



PROCEEDINGS 2026-08

Program on Social and Political Change

Bagong Pilipinas Na Ba?

Proceedings of the Forum on Assessing the Marcos Jr.
Administration Performance

5 September 2025 | 1:00 PM to 6:00 PM

Colegio de San Juan de Letran, Intramuros, Manila

Maria Corazon C. Reyes



UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES
CENTER FOR
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"President-elect Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. is sworn in as the 17th president of the Philippines."

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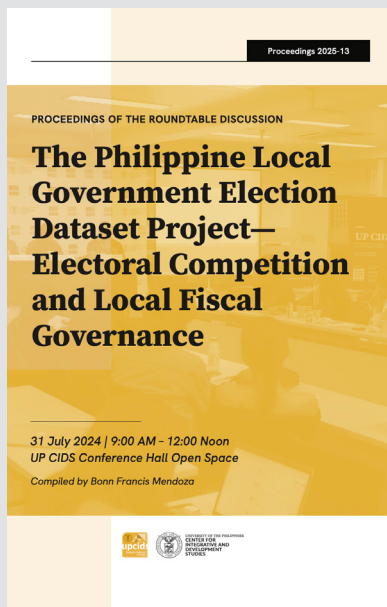
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The Philippine Local Government Election Dataset Project— Electoral Competition and Local Fiscal Governance

31 July 2024 | 9:00 AM – 12:00 Noon

UP CIDS Conference Hall Open Space

Compiled by Bonn Francis Mendoza



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PROCEEDINGS

The Philippine Local
Government Election
Dataset Project—Electoral
Competition and Local Fiscal
Governance

About the Forum

The forum entitled *Bagong Pilipinas Na Ba? Assessing the Marcos Jr. Administration's SONA Performance* was held on 5 September 2025 at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran in Intramuros, Manila. This event was collaboratively organized by the Program on Social and Political Change (PSPC), the Philippine Political Science Association (PPSA), and the Colegio de San Juan de Letran. The central rationale for this event was the need to scrutinize whether the *Bagong Pilipinas* slogan, which functions as the flagship governance brand of the current administration, has successfully moved beyond rhetorical branding to achieve substantive institutional reforms.

The "*Bagong Pilipinas*" campaign represents the central narrative of the Marcos Jr. administration. Launched in the administration's first State of the Nation Address (SONA) and reinforced in subsequent policy pronouncements, the campaign aims to signal a departure from previous governance styles and to chart a new course for the nation. The branding is particularly significant given the Marcos surname's historical associations and the need to distinguish President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. from both his father's martial law legacy and his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte's confrontational populism.

At the three-year mark of the six-year presidential term this forum examines the "*Bagong Pilipinas*" brand as to whether this campaign produces measurable improvements in governance, institutional integrity, and public service delivery; or does it remain primarily a communications strategy disconnected from on-the-ground realities.

The forum was structured around four overarching questions:

1. Democratic Institutions

Have the three co-equal branches of government maintained their independence and efficiency? Is there evidence of institutional strengthening in the Judiciary and Legislature, or do patterns of Executive dominance persist?

2. Governance and Anti-Corruption

Has the administration made progress in addressing the Philippines' perennial corruption challenges? Are civil service reforms improving the delivery of public services to peripheral areas?

3. Foreign Policy and Sovereignty

How has the administration navigated the complex geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region? Has the Philippines successfully balanced economic engagement with China against security cooperation with the United States and other partners?

4. Civic Engagement

What role can and should the youth and civil society play in actualizing the aspirations of a "New Philippines"? How can academic research inform policy and empower citizens?

Organizers

1. Program on Social and Political Change (PSPC)

Under the leadership of Dr. Rogelio Alicor L. Pano, the Program on Social and Political Change has established itself as a platform for evidence-based policy dialogue. The Program's commitment to bridging academic research and public policy discourse was instrumental in conceptualizing and executing this forum.

2. Philippine Political Science Association (PPSA)

As the premier professional organization for political scientists in the Philippines, the PPSA provided institutional support and helped mobilize expert participation. The Association's network ensured broad representation from the academic community.

3. Colegio de San Juan de Letran

As the host institution, Letran provided not only the physical venue, but also logistical support and enthusiastic student participation. Special recognition is due to the Letran Political and Legal Studies Area under the leadership of Assistant Professor Clarita B. Rivera, and the National Service Training Program under Professor Enzo Moreno.

