

# Impeachment of Philippine Vice President sets off sharp political crisis

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Gunfire in the Philippine Senate is the latest and most graphic expression of a deepening political crisis that has been building in Manila for months. On May 13, more than a dozen shots were fired in or near the Senate building where Senator Ronald “Bato” dela Rosa, the former police chief who oversaw Rodrigo Duterte’s drug-war campaign of mass murder, remained holed up under “protective custody.” Authorities were attempting to enforce an International Criminal Court (ICC) warrant for his arrest. No one was hurt, but the incident made clear that the bitter struggle within the ruling class over control of the state’s repressive apparatus is beginning to spill over into armed confrontation.

The gunfire was the most dramatic event in a tightly linked sequence of moves and countermoves over the last three days. On May 11, the House of Representatives voted by 257 to 33 to impeach Vice President Sara Duterte for the second time and transmit the articles of impeachment to the Senate. In the Senate, a bloc of pro-Duterte senators pulled off a parliamentary coup, ousting Senate President Vicente “Tito” Sotto III and installing Alan Peter Cayetano in his place by a 13–9 vote. Simultaneously, the ICC made public an arrest warrant, issued on 6 November 2025, for dela Rosa on charges of crimes against humanity. Agents of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) then attempted to seize dela Rosa, who had been in hiding for the past six months, as he entered the Senate compound to vote for Cayetano; he fled through the corridors and up staircases, protected by the Senate’s assertion of “co-equal” status and Cayetano’s grant of “protective custody.” Two nights later, armed men tried to enter the locked-down Senate building, and gunfire rang out as the standoff escalated.

The logic of this escalation can only be understood by situating it in the political war within the Philippine elite over the impeachment of Sara Duterte. This conflict is a struggle between rival factions of the elite over how to respond to the immense social and geopolitical crisis that confronts the Philippines—the mounting anger of the working class at unbearable social conditions and skyrocketing prices, and Washington’s aggressive drive to transform the country into a forward base for war against China.

Four years ago, Marcos and Duterte shared a common platform and perspective. They represented layers of the ruling elite, headed above all by former president Rodrigo Duterte, who sought to develop the country’s infrastructure, particularly to the advantage of capitalists in provincial regions long excluded by Manila’s

dominance, by securing economic investment from China. This required distancing the Philippines from Washington’s preparations for war in the region. On taking office, under immense pressure from Washington, Marcos re-oriented, firmly integrating the Philippines into the US campaign against China. Ties with the Duterte camp ruptured. Former President Duterte was arrested and brought on charges of crimes against humanity to The Hague. Vice President Sara Duterte, his daughter, took the reins of their political faction. Earlier this year she declared her intention to run for president in the 2028 elections.

The political war between the camps of Marcos and Duterte is at the same time a conflict within the ruling class over how best to deal with growing social unrest. Marcos, son of the former dictator, represents a well-oiled tendency to resort to military rule in response to social instability. Duterte, whose political rule grew out of the reactionary political modes of behavior that emerged in the chaos of the 1986 overthrow of the Marcos regime, represents open fascism, paramilitary death squads and the rule of the police. There is not a shred of support for democratic rights in either camp.

The second impeachment of Sara Duterte rests formally on three sets of charges. She is accused of the misappropriation of over half a billion pesos in “confidential funds”; conducting suspicious transactions amounting to billions of pesos based on bank data supplied by the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC); and announcing at a press conference in November 2024 that, should she be murdered, she had arranged for an assassin to kill President Marcos, his wife and the Speaker of the House.

The political reality of these charges is a struggle for control of the repressive apparatus of the state. The “confidential funds” that Duterte is accused of misusing were not neutral budgetary items; they were the opaque financial infrastructure of counter-insurgency and political repression. Duterte was co-vice chairperson of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), the hub of political repression established by her father’s administration. It arranged the confidential funding for surveillance and repression throughout all the ministries of government. Duterte controlled the confidential funds of the Office of the Vice President and the Department of Education (DepEd).

House hearings uncovered spending on “safe houses,” cash deliveries from special disbursing officers to unnamed “security

officers,” and youth programs run jointly by the army and DepEd in schools described as Communist recruitment grounds. Duterte herself denounced critics of the funds as “enemies of the state.” The Marcos administration has not dismantled NTF-ELCAC or repudiated its methods; it is prosecuting Duterte not for wielding the repressive apparatus, but for doing so as the head of a rival faction.

