

Philippine impeachment prosecutors withdraw some charges against Vice President Duterte

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Prosecutors in the impeachment trial of Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte withdrew three of their four charges on October 13, abandoning the accusations that drove the campaign for her removal. Having presented evidence on the alleged misuse of confidential funds and threats to assassinate President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., they secured the withdrawal of both articles before her legal defense could present its answering case. A bribery charge, on which evidence had not been presented, was also dropped.

The trial now rests exclusively on allegations of unexplained wealth and defective asset declarations. Lead prosecutor Gerville Luistro presented the maneuver as an expression of confidence: the financial evidence alone would suffice to remove Duterte.

However, the prosecution's own explanation exposes a different calculation. Manila Representative Joel Chua, a member of the prosecution panel, warned that a lengthy defense presentation would erode the impact of the prosecution's evidence. "People will forget the evidence we presented. People will lose interest," he told the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

The accused's opportunity to answer is thus treated as a threat to the prosecution's political objectives. The defense becomes an interruption during which the public might cease to accept its account.

The withdrawal constitutes a direct attack on due process. Prosecutors obtained the benefit of presenting accusations before the tribunal while preventing those accusations from undergoing a completed adversarial examination. Neither the confidential-funds charge nor the threats charge will receive a verdict.

Defense counsel Sheila Sison stated: "The prosecution cannot be allowed to have the benefit of its accusations without bearing the burden of having those accusations tested."

The court compounded the maneuver by lifting restrictions on public statements concerning the withdrawn articles. Prosecutors, lawyers and witnesses can now repeat the untested allegations before the press. Presiding officer Francis Escudero presented this as an opportunity for Duterte to defend her reputation outside the courtroom.

The supposed equality conceals a fundamental asymmetry. The prosecution's accusations have acquired the institutional authority of testimony and exhibits presented before an impeachment court. Duterte's answering case will receive no equivalent hearing. The maneuver reveals the political weakness of a prosecution anxious to preserve the immediate impact of accusations it has withdrawn from adjudication.

The impeachment is an instrument of the struggle between the Marcos and Duterte factions of the ruling class for control of the Philippine state. Their 2022 electoral alliance disintegrated and gave way to open political warfare. The approaching 2028 presidential election turns their rivalry into a conflict over succession. Removing and disqualifying Sara Duterte would eliminate her faction's presidential leading candidate.

The rupture developed over the geopolitical orientation of the Philippines. Marcos and Duterte campaigned together promising continuity with the policies of the outgoing administration of Rodrigo Duterte, Sara Duterte's father, pursuing improved relations with China. On taking office, Marcos reversed course, dramatically expanding American military access and placing the Philippines in the forefront of Washington's confrontation with Beijing.

The Duterte faction represents sections of the bourgeoisie whose economic interests favor closer relations with China. The sharpening global crisis makes accommodation between these orientations impossible. Presidential succession concerns not merely patronage and offices, but the country's position in a war with China for which Washington is actively preparing.

The impeachment campaign developed out of allegations that Duterte misused confidential funds. Congressional scrutiny initially focused on P125 million (\$US1.97 million) that her office reported spending within 11 days in December 2022. Subsequent investigations examined P612.5 million administered through the vice president's office and the Department of Education.

The accusations concerned Duterte's use of civilian agencies to finance intelligence operations and sustain networks of surveillance and repression. The confrontation escalated in

November 2024 during the congressional detention of her chief of staff. Duterte declared that she had instructed someone to kill Marcos, his wife and then House Speaker Martin Romualdez if she herself were assassinated. These allegations became separate articles of impeachment.

A completed hearing on either charge threatened to expose the shared political history of corruption and violence of both rival factions. Marcos's administration had authorized and released the P125 million: the confidential-funds case could not be fully examined without accounting for his role in financing the arrangement. The threats charge arose from the campaign against Duterte after their alliance collapsed. Her defense would have turned attention toward the administration's conduct in that confrontation. Both charges implicated the relationship between the accusers and the accused—their collaboration in power and the struggle that tore it apart.

The unexplained-wealth charge permits a different presentation. Duterte stands accused through an investigation of her family's finances, while Marcos's participation in their shared political history recedes from view. A struggle between former partners for control of the state is repackaged as an investigation of one family's private dishonesty.

Prosecution witness Alexander Cabrera calculated P817.87 million in allegedly unexplained wealth involving Duterte and her husband, lawyer Manases Carpio, during 2022–2025. The total combines alleged undeclared assets and income, including amounts associated with their companies. It is not a demonstrated sum personally received by Duterte in corrupt payments.

This approach supplies an almost inexhaustible field of accusation. Every transaction generates another suspicion, every explanation another demand for documentation. Undeclared assets, unexplained income and illicit acquisition—distinct questions requiring distinct proof—are compressed into a single impression of corruption.

Corruption is endemic to bourgeois rule in the Philippines. The flood-control scandal exposes its social consequences. The Department of Finance estimated economic losses of P42.3 billion to P118.5 billion—approximately \$US740 million to \$US2.1 billion—from non-existent flood-control projects during 2023–2025. Behind these figures stand families driven from their homes, possessions accumulated over a lifetime submerged in filthy water, and livelihoods destroyed when another storm exposes the absence of infrastructure already paid for.

A corruption scandal is a faction fight in the bourgeoisie; it does not address the systemic injustices of capitalism upon which their political rule rests. The Marcos administration conducting the impeachment presides over this system. Selective investigation does not challenge it. It equips one faction to destroy another.

The precedents are familiar. Renato Corona was removed as chief justice under Aquino over asset disclosure. Under

Duterte, Aquino-appointed Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno was ousted through a different procedure that likewise turned on asset statements. Each faction discovers the sanctity of financial disclosure when opening its opponent's records.

The financial investigation is acquiring a more openly political character. Accusations of unexplained wealth are being joined to allegations of disloyalty: the Duterte faction's economic relations with China are presented as evidence of foreign penetration of the state.

After withdrawing from the prosecution's witness list, former senator Antonio Trillanes held an October 2 press conference alleging Chinese financial support for Duterte. Anti-Money Laundering Council records documented P319 million in remittances from China and Hong Kong to Cale88, a food exporter associated with the vice-president's husband Carpio.

The records established remittances, not political financing. Cale88 exports to the Chinese market. Senator Risa Hontiveros identified state-sector connections among remitting companies, but neither their nationality nor their ownership establishes that Beijing was financing Duterte politically.

Nevertheless, the National Security Council took up the matter. The accusation is now moving to the House. Deputy Speaker Jefferson Khonghun announced on October 17 that a separate inquiry was being prepared, with Carpio and Trillanes among the possible invitees. Allegations advanced after Trillanes withdrew from examination in the Senate are acquiring another institutional platform.

Here the financial case reconnects with the geopolitical struggle. Relations with China become grounds for questioning the loyalty of the faction that could reverse Marcos's alignment with Washington.

Duterte's defense presentation begins November 9, shortly before Trump's expected arrival for the November 15–17 ASEAN summit in Manila.

Marcos will receive the American president while working to eliminate his principal domestic rival. Integration into American war preparations is presented as national policy, and commercial relations with China as evidence of suspect loyalty.

Neither faction offers working people a way out of corruption, repression or war. Both defend the capitalist social order that produces these conditions. Behind the impeachment's financial ledgers stands a struggle over control of a state that Washington is turning into a frontline position in its confrontation with China.



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