Resource Speakers

Deep gratitude is extended to the four panelists who generously shared their expertise: Dr. Rogelio Alicor L. Pano (UP Diliman), Dr. Ederson Delos Trino Tapia (University of Makati), Professor Wayne Winter Uyseco (Far Eastern University), and Professor Gilda Quiñones (Letran). Their willingness to engage seriously with student questions, offer frank assessments, and provide actionable recommendations exemplifies the best traditions of public scholarship.

Significance of This Event For Policymakers

This forum is particularly relevant for policymakers for three reasons. First, it provides an independent academic assessment free from partisan political considerations. The panel is comprised of scholars within the fields of political science, public administration, and international relations, offering evidence-based analysis rather than ideological advocacy.

Second, the forum incorporated direct engagement with the youth demographic—particularly political science students who represent the next generation of civil servants, elected officials, and policy analysts. Their questions revealed concerns that should inform policy priorities.

Third, the forum occurred at an important period of the current administration: with three years remaining in the presidential term, it sheds light on the realities that may debunk or support the “Bagong Pilipinas” narrative.

This event was conceptualized by Dr. Rogelio Alicor L. Pano and the entire PSPC team. These proceedings were written by Maria Corazon C. Reyes, the Senior Research Analyst of PSPC.

Presentations

Foreign Policy and Sovereignty

Ms. Gilda L. Quiñones

Faculty member, Political and Legal Studies

Colegio de San Juan de Letran

Professor Gilda Quiñones centered her presentation on the inextricable link between domestic integrity and international standing, drawing from her studies in Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) welfare, migration policy, and foreign relations. She brought critical attention to the human dimension of foreign policy, arguing that the welfare of the millions of OFWs serves as a vital pillar of the nation's global engagement. A significant portion of her discourse focused on domestic corruption directly undermining the Philippines' international credibility, creating a reputational deficit that hampers the state's ability to attract essential foreign direct investment. By emphasizing that no rational investor would risk capital in a system characterized by instability and graft, she framed good governance not merely as a moral imperative but as a prerequisite for successful economic diplomacy.

Professor Quiñones further analyzed the legal and strategic frameworks governing Philippine sovereignty, strongly asserting that the 2016 Arbitral Ruling serves as a powerful "strong backup" for the nation's maritime claims. She explained that this ruling has fundamentally transformed the Philippines' negotiating position in the South China Sea dispute, providing a legitimate international basis to assert its rights. Considering this, she challenged the traditional notion of over-dependence on established allies, advocating instead for the continued development of a multipolar network of partnerships. This strategy involves actively diversifying foreign relations by strengthening ties with regional actors such as India, Australia, and fellow ASEAN members to ensure the Philippines is not caught exclusively between competing hegemonies.

Addressing the complexities of the US-China relationship, Professor Quiñones acknowledged the limited room for maneuver given the geopolitical reality of China as a permanent neighbor and the binding treaty obligations of the Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States. She noted that this requires

a balancing act, as seen in recent diplomatic "damage control" regarding the Taiwan dilemma. When controversial statements surfaced concerning Taiwan, she highlighted how the Department of Foreign Affairs acted swiftly to reiterate adherence to the One-China Policy, clarifying that earlier remarks were misinterpreted to maintain regional stability. Ultimately, Professor Quiñones concluded that the effectiveness of the Philippines' "New Diplomacy" rests on its ability to project a stable, transparent, and legally grounded image to the world, thereby securing both its sovereign territory and its economic future.

Philippine Economy

Mr. Wayne Winter Uyseco

*Faculty member, Department of International Studies
Far Eastern University*

Professor Wayne Winter Uyseco's presentation entitled "Perspectives on the Philippine Economy and Development," provided an empirical assessment of the Marcos Jr. administration's performance under the "Bagong Pilipinas" framework. His analysis sought to determine whether the administration's flagship branding has translated into tangible economic improvements, particularly for the most vulnerable sectors of Philippine society.

Professor Uyseco began by contextualizing the Philippines' economic standing using indicators from the IMF's World Economic Outlook and the UNDP's Human Development Index. He noted that while the Philippine economy has demonstrated robust performance in recent years, this growth was significantly tempered by high inflation. Regarding regional competitiveness, he pointed out that Vietnam overtook the Philippines in the Human Development Index in 2006, followed by Indonesia in 2010. Furthermore, while GDP growth appeared favorable compared to regional neighbors, Professor Uyseco argued that it remains underwhelming relative to the government's own set targets.

