

Reality Check: Assessing President Marcos Jr.'s First Year in Office

**Proceedings of the Roundtable Discussion,
Reality vs. Expectation: BBM's 2023 SONA**

17 July 2023 | 2:00 P.M. – 4:30 P.M.
*University of the Philippines
Center for Integrative and Development Studies
(UP CIDS) Conference Hall*



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UP CIDS | PROCEEDINGS

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ABOUT THE PROCEEDINGS

The roundtable discussion (RTD) “Reality versus Expectation: A Discussion on BBM’s 2023 SONA” was held last 17 July 2023 at University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS). This was organized by the Program on Social and Political Change (PSPC) and the Department of Political Science of the University of the Philippines Diliman.

The event aimed to facilitate a critical examination of President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr.’s first State of the Nation Address (SONA). Speakers from various areas of expertise and civil society organizations presented their understanding and recommendations on the issues that may impact the next five years of the current administration. Assistant Professor Jan Carlo B. Punongbayan talked about President Marcos, Jr.’s role as the Department of Agriculture Secretary and his economic policies. Professor Maria Ela L. Atienza examined the state of central-local relations and local governance in the first year of Marcos, Jr.’s presidency. Professor Emeritus Maria Fe Villamejor-Mendoza shared her insights on the current state of executive-legislative relations, and Congress. Joseph Purugganan discussed the state of civil society participation. Lastly, Associate Professor Thaemar C. Tana expounded on the current Philippine foreign relations issues and related policies.

The RTD was moderated by Assistant Professor Maria Elize H. Mendoza. Likewise, the discussion was live streamed on DZUP’s Facebook page and YouTube channel. This event was documented by PSPC’s Senior Project Assistant, Maria Corazon C. Reyes.

Opening Remarks

■ Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem, Ph.D.¹

Distinguished panel speakers, guests, colleagues, and friends, good afternoon. On behalf of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies or UP CIDS, I wish to welcome you all to this roundtable discussion or RTD on “Reality versus Expectations: BBM 2023 SONA.” This is sponsored by the UP CIDS Program on Social and Political Change and the UP Department of Political Science. This roundtable discussion is part of the activities of UP CIDS, the research policy unit of the University of the Philippines. Founded in 1985 by then-UP President Edgardo Angara, UP CIDS is currently under the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Since its inception, UP CIDS has sought to encompass various perspectives, methodologies, and ideologies in its conduct of basic and policy-oriented research under the threat-strategic trajectory of the university since 2017.

UP CIDS aims to contribute to national development and knowledge creation through enhancing research publications and creative works. Its channels to implement this vision include workshops, lectures, fora, RTDs—as we have this afternoon—as well as publications like policy briefs, discussion papers, monographs, conference proceedings, and the *Philippine Journal of Public Policy: Interdisciplinary Development Perspectives*. These are all available on the UP CIDS website and on print. To attain our UP CIDS objectives, the Center presently has twelve programs, consisting of three clusters. We have the Education and

¹ Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem, Ph.D. is a Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman. At the time of the RTD, she was the incumbent Executive Director of UP CIDS.

Capacity Building Cluster, which consists of the Education Research Program, the Program on Higher Education Research and Policy Reform, the Assessment, Curriculum, and Technology Research Program, and the Program on Data Science for Public Policy. We also have the Development Cluster, which consists of the Program on Escaping the Middle-Income Trap: Chains for Change, the Political Economy Program, the Program on Alternative Development, and the Program on Health Systems Development. And lastly, the third cluster is the Social, Political, and Cultural Studies Cluster. This consists of the Program on Social and Political Change—our cosponsor for this RTD—which Dr. Maria Ela Atienza and Dr. Jorge Tigno, both speakers this afternoon, are Co-Convenors. Included in the same cluster are the Islamic Studies Program, the Decolonial Studies Program, and the Strategic Studies Program.

Among the UP CIDS programs, it is PSPC that provides a platform for understanding the various social and political challenges facing modern Philippine society and polity from a multidisciplinary perspective. PSPC designs empirical studies, which form the basis for policy inputs and discussions at the local, national, and international levels.

On 17 July 2019, four years ago, UP CIDS sponsored a roundtable discussion, “Duterte Administration at Midterm: Insights from the President’s State of the Nation Address.” The proceedings of *Mga Pahayag at Sabi-sabi sa SONA 2019: A UP Roundtable Discussion*, spearheaded by PSPC, are now available in print and online. This was participated in by UP CIDS programs and cosponsored by the UP Department of Political Science. Four years later, we will now be listening to the SONA of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., or BBM, who forged an alliance with Duterte’s daughter, Sara, as his Vice-President. Both won by a landslide in millions with BBM garnering 31 million votes of the 75 million votes. His chief opponent garnered only half of this, 15 million votes. This victory is considered a continuity of his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte over his chief presidential rival Mar Roxas who got 23.5 percent of the votes. The major campaign promise, however, seemed to be different. Duterte campaigned heavily on his war against drugs while Marcos Jr. campaigned on the restoration of the “Golden Age” of his late father, the Martial Law era of the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos Sr. Despite the seemingly different campaign thrusts, the SONAs of both Duterte and Marcos Jr. are examined within issues of urgency to the Filipino people. That is, the economy, governance, in relation to this, executive-legislative relations, civil society, and Philippine foreign relations—where the

pivot of Duterte to China has been reversed by Marcos Jr. restoring Philippine ties with the US. We are fortunate to have with us today a panel of experts from the academe and civil society who will speak on these topics. I have no doubt that their presentations will generate an interesting and relevant dialogue during the open forum with regard to one of the major goals of this RTD: to provide honest and open perspectives with regard to the first year of the Marcos presidency.

Thank you.

Welcome Remarks

■ Jorge V. Tigno, DPA²

Magandang hapon po. I would like to join Tesa in welcoming you as well to, shall I say, the “new” University of the Philippines, specifically to the new Center for Integrative and Development Studies, where the new Program on Social and Political Change is organizing this event for the upcoming SONA, which is about to happen maybe a week from now. I would also like to thank the speakers in advance for agreeing to touch on the many issues that you will hear them talk about this afternoon. I should also kind of issue a caveat here. The issues that have been lined up for us today are not that exhaustive. Number one, because they only get a few minutes to speak at best; and, number two, the issues are some other issues that I think we can also touch on in succeeding events, later events. Maybe, specifically on the bureaucracy, defense, and security, although some of the speakers might touch on these issues in the course of their talks this afternoon.

Just to give an overview of this event, since Tesa already touched on the design of this roundtable, and to offer you a platform for having this kind of conversation happening, this is incidentally the first time that we are doing this again face to face. The first SONA—is it really supposed to be that remarkable? I think because I mean it’s the first SONA. You have a President who has just come in and is trying to learn the ropes at best. What I think makes sense for a new administration is to try to rebrand itself and to make it distinct from the previous administrations. That, I think, the new administration has done, has managed to

² Jorge V. Tigno, DPA is a Professor at the University of the Philippines Diliman Department of Political Science and the Co-Convenor of the Program on Social and Political Change of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies at the time of this event.

do so far. Although I would have thought that it should have done this at the start of its term. But in any case, the title of course of this roundtable, “Reality versus Expectations” speaks to that point. You have this sense of perception of how the administration wants to project itself and what it has actually managed to do in its first year. Since I’m not one of the panel, I’m only going to give you an overview. Just sit back, and I hope that you can also take part in the discussions later, including those who are participating via the live stream on Facebook. You can also turn in your questions and comments.

Maraming salamat po.

Presentations

The Economy Under President Marcos Jr.

■ Jan Carlo “JC” Punongbayan, Ph.D.³

Dr. Punongbayan presented the latest data and the main issues concerning the economic status of the Philippines during the first year of Marcos Jr.’s administration.

The first economic issue discussed was inflation. According to Dr. Punongbayan, the most distinguishing characteristic of the economy during the first year of President Marcos would be the runaway inflation rate, which reached a high of 8.7 percent in January of this year. That turns out to be the highest inflation rate in 14 years. Since then, the inflation rate dropped to more than 5 percent. However the inflation rate remains above the 4 percent upper inflation target of the government. He added that even if inflation has global factors (for example, supply chain disruptions), the Marcos administration could have done more to bring down the inflation rate toward the target. Likewise, the country was in an unusual situation where the headline inflation rate lies below the core inflation rate. Core inflation rate is inflation sans food and energy items. It was higher than the headline inflation rate over the past year.

