

The Philippines in 2025

Midterm Elections and the Reordering of Power, Policy, and Posture

ABSTRACT

This year-ender examines Philippine politics in 2025 through the lens of the May midterm elections and their effects on political, economic, and foreign policy incentives. As elections approached, institutional reform stalled and unresolved elite rivalries were reorganized into electoral competition, most visibly through impeachment efforts, alliance breakdowns, and Senate contests. Economic performance remained narrowly based, driven primarily by consumption amid weak investment, persistent planning constraints, and limited structural change, yet sufficiently stable to reduce pressure for difficult reforms. At the same time, corruption in infrastructure became unusually visible, exposing long-standing patterns of politically mediated contracting but without producing durable accountability. In foreign affairs, sustained pressure from China in the West Philippine Sea reinforced a familiar strategy centered on presence, legal framing, and alliance signaling rather than resolution. The result was continuity rather than transformation, as power, policy, and posture were reordered by electoral incentives rather than institutional change.

KEYWORDS: midterm elections, corruption, Philippines-China, Marcos Jr

IN THIS JOURNAL'S 2024 year-ender, Arugay and Encinas-Franco (2025) described Philippine politics as marked by stalled reform, intensifying elite rivalry, and rising external pressure. They highlighted three developments that defined President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s second year in office: the

NICO RAVANILLA is Associate Professor in the School of Global Policy and Strategy, University of California, San Diego, USA. Email: <nravanilla@ucsd.edu>.

Asian Survey, Vol. 66, Number 2, pp. 312–322. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2026 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2026.66.2.312>.

collapse of efforts to amend the 1987 constitution, the breakdown of the Marcos–Duterte alliance, and worsening tensions with China in the West Philippine Sea. Despite steady economic growth, governance remained reactive, and institutional reform failed to gain traction. In foreign policy, the administration deepened security alignment with the United States while relying on legal and diplomatic responses to persistent gray-zone coercion. Together, these dynamics pointed to a political system increasingly shaped by elite competition at home and strategic pressure abroad as the country moved toward the May 2025 midterm elections.

This year-end examines how these dynamics played out in 2025. As the midterm elections approached, political priorities shifted decisively toward electoral competition, sidelining institutional reform and turning elite rivalry into the central organizing force of national politics. Economic performance remained steady but narrowly based, with growth driven by consumption amid weak investment, planning constraints, and limited structural change. Corruption in infrastructure and flood control became unusually visible, exposing long-standing weaknesses in oversight and accountability but without altering the incentives that sustained them. In foreign affairs, sustained pressure in the West Philippine Sea reinforced a familiar pattern of posturing, alliance signaling, and deferred resolution. In brief, across these domains, political elites and economic managers largely relied on established strategies, producing outcomes that were increasingly predictable in the absence of institutional change.

REFORM SIDELINED AS ELITE RIVALRY MOVES TO THE BALLOT

By early 2025, Philippine politics had fully shifted into electoral mode. The issues that dominated debate in 2024 did not recede, but they were reorganized around the incentives of the May midterm elections. Legislative priorities narrowed, elite conflict intensified, and policy choices increasingly reflected calculations about coalition strength, voter mobilization, and control of the Senate.

This shift was evident in the fate of constitutional reform. In the months leading up to the midterm elections, efforts to amend the 1987 constitution stalled completely. Even lawmakers who had supported economic amendments publicly withdrew, arguing that reopening constitutional debates during an election year would be divisive and politically risky. Iloilo

representative Lorenz Defensor, a former charter change advocate, explicitly called for deferring any amendments until after the 2028 elections, citing the risk of economic disruption and political misuse ahead of the next presidential race (Lalu 2025). Constitutional reform was not formally defeated, but it was set aside as incompatible with campaign priorities.

Elite competition quickly filled the space left by stalled reform. The breakdown of the Marcos–Duterte alliance, already apparent in 2024, became the central organizing conflict of the 2025 midterm elections. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte openly backed rival senatorial slates, transforming the race for the Senate into a contest over factional loyalty and future succession rather than policy platforms (Mallari and Arugay 2025). Marcos-aligned candidates were framed as defenders of institutional stability and continuity, while Duterte-backed contenders positioned themselves as challengers to an increasingly centralized ruling coalition. Endorsements, defections, and campaign appearances were widely read as signals of alignment within a fractured elite bloc.