His presentation highlighted a significant recalibration of the country's economic goals by the Development Budget Coordination Committee (DBCC). For 2025, the growth target was lowered from the initial 6–8 percent range to 5.5–6.5 percent. Similarly, targets for 2026 through 2028 were narrowed to a 6–7 percent range. On the issue of poverty, while the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported a decline in the poverty rate to 15.5

percent in 2023 from 18.1 percent in 2021, Professor Uyseco cautioned that the country remains far from its 2028 target of 8–9 percent. He emphasized that the current growth-inflation mix has failed to deliver the broad welfare gains implied in the administration's State of the Nation Address (SONA), as poverty remains highly sensitive to food inflation.

A significant portion of his presentation was dedicated to infrastructure, specifically the transition from the Duterte administration's "Build, Build, Build" (BBB) program to the current "Build Better More" (BBM) initiative. Professor Uyseco noted that despite the high spending of the previous administration, only 12 out of 119 infrastructure flagship projects (IFPs) were completed by April 2022. The current BBM program, valued at PHP 9.5 trillion, is funded through a combination of Official Development Assistance (ODA), Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), and national government funds. However, he warned that the success of these projects is threatened by persistent challenges such as corruption, execution bottlenecks, rising debt, and project selection issues.

Regarding the labor market, Professor Uyseco reported that the unemployment rate improved to 3.8 percent in 2024, down from 4.4 percent in 2023. Underemployment also saw a reduction to 11.9 percent. While these employment rates appear positive on the surface, he stressed that the quality of jobs and low productivity remain pressing concerns. He referenced the "Trabaho Para sa Bayan Act" (Republic Act No. 11962) as a primary policy tool intended to address these human capital issues.

In his concluding remarks, Professor Uyseco evaluated these developments against the long-term vision of "Ambisyon Natin 2040," which envisions the Philippines as a prosperous middle-class society that is "Matatag" (strongly rooted), "Maginhawa" (comfortable), and "Panatag" (secure). He concluded that while various indicators show "subtle improvements," the poorest sectors of society still struggle to feel the benefits of the "Bagong Pilipinas" campaign. He identified domestic political irritants, persistent corruption, and security concerns as ongoing threats to investor confidence and long-term economic stability.

National Government

Dr. Ederson de los Trino Tapia

*Professor and Dean, College of Continuing Advanced and Professional Studies
University of Makati*

President, Philippine Society for Public Administration (PSPA)

Dr. Ederson Tapia's presentation was titled "Public Administration and Governance under the Marcos Administration: Midterm Crossroads and Prospects for Reform". He framed his analysis through a public administration lens that prioritized the evaluation of institutions over individual personalities, asking the critical question of whether state institutions have been substantively strengthened three years into the administration's term. A central theme of his presentation was the tension between the sheer quantity of legislative outputs and the actual quality of structural reforms, a dynamic he explored across five key focus areas including administrative capacity, fiscal governance, integrity, the executive-legislative interface, and democratic participation.

In his assessment of administrative capacity, Dr. Tapia presented a sobering picture of the Philippine civil service and human capital development. He pointed to the 2022 PISA scores where Filipino students lagged significantly behind their Southeast Asian neighbors, ranking lowest in reading comprehension and second lowest in science and mathematics, as an indicator of foundational weaknesses in the country's future workforce. Within the bureaucracy itself, he highlighted a persistent talent drain characterized by a 13 percent vacancy rate across 1.8 million civil service positions. He further noted that competency gaps remain prevalent at the local level, with less than 60 percent of Local Government Units (LGUs) meeting mandated training requirements, while digitalization efforts continue to struggle with only 38 percent of agencies fully onboarded to PhilGEPS and less than a quarter possessing functional electronic platforms. These administrative inefficiencies were shown to have tangible impacts on service delivery, exemplified by the PHP 27 billion claims backlog plaguing PhilHealth.

The presentation then shifted to the paradoxes of fiscal and policy governance, particularly regarding the Mandanas-Garcia Ruling which increased LGU funds to PHP 959 billion in 2024. Dr. Tapia argued that this influx of resources has been met with weak absorptive capacity, as 70 percent of local governments lack updated development plans and 48 percent struggle with liquidation.