Dr. Punongbayan emphasized that this is indicative; the inflation rate was explained by both food and non-food items. Electricity and rent also contributed a lot to inflation during the first year of the Marcos, Jr. administration.

³ Jan Carlo “JC” Punongbayan, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the School of Economics, University of the Philippines Diliman.



- Dr. Punongbayan on his discussion about the Philippine economy under Marcos' first year in office.

Dr. Punongbayan also stressed that the main campaign promise of achieving ₱20 per kilogram of rice was far from being met. At the time of presentation, the average retail price of regular milled or well-milled rice was still about ₱40 per kilogram. This is about double the promised price of President Marcos. Other than rice, onions reached a high inflation rate of 200 percent. This contrasts with the average 7 percent or 8 percent inflation rates seen of late. Other food items such as vegetables, sugar, bread, and flour also had high inflation rates during the first year of President Marcos's term. Dr. Punongbayan mentioned that President Marcos was in fact in a very good position to bring down food inflation because he was also the agriculture secretary at that time.

In terms of policy responses to inflation in the Philippines, Dr. Punongbayan showed that the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) has raised its policy interest rate in an effort to combat inflation. This makes it more expensive for people to borrow money. Doing so can help to slow down economic growth and abate inflation. However, the BSP's actions can only do so much. BSP has been consistently calling on other government agencies to implement nonmonetary measures to help address inflation. Meanwhile, the President has also taken some steps, such as increasing the number of Kadiwa stores and allowing more food imports. However, these measures have not been enough to bring inflation under control. For example, the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) at the time did not yet import the full amount of sugar it was authorized to import. Additionally,

cartels and imperfect competition in the food sector were preventing prices from falling, even with increased imports.

As for the economic progress of the Philippines, gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 7.6 percent in 2022, its highest growth rate since 1976. Yet, according to Dr. Punongbayan, this growth has not been sufficient to heal the wounds caused by the pandemic. To return to the economy's pre-pandemic trajectory, the Philippines would need to grow at a rate of more than 9 percent annually. He added that the pandemic has permanently lowered the Philippine economy's growth trajectory. Current growth rates of 7.6 percent are not nearly enough to return the economy to its pre-pandemic path. The pandemic has also hurt the Philippine government's finances. The government is now a net borrower from the rest of the world as evidenced by the growing current account deficit. This arose from the fact that the Philippines has been importing more than it has been exporting, and that it needs to borrow money from the rest of the world. This is in contrast with the pre-pandemic situation (especially from the 2000s to the early 2010s), when the Philippines was a net lender to the rest of the world due to large inflows of dollars from overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and PPO earnings. Thus, the Philippine government's plan to establish the Maharlika Investment Fund, a strategic investment fund that would invest in local development projects and international financial instruments, is controversial given the country's current status as a net borrower.

As for the priorities of President Marcos Jr., Dr. Punongbayan examined the various facets of the economy. First, he touched on the education sector and the Philippines' 90 percent learning poverty rate. According to international assessments, nine out of 10 grade-five children are unable to understand what they are reading. This is a serious problem that the Marcos administration should be prioritizing. Second, Dr. Punongbayan discussed issues in the transportation and infrastructure sectors. He suggested that the Philippines veer away from car-centric infrastructure and invest in more sustainable modes of transportation, such as public transportation and walkable and bikeable communities. The country also needs to improve its overall infrastructure as this is essential for economic growth. Third, Dr. Punongbayan discussed the status of the agriculture sector, which has barely been contributing to economic growth in the Philippines. He emphasized that the Marcos administration should prioritize this sector and invest in policies and programs that would help farmers and fishers to be more productive and profitable. Fourth, Dr. Punongbayan elaborated on the future of the energy sector.

The Philippines is facing a potential energy crisis with the depletion of Malampaya natural gas reserves by 2027. The Marcos administration needs to invest in facilities that will replace this energy source. Finally, Dr. Punongbayan presented insights into the financial health of the country. He highlighted the administration's push for fiscal consolidation, which is important for reducing the government's budget deficit. However, more needs to be done in this area.

Accordingly, Dr. Punongbayan presented the Marcos administration's priority programs that do not align with the country's most pressing needs. The Maharlika Investment Fund is a pseudo-sovereign wealth fund that would invest in local development projects and international financial instruments. Many economists, including faculty members of the UP School of Economics, have warned that this fund would be a major threat to the public coffers and institutions. Second, the administration window-dresses the economy to attract foreign investments and resources. Dr. Punongbayan stated that it is important to track how much of the presidents' multiple foreign trips are attracting actual investments versus just pledges. Third, the administration exerts efforts in warping statistics to make the economy appear more robust than it actually is. For example, Tourism Secretary Christina Frasco in an Instagram post on July 5, 2023, presented infographics on social media showing that there was supposedly a 131 percent increase in tourism spending from 2021 to 2022.⁴ However, a time-series analysis from 2000 to 2022 shows that this increase is only a small part of the overall picture. Other examples of window-dressing and warping statistics include a graph posted by President Marcos on social media, showing that inflation supposedly went down from 8.7 percent to 5.4 percent. However, the graph omits the situation before January 2023 when the inflation rate skyrocketed to a 14-year high. President Marcos also claimed in a Twitter/X infographic that, in terms of 2023 GDP growth forecasts, the Philippines ranks first in ASEAN "including India and China."⁵ However, India and China are not even part of ASEAN. Finally, he also said in at least one speech

⁴ Christina Frasco [@christinafrasco], "We all love the Philippines," Instagram, 05 July 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CuT5QKopNcD/?igsh=YzljYTk1ODg3Zg%3D%3D&img_index=4

⁵ JC Punongbayan [@jcpunongbayan], Twitter/X, 21 April 2023, <https://x.com/jcpunongbayan/status/1649434776343040000>

in 2023 that the Philippines is the “fastest growing country in the world.”⁶ But in 2022, the Philippines was only the 9th fastest growing economy in Asia.

Dr. Punongbayan ended his presentation by stating that the Marcos administration could have done more due to the President’s large political capital and the mandate he received in 2022. He emphasized that there is a lot of room for improvement, but key reforms have not pushed through. The administration also needs to focus more on key issues, such as the education crisis, transportation crisis, agricultural stagnation, the potential energy crisis, and the potential fiscal crisis. Finally, there should be less talk and more action from the administration. Too much effort is being put into public relations and image-making, such as the Bagong Pilipinas initiative and the new tourism slogan. Dr. Punongbayan said that the government cannot “PR its way out” of all the country’s economic problems. He stressed that the Marcos administration needs to do more to address the country’s pressing economic and social problems.

BBM and Central-Local Relations

■ Maria Ela L. Atienza, Ph.D.⁷

Dr. Atienza addressed three questions in her discussion. First, how does President Marcos Jr. view central–local relations, local governments, local governance, devolution, and local autonomy in his policy rhetoric as seen through his upcoming SONA? Second, how are local governments and issues of local governance, devolution, and local autonomy placed in the context of the administration’s policy agenda in governance, the economy, peace and order, etc.? Third, what specific laws and other actions should President Marcos, Jr. pursue in this area?

⁶ “VERA FILES FACT CHECK: Data contradict Marcos’ claim that PH economy is ‘fastest growing’ in the world, Vera Files, 06 June 2023, <https://verafiles.org/articles/vera-files-fact-check-data-contradict-marcos-claim-that-ph-economy-is-fastest-growing-in-the-world>

⁷ Maria Ela L. Atienza, Ph.D. is a Professor and former Chair of the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman. She is the Co-Convenor of the Program on Social and Political Change of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies at the time of this event.

According to Dr. Atienza, the year 2022 was a significant one for local governments and local governance in the Philippines. It marked the beginning of the implementation of the Supreme Court's Mandanas-Garcia ruling, which increased the base of national fiscal transfers to local government units (LGUs), and President Duterte's Executive Order No. 138, which called for full devolution following the high court's ruling. These developments came at a time when LGUs were still facing the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, academic assessments, including their works in political science, have noted that despite its lofty goals, the decentralization process under the 1991 Local Government Code (LGC) has fallen short of promoting actual democratization, self-sustaining economic development, and social justice among many LGUs, despite a number of trailblazing LGUs.

