

From Anarchy to Unity of Families in the 2022 Philippine elections: A Marcos-Duterte Leviathan state?

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Introduction

As a social institution, the family plays a significant role in Philippine politics. The political and economic domination of elite families in the country can be rooted in Philippine colonial history when colonial powers relied on co-opted local prominent families to maintain order and control (Hau 2017). Since then, the family has been a key institution for local elites to consolidate and perpetuate power. In contemporary times, they rely on creating enduring political dynasties in various models and sizes (Teehankee 2001; Mendoza, Jaminola, and Yap 2019). The fierce electoral competition among these dynasties and other elite families had been a permanent feature of Philippine politics since the American colonial period (Abinales and Amoroso 2005). Characterized as anarchic, it had shaped the trajectory of Philippine politics including the parasitic but also synergistic relationship these families have with a perennially weak Philippine state (McCoy 1993). However, although elite familial rule has survived for more than a century, it has also been regularly interrupted and pressured by significant challenges from below in the form of reformist politicians, protest movements, and even rebellions and revolutions (Quimpo 2008).

In this essay, I argue that the political developments leading to and until the conclusion of the 2022 Philippine elections show that a section of the country's elite families are shifting away from the usual anarchic competition to a path of unity to insulate themselves and the institution of familial rule from threats of reform and other similar challenges in the future. This process can be described as the formation of a metaphorical Philippine Leviathan state, similar to how previously fractured communal, economic, and political elites in Malaysia and Singapore have come together to build strong authoritarian states to permanently protect themselves from the destabilizing threats of communism and liberal democratization (Slater 2010). I develop four points to illustrate my argument. First, the popularity of former president and populist par excellence Rodrigo Roa Duterte has driven a demand for a continuity government among the 2022 election voters. This has benefited the Marcos-Duterte candidacies. Second, the tandem has also taken advantage of the Marcos family's well-oiled myth-making machinery. Although beneficial, none of these could have won them the elections if not for the careful brokering of arranged marriages among some of the country's most dominant political families. This is my third point. Finally, I explain why the political conditions in post-authoritarian Philippines have motivated the country's elites to band together rather than compete, a longstanding practice in elections, to fortify defenses against challenges to their individual and collective rule.

The 2022 elections as a continuity election

The landslide electoral victory of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Romualdez Marcos Jr. and Sara Zimmerman Duterte-Carpio as the 17th president and 15th vice president, respectively, in the 2022 elections with Bongbong winning 59 percent of the votes and Sara 62 percent (see Table 1) represents the re-asserted dominance of familial politics in the Philippines. The old order that was supposedly in crisis and decay, as many analyses of the 2016 electoral victory of Duterte sharply pointed out (Arguelles 2016, 2019; Thompson and Teehankee 2016; Ordoñez and Borja 2018), was

made attractive, fresh, and popular again. The unprecedented success of the Marcos-Duterte tandem in the ballots, hereinafter referred to as the coalition of old order restorationists, if situated in longer political history can be seen as a result of more than three decades of attempts to undermine the EDSA People Power-born Fifth Republic which required the use of massive resources and strict coalitionist politics.

Table 1. 2022 Philippine election results for President and Vice President

Candidate	Party	Votes	%
President			
Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.	Partido Federal ng Pilipinas	31,629,783	58.77
Maria Leonor "Leni" Robredo	Independent / Liberal Party	15,035,773	27.94
Emmanuel "Manny" Pacquiao Sr.	PROMDI	3,663,113	6.81
Francisco "Isko Moreno" Domagoso	Aksyon Demokratiko	1,933,909	3.59
Panfilo "Ping" Lacson	Independent / Partido para sa Demokratikong Reporma	892,375	1.66
Vice President			
Sara Duterte-Carpio	Lakas-CMD	32,208,417	61.53
Francis "Kiko" Pangilinan	Liberal Party	9,329,207	17.82
Vicente "Tito" Sotto	Nationalist People's Coalition	8,251,267	15.76
Willie Ong	Aksyon Demokratiko	1,878,531	3.59
Jose "Lito" Atienza Jr.	PROMDI	270,381	0.52

Note: Only major candidates and/or those who received more than one percent of the total votes are included in this table.

Source: Data from Congress of the Philippines (2022).