This misalignment resulted in a remarkable lag in budget execution, with over PHP 1.2 trillion in funds left unutilized between January and September 2024 despite high obligation rates, indicating a failure to translate allocated budgets into actual public services. On the front of integrity and accountability, the Philippines' standing remained stagnant with a Corruption Perceptions Index score of 33 out of 100, placing the nation 114th globally. Dr. Tapia cited Commission on Audit flags regarding PHP 216 billion in delayed infrastructure projects and ongoing fraud audits for flood control initiatives as evidence that corruption control remains elusive.

Dr. Tapia offered a nuanced view of the executive-legislative interface, acknowledging the administration's efficiency in passing 32 of 42 LEDAC priority measures by mid-2025. However, he contrasted this legislative speed with substantive concerns regarding the governance of the Maharlika Fund and the stalled status of the Rightsizing Bill, which remains deadlocked in Congress due to political trade-offs. He also observed that despite high voter turnout in the 2025 midterms, the political landscape remains dominated by dynasties which control approximately 82 percent of House seats. This concentration of power correlates with declining public trust, as evidenced by a drop in the administration's approval rating to 25 percent and a sentiment shared by 54 percent of Filipinos that they possess little influence over government decisions. Dr. Tapia concluded that while the "Bagong Pilipinas" campaign has succeeded in stabilizing inflation and accelerating lawmaking, it must mature from a mere slogan into a vehicle for genuine systemic transformation to address deep-seated institutional weaknesses and democratic erosion.

Legislative Priorities

Dr. Rogelio Alicor L. Panao

*Professor, Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman
Convenor, Program on Social and Political Change*

In his presentation entitled "Marcos' Legislative Priorities, 2022 to 2025," Dr. Rogelio Alicor L. Panao examined the State of the Nation Address as a foundational agenda setting tool. His analysis provided a categorization of the administration's legislative outputs into six primary thematic areas which include economic and investment measures, social protection and labor welfare, defense and governance, education and human capital development, health and environmental resource management, and heritage and symbolic

laws. Dr. Panao highlighted a robust throughput of economic legislation, citing the enactment of the Maharlika Investment Fund Act of 2023, the Public Private Partnership Act, and the Ease of Paying Taxes Act as evidence of a prioritized focus on growth, fiscal reform, and investment attraction. Within the realm of social welfare, he pointed to significant legal milestones such as the New Agrarian Emancipation Act, the Magna Carta of Filipino Seafarers, and the Eddie Garcia Law, which seeks to improve workplace safety in the entertainment industry.

Then his presentation centered on a comparative assessment of the legislative promises made during the 2022 State of the Nation Address against their actual status by the midterm juncture. Dr. Panao observed that while some promises were fulfilled, such as the Real Property Valuation and Assessment Reform Act and the Internet Transactions Act of 2023, several high priority proposals remain unfulfilled. Notably, the National Government Rightsizing Program and the Budget Modernization Bill have not yet resulted in enabling laws, remaining as mere proposals despite being early administrative priorities. Other pending measures include the E-Government Act and the creation of specialized medical and research bodies like the Virology Institute of the Philippines and the Medical Reserve Corps, which were emphasized during the pandemic but have yet to be enacted.

Dr. Panao further noted that while specific defense related laws like the AFP Professionalism Act and the Self-Reliant Defense Posture Act were passed, the comprehensive National Defense Act remains a long-standing proposal that has not been finalized. Similarly, the creation of a Department of Water Resources and the Unified System of Separation, Retirement, and Pension remain unfulfilled, with the latter only addressed through piecemeal adjustments such as the Adjusted DFA Retirement Benefits Act rather than a unified law. His presentation concluded that the administration's legislative record is characterized by a high volume of activity in economic and symbolic legislation but faces significant hurdles in translating complex institutional reforms, such as the National Land Use Act and EPIRA amendments, into final legislative successes. This scorecard approach effectively illustrated the gap between the rhetorical agenda set during the SONA and the political realities of legislative enactment.

Forum

Ms. Dionessa Bustamante

*Associate Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Development Studies
De La Salle University*

Democratic Institutions and Governance

The first part examined the state of democratic institutions, focusing on the Judiciary and Legislature. The guiding question was whether the "Bagong Pilipinas" rhetoric has produced observable changes in how these branches function, particularly in terms of independence, efficiency, and responsiveness to public needs.

The Judiciary: Is There a Bagong Pilipinas in the Courts?

A student from Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila posed the opening question, asking whether there is evidence of a "New Philippines" in the judicial branch, referencing recent Supreme Court sessions involving Vice President Sara Duterte.