In President Marcos Jr.'s inauguration speech, Dr. Atienza observed that he did not discuss local governments and devolution in a significant manner. The President mentioned local governments in the context of disaster preparedness, improving health service delivery, repairing school buildings, and the passage of a national land use act. However, he did not mention amending Executive Order No. 138, strengthening devolution, or calling for amendments to the 1991 Local Government Code in view of the Mandanas-Garcia ruling. There was also no mention of Mindanao, BARMM, and autonomy.

Dr. Atienza then compared President Marcos Jr.'s first SONA with the SONAs of President Benigno Aquino III and President Rodrigo Duterte. She found that there was not much difference in how the two presidents' first three SONAs looked at local governments and their roles. However, the exception was Duterte's stance on federalism. Both previous presidents appear to recognize the LGUs' role in the areas of provision of health services and protection of the environment. President Duterte especially emphasized pushing federalism, the role of LGUs in the war on drugs, and the fight against corruption. On the other hand, President Aquino's first three SONAs expressed more articulately the partnership between the national and local governments in national development, including health and anti-poverty programs. In his second SONA, he said LGUs are not just implementers of national policies. They are partners of the national government. They also have local autonomy to address local problems that would benefit citizens. However, like President Marcos Jr., both President Aquino III and President Duterte did not mention reviewing and amending the 1991 Local Government Code.

Despite the lack of focus on central–local relations, local governments, and devolution in the SONA, Dr. Atienza acknowledged that there were several developments in Congress, leagues of local governments and officials, and the Supreme Court. These developments can affect local governments and central–local relations.

First, while not mentioned in the SONA but part of the forty-two priority bills proposed by the Legislative Executive Development Advisory Council (LEDAC), the Act Postponing the December 2022 Barangay and SK Elections (Republic Act [RA] No. 11935) was passed. However, this June 2023, the Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional. Nonetheless, it recognized “the legal practicality and necessity of proceeding with the conduct of the BSKE” in October 2023, “pursuant to the operative fact doctrine.” The free and meaningful exercise of the right to vote requires the holding of “genuine periodic elections” and the law “violates the freedom of suffrage” and its enactment was “attended with grave abuse of discretion amounting to lack or excess of jurisdiction.” This means that postponing the elections to augment the executive’s fund violates the Constitution.⁸

Second, officials of the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), the Department of Finance (DOF), and the Interagency Committee on Devolution said that “the national government should extend the timeline of the devolution of some functions to LGUs amid the implementation of the Supreme Court’s (SC) Mandanas–Garcia ruling” by a few more years.⁹ According to DBM Undersecretary Wilford Will. T. Wong, there is a “need to fully prepare and capacitate LGUs” to

⁸ [G.R. No. 263590/G.R. No. 263673] *Macalintal v. Commission on Elections* (Manila: Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2023), uploaded 25 September 2023, <https://sc.judiciary.gov.ph/263590-atty-romulo-b-macalintal-vs-commission-on-elections-and-the-office-of-the-president-through-executive-secretary-lucap-p-bersamin-atty-alberto-n-hidalgo-et-al-vs-executive-secretary-lu/>; Supreme Court of the Philippines, “SC Declares Unconstitutional Law Postponing Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections, Orders the Conduct of Elections in October 2023, Issues Guidelines for Validity of Rules Postponing Elections,” 27 June 2023, <https://sc.judiciary.gov.ph/sc-declares-unconstitutional-law-postponing-barangay-and-sangguniang-kabataan-elections-orders-the-conduct-of-elections-in-october-2023-issues-guidelines-for-validity-of-rules-postponing-elections/>

⁹ Wilford Will T. Wong, quoted in Diego Gabriel C. Robles, “Experts Push to Extend Devolution Transition,” *BusinessWorld*, 3 October 2022, <https://www.bworldonline.com/top-stories/2022/10/03/477951/experts-push-to-extend-devolution-transition/>

perform all their functions effectively and efficiently.¹⁰ In effect, this task will require an amendment to Executive Order No. 138, s. 2021.¹¹ A representative also appealed to the executive and legislative branches of government, calling for the postponement of devolution. They argued that LGUs were not yet ready for full devolution, and cited the misalignment in the national tax allocation sharing formula and the cost of devolved functions to LGUs. These are facts that academics and other experts have already pointed out since the beginning of the implementation of the 1991 LGC.¹²

In addition, in various speeches addressed to various groups of local government officials, President Marcos Jr. declared that LGUs are partners of the national government, particularly in advancing the government's development agenda. He promised to examine the impact of the Mandanas-Garcia ruling and the possibility of amending EO No. 138 to help poorer LGUs who may not be ready for full devolution. In March 2023, the President ordered agencies of government to study EO No. 138 for possible amendments and to determine what national government functions should be devolved to LGUs.

Dr. Atienza posits that President Marcos, Jr. might make more pronouncements on local governments, local governance, devolution, and local autonomy in his second SONA. He may even discuss possible amendments to EO No. 138 or the 1991 Local Government Code itself. However, it is also possible that he will not make any clear commitments to these issues, given that they have not been highlighted in his past campaign promises, inaugural speech, and first SONA.

Furthermore, Dr. Atienza argued that even if the President does not make any clear commitments to devolution, democratization, and local autonomy, the same problems of LGUs would remain. Dr. Atienza and Associate Professor Jan Robert Go

¹⁰ Diego Gabriel C. Robles, "Experts Push to Extend Devolution Transition," *BusinessWorld*, 3 October 2022, <https://www.bworldonline.com/top-stories/2022/10/03/477951/experts-push-to-extend-devolution-transition/>

¹¹ E.O. NO. 138, June 01, 2021 also known as the Full Devolution of Certain Functions of the Executive Branch to Local Governments, Creation of a committee on devolution, and for other purposes.

¹² Billy Begas, "Cash-Strapped LGUs Not Yet Ready for Full Devolution—Richard Gomez," *Politiko*, 29 November 2022, <https://politics.com.ph/2022/11/29/cash-strapped-lgus-not-ready-for-full-devolution-richard-gomez/>

already articulated in a PSPC discussion paper that there is a need to amend the 1991 Local Government Code, strengthen local administrative skills and capacities, increase resources available, and promote genuine people’s participation and inclusion in local governance (Atienza and Go 2023, 18)¹³. Specifically, Dr. Atienza suggested that amendments to the Local Government Code could address the impact of the Mandanas-Garcia ruling, the allocation formula of the shares of LGUs, the selection of three sectoral representatives in the local legislative bodies, and the strengthening of people’s participation in local governance.

Dr. Atienza concluded by stating that genuine people’s involvement in governance, both local and national, has not been given enough attention in the SONAs. It is up to advocates to push for genuine reforms at different levels of government.

Civil Society under a Marcos Presidency¹⁴

■ Joseph Purugganan¹⁵

Joseph Purugganan’s presentation focused on the relationship between civil society and the government under President Marcos Jr.’s administration. He started by discussing the three main provisions in the Constitution that set the parameters for this relationship.

The first provision is Article II, the Declaration of Principles and State Policies, Section 23, which states, “The State shall encourage non-governmental, community-based or sectoral organizations to promote the welfare of the nation.” Then in Article XIII on social justice and human rights, two more provisions are important to highlight. Section 15 expounds on the duty of the

¹³ Maria Ela L. Atienza and Jan Robert R. Go, *Assessing Local Governance and Autonomy in the Philippines: Three Decades of the 1991 Local Government Code*, Discussion Paper Series 2023-05, (Quezon City: UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, 2023).

¹⁴ This part of the manuscript is based on Joseph Purugganan’s article, “Civil Society Under the Marcos–Duterte Administration,” *Focus on the Global South*, delivered 17 July 2023, transcript posted 21 July 2023, <https://focusweb.org/civil-society-under-the-marcos-duterte-administration/>

¹⁵ Joseph Purugganan is the head of the Focus on the Global South Philippine Office.

state not just to encourage but also to respect the role of people's organizations, as mechanisms to pursue and protect within the democratic framework their legitimate and collective interest and aspiration. Finally, Section 16 affirms the right of the people and their organizations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels of social, political, and economic decision-making. With this, he highlighted that the State should encourage the formation of civil society organizations (CSOs). Their role as mechanisms for the pursuit of collective interest and aspiration shall be respected, and their right to participation at all levels of social, political, and economic decision-making shall not be abridged.