The administration's handling of accountability issues followed the same electoral logic. In February 2025, the House of Representatives impeached Vice President Sara Duterte on charges that included misuse of public funds and betrayal of public trust. The timing placed the impeachment squarely in the campaign period, even as its final outcome was uncertain from the outset. The Senate did not proceed to trial before adjournment, which was required for the impeachment to advance beyond the Lower House, and in July the Supreme Court ruled the impeachment complaint unconstitutional under the one-year bar rule. So although the impeachment did not culminate in removal, it served its immediate political purpose by weakening Duterte's standing during the campaign season.

A similar dynamic shaped the reactivation of the International Criminal Court case against former president Rodrigo Duterte. In March 2025, less than two months before election day, the Marcos administration reversed its earlier stance and cooperated with the ICC, facilitating Duterte's arrest to face trial abroad. Accountability for the drug war shifted from a dormant domestic issue to an external legal process with immediate electoral consequences (Lee 2025). Duterte-aligned candidates framed the arrest as political persecution orchestrated to damage their camp ahead of the polls, using it to mobilize support in Mindanao and among voters sympathetic to the former president.

The electoral impact was clearest in the Senate races. Despite the administration's moves, Duterte-backed candidates performed strongly, winning or leading in several contests and denying Marcos-aligned forces a clean consolidation of the upper chamber (Strangio 2025a). Rather than resolving elite conflict, the elections absorbed it. Legal accountability, impeachment, and alliance breakdowns were not settled through institutional processes but were carried into the ballot box, where they reshaped campaign narratives and voter alignments.

As in previous midterm cycles, the approach of the elections reordered political incentives. Reform initiatives lost urgency, while unresolved political conflicts were carried into the campaign itself. Institutional questions remained formally unsettled, but their practical importance lay in how they organized elite competition and mobilized voters during the election period.

That electoral logic shaped executive behavior after the vote as well. Following his coalition's weak showing in the Senate races, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. moved quickly to signal adjustment rather than policy rupture. Shortly after the elections, he asked all Cabinet secretaries to submit courtesy resignations, framing the move as a "bold reset" intended to realign the administration with public expectations (Romero 2025). While several officials complied immediately, Marcos made clear that continuity would be preserved in key portfolios, underscoring that the reshuffle was aimed less at institutional overhaul than at managing political accountability in the wake of the midterms.

STEADY GROWTH, LIMITED STRUCTURAL CHANGE

The post-election reset did not translate into a shift in economic strategy. As in previous midterm cycles, political adjustment prioritized stability over structural change. Economic performance in 2025 reflected this constraint. Growth remained positive but slowed, and its sources did little to alter the country's long-standing development trajectory. Output expanded by about 5% in the first three quarters of the year—nearly a full percentage point slower than in 2024—as domestic shocks weighed on activity (World Bank 2025). The economy avoided crisis, but it did not move closer to a higher-growth or higher-income path.

Growth was driven mainly by household consumption rather than investment or exports. Consumption held up early in the year as inflation eased,

but momentum weakened after typhoons disrupted activity. At the same time, both public and private investment declined. Construction slowed due to weather shocks, the pre-election public works ban, and increased scrutiny of infrastructure projects, while services exports and tourism underperformed. Growth therefore became more narrowly dependent on domestic demand.

Employment continued to expand, but its composition limited its growth impact. Most new jobs were created in nontradable sectors such as retail, construction, and personal services, while manufacturing growth softened. These sectors absorb labor but generate limited productivity gains, export capacity, or long-term income growth, constraining economic convergence despite rising employment.

Investment execution problems reinforced these limits. Capital outlays fell short of targets as disbursements slowed, widening the gap between planned and realized public investment (Department of Economy, Planning, and Development 2025). Fragmented implementation across national agencies and local governments with uneven capacity led to delays and uneven project quality, diluting the productivity effects of continued infrastructure spending.

By year's end, the economy remained stable but stuck. Growth continued, inflation fell, and employment expanded, yet investment weakened, productivity gains remained modest, and income convergence showed little movement. The pattern was familiar: macroeconomic stability without structural change. Moderate growth reduced pressure for difficult reforms, while the electoral cycle further narrowed the space for policies that might impose short-term costs. Mediocrity, rather than crisis, once again underwrote policy caution.

