

Philippine election in crisis, as COVID cases skyrocket

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The 2022 presidential election campaigns are being staged in the Philippines as the country is in the grip of a profound crisis. The year opened with a skyrocketing COVID-19 infection rate and soaring food and oil prices. The rival ruling class candidates for the presidency are openly plotting against democracy.

The most recent voter opinion poll, conducted by Pulse Asia from December 6–11 and published on December 22, revealed that Senator Ferdinand Marcos Jr, son of the former dictator, dominated the field, receiving support from 53 percent of polled voters nationwide.

His nearest competitor was Vice President Leni Robredo, head of the bourgeois opposition to the current Rodrigo Duterte administration, who was supported by 20 percent of those surveyed. While Robredo trails Marcos substantially her numbers have more than doubled since the last poll in September. Below her, were Manila Mayor Isko Moreno and Senator Manny Pacquiao, who polled at 8 percent each.

The campaigns have been shut down by an explosive rise in COVID cases in the Philippines over the holidays. The Department of Health reported on Monday, that the country had seen a 222 percent growth rate in cases over the past two weeks, placing the Philippines back into the category of “high risk” country. On Sunday, the country reported a two-month high record of 4,600 new cases.

The capital region of Metro Manila has a test positivity rate of 19.6 percent. Fourteen instances of the Omicron variant have been documented thus far. While testing for the variant has been limited, infectious disease specialist Dr. Rontgene Solante told the press that it was “most likely” that the Philippines was already experiencing an Omicron-driven surge.

Metro Manila has been placed under Alert Level 3 until January 15, limiting most public gatherings. Unvaccinated individuals, including those who have received only one dose, are to be restricted to their homes.

Marcos, Robredo, and Pacquiao all announced that they were suspending all physical gatherings in their campaigns. Marcos was forced to close his campaign headquarters after more than 20 of his staff tested positive for COVID. Robredo is currently quarantined after a member of her own security detail tested positive for the virus.

The new surge of the pandemic will exacerbate already sharp social tensions. Millions remain unemployed as a result of job losses incurred during the first two years of the pandemic. The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) reported that 46.1 million people in the country suffered from moderate to severe food insecurity, up by more than 2 million from 2019.

The ruling elite is responding to the threat of social upheaval with plots to end democracy in the country. The Duterte administration, over the course of its more than five years of rule, has overseen a systematic attack on basic democratic norms and civil liberties, with strong support from a historically unprecedented super-majority of all elite political factions.

The front-runner candidacy of Marcos, son of the hated dictator, has been the leading beneficiary of this assault. Duterte normalized the political rhetoric of dictatorship and repression, with the full sanction of the elite. What was unthinkable six years ago—a return of the Marcos dynasty to Malacañang presidential palace—now appears possible if not likely.

While there is widespread agreement in the ruling class that the trappings of democracy are incompatible with their need to suppress the emerging social struggles of the working class, there is not agreement on what faction of the elite will have their hands on the reins of power.

The official period for declaring candidacy in the 2022 election drew to a close in October and November of last year and witnessed the ignominious collapse of ruling-class support for Duterte. Duterte’s own daughter, Sara

Duterte-Carpio, turned on him and announced that she was running as the vice-presidential candidate of Marcos, who was emerging as the consensus candidate of large sections of the elite. Duterte, who cannot run for re-election, found himself utterly isolated.

Duterte's party, PDP-Laban, split in two. Senator Manny Pacquiao, long an ally of the president and former professional boxer, sought the party's nomination as early as May, but Duterte had other plans, possibly intending to make his daughter the frontrunner. Energy Secretary Alfonso Cusi, loyal to the president and claiming control of PDP-Laban, expelled Pacquiao. Pacquiao, retaining a majority of PDP-Laban, expelled Cusi. Both now claim to control the party.

Everyone abandoned Duterte. The Cusi faction of PDP-Laban, scrambling to meet the deadline for declaration of candidates, put forward nominations for president and vice-president who did not stand a chance. They have now both dropped out. The ruling party has been reduced to a rump fraction, whose official sanction is in question, and was unable to field candidates.

On December 31, the Cusi faction of PDP-Laban filed a 20-page petition with the Commission on Elections (Comelec), to scrap the October deadlines for the filing of Certificates of Candidacy in the upcoming election. The deadlines, it claimed, were "unreasonable, unnecessary and legally impossible." In other words, the petition argued that the rump PDP-Laban should be allowed to declare its candidates now. Further, the petition called for the printing of ballots, scheduled to begin on January 12, to be delayed until all cases "pending before the poll body" were resolved.

Should the petition be granted the effect would almost certainly be the indefinite delay of the presidential election currently scheduled for May 9. If PDP-Laban were allowed to file candidates two months after the official deadline, cases would be filed with Comelec to disqualify the new candidates. If ballots are not to be printed until all such cases are resolved, it is likely that elections would be delayed by a year.

The rival faction of PDP-Laban immediately stated that this was Cusi's—and Duterte's—intention. Vice Chair of the Pacquiao faction, Lutgardo Barbo, declared on Monday that the petition would result in "delaying and derailing the electoral process" and that they would use "failed elections [to] prolong their hold on power."

Leila de Lima, running for Senate on Robredo's ticket, similarly declared that a "no-election scenario" was likely the goal of the Cusi faction petition.

Senator Ping Lacson oversaw the torture apparatus of the Marcos dictatorship and is now running for president. He declared that should the polls be delayed, the 24 members of the Senate would appoint an acting president. As the offices of neither the president nor vice president would be filled in a failed election, the Senate president would become acting president by dint of the order of succession.

Lacson declared that "most of his colleagues have already agreed to his proposal." Lacson's running mate is current Senate President Tito Sotto and he has expressed agreement for this plot against democracy.

Among the cases currently pending before Comelec are a number of disqualification cases filed against Marcos. Marcos is charged with tax evasion. Under a law signed by his father, which has never been previously enforced, tax evasion is a crime of moral turpitude that if proven permanently disqualifies one from holding elected office.

That Marcos did not pay taxes from 1982 to 1985 is well substantiated, but he was subsequently elected to the Senate and no one objected. The martial law era legal code was rediscovered by the bourgeois opposition when Marcos' presidential poll figures first came in.

Robredo, candidate of the bourgeois opposition, stands at the head of the widely hated Liberal Party. The Liberal Party was the leading political beneficiary of the ouster of Marcos senior in 1986. Immense popular hopes were placed in, and shattered by, the Liberal administration of Corazon Aquino. The Liberal Party administration of Benigno Aquino III, her son, was directly responsible for bringing Duterte, then a mayor, forward as a national political figure.

Unable to mobilize mass support, the bourgeois opposition seeks to disqualify Marcos on what amounts to a historical technicality. The entirety of the ruling elite is working to sabotage democracy in one way or another. Marcos and Duterte and Lacson are all plotting dictatorship, which they are seeking to impose before a social explosion erupts in the working class.



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