Referring to the previous provision, Purugganan mentioned that in a 2002 paper on relations between NGOs, the late CSO leader Isagani Serrano elaborated on the role of civil society and its importance. He emphasized that CSOs play a vital role in influencing the course of development in general, primarily by serving as an alternative voice or proxy for the "conscience" of the people. They also play a fiscalization role by critiquing the government's management of the economy and society. It is against these parameters, the state's recognition of the role and rights of CSOs as stated in the constitution, as well as the track record of CSOs under the Philippines democratic system, that the people must view or gauge CSOs under the Marcos–Duterte administration.

Moreover, Purugganan outlined the current state of the relationship between the civil society and the government. According to him, former Commission on Human Rights (CHR) Commissioner Karen Gomez-Dumpit once said that two baselines serve as the reference for the engagement with the Marcos–Duterte government.¹⁶ The first is the experience under the Marcos Sr. dictatorship, and the second one is under the authoritarian Duterte administration.

According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Ferdinand Marcos Sr., who became president in 1965, envisioned a "new society" in which there was little space for civil society and no tolerance for advocacy NGOs. His administration became increasingly associated with the suppression of civil, human and political

¹⁶ Jodesz Gavilan, "ICC Does What UN Human Rights Council Couldn't Do vs Duterte's Drug War Killings," Rappler, 07 July 2022, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/international-criminal-court-action-united-nations-human-rights-council-duterte-drug-war-killings-philippines>

rights. Under the repressive regime, both organizations either fled underground by joining the armed struggle of the National Democratic Front or sought shelter from Marcos Sr.'s security forces by affiliating with the university or religious institutions. Civil society played an active role in key mobilizations both at the local and national levels. These actions served as a buildup to and culminated in the EDSA uprising that ousted Marcos Sr. in 1986.

The post-EDSA period is altogether unique in CSO and government relations. However, it can be characterized as a period of growth as the number of CSOs grew, and their areas of operations expanded. Concomitantly, it is also a period of ideological splits of decisions along political alliances. This led us to Duterte's brand of pro-corporate strongman-style governance, which was characterized by relentless attacks against democratic institutions, including NGOs and civil society; misogyny; a militarized pandemic response; extrajudicial killings and the violent war on drugs; the demonization of human rights and human rights defenders, red-tagging, and terror-tagging; institutionalized repression under the anti-terror law; and the criminalization and weaponization of land rights, environmental, and indigenous people's rights.

Purugganan explained that the two baselines also formed the basis of the electoral engagement of CSOs during the 2022 election. The broad human rights movement IDEFEND (In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity), for instance, called for a regime change and demanded to move away from a regime characterized by the demonization of human rights and threats to human rights defenders towards one with greater accountability. It was a desperate call to stop the slide and defeat Duterteism. The movement called for governance that is democratic, inclusive, accountable, and compassionate—where people are seen as critical movers of solutions and remedies, and their communities are able to participate effectively in crisis response and peacebuilding. The movement echoed the state's obligation under the constitution to strengthen civil society as partners of development and not tag them as enemies of the state.

Subsequently, in the aftermath of the 2022 elections, Marcos and Duterte's victory has posed significant challenges to CSOs. The first challenge is how to move forward from the election defeat, while advancing the progressive agenda under an administration with a huge electoral mandate. The second challenge is what *Rappler* columnist John Nery referred to as the "fog of normalization." The sense of crisis that had been so powerful during the election has dissipated into

an ambiguous, “is it really back to normal unavoidable case?”¹⁷ Normalization has been a strong agenda of the Marcos administration. His many trips abroad and, to some extent, the government’s re-engagement in international bodies, like the United Nations Human Rights Council, all carry the central message that there is new leadership in the Philippines, that Duterte is out, and that it is now time for things to normalize and return to business as usual. To illustrate, some progressive members of the European Parliament visited the Philippines or sent a mission in February this year and reported on this as well. Purugganan stated that normalization means, among other things, a greater willingness to engage with the new government, particularly on economic issues like trade and investment. Unfortunately, normalization also means downplaying or de-prioritization of the human rights agenda. These are the challenges that human rights groups and CSOs must confront: how to continue delivering the message during crises, whether on human rights, food, climate, or agriculture, are far from over; that the situation should not be normalized; that each extrajudicial killing (EJK) continues; that there’s continued repression and attacks against human rights defenders; and that the corporate-driven development agenda continues to be the centerpiece. Finally, there is the challenge to remove the fog or lift the veil of normalization, to identify and define clear points of critical engagement and resistance under the new administration.

During the first SONA of the new administration, glimpses were seen of where this new normal might take us. According to Focus on the Global South, in BBM’s first SONA, “he was not really addressing the entire nation but the local and international business community and the political and economic elites of this country.” Indigenous communities highlighted their invisibility in the SONA, while scrutiny turned toward their ancestral lands as potential investment areas, as LILAK (Purple Action on Indigenous Women’s Rights) pointed out. Meanwhile, Workers’ groups stressed in their SONA and post-SONA statements the need for the government to allow labor and progressive movements to be involved in making decisions, setting priorities, and in identifying ways to collectively overcome our present situation. They also demanded for the Marcos Jr. administration to

¹⁷ John Nery, “State of the opposition: The fog of normalization,” Rappler, 31 August 2022, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/newsstand-state-of-opposition-fog-of-normalization/> 17

seriously engage with the workers' movement in crafting the government's labor policy to ensure that the labor agenda will be seriously pursued.

Purugganan expounded and stated that in the current administration, the corporate sector has been given the driver's seat time and again, while CSOs and movements continue to advocate for the government to recognize their role as stakeholders of development and not as enemies. This is evidenced by one of Marcos' first acts as President. Soon after his first SONA, he created the Private Sector Advisory Council to help strengthen collaboration between the public and private sectors. Billionaires, as well as CEOs and Presidents of the biggest corporations, were given the task to develop an agenda that would solve critical areas of the economy. Sabin Aboitiz of the Aboitiz Group was the lead convener on infrastructure. Century Property looks to be the lead in agriculture. Ayala Healthcare was tasked to look at the health economy, and so on.

Purugganan asked himself whether he found it important for CSOs to be mentioned in BBM's second SONA. As an alternative, he proposed a social justice and human rights parameter in understanding the SONA. The speech, according to him, should be engaged as a blueprint of things to come. He suggested listening to the SONA and reflecting on social justice principles such as access to resources, equity, diversity, participation, and human rights. He urged everyone to gauge whether President Marcos, Jr.'s words and actions move us closer to or further away from social justice.

For instance, Purunggan suggested reflecting on government actions regarding resource conflicts in Manila Bay and the struggle of small fishers to sustain their livelihoods amid reclamation and seabed quarrying projects. He also stressed that people should examine the SONA with various social issues plaguing the country. For example, on equity, the ₱40 minimum wage increase for the National Capital Region (NCR) might find space in the President's speech. However, labor groups have expressed that this is not enough as they continue to struggle for a living wage. On diversity, the SOGIE Equality Bill and other anti-discrimination bills are finding it hard to leave the congressional committees and work their way into the legislative process. On participation, small fishers demand their say in the rehabilitation of Manila Bay, while farmers demand to be consulted on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and other trade agreements that would impact their livelihoods. And finally, on human rights, it is important to reflect on whether the BBM administration is doing something to address

the human rights crisis in the country. The crisis has been characterized by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as widespread and systematic. It is important to see whether there is progress on accountability and reform. It is also important to reflect on continuing extrajudicial killing (EJK) cases from the war on drugs. Marcos has yet to rescind the orders and other policy statements that underpin Duterte's war on drugs. It is also important to reflect on enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests of activists, red tagging, terror tagging, criminalization of human rights defenders' cases, and economic agendas that violate economic, social, and cultural rights.

Like Dr. Atienza, Purugganan also emphasized the importance of various groups and advocates in promoting reforms in the government. He draws optimism from movements continuously coming together in their opposition. For example, during Labor Day, workers march under the banner of all Philippines trade unions for the coming together of various agricultural stakeholders and trade justice advocates during the RCEP debates. There is continuing solidarity among Indigenous groups under 1Sambubungan in the face of relentless attacks. However, he states that the challenges are huge, especially under the veil of normalization; civil society must continue to assert people's rights, demand a role in building a more just society, act as fiscalizers and alternative voices of conscience, as well as speak truth to power.

President Marcos, Jr. and Executive–Legislative Relations

■ Maria Fe Villamejor-Mendoza, Ph.D.¹⁸

Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza's discussion focused on the relationship between President Marcos, Jr. and the legislative branches of the Philippine government. She contextualized the expectations in President Marcos Jr.'s SONA by discussing the fundamentals of the Philippine executive–legislative relationship. She explained that in a constitutional democracy, where there is separation of powers between the three branches of government, there is assertion of independence.