Dr. Rogelio Panao responded by characterizing the Judiciary as inherently passive, compared to the Executive and Legislative branches. He explained that while the Executive actively sets agendas through the SONA and the Legislature drafts policy, the Judiciary waits for controversies to reach its docket before acting.

Dr. Panao noted that he had reviewed the 97-page decision mentioned by the student and found it legally sound and grounded in existing procedural rules rather than representing a new judicial philosophy or activism aligned with "Bagong Pilipinas."

Dr. Ederson Tapia offered a more critical perspective, focusing on efficiency. He cited research from his colleagues showing that the Judiciary consistently ranks as the least efficient branch in terms of processing times and service delivery.

Dr. Tapia highlighted a significant structural problem: the Judiciary is excluded from the Anti-Red Tape Act (ARTA) due to separation of powers concerns. This exemption effectively allows the courts to maintain inefficient practices without accountability.

Legislative Dynamics and Agenda Setting

The relationship between the Executive and Legislative branches generated significant discussion. A student from FEU asked about what obligates Congress to follow the presidential agenda laid out in the SONA, given that the branches are theoretically co-equal.

Dr. Panao explained the theory of "dual legitimacy" in presidential systems. He explained that both the President and Congress derive their authority directly from voters, which should theoretically preserve independence.

However, Dr. Panao identified three practical factors that create Executive dominance:

1. **Fiscal Dependence:** Congress needs the Executive (through the Department of Budget and Management) to release funds for local projects that legislators use to demonstrate effectiveness to constituents.
2. **Electoral Survival:** Legislators require the President's endorsement and party machinery to win midterm elections.
3. **Weak Constituent Lobbying:** In the absence of direct constituent pressure, legislators act as "trustees" who substitute their own judgment (or follow the President's lead) rather than strictly following constituent preferences as "delegates."

Dr. Panao also addressed the persistence of "pork barrel" politics despite constitutional reforms. While acknowledging that the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) was declared unconstitutional, he noted that "pork light" mechanisms continue to exist, creating continued dependence on Executive approval.

The implications for the "Bagong Pilipinas" agenda are significant. The structural subordination of Congress to the Executive means that legislative priorities will largely mirror presidential preferences rather than representing

genuine, independent policy innovation. For policymakers concerned about the balance of powers, this suggests the need for reforms that reduce legislative fiscal dependence on the Executive, potentially through constitutional amendments or changes to budgetary procedures.

Governance, Bureaucracy, and Anti-Corruption

The second part focused on the operational machinery of government—how policies translate into actual services delivered to citizens. This session revealed some of the most significant challenges facing the "Bagong Pilipinas" agenda, particularly regarding corruption and bureaucratic efficiency.

Civil Service Reforms and Decentralization

A student from the FEU Political Science Society raised a question about the centralization of government offices and whether moving agencies outside Metro Manila would improve governance effectiveness.

Dr. Ederson Tapia explained what he termed the "Imperial Manila" syndrome. He explained that despite constitutional mandates for decentralization—particularly the Local Government Code of 1991 and the recent Mandanas-Garcia Ruling—the Philippine bureaucracy remains stubbornly concentrated in the National Capital Region.

Dr. Tapia clarified that he was not referring to nearby provinces like Bulacan or Laguna, but rather to far-flung areas such as Sultan Kudarat and remote regions in Visayas and Mindanao that suffer from inadequate government presence.

Paradoxically, despite the devolution mandated by the Local Government Code, the size of the national bureaucracy has not decreased. Dr. Tapia cited research showing that even after functions were transferred to local governments, national government employment levels remained static or even increased.

This failure to rightsize creates multiple problems. National agencies continue to design and implement programs without sufficient local context, resulting in cookie-cutter solutions that fail to address community-specific needs. Dr.

Tapia used the *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps) as an example of a program run by a national agency without adequate local adaptation.

Dr. Tapia also questioned the current structure of government agencies, particularly in the education sector where three separate agencies (DepEd, CHED, and TESDA) operate in silos rather than as a coordinated system.

For policymakers, this points to the need for genuine administrative reform that goes beyond rhetoric. Specific recommendations include: conducting a comprehensive civil service mapping exercise to identify deployment gaps; creating incentives for national government employees to relocate to underserved areas; strengthening local government capacity to absorb devolved functions; and considering agency consolidation where fragmentation impedes efficiency.