CORRUPTION, BLATANCY, AND THE LIMITS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Long-standing weaknesses in public spending and oversight, especially in infrastructure and urban management, became harder to ignore in 2025. Even before the year began, analysts warned that failures in flood control and waste management were being treated as technical or behavioral problems rather than as outcomes of contractor capture, weak supervision, and misallocated funds. These warnings anticipated that climate shocks would expose corruption embedded in everyday governance, particularly in flood-prone urban areas (Gregorio 2024).

That exposure became unavoidable in 2025. Recurrent flooding across Metro Manila and nearby provinces shifted public attention away from rainfall intensity and toward the integrity of flood control projects themselves. Reports circulated of projects that were unfinished, poorly built, or entirely missing despite having been fully funded. What set 2025 apart was not the discovery of corruption but its visibility. Corruption was widely described as *garapalan* (shameless): out in the open, hard to deny, and easy for ordinary people to recognize.

This dynamic crystallized around the case of Cezarah “Sarah” Discaya and her husband, whose construction firms emerged as dominant recipients of flood control contracts worth tens of billions of pesos. Flood control has long been vulnerable to rent extraction: projects are technically complex, geographically dispersed, and difficult for citizens to monitor. Systematic evidence shows that legislators disproportionately favor politically connected and nepotistic contractors, especially in election periods and in discretionary infrastructure sectors like this one (Hartmann and Ravanilla 2025). Despite massive spending, flooding has persisted in areas covered by these projects. Discaya’s failed congressional bid in the midterm elections further personalized the issue, turning a structural pattern of politically mediated contracting into a widely recognized symbol of *garapalan* corruption.

Public anger followed, and crossed into sustained mobilization. Protests, online campaigns, and civic actions—often led by students, religious groups, and local organizations—demanded accountability and transparency. Yet the political effects of this outrage were limited. After the midterms, corruption scandals raised reputational costs within elite circles, contributing to leadership struggles in the Senate. Senate president Francis “Chiz” Escudero became increasingly vulnerable amid public scrutiny of infrastructure spending and campaign finance links, even though no formal charges were filed.

In September 2025, a coalition of senators replaced Escudero with Vicente “Tito” Sotto III, framing the leadership change as a response to eroding public trust. The switch, however, produced no new oversight mechanisms or reforms of public spending. Instead, it illustrated a familiar pattern: public outrage creates openings for intra-elite realignment, not institutional change. Corruption scandals heightened volatility and reshuffled leadership, but the incentives governing infrastructure allocation, contractor selection, and legislative behavior remained intact. Once again, accountability pressures were absorbed by elite turnover rather than translated into reform.

PRESSURE, POSTURE, AND POSTPONEMENT IN THE WEST PHILIPPINE SEA

Foreign policy in 2025 unfolded within a familiar pattern in the West Philippine Sea. Chinese pressure continued through calibrated, low-level coercion. The Philippine response emphasized presence, legal framing, and alliance signaling. Regional and diplomatic resolution remained deferred. The year did not introduce a new phase of confrontation but reinforced an entrenched cycle of pressure, posture, and postponement.

Pressure remained steady. Chinese coast guard and maritime militia vessels continued to challenge Philippine patrols and resupply missions around Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Shoal (Strangio 2025b). Incidents involving blocking maneuvers, water cannon use, and close-range encounters occurred throughout the year. These actions stayed below the threshold of armed conflict but imposed recurring operational and political costs. The pattern was incremental rather than escalatory, testing how much friction could be sustained without provoking a military response.

The Philippine response emphasized posture rather than retaliation. After the standoff at Sabina Shoal in late 2024, preventive deployment became routine in 2025. The Coast Guard and Navy maintained a constant forward presence, escorted resupply missions, and documented confrontations as they unfolded. Encounters were no longer treated as quiet operational incidents: videos and photographs were released almost immediately, turning maritime friction into a visible, narratable event. This visibility was reinforced by sharp public rhetoric. In December 2025, Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro denounced the Chinese maritime actions near Sabina Shoal as “dangerous” and “inhumane,” condemning the use of water cannons against Filipino fishermen and filing formal diplomatic protests (Reuters 2025). The statement projected resolve and moral clarity, but it was not followed by escalation or changes in operational posture. Manila continued to frame these episodes through international law, repeatedly invoking the 2016 arbitral ruling while avoiding moves that would alter the military balance. This pattern reflects a broader logic of strategic posturing: when direct deterrence is costly or infeasible, visibility and rhetoric become instruments of signaling. By publicly asserting firmness without following through militarily, the government accepted sustained pressure as the price of blocking further consolidation of Chinese control—while also extracting domestic political

value from appearing resolute on sovereignty, even in the absence of material gains (Sexton and Ravanilla, forthcoming).