¹⁸ Maria Fe Villamejor-Mendoza is a Professor Emeritus at the National College of Public Administration and Governance (NCPAG), University of the Philippines Diliman.



- Dr. Maria Fe Villamejor-Mendoza discussing the executive-legislative dynamics under the Marcos administration.

There should be no encroachment on the powers of the other branches. With this, she posed three questions: What is the relationship between BBM and the Congress during the first year of the administration? Will this situation improve or get worse in the future? Will the Congress continue to explicitly act like a rubber stamp of the president?

In addressing the first question, Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza detailed that in an ideal democratic constitutionalism, there is separation of powers between the three branches of government, but there may be overlaps in their mandates and functions of policy formulation, implementation, and arbitration. The three branches maintain, or would like to maintain, independence from each other for checks and balances. They would not wish to encroach or usurp on the functions of the other branches as well. However, Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza noted that because of a very strong executive, especially in the Philippine context, the President always holds sway, influence, and even control over the other branches. She cited the example of Marcos Sr., who declared Martial Law and enshrined in him the powers of legislating, executing, and even adjudicating.

Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza argued that even though Marcos Jr. has not yet declared martial law, he has influenced the trajectory of policy legislation through his priority legislative measures in the LEDAC. His priority measures count to forty-two (twenty in his first SONA; an additional twelve in the LEDAC's 1st session, and an additional ten in the LEDAC's 2nd session) and include, among

others, “the amendments to the [Build-Operate-Transfer] Law, the National Rightsizing Program, the National SIM Registration Law; postponement of the Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan elections, Medical Reserve Corps, National Disease Prevention Management Authority/Center for Disease Prevention and Control Act, Virology Science and Technology Institute of the Philippines, Mandatory Reserve Officers’ Training Corps and revision of the National Service Training Program (ROTC/NSTP), and the Condonation of Unpaid Amortization and Interest on Loans of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza stated that many of these measures have been in the 17th and 18th Congresses and were just recycled in the 19th Congress.

Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza then proceeded to expound on the current dynamics between the three branches of the government vis-à-vis the priorities of Marcos Jr.’s administration. She explained that since the Legislature is totally on the president’s side, with a supermajority present in both the Senate and the House of Representatives (HOR), the latter vowed to approve Marcos’ legislative priorities.²⁰ The Senate agreed to approve six of these priority measures by year end. Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza mentioned that in previous studies, it actually takes at least eight to eleven years before a bill becomes law. Yet, the Senate committed to approve six of these priority measures by year end. Meanwhile, the House committed to give these measures their “utmost priority.” Both chambers identified the legislature’s priority agenda, which included the establishment of Regional Specialty Hospitals, the Magna Carta of Filipino Seafarers, establishing the Negros Island Region, New Philippine Passport Act, Waste-to-Energy Bill, Apprenticeship Act, a bill providing free legal assistance for military and uniformed personnel, Magna Carta of Barangay Health Workers, the creation of the Leyte Ecological Industrial Zone, and the creation of the Eastern Visayas Development

¹⁹ Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza, “Congress Vows to Approve Marcos’ Legislative Priorities,” *BusinessWorld*, 11 October 2022, <https://www.bworldonline.com/top-stories/2022/10/11/479725/congress-vows-to-approve-marcos-legislative-priorities/>

²⁰ Dwight de Leon, “How Congress Performed during Marcos’ 1st Year: 6 out of 42 Pet Bills Passed,” *Rappler*, 7 July 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/data-documents/tracker-status-congress-priority-bills-marcos-jr-administration-first-year-office-2023/>

Authority.²¹ As of 25 May 2023, the House has already approved thirty-one of the forty-two priority bills, including the four that have already got the nod of the Senate. These include the SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) Registration Act; the postponement of the Barangay and SK elections to October 2023 (which is problematic and adjudicated by the Supreme Court), fixing the term of the military officials, especially the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff; and condoning the unpaid loans of agrarian reform beneficiaries together with their penalties. This means twenty-seven HOR-approved bills are in the backlog of the Upper Chamber. These bills include the Maharlika Investments Fund. As of 25 May 2023, it also includes the National Infrastructure Development Program, Amendment to the Universal Health Care Act, and the National Land Use Act.²²

Subsequently, in an agenda-setting session with the House of Representatives (HOR) on 7 June 2023, it was found out that the HOR had already approved thirty-six, and not thirty-one, of the forty-two priority measures. What was left were the following: amendments to the Electric Power Industry Reform Act (EPIRA), amendments to the anti-agricultural smuggling act, budget modernization bill, creation of a Department of Water Resources, National Defense Act, and the unified system of separation, retirement and pension of military and uniformed personnel. Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza stated, as she is informed in confidence, that these measures are difficult to approve because of strong rent-seeking of persons or groups of interests, e.g., “mafias,” MUP, etc. As of 7 July 2023, seven days after the one-year period, two other priority bills have passed both HOR and Senate, making the total number of priority bills passed to six. These include the controversial Maharlika Investment Fund, which was eventually signed by the president, and the establishment of specialty centers in hospitals, which is part of the agenda of the legislature.²³

²¹ Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza, “LEDAC Identifies 20 Bills for Congress Approval before the End of 2023,” *BusinessWorld*, 5 July 2023, <https://www.bworldonline.com/editors-picks/2023/07/06/532605/ledac-identifies-20-bills-for-congress-approval-before-the-end-of-2023/>

²² ABS-CBN News, “19th Congress Passed Only 4 Admin Priority Bills in 1st Year,” 25 May 2023, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/05/25/23/19th-congress-passed-only-4-admin-priority-bills-in-1st-year>

²³ Dwight de Leon, “How Congress Performed during Marcos’ 1st Year: 6 out of 42 Pet Bills Passed,” *Rappler*, 7 July 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/data-documents/tracker-status-congress-priority-bills-marcos-jr-administration-first-year-office-2023/>

She further stated that, in an article on Rappler, nine additional measures that had either already received approval from at least one chamber of Congress, or were pending in the chamber where they remain pending, had already reached the plenary.²⁴ Thus, in addition to approving six committed priority measures by year end, the Legislature has been working very hard to send approved bills to the President for his enactment. Despite opposition from various sectors, this has occurred amidst the impending barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) elections, along with the perceived railroading and lack of substantive discussion, debate, critical retrospection, and circumspection in the supposedly august halls of Congress.

With these developments, Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza observed that the HOR appears more prolific in approving BBM's bidding or marching orders than the Senate. This, citing herself, may mainly be because the former is headed by a cousin (House Speaker Martin Romualdez) and the composition of the House leadership includes long-standing allies. These include Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, party supporters, and a son (Sandro Marcos). The opposition is only a drop in the bucket. Also, dynasties and political clans consist of at least 70 percent.²⁵ Likewise, the Senate is also composed of similar profiles—long-standing allies, party supporters, a sister (Imee Marcos). There is a very tiny opposition, only two or one. Also, dynastic siblings (Cayetano; Estrada-Ejercito), mother and son (Villars), and scions/members of political clans (Zubiri, Gatchalian, Binay, Escudero, and Revilla) dominate the set.

Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza believes that during Marcos, Jr.'s first year in office, his relationship with Congress is characterized by blind charismatic obedience. The President is still in an extended honeymoon period. The supermajority in Congress does his bidding because its composition dictates or shapes it so. In addition, it is still awed at how a dictator's son was able to win the 2022 elections by a very big margin. BBM's charisma or popularity is apparently rubbing off well. As such, BBM had a 78–80 percent trust rating in the November 2022 Pulse

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ronald U. Mendoza, et al., *Building Inclusive Democracies in ASEAN* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2018).

Asia survey.²⁶ Out of forty-two priority bills, BBM approved six laws (14 percent). However, while the Congress committed all these laws during the first year of the BBM administration, they may have other agenda. They may wish to maintain their institutional independence. They may wish to reclaim the integrity of the august halls of Congress. But at the end of the day, they collaborated with the Executive to bring home the bacon, upon BBM's orders.

Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza reiterated that despite the opposition from various sectors, the perceived railroading, and the lack of substantive discussion, debate, and critical retrospection and circumspection in the supposed august halls of Congress, Congress continues to do BBM's bidding. This trajectory does not bode well for democratic constitutionalism as the elusive checks and balances may just fly out of the window. The Legislature may just become the rubber stamp of the President. This situation is unlikely to change unless the minority increases in number and speaks up louder than it has been doing. However, there is tyranny of the majority, and in the voting for priority measures, the number spells the win in the game. Moreover, having a less subservient Congress may be far from reality, considering the horse-trading (buying votes), jockeying for positions and resources, and aggressive drives to sustain juicy positions and pork barrel from the "political kitchen." There is always that desire not to be relegated to a lower position with less pork barrel or campaign kitty (i.e., allotted campaign budget) to spread around.

Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza then addressed her second question: whether the current political situation will improve or get worse in the future. She stated that the future of BBM's relationship with Congress depends on several factors. One of these factors is the continuing popularity of BBM. If his popularity wanes due to surging inflation, worsening food security, unimpeded corruption, or increasing unemployment, Congress may become less subservient to him. However, Filipinos have high tolerance for misdeeds and unethical behavior. This may hinder virtuous impatience and the desire to say, "enough is enough." The political maturity of the people is also a factor. It really depends on their awareness of whom to vote for and why. However, in an era of unregulated

²⁶ Xave Gregorio, "Pulse Asia poll: Marcos, Duterte keep high approval, trust ratings," Philstar.com, 12 April 2023, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/04/12/2258366/pulse-asia-poll-marcos-duterte-keep-high-approval-trust-ratings>

fake news and a political culture anchored on immediate concerns such as food, children's allowances, and other daily needs, political maturity may be infantile. The possibility of celebrity politics and the election of political dynasties also continue to loom in the background.

Finally, Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza addressed her third question: whether or not Congress would continue to explicitly act like a rubber stamp of the President. She firmly believed it would be the case. She explained that if personal and not public interest dominate the legislators' way of life; if people continue to elect those who are *matunog* (likely candidates), *kilala* (well-known), *may pera* (have a lot of money), or *maraming connections* (with many connections); if the supermajority remains; and if Congress remains to be a community of allies, family members, and political clans who have not changed from the traditional political (*trapo*) system, then an independent, critical, and thinking Legislature for public interest will remain only ideal.

She ended her discussion by expressing hope for a Congress that would not blindly follow the President's pied piper magic. Instead, she hoped they would check on the abuses of other branches, and assert what they believe is right for the people of the Philippines. However, at this point, the aspiration for a change in the relationship between Marcos Jr. and Congress will remain a dream and not a reality. She bid, "God bless our country."

Philippine Foreign Policy Under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

■ Maria Thaemar C. Tana, Ph.D.²⁷

Dr. Maria Thaemar C. Tana discussed Philippine foreign policy under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., focusing on developments in Philippine relations with key regional actors and defense policies against the backdrop of the South China Sea disputes.

²⁷ Maria Thaemar C. Tana, Ph.D. is the Co-Convenor of the UP CIDS Strategic Studies Program (SSP) at the time of this event. She is an Associate Professor at the UP Diliman Department of Political Science.

According to Dr. Tana, the Philippines' foreign policy under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is frequently described as flexible, but it is also more assertive than that of his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte. She observed that President Marcos Jr. has taken a harder line on the South China Sea issue, promising to uphold the international court ruling against China's claims and emphasizing his determination to protect Philippine sovereignty. He has also re-forged the Philippines' alliance with the United States and developed new relationships with other US allies, such as Japan and Australia.

Dr. Tana believes that Marcos' shift in foreign policy is due to his realization that the soft approach or low-key diplomacy that Duterte pursued would not work. The Chinese pledges made during Duterte's time did not translate into actual policies. Maritime tensions, harassment of Filipino fishermen, and Chinese bullying continued. The President, therefore, has changed his approach to strengthen ties with traditional allies and develop new ones, particularly with other US allies and nontraditional ones like India and South Korea.

To illustrate the current foreign policy of President Marcos Jr., Dr. Tana briefly discussed each of the partnerships. The first involves Japan. In June 2023, the Philippine Coast Guard, the Japan Coast Guard, and the US Coast Guard engaged in a joint trilateral drill for the first time. The drill aimed at implementing maritime laws and security measures in the South China Sea. They also drafted a formal strategy agreement, which they set to complete by the end of 2023, focusing on strengthening air and maritime defenses in the East and South China Seas. Japan also affirmed military assistance to the Philippines through the Official Security Assistance (OSA). According to Dr. Tana, this is a relatively new policy. In addition, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and the US military also pledged to assist the Philippine military in enhancing its proficiency, equipment, and unit interoperability.

Second, the Philippines also stepped up its relations with the US-Australia partnership. The United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines recently held their first-ever quadrilateral dialogue, chief talks in Singapore. During the Shangri-La dialogue, the four countries reaffirmed their shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. They shall collectively make efforts to ensure the vision continues to thrive. Dr. Tana explains that this again demonstrates the strengthened ties between the Philippines and the United States under President Marcos, Jr. In addition, the Philippines is exploring closer bilateral and

multilateral relations with its fellow US allies. Japan and Australia, for their part, recognize the Philippines could support their respective Indo-Pacific strategies.

The President is also seeking to diversify the Philippines' defense cooperation with nontraditional partners. Among these partners is India. In early July 2023, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo met with his Indian counterpart to co-chair the Fifth Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) in New Delhi. The meeting resulted in a joint statement covering a wide range of issues including political, defense, security, maritime cooperation, trade and investment, regional and multilateral issues of mutual interests, and so forth. Additionally, South Korea could also be another potential partner. The Philippines and South Korea are currently working on establishing or formalizing a strategic partnership. Dr. Tana now poses the question about China. She states that despite the apparent realignment of the US, the Philippines still maintains good relations with China. In one interview, President Marcos, Jr. denied that he was pushing China away and insisted that Philippines-China relations remain fundamentally unchanged despite maritime tensions. Thus, the President seems to be making a double-handed move. On the one hand, it seeks to obtain US security guarantees. On the other hand, the Philippines is still economically interdependent with China. Therefore, the President must negotiate with China and resolve the territorial issues peacefully.

Dr. Tana posits the question: Is it still possible for the Philippines to be a friend to all, enemies to none? She suggests that while the government could try to address this complex issue, it would be very difficult to do so. Therefore the short answer is no. The Philippines cannot afford to be neutral because the country has a treaty alliance with the United States and territorial disputes with China. President Marcos Jr. needs to assume a guise of neutrality and maintain a position of noncommitment to any conflict outside the Philippines like Taiwan. However, the critical overarching agreement is the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). When the US is under attack, the Philippines would be obligated to be involved and provide aid. Likewise, the Philippines has adopted a strategy of limited hard balancing in response to growing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, increasing rivalry between the great powers, and the changing regional security environment. Dr. Tana explains that limited hard-balancing seeks to deter or constrain a threatening power through military buildup and informal alliances. It is a middle ground between hard-balancing, which relies on military buildup and formal alliances, and soft-balancing, which relies on institutional legitimization

and economic sanctions. Dr. Tana believes that this is a good strategy. It increases the Philippines' deterrent capabilities and enhances its operational responses. However, the country should be cautious and aware of the risks of playing this geopolitical game with the great powers. The Philippines is in danger of being entrapped or entangled in a great power conflict, particularly over the South China Sea as well as the issue over Taiwan.

Dr. Tana then elaborated on what Secretary Gilbert Teodoro said when asked about the Philippines' stance. The secretary stated that the Philippines is a sovereign state and not a pawn in the geopolitical battle that is raging in the region. According to him, the Philippines has a right to build up its military capabilities, both defensive and offensive, without being questioned by other countries. He also said that the Philippines' military buildup should not be tied to any specific issue, such as Taiwan. Dr. Tana explained that Secretary Teodoro's statement showed that the Philippines is still endeavoring to assert its autonomy, stressing that whatever the Philippines is doing is exclusively an internal matter. The foreign and security policies the government is pursuing are based on our own assessment of our national interests in improving our defense and deterrent capabilities, not because of external pressures from either the United States or China. Furthermore, the Philippines has the right to build its own defense capabilities. Who the Philippines should partner with to achieve our foreign policy and strategic objectives is our business and no one else's.

Teodoro is pushing for what he calls "deconfliction," which is about reducing the risk of accidental and unintended clashes between two or more parties by improving dialogue. In addition, he is willing to talk to China about the West Philippine Sea issue but will not give up the Philippines' claim to the area, inferring that there are some lines that the Philippines cannot cross. Still, all these statements are unclear as to whether Teodoro will be able to find a way to successfully deconflict the Philippines' interests with China. His comments only suggest that the Philippines is willing to take a more assertive stance in the dispute.