Despite the usual pretense of change messaging from all camps, the 2022 election is, for all intents and purposes, a continuity election. Then incumbent president Duterte exited from the presidency as among the most popular and powerful of all the Fifth Republic Presidents (Lalu 2022; Hutchcroft and

Gera 2022). His popularity, and populism, was resilient despite the rampant killings, erosion of democracy and human rights, and mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic (Arguelles 2021; Magno and Teehankee 2022; Thompson 2022). By election season, most Filipino voters already had a very positive assessment of his administration and continue to support him. This popularity of Duterte drove a demand among candidates who can do a “Dutertismo 2.0.”²¹ In an October 2021 survey of WR Numero, voters were asked about the outgoing Duterte administration and their choice of presidential candidate in the 2022 elections (see Table 2) (Philstar.com 2022). As much as 55 percent of the voters said they prefer “partial continuity” and 30% said they want “full continuity.” Of the surveyed, a mere 16 percent are looking for a president who will represent a total change from Dutertismo.

Table 2. WR Numero October 2021 survey on public assessment of the performance of then president Duterte and voters’ preference for the 2022 elections

What is your assessment of the performance of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte as president of the Philippines for the past five years?	Total Philippines (1,200 voters) %
Very good performance	34.00
Good performance	34.00
Can't say or unsure	13.00
Poor performance	10.00
Very poor performance	10.00
In choosing who to vote for as president of the Philippines, which of the following listed characteristics is the most important for you?	Total Philippines (1,200 voters) %
S/he will continue the agenda and programs of the Duterte government	30.00
S/he wants change and will not continue the agenda and programs of the Duterte government	16.00
S/he will continue the good agenda and programs of the Duterte government but change the bad agenda and programs of the Duterte government	56.00

Source: Data from Philstar.com (2022).

The Marcos-Duterte tandem have clearly positioned themselves as the continuity candidates and was effectively perceived by many voters as such. An analysis of a Pulse Asia survey reveals that the strongest predictors of voting intention for their candidacies are views on former president Duterte: those who approve of his administration are also more likely to support Marcos Jr. (Dulay et al. 2023). Moreover, although then President Duterte did not give the much-coveted explicit endorsement to the tandem, there was no need for it to convince the voters that Marcos Jr. is the candidate for “Dutertismo 2.0.” Since 2016, the former president has mobilized state resources to repudiate the memories of People Power and rehabilitate the image of the Marcos family (Masangkay and Del Mundo 2016; Arguelles 2017). He has repeatedly publicly talked about the rule of Ferdinand Edralin Marcos Sr. and the supposed lasting achievements of the dictatorship. He also ordered the burial of Marcos Sr., after decades in interregnum, at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani*. Duterte has resurrected and infused fresh insurgent populist energies to what was then the struggling Marcos family brand—and this will be one of what will be his enduring insidious legacies in Philippine politics.

The Marcos family’s myth-making machinery in social media and beyond

Although the benefits of a constituency of continuity voters are clear, the resounding victory of the Marcos-Duterte tandem was not all the former president’s doing. The Marcos family also reaped the benefits of investing in a massive online disinformation machinery that was put into operations as early as six years ago (Ong et al. 2022), and on-the-ground disinformation campaigns that have been in place for far longer (Ariate, Reyes, and Del Mundo 2023). Pro-Marcos disinformation campaigns have dominated social media platforms popular to a cross-section of Filipino voters including Facebook and YouTube. It also appears that the campaigns have been effective although the precise causal mechanism of how it affected the voting intentions of many Filipinos is still under study. My interviews

with more than 100 Marcos-Duterte voters across the country revealed that many of their voting considerations were significantly shaped by the disinformative narratives that were made popular online.² Many of their voters think that the Philippine martial law years was the country's golden era, that the Marcos legacy is that of the public infrastructures people enjoy today, and that the plunder of state resources the conjugal dictatorship and their cronies committed were nothing but black propaganda.

The Marcos disinformation machinery has also systematically targeted young voters in social media platforms like TikTok (Mendoza 2022). These TikTok disinformation campaigns were designed to portray the Marcos family as authentic, hip, and relatable political celebrities while downplaying the family's leadership in some of the country's worst cases of corruption and human rights abuses. For instance, one of the young voters I interviewed showed me old videos of Imelda Marcos she "rediscovered" in TikTok. In these videos, Imelda was justifying the use of government resources for her personal excesses by discussing her "uniquely Filipino philosophy of beauty."

The rebranding process for the Marcos family, however, had already begun even before social media had become central to election campaigns. The arts and culture community, fashion brands, and lifestyle publications have previously produced materials depicting a fabulous and glamorous Marcos family, and these old materials were "rediscovered" from the archives and were given new life as social media contents. First accomplished offline, the Marcos rehabilitation has only recently gone digital (Quezon 2022). The triumph of the Marcos myth-making machinery, then, cannot simply be a story of widespread brainwashing of voters made possible by social media technology. Rather, communications scholar Jonathan Corpus Ong (2022, 396–7) points to the multitude of interconnected factors that shape today's digital political culture: "... the warlike operations of political fandoms and attention-hacking techniques of media manipulators have flourished due to the longer histories of charismatic leadership and patronage politics, inter-elite competition and factionalism, and the entrepreneurialism of partisan media outfits."