Alliance behavior reinforced this posture-first strategy. Security cooperation with the United States continued without interruption despite earlier uncertainty over US leadership. Joint exercises, rotational access, and capacity-building programs proceeded under existing frameworks, and after Donald Trump returned to office, alliance commitments held with no major changes to basing or access arrangements. Manila adjusted its rhetoric but not its alignment, using the alliance less as a tool for escalation than as a stabilizing signal that amplified its visible stance at sea without committing to confrontation.

At the same time, the Philippines widened its network of security partners. Defense cooperation agreements with countries such as Canada and Germany emphasized maritime security, training, and interoperability. These partnerships did not substitute for the US alliance but complemented it, reflecting an effort to distribute security dependence across multiple actors. Strategic diversification became a hedge against uncertainty rather than a signal of realignment.

Postponement defined the diplomatic track. ASEAN again failed to act as a collective constraint. Statements emphasized restraint and dialogue, but no coordinated measures followed. Negotiations on a code of conduct showed little progress. Manila continued to internationalize the dispute with China through external partnerships rather than regional mechanisms. It remained managed rather than resolved.

Economic engagement lagged behind security cooperation. Trade initiatives linked to the United States generated limited gains, reinforcing the imbalance between strong defense ties and modest economic returns. Security alignment continued to advance faster than economic integration.

By the end of 2025, the contours of Philippine foreign policy were clear. China applied sustained pressure without escalation. The Philippines responded through presence, law, and alliance signaling. Regional resolution remained deferred. The South China Sea was not a site of crisis but of repetition, where stability rested on endurance rather than agreement.

CONCLUSION

The events of 2025 reaffirmed a familiar pattern in Philippine politics. The midterm elections reordered domestic priorities, sidelined reform, and absorbed unresolved elite conflict into electoral competition. Economic

performance remained steady but narrowly based, reducing pressure for structural change. Corruption became unusually visible without becoming institutionally consequential. In foreign policy, pressure in the West Philippine Sea was met with posture and endurance rather than resolution. Across domains, outcomes were shaped less by policy innovation than by how elites managed risk, rivalry, and timing.

What stands out is not simply continuity, but how predictable that continuity has become. The midterms once again converted governance into a contest over survival and succession. Accountability mechanisms—from impeachment to legal cooperation—were activated strategically and abandoned once their electoral utility expired. Public works spending remained the central currency of political mobilization even as flood control scandals exposed the depth of contractor capture. At sea, visibility and alliance signaling substituted for costly escalation or settlement. The logic was consistent: endure, defer, and manage rather than redesign.

In this context, it is unsurprising that renewed attention has turned to anti-political-dynasty legislation. In the aftermath of 2025, Congress once again took up bills seeking to operationalize the constitution's long-standing prohibition of political dynasties. Yet the pattern is familiar. Competing proposals vary widely in scope, loopholes remain substantial, and the legislative process itself is dominated by dynastic actors with strong incentives to dilute, delay, or derail reform (Subingsubing 2025). As in past cycles, elite vulnerability produced symbolic momentum without altering the underlying balance of power. Anti-dynasty reform appears normatively appealing precisely because it targets visible concentrations of power, but it remains politically threatening to those best positioned to block it.

This impasse underscores why institutional change must focus on incentives rather than identities. Electoral system redesign offers a more feasible path forward—not as a moral corrective, but as a way to reduce the incentives for candidates to rely on personal networks and individual name recognition, and to change how political careers are built (Ravanilla 2019). Such reforms are politically difficult but less directly threatening to incumbents than blanket prohibitions of family participation. If pursued incrementally and framed around competitiveness, transparency, and accountability rather than punishment, they are more likely to survive elite resistance.