Dr. Tana concluded that it remains to be seen whether Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy of deterrence and engagement can be sustained, as Philippine foreign policy is largely personality-driven and dependent on the president. The next president could continue Marcos Jr.'s trajectory or adopt a more appeasement-oriented policy towards China or the United States. For example, during Duterte's term, he adopted the policy of appeasement towards China. Thus, the next president

could perhaps adopt a policy of appeasement towards the United States. Dr. Tana further stated that there are still several years into the Marcos presidency, and that the current policies are better than those of the previous administrations. However, she stressed that the president must be cautious. She also noted that Philippine foreign policy is influenced by external conditions, such as the competition between the United States and China, China's behavior in the South China Sea, and the evolution of the United States and its allies' Indo-Pacific strategies. The Philippines' next move will depend on how these factors play out.

Open Forum

■ Moderator: Maria Elize Mendoza²⁸

One of the audience members, a Ph.D. candidate from Taiwan, asked: How Filipinos can demand accountability from government officials? He also inquired: Given the current alliance between Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte, is the opposition sufficiently strong? He also raised the implications of co-opting or reorganizing PhilHealth, and whether it would be prone to politicization.

Another member of the audience from the group LILAK (Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights) asked the panel's insights on Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte's political relationship. She asked: What issues the panel expects from their power-sharing relationship?

Demanding Accountability from the Government

To address the question on accountability, Purugganan discussed the issues of the Marcos-Duterte administration in the context of human rights violations. According to him, this is also echoed in an article by Human Rights watch, that the Marcos administration has been criticized for failing to improve human rights protections in the Philippines and for continuing the dangerous and fatal “red tagging” of activists. The previous Duterte administration left a legacy of attacks on leftist, environmental, and indigenous activists, a crackdown on the media, and thousands of extrajudicial killings linked to its “war on drugs” that could

²⁸ Maria Elize Mendoza is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman.

amount to crimes against humanity.²⁹ However, the Marcos Jr. administration has done little to address these human rights issues. It has continued the “drug war” killings, though at a lower rate than during the Duterte administration. Moreover, the refusal of the Marcos administration to support the ICC investigation and to rescind or have a statement opposing the war on drugs is a point of contention. He particularly described the relationship between Marcos and Duterte as characterized by a *quid pro quo* arrangement.

For Filipinos to demand accountability, Dr. Atienza emphasized that people must understand how the government works and what civilian officials’ actual responsibilities are. She explained that civil society organizations, universities, and the media can play a role in promoting a better understanding of responsibilities, particularly at the local government level, as well as encouraging progressive people to run for local offices. These actions can help ensure that there are more allies in the fight for accountability. For her, working together with local government officials also leads to the production of better officials to implement progressive policies. She also noted that increasingly, Filipino presidents have come from local governments, which suggests that local government is a good place to start in demanding greater accountability.

Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza provided some pointers on how to extract accountability from public servants in the Philippines. She suggested continuing existing programs and policies, promoting more conscious association among public servants, encouraging more vigilance among citizens and civil society organizations, and demanding zero tolerance from the private sector. She stressed that if people held responsible are not committed to doing so, it is difficult to obtain accountability. Additionally, there needs to be a culture of oversight and vigilance from all sectors of society. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in holding public servants accountable. However, many civil society organizations in the Philippines are now facing challenges and restrictions. It is important to create a more conducive environment for civil society organizations to operate and engage with the government. For Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza, extracting accountability is a complex task that requires a whole-of-society approach, in which everyone has a role to play in ensuring that

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, “Marcos Fails on Rights in the Philippines,” *Mirage News*, 29 June 2023, <https://www.miragenews.com/marcos-fails-on-rights-in-philippines-1037151/>

public servants are held accountable for their actions. Filipinos need to create a culture where everyone watches out for corruption and demands transparency. Civil society organizations have a big role to play in this, but they need support from the people and the private sector.

PhilHealth

Regarding the issue of PhilHealth being co-opted under the Office of the President, Dr. Atienza warned that it is a serious action, as PhilHealth's operations are a source of many problems for sick Filipinos, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main process of obtaining PhilHealth benefits is lengthy and complicated. Now that PhilHealth is being proposed to be placed under the direct supervision of the Office of the President, it is advisable to be vigilant about any attempts to further weaken PhilHealth.

Likewise, Dr. Punongbayan explained that there is a pattern of financial institutions and government-owned and controlled corporations (GOOCs) being co-opted politically. According to him, this pattern is reminiscent of what happened during Martial Law, back when Marcos Sr. instructed government financial institutions (GFIs) to finance loans to his cronies. The Maharlika Investment Fund is an example of this pattern, where there is a possibility of GSIS and SSS pension funds being invested in Maharlika, despite a prohibition in the bill. The Land Bank of the Philippines and the Development Bank of the Philippines are also making behest contributions to Maharlika. Moreover, the three-page business proposal for Maharlika suggests that it can invest in real estate companies listed in the Philippine Stock Exchange, which may be connected to the proponent of Maharlika in the Senate. Dr. Punongbayan suggested that the PhilHealth issue and the pattern in GOOCs and GFIs being co-opted need to be watched closely.

Relationship of President Marcos Jr. and Vice-President Sara Duterte

As for the relationship between Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte, Dr. Atienza noted that clearly, the alliance worked for them to win the election. Marcos Jr. faces the difficult problem of contradicting and changing the policies that Sara Duterte's father put in place. Additionally, the problem of the alliance breaking up is not helped by the fact that the Philippines does not have strong political parties; instead, personalities and political families forge alliances. But for Dr. Atienza, this may be an opening for progressive sectors to break through. She then explained the concept of "opportunity structure" in political science. These strains and the breaking of the alliance are small opportunities that can be used to engage and educate the people and present better alternatives.

Correspondingly, Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza agreed that the relationship between the President and the Vice-President is a good alliance between the strong north and the strong south. However, the crack in the alliance is evident due to the removal of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo as senior deputy speaker of the House of Representatives. It is difficult to predict what will happen. The President and Vice-President are creating their own image and legacy. This may lead to conflicts between them as well. Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza suggested that there may be a falling apart in the next few years if the conflict and aspirations of Bongbong and Sara are widely different. Furthermore, the direction of Marcos' presidency is uncertain, and there might be conflicts between Romualdez and Zubiri, who are also jockeying for the position.

In terms of Philippine diplomacy, Dr. Tana described that during the first 100 days of Sara Duterte's vice-presidency, she helped strengthen relations with other countries by hosting courtesy calls, participating in gift-giving to daycare children in partnership with the embassy of the state of Qatar, and visiting the residence of the Japanese ambassador. However, some observers are worried that if Sara Duterte becomes president, she might focus on internal conflicts such as counterinsurgency and concerns about communist and terrorist groups, instead of external issues. Additionally, Dr. Tana emphasized that there may be a disjoint relationship between the Marcos Jr. and Duterte camps, as they have different positions on China and the South China Sea. Marcos is trying to strengthen traditional and nontraditional partnerships, while Duterte's camp warns that fostering closer relations with the US, Australia, and Japan could drag

the Philippines into a great power conflict. According to Dr. Tana, it is unclear what Sara's position is on this matter.

The Maharlika Investment Fund and the Philippine Economy

In the second round of questions, one of the audience members asked about the implications of the Maharlika Investment Fund. This also raises the question of whether there are ways to challenge the bill, even at the judiciary level, regarding its constitutionality due to its serious consequences. Consequently, the issue on devolution was raised, questioning whether it might be at risk amidst the prevalence of patronage politics in local governments. If so, what exactly could the Local Government Code (LGC) or amendments to the LGC do?

Dr. Punongbayan emphasized that the Maharlika Investment Fund (MIF) has several issues that can be raised before the Supreme Court. However, the Court may be unable to deal with the issues. Besides, Congress has discretion when it comes to making policies related to economic growth and development. Interestingly, the main problem with the Maharlika Investment Fund is its purpose, of which even the proponents are unsure. Dr. Punongbayan stated that the fund's identity crisis may be due to its job generation approach, something to speed up infrastructure investments, or a sovereign wealth fund. The MIF also aims to create a long-term source of investment capital for the Philippines to stimulate economic growth and create jobs. However, there are concerns about the fund, ranging from graft risks to the Philippines' significant fiscal deficit. The Senate bill does not respond to the clamor for a genuine people's wealth fund. Some of its provisions can even be interpreted to allow SSS, GSIS, and PAG-IBIG fund managers to voluntarily use pension funds and contributions for the Maharlika Fund. The bill also allows the government to privatize state assets to finance the Maharlika Fund. Thus, for Dr. Punongbayan, the Supreme Court challenge will be interesting to watch and to engage in.

