

# Political conflict in the Philippine elite deepens over Washington's war preparations

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On February 2, the Philippine Senate removed Senator Imee Marcos as chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations and replaced her with Senator Erwin Tulfo, a close ally of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The post controls oversight of treaties, alliances, and foreign policy. Sen. Marcos is both the president's older sister and one of the most insistent elite critics of his tight alignment with Washington and confrontational stance toward China.

Her ouster is a calculated blow by the pro-US camp of President Marcos against the rival faction of the elite, aligned with former President Rodrigo Duterte, which has sought closer economic integration with China and distance from Washington's war preparations.

This change was prepared by the Senate realignment in September 2025, when a new majority bloc deposed Sen. Francis Escudero and installed Sen. Vicente Sotto III as Senate President. The move was presented as a response to public anger over the multibillion-peso flood-control "ghost projects" scandal, in which funds for supposed flood-mitigation works were revealed to have been diverted through fictitious or overpriced projects. The shake-up in the Senate was in reality a manoeuvre by a recomposed majority—dominated by forces willing to stand with Marcos Jr. and the US—to secure control of the upper house as mass anti-corruption protests erupted and fissures widened between the Marcos and Duterte camps.

The flood-control scandal has implicated both political factions. The schemes began under Duterte and continued under Marcos Jr., channeling enormous sums through networks of contractors and political brokers, while deadly floods and landslides exposed the absence of real protection for the population. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets in Manila and

elsewhere in September, demanding accountability and the return of stolen funds. At the same time, impeachment complaints were filed in the House against both Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte—nominally over corruption and abuse of power, but in fact reflecting a far-reaching struggle within the elite itself. The House justice committee junked the impeachment cases against Marcos Jr. on February 10, but the political crisis continues unabated.

Marcos Jr. has so far managed to emerge dominant in this faction fight. He has reshuffled congressional leadership, secured the backing of key generals, and used the machinery of the state to contain the immediate fallout of the scandal, even though his administration is directly implicated in it. The removal of Imee Marcos as Chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations must be seen in this light. It is not a family quarrel but a move by the dominant pro-US faction to tighten its grip on foreign policy, remove a prominent critic from a strategic post, and send a message to the Duterte camp that opposition to Washington's war plans will not be tolerated at the summits of power.

Central to this process has been the role of the Liberal Party (LP) and Akbayan. The pseudo-left Akbayan merged with the Liberal Party, which has been historically tied to a wing of the bourgeoisie allied with the once dominant Aquino family and to mildly reformist-minded sections of the middle class. The LP-Akbayan have positioned themselves as the "democratic" and "progressive" pole of the political establishment while lining up with Marcos Jr. as he integrates Manila into Washington's war preparations. Their leading figures—Rep. Leila de Lima, Sen. Francisco Pangilinan, and above all Senator Risa Hontiveros—have focused their attacks on former President Duterte and Vice President Sara Duterte, his

daughter, championing impeachment complaints, inquiries into the drug war, and campaigns against confidential funds, and vigorously demanded escalating confrontations with China over the South China Sea.

Hontiveros, long the leading representative of Akbayan, has emerged as the likely standard-bearer of this milieu in the 2028 presidential election. She has announced that she is “open” to a presidential run if chosen by the opposition. Hontiveros has been one of the loudest advocates of a harder line against China in the South China Sea, demanding more joint patrols and tighter security ties with the United States, Japan, and Australia under the banner of supporting a “rules-based order.” She and her allies are forging an alliance with right-wing figures such as Antonio Trillanes and Panfilo Lacson, long tied to coup-plotting sections of the military and the police apparatus of torture and repression.

There are two immense pressures that drive the spiraling conflict in the Philippine elite: the fraught question of alignment with Washington’s war drive, and the question of who will head the repressive apparatus of the state to suppress explosive levels of social anger.

Under Marcos Jr., the United States has effectively secured a military foothold for staging war with China over the South China Sea or Taiwan. Washington now bases military forces at nine “agreed locations,” throughout the archipelago including in strategic locations of northern Luzon and Palawan. Rotational US military units cycle through these sites on a continuous basis. Advanced systems such as the Typhon Mid-Range Capability missile battery, capable of firing Tomahawk cruise missiles and SM-6s, have been deployed on Luzon, from where they can hit targets across the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Over 500 joint military activities have been scheduled for 2026—far more than an average of one a day—with the annual Balikatan war games expanding into multi-national, live-fire rehearsals for conflict with China.

These developments generate a certain unease in Manila. Business groups and officials worry that the volatility of the Trump administration—its threat of tariffs, restrictions on migrants, and transactional approach to alliances—could devastate exports and remittances or leave the Philippines exposed

mid-crisis. Yet this anxiety has not led to a break with the US alliance. On the contrary, the dominant response of the Marcos faction and its liberal allies is to deepen integration with Washington in the hope of securing firmer commitments and more military and economic aid, even as the danger of war grows.

Beneath the geopolitical confrontation, social tensions are mounting. The flood-control scandal ignited some of the largest protests in years. Students have organized walkouts over corruption, tuition, and democratic rights; teachers have protested low pay and decaying schools; industrial workers have held strikes over wages and job security.

One of the starkest expressions of the social crisis is the surge in labor migration. After the pandemic slump, overseas deployment and the total number of overseas Filipino workers have climbed to record highs. Millions of Filipinos, a growing majority of them women, now labor abroad as domestic workers, caregivers, factory employees, and seafarers under conditions of harsh exploitation and precarious legal status. Their remittances prop up the Philippine economy, but the price is the disintegration of family life and the exposure of millions to exploitative conditions and abuse around the world.

The first responses to these conditions—the protests over corruption, the initial strike actions, the anger over rising prices and collapsing services—remain politically limited. They are channeled into impeachment maneuvers, appeals to the courts, and hopes in one or another wing of the bourgeois opposition. Meanwhile, the ruling class prepares to answer any deeper challenge with repression: either through the openly fascistic methods associated with Duterte or through the more traditional authoritarianism of the son of the former dictator Marcos.



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