at the University of the Philippines

From BBB to BBM: Towards a strong infrastructure foundation for a resilient Philippine economy

From the Build Build Build (BBB) Program of the Duterte administration to the current Build Better More (BBM) Program of the Marcos administration the government pursues an ambitious public infrastructure program to attain and sustain a high-growth and resilient economy. Committed to invest five percent of GDP on public infrastructures in key sectors, the government also improved the legal framework and institutional setups, including the approval processes and monitoring systems, for wider private sector participation. Some notable achievements are seen in recent years. Yet, it cannot be helped to ask if these recently approved infrastructure projects will not end like the significant number of on-going or stalled projects that are re-evaluated each year by the NEDA Board’s Investment Coordination Committee for serious implementation delays or cost overruns. In this paper, we review the performance of the ICC-approved projects since 2010, identify the systemic or institutional factors that contribute to the delays or cost overruns, and suggest other reforms needed to ensure the massive annual infrastructure investments pay off.

Maria Socorro Gochoco-Bautista

Professor Emeritus, University of the Philippines

On Economic Resilience and Inclusive Growth

Economic resilience can be understood in at least two different ways: (1) An economy is resilient if GDP growth can quickly return to its trend path after a shock hits the economy; (2) An economy is resilient if the trend path of GDP growth itself is not permanently shifted down by a shock that hits the economy. This paper argues that the Philippine economy is not resilient using either concept of resilience, but that the more critical reason for the economy's lack of resilience is the failure to improve factor productivity and raise potential GDP growth. The government's failure to make sufficient and quality investments in such critical public goods as health, education, climate adaptation, and IT and communications technology in the past continues until today. The reason for poor growth and resilience outcomes may in large part be due to a political process to craft laws and implement policies that provide large opportunities for rent-seeking behaviour to benefit favoured individuals or groups. More than the fiscal deficit, there remains a very large good governance deficit that constrains the ability of the economy to grow and become resilient, making the goal of achieving inclusive growth less likely.

Fermin D. Adriano

Professor, University of the Philippines, Los Banos

Agriculture: Achilles Heel of the Philippine Economy

For more than two decades, Philippine agriculture grew significantly lower than its other key economic sectors (services and industry), and hence, contributed the lowest to the country's GDP, lowest in productivity and exports, but employs almost a quarter of the Philippine labor force. Consequently, the underperformance and underdevelopment of Philippine agriculture gave rise to a number of development challenges which have short, medium and long-run adverse implications on the country's effort to attain sustained and inclusive growth. Among these are: 1) low wages among agricultural workers and high resulting in poverty incidence in the rural areas (2 out of 3 poor Filipinos are found in the rural areas); 2) soaring domestic food prices, making it challenging for Philippine economic managers to substantially lower inflation in the country; and as a result of item 2, 3) high malnutrition and stunting incidences among Filipino kids, which caused cognitive impairment contributing to significant learning poverty among Filipino kids. Section 2 of the paper provides a situation analysis of the Philippine agricultural sector noting key development challenges it faces. Section 3 discusses the causes of the underdevelopment and underperformance of the sector. And section 4 proffers a number of recommendations to address these causes or challenges as a way of moving forward Philippine agriculture.

New Challenges & Critical Issues Ahead

Justin See

Lecturer in Development Studies, The University of Melbourne

Charting the Terrain of Climate Change Adaptation: Policy and Practice in the Philippines

As one of the world's most vulnerable nations to extreme weather events, the Philippines has over the past two decades developed several legislations and action plans to address climate change. Despite progressive policy frameworks and a strong 'will to improve', a gap persists between what is intended and what is accomplished. Drawing upon a review of the climate adaptation scholarship, secondary data from the national government, and findings from my own fieldwork, this presentation attempts to chart the terrain of climate change adaptation in the Philippines, in an attempt to demystify this paradox. This paper finds at least three recurring practices – (1) positioning the poor as culpable for and vulnerable to climate change who are in need of interventions, (2) mainstreaming adaptation into policy frameworks, and (3) implementing heavily technocratic solutions like seawalls – that work together to reinforce top-down and interventionist adaptation in the country. As the number and scale of adaptation projects are expected to increase, a combination of these practices may create long-term lock-in of vulnerability and risk that are difficult and costly to address. To re-imagine climate adaptation in the country, this paper echoes the call to move climate adaptation beyond top-down and technological interventions towards more human-centred approaches rooted in climate justice and embrace diverse knowledges and perspectives.