Corruption

Multiple students raised questions about corruption, reflecting deep public concern about this issue. A student from FEU asked how corruption issues—particularly those involving the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) and confidential funds—will affect the country's economic future and foreign relations.

Dr. Tapia's response was unequivocal: corruption remains the administration's "Achilles heel" and threatens to undermine all other governance achievements. Dr. Tapia dismissed marginal improvements in the Corruption Perception Index (from 116 to 114) as statistically insignificant and argued that without high-profile prosecutions and convictions, anti-corruption rhetoric remains empty. He noted that while the administration has announced an independent commission to investigate flood control projects, existing constitutional mechanisms already allow for prosecution of corrupt officials. The problem is not a lack of legal tools, but rather a lack of political will to use them.

Professor Wayne Uyseco provided a complementary perspective, characterizing the Philippines' multiple anti-corruption agencies as "paper tigers"—impressive in structure, but lacking in enforcement capacity. Professor Uyseco challenged the audience to examine their own complicity in perpetuating corruption through everyday practices such as paying fixers to avoid traffic violations or expedite government processes. His observation points to a fundamental challenge: corruption is not merely a governance problem, but a cultural one.

Professor Uyseco argued that corruption starts with citizenship and cannot be solved by government action alone.

Professor Gilda Quiñones then connected domestic corruption to foreign policy consequences, noting that corruption undermines the Philippines' international credibility and deters foreign direct investment.

Infrastructure Projects and Implementation Challenges

A student from Centro Escolar University raised concerns about the slow completion rate of infrastructure projects, noting that only approximately three percent of structural projects have been finished despite allocated budgets.

Professor Uyseco explained that infrastructure timelines are inherently long and cannot be fairly judged within a single administration's term. However, he identified a systemic problem: the tendency of each new administration to review, stall, or cancel predecessor projects rather than ensuring continuity. Moreover, he cited the example of energy projects that have been under review for decades, long outlasting his own academic career.

He also noted that infrastructure delays cannot be blamed solely on the government, as contractors, workers, and various stakeholders all play roles in project timelines.

All these analyses suggest that anti-corruption efforts must operate on multiple levels simultaneously: strengthening institutional capacity and independence of oversight agencies; securing high-profile prosecutions to demonstrate credibility; implementing transparency mechanisms in procurement and budgeting; and conducting public education campaigns to shift cultural attitudes toward corruption.

Foreign Policy And Strategic Realignments

The third and last part examined one of the most visible shifts in the Marcos Jr. administration: the recalibration of foreign policy from the previous administration's accommodationist approach toward China to a more assertive defense of sovereignty coupled with diversification of international partnerships.

Balancing US and China: The Dual-Track Strategy

A student from the FEU Political Science Society posed a sophisticated question about the administration's "dual-track strategy." She noted the approval of four new Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites near the South China Sea and Taiwan, along with increased defense spending from PHP 205.6 billion in 2021 to PHP 254.1 billion in 2024. Her question asked how the Philippines can navigate this strategy without undermining neutrality or provoking geopolitical tensions.

Professor Gilda Quiñones challenged the premise of "over-dependence" on traditional allies, arguing instead that the Philippines is actively building a multipolar network of partnerships.

However, Professor Quiñones acknowledged that regarding the two superpowers—China and the United States—the Philippines has limited room to maneuver. Geography makes China a permanent neighbor, while treaty obligations bind the Philippines to the United States.

Critically, Professor Quiñones emphasized that the 2016 Arbitral Ruling has transformed the Philippines' negotiating position. Unlike the previous administration which downplayed or ignored the ruling, the current administration uses it as the legal foundation for asserting maritime rights.

Professor Wayne Uyseco reinforced the point about diversification, criticizing the binary framing of "US vs. China" as overly simplistic.

Professor Uyseco drew lessons from the Trump tariff crisis, noting that while the Philippines spent considerable resources lobbying for tariff relief with minimal success (only a one percent reduction), regional neighbors like Vietnam and Malaysia successfully diversified their trade partnerships.

Professor Uyseco highlighted emerging opportunities with European powers, noting that Slovenia opened its first Southeast Asian embassy in the Philippines, signaling European interest in deepening engagement with the region.

The Taiwan Question and the One-China Policy

The forum addressed recent diplomatic tensions regarding Taiwan, where Philippine officials' statements required clarification. Professor Uyseco provided critical context on this delicate issue.