Table 3. Pulse Asia pre-election survey on voters' preference for president and vice president, September 2021 and December 2021

Of the people on this list, whom would you vote for as President of the Philippines if the May 2022 elections were held today and they were candidates? You may mention others not included in this list.	% Total Philippines (September 2021)
Duterte, Sara "Inday"	20.00
Marcos, Ferdinand "Bongbong"	15.00
Domagoso, Francisco "Isko Moreno"	13.00
Pacquiao, Emmanuel "Manny"	12.00
Of the people on this list, whom would you vote for as President of the Philippines if the May 2022 elections were held today and they were candidates?	% Total Philippines (December 2021)
Marcos, Bongbong (PFP)	53.00
Robredo, Leni (IND)	20.00
Domagoso, Isko Moreno (AKSYON)	8.00
Pacquiao, Manny Pacman (PROMDI)	8.00
Of the people on this list, whom would you vote for as Vice President of the Philippines if the May 2022 elections were held today and they were candidates?	% Total Philippines (December 2021)
Duterte, Sara (LAKAS)	45.00
Sotto, Vicente Tito (NPC)	31.00
Pangilinan, Kiko (LP)	12.00
Ong, Doc Willie (AKSYON)	6.00

Note: Only the top four candidates as indicated by the survey results have been included in this table (Rañada 2021; Mercado 2021).

From Anarchy to Unity of Families

The advantages of either a Bongbong or Sara presidential run are clear, but it would have still been a risky election competition if not for a brokered coalition among powerful political families. If the usual route of anarchic competition among families were chosen, an opposition defeat may not have been so inevitable. Prior to the formation of a Marcos-Duterte coalition, Sara was polling at 20 percent and Bongbong at 15 percent in a

Pulse Asia survey (Rañada 2021) (see Table 3). Since re-entering the electoral arena in 1992, the Marcos family's successive national wins and defeats have always been capped at 30 to 35 percent of the votes (Quezon 2022). In the 1992 presidential elections, the combined votes of the matriarch Imelda Romualdez Marcos and crony Eduardo "Danding" Murphy Cojuangco were 28 percent of the total. Bongbong lost in the 1995 senate elections and got only 32 percent of the votes. In 2010, he made it to the Senate with 35 percent of the votes. However, in 2016, Bongbong infamously lost the vice-presidential race and managed to obtain 34 percent. In the following elections of 2019, his sister Maria Imelda Josefa Remedios "Imee" Romualdez Marcos became a senator with 34 percent of the votes. So how did the family, in the 2022 presidential race, managed to secure 59 percent of the votes? The answer to this question is the Marcos-Duterte tandem. As soon as their joint candidacies were made public, Bongbong started to poll at 53 percent and Sara at 45 percent in the Pulse Asia survey (Mercado 2021) (see Table 3).

The political marriage among these families was inconvenient at first, as proven by the desperate charades and tantrums of Rodrigo Duterte (Quezon 2022). He wanted to run either as Vice President to his daughter Sara, or for Sara to run with his right-hand man Senator Christopher Lawrence "Bong" Tesoro Go, or a Duterte-Marcos Jr. ticket with his family at the top. Surveys after surveys have indicated that Bong Go is unelectable, and that Sara going on her own may be a risky choice. Still popular but already exiting from power, Duterte had been outwitted and outplayed by his own allies and family. Exasperated, the former president said: "I'm sure this run of Sara [as Vice President] is a decision of Bongbong's [Marcos Jr.'s] camp" (Talabong 2021). In the end, the commanding wisdom of former president Arroyo, one who may be considered the "Political Elder" of the coalition, prevailed. After all, Arroyo may be the most unpopular, but she was also in power the longest of all the Fifth Republic presidents. She is credited as the key broker of the arranged marriage behind the scenes—Sara was adopted to Arroyo's LAKAS-CMD party in her vice-presidential

run, and many consider Arroyo to be Sara's political mentor. There is also no surprise that Arroyo was motivated to make it work. Before her most recent political comeback, she was among the most prosecuted leaders of her coalition. One can imagine her saying, if they are unable to get their acts together: "Together we stand, divided we might all end up jail mates."