Acram A. Latiph

Executive Director of the Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao, Mindanao State University – Marawi Campus.

Development Challenges in the Bangsamoro

This presentation focuses on the development challenges in Bangsamoro, considered one of the Philippines' poorest and most underdeveloped regions. The presentation argues that the inability of the private sector to thrive is perhaps the biggest development challenge faced by BARMM. The scarcity of the private sector leads to the absence of the middle class, bloated bureaucracy, high poverty incidence, a violent political landscape, and a huge informal sector. Moreover, the lack of opportunities outside the government contributes to a violent political landscape, where political families compete to secure elective positions and access government resources. While political leaders understand the need to increase private sector participation and create a conducive environment for investment, it is not rigorously pursued. It could be that political leaders deliberately maintain the underdevelopment because they thrive in such conditions since more economically secure constituents will demand more rights and accountability and difficult to influence during elections.

Weena Gera

Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of the Philippines

The Mandanas-Garcia Ruling: New Challenges in Balancing Function and Finance in Philippine Devolution

The Supreme Court's 2019 Mandanas-Garcia Ruling marked a major advance for fiscal decentralization in the Philippines by expanding revenue allotments. However, the ruling has posed serious challenges: straining national resources, revealing gaps in local government readiness, and prompting Executive Order (EO) 138, which highlights a lack of local absorptive capacity, particularly in large infrastructure and cross-boundary projects. Several persistent issues affect the ruling's impact, including overreliance on national fiscal transfers, underutilization of increased funds, significant disparities in local technical and fiscal capabilities, and imbalances across regions. These underscore deeper structural issues in the country's decentralized governance model.

This paper argues that the Mandanas-Garcia Ruling continues a flawed policy approach rooted in a narrow interpretation of the "finance follows function" principle. It emphasizes expanded local revenue allocations without adequately adjusting expenditure responsibilities, placing undue strain on national resources and perpetuating inequities in local governance. For the administration, the challenge lies in rebalancing fiscal roles and governance responsibilities that broadly redefines "just share." A more tailored approach anchored in effective central steering —aligning national guidance with local capacities and needs—could better address local disparities, optimize resource use, and address the structural and political constraints that complicate Philippine governance today.

Earvin Cabalquinto

ARC DECRA Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer, Monash University

Rethinking Philippine-Australia Relations: A Socio-digital Inequalities Perspective

This provocation critically examines the implications of the widespread uptake of modern communication technologies, social media, and SMART devices on the everyday lives of Filipino migrants in Australia and their dispersed networks. More specifically, it draws insights from an ongoing multi-sited and visual ethnographic project, presenting the ways older Filipinos in Victoria, Australia and their diverse networks in Victoria, Australia and across the Philippines consume and not consume Philippine news across a range of digital channels while navigating everyday civic, economic and political realities within a local and transnational domain. The findings show that news consumption has been engendered and undermined by socio-digital inequalities (Helsper, 2021), including the impacts of the polarisation of media channels and information, unstable digital infrastructures, the emergence of SMART television, digital illiteracies, gendered norms and household structures, and geopolitical dimensions of scamming. By mapping these social and technical forces that inform the everyday and often 'paradoxical' digital practices of Filipino migrants and their fragmented networks, the presentation provides a vantage point to evaluate and inform present and future interventions on safe, secure and inclusive digital infrastructures and spaces in and beyond Australia.