He began by reaffirming that the Philippines does not officially recognize Taiwan as a country, adhering instead to the One-China Policy that acknowledges Beijing as the legitimate government of China.

Professor Uyseco emphasized that pragmatic considerations demand careful diplomacy regarding Taiwan. The island hosts a substantial population of Filipino Overseas Workers—in fact, Filipinos constitute the majority of foreign workers in Taiwan. Additionally, Taiwan dominates global semiconductor production, making it economically indispensable.

He criticized the apparent motive behind the controversial statements—to appease China—noting that diplomacy should not involve offending one party to please another.

Professor Quiñones noted that the administration quickly implemented damage control, with the DFA Secretary reiterating adherence to the One-China Policy and President Marcos himself explaining that Taiwan had misinterpreted the statements.

Economic Diplomacy and Foreign Investment

Professor Quiñones connected foreign policy to economic imperatives, noting that the current administration has prioritized attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) as a development strategy.

However, she warned that domestic governance failures—particularly corruption—directly undermine these efforts.

This observation links back to the anti-corruption discussion in the previous session, demonstrating how domestic governance and foreign policy are inextricably connected. Investors assess not only market size and labor costs, but also regulatory stability, contract enforcement, and corruption risks.

The implication for the "Bagong Pilipinas" agenda is clear: foreign policy success depends on domestic institutional reform. No amount of diplomatic skill can compensate for a reputation characterized by corruption and weak rule of law. This finding should inform policymakers that attracting FDI requires parallel tracks of effort—both diplomatic engagement and internal governance reform.

These discussions underscore the need for rigorous coordination and messaging discipline in foreign affairs. Statements from Philippine officials are parsed carefully by regional powers, and ambiguity or missteps can jeopardize economic interests and the welfare of overseas workers. The recommendation is to develop clear, pre-approved talking points on sensitive issues and ensure all officials with public-facing roles receive diplomatic training.

Other Governance Issues

Institutional Reforms and Grassroots Movements

An FEU student posed a question: "Is it wrong if reforms are initiated by ordinary people?" The student referenced recent grassroots initiatives and protests, asking whether these represent progress toward or regression away from a "Bagong Pilipinas."

Dr. Panao's response was emphatic and inspiring. He rejected any hierarchy between government-initiated and citizen-initiated reforms. Dr. Panao cited the community pantry phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic as a powerful example. Started by a single individual in Quezon City, the initiative spread virally across the country, demonstrating the power of citizen-led action.

Dr. Panao also addressed the decades-long failure to enact anti-political dynasty legislation. Despite being mandated by the 1987 Constitution, Congress has never passed implementing legislation—likely because such a law would adversely affect sitting legislators.

He noted that the Constitution provides mechanisms for direct people's initiative to propose legislation, bypassing Congress when necessary.

This exchange carries important implications for policymakers. It suggests that government should view citizen initiatives not as threats but as partners in governance. Rather than attempting to control or co-opt grassroots movements, the state should create enabling environments—legal protections,

funding mechanisms, and platforms for citizen input—that allow these initiatives to flourish.

Youth Participation in Democratic Change

A student from FEU asked a direct question: "In what way can we as political science students contribute to the aspiration of Bagong Pilipinas? How can we push for institutional reform?"

Dr. Tapia's response emphasized the power of youth as a voting bloc, referencing recent elections where 62 percent of voters came from the youth sector.

However, Dr. Tapia cautioned that electoral participation alone is insufficient. Vigilance must extend beyond election day to continuous monitoring of government performance.

Professor Quiñones added that youth contributions need not be limited to politics and government service. As students gain expertise in technology and new methodologies, they can pitch innovative ideas for managing conflicts and addressing non-traditional security issues.

Anti-Corruption: From Social Media to Street Action

A student from De La Salle University posed the question regarding Indonesians having taken to the streets in mass demonstrations against corruption, and asked: "When do you think Filipinos will move beyond just calling it out on social media? Should we mobilize in the streets like the Indonesians did?"

Professor Uyseco's response was measured but pointed. He turned the question back to the audience. He emphasized that participation means sharing responsibility and accepting accountability.

Dr. Tapia referenced the Indonesian example more explicitly, noting that Indonesians have demonstrated outrage through mass mobilization, but cautioned against romanticizing street action.

The panelists acknowledged that mass action may sometimes be necessary but emphasized that it should be informed, strategic, and paired with institutional

engagement rather than replacing it. The goal is not merely to protest, but to channel public energy into concrete policy change.