Some of these elements were faintly visible in 2025. Elite vulnerability surfaced episodically, as corruption scandals briefly raised the political costs

of incumbency. Public attention to infrastructure failure and misuse of funds persisted longer than in previous cycles, signaling frustration not just with individual actors but with the systems that enable discretion and impunity. At the national level, renewed interest in constitutional change reflected a growing recognition that existing institutions reward inheritance and control more than accountability. Yet the year also revealed the limits of this route: constitutional reform remains an elite-managed process, easily delayed or diluted when it threatens those in power. Whether these signals translate into durable change will depend on whether reform momentum shifts from symbolic fixes to institutional adjustments that can survive elite resistance. Absent that convergence, the Philippines is likely to remain on its familiar path: steady but constrained growth, elite-driven politics at home, and a foreign policy defined less by resolution than by posture and endurance abroad.

REFERENCES

- Arugay, Aries A., and Jean Encinas-Franco. 2025. "The Philippines in 2024: Dueling Dynasties, Disruptive Threats." *Asian Survey* 6 (2): 297–307.
- Department of Economy, Planning, and Development. 2025. *State of the Economy: Philippine Development Plan 2023–2028, 2025 Midterm Update*. Mandaluyong City: Government of the Philippines.
- Gregorio, Veronica L. 2024. "Flooding and Waste Management in the Philippines: Stop Blaming the Poor." *Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia*, September 9. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (<https://fulcrum.sg/flooding-and-waste-management-in-the-philippines-stop-blaming-the-poor/>).
- Hartmann, Felix, and Nico Ravanilla. 2025. "Cycles of Nepotism: How Electoral Incentives and Political Connections Undermine Public Procurement." Working paper, University of California, San Diego.
- Lalu, Gabriel Pabico. 2025. "Pro-Cha-cha Solon Shuns Amendments Now: 'Leave It to the Next Admin.'" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 19 (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2061517/pro-cha-cha-solon-shuns-amendments-now-leave-it-to-the-next-admin>).
- Lee, Sasha. 2025. "Leveraging Justice: Marcos Jr. Uses the ICC Probe to Challenge the Duterte Dynasty." *Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia*, February 24. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (<https://fulcrum.sg/leveraging-justice-marcos-jr-uses-the-icc-probe-to-challenge-the-duterte-dynasty/>).

- Mallari, Aaron Abel, and Aries A. Arugay. 2025. "Marcos Jr Versus Duterte: Betrayal and Loyalty in the 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections." *Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia*, May 9. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (<https://fulcrum.sg/marcos-jr-versus-duterte-betrayal-and-loyalty-in-the-2025-philippine-midterm-elections/>).
- Ravanilla, Nico. 2019. "The Multimember Plurality System in the Philippines and Its Implications." In Paul Hutchcroft (ed.), *Strong Patronage, Weak Parties: The Case for Electoral System Redesign in the Philippines*, 162–81. Manila: Anvil.
- Reuters. 2025. "Philippines Denounces China's 'Dangerous' and 'Inhumane' Actions against Filipino Fishermen," December 15 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/philippines-denounces-chinas-dangerous-inhumane-actions-against-filipino-2025-12-16/>).
- Romero, Alexis. 2025. "Cabinet Reset: Marcos Orders Courtesy Resignations." *Philippine Star*, May 23 (<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/05/23/2445164/cabinet-reset-marcos-orders-courtesy-resignations>).
- Sexton, Renard, and Nico Ravanilla. Forthcoming. "The Posturing Premium: How Empty Threats Can Benefit Leaders in Weak Countries." *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Strangio, Sebastian. 2025a. "Duterte Allies Perform Strongly in Philippine Midterm Elections." *The Diplomat*, May 13 (<https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/duterte-allies-perform-strongly-in-philippine-midterm-elections/>).
- _____. 2025b. "Philippine Military Claims 'Increased Chinese Movements' at Second Thomas Shoal." *The Diplomat*, August 22 (<https://thediplomat.com/2025/08/philippine-military-claims-increased-chinese-movements-at-second-thomas-shoal/>).
- Subingsubing, Krixia. 2025. "Anti-dynasty Bills Differ in Degree of Kinship." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, December 15 (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2155112/antidynasty-bills-differ-in-degree-of-kinship>).
- World Bank. 2025. "Philippines Economic Update: Slower Growth amid Domestic and External Headwinds," December 9 (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/philippines/publication/philippine-economic-updates>).