In terms of other financial issues, Dr. Punongbayan agrees with the administration's push for reform in the military and uniformed personnel pension system, which poses a huge risk to the country's finances in the coming decades. The unfunded pension payments, based on Department of Finance estimates, are about half of GDP, approximately ₱10 trillion in debt to pensioners.

If the government's funds are allocated to pension payments instead of social services, it could compromise the delivery of these services. He stressed that there is indeed a limit to delaying the addressing of the issue, which may at one point entail raising new taxes. However, for the Marcos government to have any credibility in asking for new taxes, their family must pay their own taxes as well. Quoting Justice Carpio, who stated that the unpaid estate taxes of the Marcoses amount to about 203 billion pesos, Dr. Punongbayan emphasized that paying these taxes would set a good example.

Devolution

On the question of devolution, Dr. Atienza said that the Local Government Code has been in place for thirty-two years, but patronage politics remains a problem. The poorest provinces and other LGUs keep electing persons from political families. The party-list system is another example of how a particular law can be exploited by anyone. The devolution of power requires countervailing forces to strengthen the people first, provide information, and then make people demand accountability. She mentioned that there are good proposals like what the Inter-agency Task Force on Constitutional Amendments proposed during the second half of Duterte's administration. It proposed that the National Tax Allocation (NTA) distribution formula prioritize poorer LGUs, but the latter must also use the funds for the responsibilities devolved to LGUs. However, the COVID-19 pandemic halted discussions about the proposals. Dr. Atienza hopes that somebody can revive these proposals in both Houses of Congress. In addition, Dr. Atienza suggested that instead of focusing on national anti-dynasty provisions, changes should start at the barangay level. There are also numerous proposals to reform the party system and electoral system. She mentioned that Dr. Tigno wrote several discussion papers and policy briefs on electoral and party system reforms. Likewise, she advised using the openings in the Local Government Code for people's participation and lobbying for a genuine people's assembly act. The act should not only provide an opportunity to distribute aid to people but also allow them to speak and check on the powers of the local governments and demand action on issues.

Philippine Foreign Policy and China

In the third round of questions, Dr. Robert Go from the UP Department of Political Science and the Philippine Political Science Association raised a question about the current administration's China and wider foreign policy. Dr. Tigno raised another question highlighting the lack of architecture or master plan of Marcos Jr.'s presidency. Finally, a reporter from ABS-CBN asked about the importance of SONA and how the panel would encourage ordinary Filipinos to listen or watch it.

For the current foreign policy, Dr. Tana explained that President Marcos, Jr.'s first foreign visit to Indonesia indicated that Southeast Asia remains a foreign policy priority. In the case of China, she also raised the question of what concessions the Philippines is willing to give China and what to make of the agreements signed during his visits. Agreements signed during visits are just pledges unless they are translated into actual projects. Clearly, the Marcos Jr. administration is trying to maintain good relations with China for economic reasons while seeking security guarantees from the United States. Thus, Dr. Tana described the Philippines–China relations as “cold politics and hot economics.” In addition, the Philippines has not yet decided on what role to play in the event of a Taiwan contingency. The Marcos Jr. administration emphasized that the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites will not be used for offensive purposes. Dr. Tana suggested that the Philippines is unsure which side to align itself with and what the National Defense Treaty (NDT) with the United States might seriously entail in the future.

The Masterplan of the Marcos Jr. Administration

On the question of a master plan, Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza replied that BBM has his own. For instance, the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) and Ambisyon 2040 exist. However, the PDP 2023–2028 has a different section on competitiveness and national security, and it may not be aligned with the President's master plan. The PDP is supposed to be a collective effort, and Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza suggested that the President might still be weaving through it. Perhaps Marcos Jr. is still learning, despite preparing for the position for the past forty years. Maybe his priorities have changed, or perhaps his vision of what should be in the master plan has shifted. He would need the right timing in order to push his plan forward.

Dr. Atienza responded to the question of whether there is a master plan beyond what is presented in the development plans. She explained that many people were initially afraid that Marcos Jr. would simply replicate his father's style and policies. After all, he is using the names of his father's programs for some of his own programs. However, Marcos Jr. seems to present that he has his own vision to adjust to new challenges. However, the problem with not having a clear master plan is that many groups within the political alliance have different agenda and are whispering behind the scenes. Dr. Atienza suggested that perhaps, investigative journalists may have an advantage in uncovering these intrigues and movements among various groups. She believes that it is important to study what is happening behind closed doors, as formal processes fail to present the real agenda, who are involved and who are more influential. She hopes to see these agenda and conflicts within the alliance be exposed to the public.

Similarly, Dr. Punongbayan stated that the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) is supposed to be an overarching plan that all government agencies must follow. However, the publication of the PDP was delayed, and it was only published in December 2023. In the past, plans were published earlier. The problem with previous administrations is that the plan often became just a piece of paper. There was a plan, but it was not implemented. Moreover, there was no interest in monitoring its implementation. In some instances, it seemed like the plan was invented along the way. For example, the Maharlika Investment Fund (MIF) is originally not in the PDP, but it is now being touted as the solution to all our economic problems. It has been advertised as a "silver bullet" that would address the Philippine's economic woes. Dr. Punongbayan warned about the arbitrariness of the MIF.

On Democracy and Why Ordinary Filipinos Must Listen and Watch the SONA

Dr. Villamejor-Mendoza stressed that engaging with the SONA is part of the Filipino's civic participation. She emphasized the importance of providing the real state of the nation by the President to mobilize the people toward one direction and to overcome weaknesses. The government must be honest about the current situation so that the country can move forward.

Dr. Punongbayan answered that ordinary people must be aware of critical issues, such as inflation, which is currently the most pressing concern in the country. The challenge to President Marcos Jr. is to connect bad economic outcomes to the plans of policymakers. The issue exists, but no one is being blame for because of bad policies. Thus, the SONA of Marcos Jr. might control the master narrative. Propaganda and slogans sell to many people, offering potential lessons. Therefore, ordinary people should be critical of these narratives.

Mr. Purugganan stated that the President is obliged to report on the true state of the nation. However, whether the reported state is accurate is up for debate. For Purugganan, the SONA is an opportunity to lift the fog of normalization and expose problems in the administration's policies. He believes that civil society plays a significant role in shaping democracy and addressing the problem of elite democracy. The political agenda may have been addressed to the level of local government, but economic decision-making remains undemocratic. Therefore, the SONA is an opportunity to examine whether the government serves the people's interests and inspire action to strengthen democracy.

Finally, Dr. Atienza emphasized the importance of the SONA for Filipinos in exercising their citizenship. Whether one is still studying or already working, either in media, civil society, academia, or development work, civic participation is needed. Moreover, listening to the SONA is an opportunity to disagree, validate, and hold the President accountable for the promises he made. She noted that specific promises, such as the price of rice, are more memorable, explicit, and relatable to people, as they remember them. Additionally, the top five national concerns identified by respondents, based on the June 2023 Pulse Asia survey, are controlling inflation, increasing the pay of workers, creating more jobs, reducing poverty, and fighting graft and corruption.³⁰ These issues are also often reflected in other surveys and are easy to reflect in the SONA. Thus, Dr. Atienza suggested that these aspects are the easiest to look into and to determine whether the SONA also considers these concerns important and whether the proposed solutions of the President respond realistically to these concerns. Finally, listening to the SONA can also help citizens assess if the President has fulfilled his promises regarding the issues that are close to people's current circumstances and concerns.

³⁰ Bea Cupin, "Inflation top concern of most Filipinos – Pulse Asia," Rappler, 11 July 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/marcos-jr-administration-inflation-strategy-pulse-asia-survey-june-2-23/>



- Group photo after the RTD. Starting from far left is Dr. Jorge V. Tigno, Mr. Joseph Purugganan, Dr. Jan Carlo “JC” Punongbayan, Dr. Maria Ela L. Atienza, Dr. Maria Fe Villamejor-Mendoza, Dr. Maria Thaeamar C. Tana, Dr. Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem, and Ms. Maria Elize Mendoza.

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