

Philippine impeachment trial advances Marcos' consolidation of state power

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The impeachment trial of Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte, now entering its second month before the Senate, has become the mechanism through which the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is systematically dismantling its political opposition and consolidating control over the state.

On August 2, Senator Loren Legarda fled to France. Two days earlier the Office of the Ombudsman, headed by Marcos-appointed Jesus Crispin Remulla, had announced preliminary investigation of Legarda and her son, Rep. Leandro Leviste, on plunder and graft charges tied to a P10 billion solar-energy contract. Legarda has since claimed medical leave and remained abroad, extending it week by week.

Legarda was the fourth Duterte-aligned senator to be forced from the 24-member chamber since the trial opened on July 6. Two more, Rodante Marcoleta and Jinggoy Estrada, are in detention on plunder charges. Another, former national police chief Ronald dela Rosa, is a fugitive from an International Criminal Court warrant covering the mass murders of the drug war. Sixteen votes are required to convict Duterte. The Marcos bloc holds a narrow majority. Two more votes would remove the Vice President from office and bar her from public life.

Sara Duterte leads every poll of the 2028 presidential race; her nearest rival trails by 20 points. Her destruction as a candidate would clear the field for a Marcos-blessed successor.

The battle between the Marcos and Duterte factions is a volatile struggle within the Philippine ruling class over how the country will position itself in relation to Washington's drive to war with China. Marcos has integrated the Philippines into the US war architecture more fully than any prior Philippine president.

Under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement

(EDCA), American missile systems in Luzon and the northern islands facing Taiwan target Beijing. US forces based in the country supervise the confrontations of the Philippine Navy with Chinese vessels in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. The annual Balikatan exercises have become a dress rehearsal for a war with China launched from Philippine shores. The Armed Forces of the Philippines have been made a functional auxiliary of US Indo-Pacific Command.

This alignment is the axis of the Marcos administration. Rodrigo Duterte, who governed from 2016 to 2022, took the opposite tack, cultivating economic ties with Beijing while downplaying security relations with Washington. He was arrested in March 2025 and sent to The Hague on charges of crimes against humanity; his case was brought to trial in April 2026. Sara Duterte, his daughter and political heir, represents the continuation of his line. Her elevation to the presidency in 2028 would rupture the American war front in the Indo-Pacific.

Sections of the Philippine oligarchy have oriented toward Beijing throughout the past decade out of economic necessity: the country's development requires Chinese investment and Chinese markets, and Washington's open aggression against China jeopardizes both. Now the calculation grows sharper. Washington is fighting a war not in the South China Sea but in Iran, and it is wreaking economic havoc throughout the world. Positions long treated as fixed are being drawn down across the Pacific under the pressure of imperial overextension and Trump's volatility. The unreliability of American imperialism is sharpening the fissures within the Philippine ruling class.

The impeachment's formal charges concern the misappropriation of P612.5 million in confidential and

intelligence funds released to the Office of the Vice President and to the Department of Education during Duterte's tenure as education secretary. The confidential funds, originally allocated with the support of Marcos before his break with the Vice President, were the operational money of the Philippine repressive apparatus—the opaque financial infrastructure of surveillance, informants and counter-insurgency. Duterte was the first Vice President and the first Education Secretary in Philippine history to be issued them.

Under Duterte's direction, offices with no constitutional intelligence mandate became instruments of political repression, extending the coercive networks of her father's drug war into civilian government. The impeachment does not prosecute the use of the apparatus, but rather seeks to take that apparatus out of the hands of a rival faction of the elite.

Marcos's consolidation of power runs on multiple fronts. In September 2025, Marcos created by executive order the Independent Commission for Infrastructure (ICI), an extraordinary body granted broad subpoena powers under the pretext of investigating flood control corruption. On October 8, he elevated his Justice Secretary, Remulla, to the office of Ombudsman for a seven-year term extending past the 2028 election.

Washington's hand in the operation is visible at every stage of this process. Nine days after Remulla's swearing-in, the acting deputy chief of mission of the US Embassy walked into the ICI's Bonifacio Global City headquarters—the first visit by any foreign official to the newly-created commission. Its chairman told reporters afterward that the United States and the commission were partners with a shared “commercial interest.” Six months later, the ICI dissolved and transferred its entire evidentiary file to Remulla. The evidence now underwrites the prosecution of Duterte, plunder cases against Duterte-aligned senators, and cases against former House Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez, whose diplomatic and tourist visas Washington cancelled in June.

The US Treasury's footprint is parallel and direct. The Anti-Money Laundering Council, the Philippine partner of the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, supplied the financial evidence for the impeachment and has flagged more than six billion pesos in transactions tied to Duterte and her

husband. This is the same channel through which Washington moved against Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato Corona in 2012.

Behind the prosecution stands every formation that calls itself the opposition or the left. The pseudo-left Akbayan, merged with the bourgeois Liberal Party, supplies the democratic and human-rights vocabulary of the impeachment and delivers its Senate votes to the Marcos bloc. The Stalinist Makabayan Coalition filed the first impeachment complaint; its Kabataan representative serves as official spokesperson of the House prosecution panel; Karapatan, its human-rights auxiliary, joined as complainant; and BAYAN and Kilusang Mayo Uno rallied outside the legislature on the day of the House vote. Each has enlisted itself as an auxiliary of the Marcos consolidation.

The seven remaining Duterte-aligned senators are the last institutional check on the Marcos faction's monopolization of state power. Each sits under the accumulating weight of the AMLC's referrals and Remulla's pipeline of criminal cases. Two more votes will end the Duterte candidacy. In the chamber, prosecution witnesses continue their testimony on the confidential-fund charges. Duterte has not returned from Europe.

There is nothing progressive in either camp. Marcos is assembling the instruments of authoritarianism as US imperialism prepares for war with China; Duterte, whose faction has looked to Beijing, retains the fascistic apparatus of a drug war that killed tens of thousands. The impeachment prosecution is clearing the field for Washington.



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