The youth demographic is indeed engaged, informed, and increasingly impatient with empty promises. However, this energy can be harnessed productively if the government creates meaningful avenues for participation—youth councils with real decision-making power, participatory budgeting mechanisms, and transparent performance monitoring systems.

Synthesis

The forum concluded with a reflection on the administration's central branding question, “Bagong Pilipinas na ba?,” investigating whether this slogan signifies a genuine “New Philippines” or merely aspirational rhetoric disconnected from institutional realities. The panelists collectively reframed the inquiry, shifting the focus from the pursuit of novelty to the more substantive metrics of effectiveness, integrity, and functionality. Dr. Pano articulated this distinction most clearly, stating a preference for a “well-functioning Philippines” over a merely “new” one, cautioning that novelty often carries the risk of instability or superficiality. This conceptual pivot redirected the debate from symbolic politics toward tangible governance outcomes, emphasizing that the true measure of the administration lies not in its branding success but in its ability to deliver measurable improvements in citizens’ lives.

Consensus among the speakers suggested that “Bagong Pilipinas” function primarily as a political device rather than a signal of fundamental institutional transformation. Dr. Tapia characterized the campaign as an effort by President Marcos Jr. to align with his father’s historical legacy while simultaneously distancing himself from its negative associations. Despite this critique of the domestic agenda, the panelists acknowledged genuine policy shifts in the realm of foreign relations, specifically the administration’s departure from the previous government’s China-centric accommodation in favor of a more assertive defense of sovereignty backed by the 2016 Arbitral Ruling. This shift was identified as the only clear domain where the “new” label is justified by a distinct change in strategic direction. Conversely, in areas such as corruption control, bureaucratic efficiency, and judicial reform, the evidence for transformation was deemed weak, with persistent structural issues like Executive dominance and centralized bureaucracy remaining largely unchanged.

Synthesizing the forum discussions, several key lessons for policymakers emerged, beginning with the imperative that rhetoric must be matched by implementation to avoid breeding cynicism. The forum highlighted corruption as the single greatest corrosive force undermining all other governance achievements, rendering marginal improvements in perception indices meaningless without high-profile prosecutions and genuine agency independence. Furthermore, the persistent centralization of the bureaucracy in "Imperial Manila" was criticized as a structural barrier to development, with true devolution requiring the transfer of not just functions, but also personnel and decision-making authority to local governments. The Judiciary was also identified for reform, with calls to subject its administrative functions to efficiency standards similar to other branches, arguing that its exemption from anti-red tape measures contributes to a justice system that is effectively denied through delay.

On the international front, the panelists advocated for multipolar thinking that transcends the obsolete "US vs. China" binary. They recommended cultivating relationships with diverse partners such as the European Union, India, and ASEAN to maximize strategic flexibility and economic resilience. This diplomatic discipline must be paired with domestic engagement, particularly with the youth sector, which comprises majority of the electorate. The forum argued that youth participation must move beyond social media activism to include formal mechanisms for integration into policymaking. Finally, the role of citizen initiatives was elevated, with the community pantry movement cited as proof that the government should not monopolize reform but rather create enabling environments for citizen-led solutions.

Ultimately, the forum demonstrated a rich understanding of governance challenges and an understanding of genuine commitment to national improvement, optimism must be tempered with realism. The structural problems of corruption, centralization, and institutional inefficiency have persisted across decades and will not be resolved by slogans. The path forward requires sustained, unglamorous institutional work—passing meaningful legislation, strengthening oversight, and professionalizing the civil service. As the administration enters the second half of its term, the legacy of the "Bagong Pilipinas" vision will depend entirely on whether political will can match rhetorical ambition to bridge the gap between branding and the urgent need for a well-functioning state.

Photos



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Established in 1985 by University of the Philippines (UP) President Edgardo J. Angara, the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) is the policy research unit of the University that connects disciplines and scholars across the several units of the UP System. It is mandated to encourage collaborative and rigorous research addressing issues of national significance by supporting scholars and securing funding, enabling them to produce outputs and recommendations for public policy.

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The Program on Social and Political Change (PSPC) provides a platform for understanding the varied social and political challenges facing modern Philippine society and polity from a multidisciplinary perspective. In relation to this, the Program also designs empirical studies using a variety of methods and approaches which form the basis for policy inputs and discussions at the local, national, and international levels.

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