

# Duterte loses elite support as Philippine elections open

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The Philippines will hold a presidential election in May 2022. The current slate of candidates is the most right wing and openly fascistic in the country's history.

The staggering levels of inequality in the country have worn the social fabric so threadbare that every postwar election has been, to an extent, a crisis of bourgeois rule. There are inevitably public discussions of military coups and rigged ballot boxes coupled with widespread violence at the polls.

Rival factions of the elite feverishly vie for positions and form alliances. Enemies of longstanding come to share a political slate and allies of yesterday become the opponents of today. There are no enduring party loyalties, no substantive platforms or programs; the only permanent interests are embodied in oligarchic clans and their political representatives, and these interests are preserved through shifting alliances.

The 2022 presidential elections has witnessed the marked heightening of all of these social and political tensions. No prior election has seen such a mad scramble in the elite, nor has any prior election seen its candidates so universally espouse the politics of the far right.

The period from early October to November 13 was the window for this jostling for positions. Every individual who had either declared candidacy or was currently in office by October had the space of a month in which they could withdraw their declared candidacy or state their intention to run for a different position.

Current Vice President Leni Robredo is the preferred candidate of Washington and has been the head of the bourgeois opposition to Duterte for several years. She has gathered around her a right-wing slate including former military coup plotters. Robredo has been largely quiet over the course of the past month, engaging in charitable activity and attempting to present herself as a simple, decent person.

It was a month of backroom bartering, lucrative payoffs, and lurid public denunciations. In the end the obvious loser in this political free-for-all, to widespread surprise, was President Rodrigo Duterte.

Over the past five years, Duterte has exercised repressive rule over the country. He imposed martial law on the southern island of Mindanao. His war on drugs, conducted by the police and paramilitary death squads, has overseen the murder of an

estimated 30,000 poor Filipinos; a truly staggering number.

Throughout this period, the press—both domestically and internationally—repeatedly claimed that Duterte was overwhelmingly popular among the masses. The *World Socialist Web Site* challenged this claim, writing, “There is a climate of fear that grips the country and not mass approval for the fascistic policies of Duterte.”

The base of support for Duterte rested not in the masses, but the upper middle class and elite who saw in his fascistic policies a means of suppressing explosive levels of social tension and class conflict. The spectacular collapse of Duterte over the past month is proof of this point. The ruling elite is abandoning Duterte for a new candidate, but they are preserving his repressive policies.

Duterte is constitutionally prohibited from running for re-election as president, but he can run for a lesser office. Over the past six years, Duterte cultivated ties with Ferdinand Marcos Jr, known as Bongbong, son of the country's former dictator, as a means of preserving his political influence and legacy.

On taking office in 2016, Duterte arranged a state funeral for the country's former dictator. Marcos Jr lost his vice-presidential bid that year, and Duterte did everything possible to indicate his support for overturning the election result so that Marcos could take office.

Marcos declared his intention of running for president in October. Duterte sought to have his daughter, Sara Duterte-Carpio, mayor of Davao city in Mindanao, withdraw her candidacy for re-election as mayor and run for president with Marcos stepping down to run as her vice president. It was at the same time widely mooted that Duterte himself would run for vice president on Marcos slate.

Duterte arranged for two close allies—Sen. Ronald dela Rosa, former head of police responsible for the launching the war on drugs, and Sen. Bong Go, Duterte's right-hand man for decades—to file their candidacies for president and vice president. Duterte's ability to secure their withdrawal from the race would serve him as bargaining chips.

There is obvious political continuity between Marcos and Duterte. Marcos intends to continue and even escalate the repressive law-and-order policies of the current president. He has declared his intention to rewrite the country's textbooks on

the martial period of his father's rule, depicting it as a golden age. Marcos also has repeatedly declared that he will continue the economic and diplomatic policies of Duterte reorienting the country's relations toward China.

There is obvious bad blood between President Duterte and Sara Duterte-Carpio, who is known in the Philippine press as "Daughterte," but they have a common set of political interests as well. For years, the notoriously misogynistic Duterte passed over his daughter. His sons, however, turned out to be immensely incompetent and given to drug-fueled partying, while Sara proved herself to be every bit as capable a prominent fascistic political figure as her father.

Duterte-Carpio met publicly with Marcos, but neither side would agree to seek the vice-presidential slot. The deadline for final candidacy declaration approached. They could not run against each other; they were clearly vying for the same voter base.

Sensing his daughter's inability to secure the presidential slot on the Marcos ticket, Duterte denounced Marcos and arranged for Ronald dela Rosa to step down, inviting Sara to run as president on a separate ticket with Bong Go. Duterte-Carpio hesitated. Two days remained before the deadline to file candidacy.

The standoff was resolved at the last minute through the intervention of former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Arroyo made Duterte-Carpio chair of her influential political party, Lakas-CMD, in exchange for accepting the vice-presidential slot under Marcos. The choice entailed a clear break with her father.

Duterte exploded in fury. On the day before the deadline, he arranged for Bong Go to run for president and announced that he was running for vice president against his daughter. He denounced Marcos and his daughter and all of the other candidates as being "pro-Communist." The press was filled with reports of the Bongbong-Duterte vs. Bong-Duterte rivalry, and comparisons were being widely drawn to the backstabbing of the popular television drama, *Succession*.

On Sunday, November 14, when all candidate substitutions had to be finalized, Duterte, apparently realizing he could lose to his own daughter, announced he was running for Senate instead, leaving Bong Go without a running mate. At this point it was apparent that ruling class support for Duterte had collapsed.

The head of Duterte's anti-Communist task force, retired Gen. Antonio Parlade, announced he was running for president. Parlade is a fascistic figure, long tied to Duterte, who has overseen the red-tagging, criminalization and persecution of dissent in the country. Parlade denounced Go and Duterte, claiming that Go had for years been "controlling" the president.

The Duterte administration faces charges of crimes against humanity in the International Criminal Court (ICC) as a result of its murderous war on drugs. For months Duterte has mocked the ICC, declaring that he would never be brought up on

charges. He was counting on the next administration providing him immunity.

Over the past week, the Duterte administration drastically reversed course. Through the Philippine ambassador to the Netherlands, Duterte appealed to the ICC to delay its investigation citing the fact that the administration was conducting a domestic investigation, with which the ICC investigation would interfere. Of the estimated 30,000 people killed under the war on drugs in the past five years, 52 cases are under investigation in the Philippines.

On November 18, Duterte accused Marcos on national television of having a regular cocaine habit. The accusation smacks of desperation.

On top of Duterte's other woes, the US government intervened. The Federal Bureau of Investigation announced that Duterte's longtime spiritual advisor, Apollo Quiboloy, had been indicted by a grand jury for sex trafficking girls as young as 12 and that they would be seeking his extradition.

Quiboloy is a powerful cult leader, the head of the "Kingdom of Jesus Christ." He claims to be the Son of God, and operates a radio network, owns private jets, and commands considerable influence. On the day his indictment was announced, he was laying hands on Bong Go, proclaiming him God's anointed.

It is plausible that a realignment will occur in the ruling elite, even in the near future, and Duterte will be rehabilitated. It is apparent for now, however, that most have abandoned him. The mantle of overt repression and dictatorship is being passed to Ferdinand Marcos Jr and Sara Duterte-Carpio.

However, US hostility and opposition to another president oriented to Beijing rather than Washington will prove to be a powerful factor in the final electoral outcome in the former American colony.



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