The arranged marriage between the First Families kept the house in order and delivered the promise of unmatched "unity" machinery. On election day, Marcos' North and Duterte's South proved to be as solid as expected. Among the strongest predictors of vote choice in the 2022 elections is whether the voter comes from the same region as the candidate (Dulay et al. 2023)—that voters support their "own" sons and daughters has always been a key element of the electoral success of these families. Since the return of elections after the Marcos dictatorship, many of the coalition families have been in control of their provinces (Teehankee 2001). Likewise, they have the means and the recipe, among other resources, to deploy proven grassroots election machines and through it organize cash distribution, network building, and turnout discipline. It is almost like child's play (Teehankee and Calimbahin 2022). The Marcos and Duterte families of Ilocos Norte and Davao City are, of course, best examples of this. The Coalition ensured a concentration of significant political resources in the Marcos-Duterte campaign aided by their vast networks of local political allies. Outside their command bailiwicks, this allowed them to corner the endorsements of resource-rich political incumbents in market vote-rich areas of Central Luzon, South Luzon, and Metro Manila. For instance, the tandem has been able to secure the endorsements of at least 50 out of the 80 governors across the country.

The Marcos Jr.-Duterte tandem's campaign slogan of "unity" may be more than just the usual empty election rhetoric given how the results showed that many Filipinos share the same electoral choice. Unlike past elections, the winners of the 2022 elections were decided not on election day. As shown in an April 2022 survey by WR Numero (2022), most of the voters already made up their minds even before the start of the campaign

period (see Table 4). It was a done deal; less voters were even willing to go through the long rituals of the election season. Philippine election results have usually reflected the fragmented nature of Philippine society: an archipelagic nation with diverse identities and loyalties. Some political families enjoy the support of some regions in the country but not in others and rarely the entirety of the nation. Presidents and vice presidents may get the greatest number of votes, but a majority mandate is rather exceptional. Prior to Marcos Jr., none of the elected Fifth Republic presidents has secured more than 42 percent of the votes. The differences in cultural and ethnic identities as well as competing patron-client networks and political factions across the country has made Philippine elections intra-competitive and relatively plural for the longest time—no one dynasty rules the kingdom, and the usual rigodon of families at the top is a sacred informal pact. The marriage of the First Families and along with it their resources, networks, and territories have made it possible to disrupt, at least for the time being, the usually anarchic competition among families in Philippine elections.

Table 4. WR Numero April 2022 survey on the timing of presidential choice of voters in the 2022 elections

When did you decide whom you will vote for President of the Philippines in the upcoming May 2022 elections?	Total Philippines (1,200 voters) %
Just this week (April 2022)	13.00
This month of April 2022	10.00
Last March 2022	11.00
Last February 2022	12.00
Between October 2021 and January 2022, before the official start of election campaign period	55.00

Source: WR Numero (2022).

Is Marcos-Duterte building a Philippine Leviathan state?

But why the unity among families in the 2022 elections? Why build a coalition and deviate from the usual electoral competition? I argue that there is nothing like the fear of enduring years of persecution, prosecution, and popular mobilization in a potential reformist government that brings together the Old Order restorationist families, especially Arroyo, Duterte, Estrada, and Marcos. They have intimate experiences of the threats that a reformist government may pose to their power and rule, especially the Marcos family whose dictatorship was brought down by the combined forces of the EDSA People Power and the reformist former president Maria Corazon “Cory” Sumulong Cojuangco-Aquino. Although recently fully rehabilitated and restored to power, the Marcos family have yet to also freely take control of their entire ill-gotten assets that have been frozen and seized by the Cory government and foreign institutions. Also, they still face numerous charges, at home and overseas, for the crimes they have committed when Marcos Sr. was in power. For instance, there is a standing warrant of arrest in the United States against President Marcos Jr. himself in connection with a human rights lawsuit. Therefore, although he can now travel to the US because of the immunity afforded to a head of state, the same diplomatic guarantee is not extended to the entire Marcos family. The coalition-building among the First Families and more is a strategic response to the threat of losing power and the possibility to be subjected to the taxing power of a reformist government, however it may be episodic.