It is in this context that the struggle for control of the Senate acquires its full significance. Under the constitution, conviction in an impeachment trial requires the votes of two-thirds of all senators. The Senate President presides over the trial, rules on procedure and shapes its course. On May 11, a bloc of pro-Duterte senators moved to vacate all leadership positions and install a new President, a move described by the *Philippine Star* as a “pro-Duterte senators’ coup.” Cayetano—Duterte’s former running-mate in 2016 and initial Senate President—secured 13 votes, including that of dela Rosa. The opposition minority of nine consisted of figures close to Marcos, including pseudo-left Akbayan representative Risa Hontiveros, and members of the Liberal Party.

Numerically, dela Rosa’s vote was not decisive; the coalition could have assembled a majority without him. Politically, his reappearance in the chamber after months in hiding signaled the consolidation of a Duterte-aligned majority; Cayetano announced that they “had the numbers” only when dela Rosa was physically in the building.

It was immediately after this maneuver that National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) agents attempted to serve the ICC warrant on dela Rosa inside the Senate. CCTV footage of a Senate stairwell shows dela Rosa scrambling and stumbling up the stairs to avoid arrest. Cayetano granted dela Rosa “protective custody” and the Senate invoked its constitutional status as a co-equal government power.

Two days after the failed arrest, the standoff escalated into gunfire. On the night of May 13, more than a dozen shots were fired in or near the Senate building as armed men tried to enter from an upper floor while dela Rosa remained inside under “protective custody.” Senate officials initially said the intruders were believed to be NBI agents, while dela Rosa’s lawyer claimed to have seen “NBI” markings on their vests. The NBI director, however, flatly denied that any of his personnel were deployed, and Marcos publicly insisted that no government security forces were involved, ordering an investigation that has yet to identify the gunmen. Interior Secretary Remulla stated that Senate security fired warning shots and that the intruders then “fired indiscriminately in the air” as they retreated. The balance of evidence suggests a staged provocation whose purpose was to harden the image of dela Rosa as besieged and to dramatize the confrontation between the Duterte camp and the state, but who orchestrated this operation remains for now uncertain.

Dela Rosa himself is the most concentrated expression of the fascistic strategy of the Duterte faction. The ICC warrant covers the period from July 2016 to April 2018, during which, as PNP chief, he oversaw the nationwide anti-drug campaign *Oplan*

*Tokhang* and is accused of crimes against humanity for the murder of at least 32 named victims as part of a widespread and systematic attack on the civilian population. But his record of state violence extends back decades.

In 1987, Canadian filmmaker Nettie Wild shot the documentary *A Rustling of Leaves: Inside the Philippine Revolution*, which includes footage of dela Rosa as a young Constabulary lieutenant patrolling Santa Cruz, Davao del Sur, and working with the Tadtad—a fanatical anti-Communist religious cult whose members hacked to death and decapitated alleged Communist sympathizers. Many of the members of Tadtad were later integrated into the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units (CAFGUs), paramilitary groups created under President Corazon Aquino. This integration of paramilitary death squads with the new post-Marcos government expressed itself in the southern city of Davao with the incorporation of dela Rosa into the mayoral rule of Duterte, as head of police. The Davao death squads of Duterte and dela Rosa provided the architecture for the nationwide drug-war killings.

Then President Duterte withdrew the Philippines from the ICC in 2019, but the court in April 2026 asserted jurisdiction over crimes committed while the Philippines was a party to the Rome Statute. Domestically, Republic Act 9851—passed in 2009—gives the Philippine government clear authority to arrest and surrender suspects to international courts, and this was the legal basis invoked for Rodrigo Duterte’s own arrest and transfer to The Hague in March 2025.

Like all major faction fights in Philippine politics before it, this one bears the imprint of US imperialism. The ICC’s decision to keep dela Rosa’s warrant under seal for six months and then unseal it on May 11, precisely as the impeachment moved to the Senate, was at the same time a discretionary judicial act and an overtly political intervention. The AMLC, which supplied the evidence against Duterte, is the Philippines’ Financial Intelligence Unit and operates as a partner of the US Treasury’s Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN). It has been the conduit through which foreign financial intelligence has repeatedly entered Philippine political life, as in the impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato Corona.

Gunfire and putschist conspiracies are not new to Philippine politics. Since the overthrow of Marcos in 1986, the Philippines has seen a long series of coup attempts and mutinies. But now we see the security forces of rival factions of the elite shooting at each other in the very halls of the legislature. It is a measure of how far bourgeois rule has degenerated, and how sharp its political crisis has become.



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