The administration of former president Benigno Simeon “Noynoy” Cojuangco Aquino III has pursued cases, a key promise in his election campaign, against former president Arroyo and her allies. For much of the Aquino III presidency, Arroyo was under detention for charges of electoral fraud and plunder. It was only when the Duterte administration came in 2016 that the Supreme Court ended her house arrest. Currently, an informal network between Arroyo and Duterte-appointed justices are voting together in judicial decisions concerning high-profile corruption cases including in the grant of bail for Marcos Jr.’s Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Juan

Valentin Furagganan Ponce Enrile Sr. (Dressel, Inoue, and Bonoan 2023). Meanwhile, the Sandiganbayan has recently acquitted LAKAS-CMD party co-chairperson Senator Ramon Bautista “Bong” Revilla Jr.—two out of the three deciding votes came from Duterte-appointed justices in the court (Buan 2018). Both Enrile Sr. and Revilla Jr. were charged by the Aquino III government as part of its anti-corruption and government reform campaign. Former president Estrada was ousted in 2001 after just a few years in power when a failed impeachment trial led to a popular uprising against his administration. Dubbed the “Second EDSA People Power” or “EDSA Dos,” a middle class and civil society-led resignation campaign took to the streets to protest Estrada’s involvement in illegal gambling and other corrupt activities. He was convicted for plunder and sentenced for life imprisonment but was given executive clemency by then-president Arroyo.

The Duterte family has yet to experience the spectacular defeats suffered by the other families but the threats they face are no less credible and serious. My previous interviews with two cabinet-level officials close to Duterte have also shared that he and his allies have always been haunted by the prospects of a street mobilization against his government in the style of “EDSA Uno” or “EDSA Dos.”³ More importantly, former president Duterte and his allies are under investigation by Philippine and international courts for their role in the drug war killings of thousands of Filipinos. If the International Criminal Court decides to issue a warrant of arrest against the Duterte patriarch or any of their close allies, the cooperation or non-cooperation of the incumbent government will make a big difference.

It is a shared perception of threat, as Dan Slater argued, that elites may be driven to form an authoritarian Leviathan (Slater 2010). When faced with what they perceive as shared and persistent dangers, elites will choose to act collectively, however costly collective action is. In the early days of the 2022 elections, what a Maria Leonor Robredo candidacy and the coalition it inspired represented to the First Families is what Karl Polanyi would characterize as “the impress of an acute danger ... [in which] ... fear remains latent, as long as its ultimate cause is not removed”

(Polanyi 1944, 425). A potential reformist government poses threats to the rule and power of each of the families and to familiar rule as well. They know how seriously punitive these threats can be turned into, given their individual and collective experiences of persecution, prosecution, and popular mobilizations. In the country's electoral history, reformists are elected to power in episodic moments, but these families would rather not take their chances this time. Like many of their counterparts in other nations, Philippine elites are typically fractured due to their habitual involvement in personal and factional conflicts, rendering them unable to establish or maintain a unified coalition. Inaction may be costly but so can collective action. Despite the widely held notion that shared state plunder can facilitate unity, such resources alone cannot disrupt the usual anarchic intra-elite electoral competition. Slater (2010) argues that elites begin to contemplate ways to overcome their collective action problems only when they perceive credible threats to their statuses and interests, especially if the threat comes from below. Thus, the unity of elites, at least in the formation of strong authoritarian states in Malaysia and Singapore, is not primarily driven by the necessity for shared access to state resources but instead by the more pressing need for protection from enduring and serious threats (Slater 2010).

In the case of the 2022 Philippine elections, one can see a Marcos-Duterte Leviathan formed and forming under an inconvenient but necessary situation. I argue that this unity of families, however momentary, may be seen as an attempt to build not merely to withstand the persistent challenges of the day but to facilitate the difficult work of creating more enduring and durable defenses against reformist ambitions in Philippine politics. How long this seeming unity of families will last will depend on how much of each other's orchestrations can the First Families tolerate as well as how soon can a fresh and vibrant popular reform energy may take root again in many Filipinos.

About the Author

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Declaration of Funding and Conflict of Interest

Select parts of this paper drew insights from my Ph.D. research project generously funded through the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Acknowledgments

The early versions of this paper have benefitted from comments from audiences of the following events: a 2022 guest lecture on “Triumph of the Counter-Revolution in the 2022 Philippine Elections” in the Music, Memory, and Politics Study Lab in the University of Cologne, a 2022 roundtable discussion on “Philippine Politics: Assessments and Projections” hosted by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in the National University of Singapore, and a 2022 online forum “From Duterte to Marcos Jr” jointly sponsored by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs in The Australian National University.

Endnotes

- ¹ Dutertismo is the set of political ideas, programs, and style associated with Rodrigo Roa Duterte who served as President of the Philippines between 2016 and 2022. Its core element is populist politics which features the use of polarizing language and policies as well as penal populism. For more details, see Arguelles (2021).
- ² The interviews were conducted as part of a research project on voter's motivations in the 2022 Philippine election that I have led as Convenor of the De La Salle University Populism and Democracy Research Cluster. As of press date, the manuscript is still in progress.
- ³ The interviews were conducted as part of my Ph.D. research project funded by the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. As of press date, the manuscript is still in progress.

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