

## Political Dynasties Fight to Run the Philippines

Leading contenders the Marcos and Duterte alliance take an early lead in a race that has a long way to run

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*Over the past month, the “UniTeam” of ex-dictator’s son **Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr** and presidential daughter and former Davao City **Mayor Sara Duterte** has rapidly emerged as a formidable tandem ahead of next year’s Philippine elections.*

Having convinced Sara Duterte, a top potential rival, to instead become his vice-presidential running mate, Marcos Jr has emerged as the clear frontrunner to succeed **President Rodrigo Duterte** next year.

The latest surveys show that Marcos Jr is the preferred candidate of almost half of the [total prospective voters](#) (47%), with **Vice-President Leni Robredo** a distant second (18%).

Having lost the vice-presidential race by razor-thin margins in 2016 to Robredo, de facto liberal opposition leader Marcos Jr has wasted no time in consolidating a nationwide network of support.

Among his backers are former presidents **Joseph “Erap” Estrada** and **Gloria Macapagal Arroyo**. A growing number of local government leaders and warlords across the country are also throwing their support behind Marcos Jr’s presidential bid.

But the only son of the former Filipino dictator could soon face a major hurdle in his plans to return the Marcos name to Malacanang. The incumbent, who preferred his own daughter to run for the presidency instead, is widely expected to rally behind the charismatic Mayor of Manila **Francisco “Isko” Moreno**, who is now third in most recent surveys.

Adding to Marcos Jr’s electoral headaches [are multiple petitions](#) calling for his disqualification based on an old conviction for tax evasion. The Commission on Elections

(COMELEC), which is packed with Duterte appointees, has yet to decide on the fate of Marcos Jr's candidacy, which has the shadow of potential disqualification hanging over it.

For several quarters, Sara Duterte [was the leading candidate](#) in multiple presidential surveys. But the Marcoses, in tandem with Arroyo, managed to convince her to abandon the race and join forces with them instead.

The upshot is a Marcos-Duterte-Arroyo-Estrada "grand coalition," which extends from the "Solid North" base of the Marcoses in the Ilocos region on Luzon island to the "Solid South" base of the Dutertes on Mindanao island.

The emerging coalition is now composed of major national and regional parties, including Marcos Jr's Partido Federal ng Pilipinas (PFP), Duterte's Hugpong ng Pagbabago (HNP), Arroyo's Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats (Lakas-CMD) and the Partido ng Masang Pilipino (PMP) of former President Estrada.

With practically all of them facing charges of corruption and abuses of power, the Marcos-led coalition has been decried as a [menacing "cartel,"](#) which is intent on dominating Philippine state institutions.

Analysts believe that should the 'grand coalition' emerge victorious in next year's elections, they will likely overhaul the country's constitution in favor of a federal-parliamentary system, making it much easier for dominant political dynasties to perpetuate themselves in power.

What stands in the way of the cartel's plan, however, is the outgoing Filipino president, who has lambasted the Marcoses for [allegedly bullying](#) his daughter to drop out of the presidential race.

Over the past few weeks, Duterte has openly attacked Marcos Jr, a supposed ally, as "[pro-communist](#)" and a "weak leader." On multiple occasions, the Filipino president raised the stakes by implying that Marcos Jr is [a cocaine addict](#) who should be disqualified from running for the presidency.

In order to thwart a Marcos presidency, Duterte instead pushed for his long-time aide, **Senator Christopher "Bong" Go**, to succeed him next year. Lacking charisma and his own independent base, Go has struggled to make an impression on voters. A laggard in various surveys, Go has indicated he would withdraw from the race.



President Rodrigo Duterte, left, with personal assistant Christopher Lawrence 'Bong' Go. Photo: Philippine Government

“My love for him is more than the love for a father. He is old and he has given a lot to the country. So I don’t want to add to his problems. I remain loyal to him and I promised to be with him for life,” Go told the media on the sidelines of a public event this week, spinning his expected withdrawal as a “supreme sacrifice” with due consideration for his aging patron.

Seeking “forgiveness” from his own supporters, Go admitted: “I was not ready for this ... Perhaps it’s not yet my time to be president.”



With Go out of the race, the focus has rapidly shifted to Manila Mayor Isko Moreno, who has long been rumored to be Duterte’s “Manchurian candidate.”

Back in October, Isko [flatly dismissed as “fake news” reports](#) that he was the real candidate of the administration, with Go simply serving as a decoy. Yet the Manila mayor began to rely on a growing number of Duterte administration stalwarts, including Lito Banayo (campaign manager) and Vince Dizon (deputy campaign manager), who began to tweak Isko Moreno’s earlier more progressive language on major issues.

In recent weeks, Moreno has largely refrained from criticizing the incumbent, despite presenting himself as a potential opposition candidate earlier this year.

Having opposed extrajudicial killings in the past, the Manila mayor began to curry favor with Duterte, who faces potential charges by the International Criminal Court (ICC) over his deadly drug war, which has claimed tens of thousands of lives in the past five years.

When asked about the ICC investigations, Isko Moreno [parroted](#) the Duterte administration’s line by arguing “we have existing, effective, *at gumaganang* (working) justice system.”

Like Duterte, he also began criticizing the international body, which recently decided to defer any further probe after a request by the Philippine government to investigate matters through domestic courts.

The Manila mayor also promised to continue Duterte’s drug war, albeit promising to uphold human rights.

In the past week, Moreno also started attracting support from other top Duterte allies, who are opposed to the Marcoses. Among them was Taguig City Mayor Lino Cayetano, the brother of former Speaker of the House and Duterte’s vice-presidential mate Alan Peter Cayetano, who has praised Moreno as the next potential Duterte.

“I love our president. I supported our president, but I saw in mayor Isko Moreno what I saw in mayor Duterte – fearlessness,” Cayetano said, indicating growing support for the Manila mayor among key Duterte allies.

“Just on the first day, the way he cleaned up Manila’s streets, how he caught criminals, how he helped businessmen, vendors. You see how fast he took action?” he added, raising the prospect of a well-oiled Cayetano-Duterte alliance behind the presidential candidate.

Following Go’s announcement of his withdrawal from the presidential race, which is yet to be formalized, Moreno was quick to present himself as the potential candidate of the administration.

“If they endorse me, thank you. Thank you in advance, but I will not preempt them until they say so. For the meantime, I am always hopeful,” a gleeful Moreno said, now anticipating massive backing from the incumbent, who seems determined to either prevent the Marcoses from succeeding him or to drive a hard bargain with his dynastic rival.

“I will wait for them to choose me. For the meantime, while I am expecting help, I will keep reaching out. While reaching out, I am learning a lot,” the Manila mayor added.

For progressive statesmen, however, this is all part of a cynical ploy and set of ongoing negotiations between the Duterte and Marcos dynasties in anticipation of major changes next year.

Progressive senatorial candidate Neri Colmenares lambasted the Go withdrawal maneuver as “a desperate Machiavellian attempt to salvage the crumbling Duterte-Marcos alliance.”

“May this serve as a warning to all politicians who will seek anointment from the president and his family in 2022,” he said.

House Deputy Minority Leader Representative Carlos Isagani Zarate dismissed the latest developments as part of Duterte’s “political playbook,” whereby Moreno is “just a pawn used as leverage to gain concessions” from the Marcos camp.

“[Duterte is seeking] protection when [his] term ends ... especially now that he is already considered a lame-duck president,” Zarate said, arguing Go’s “withdrawal will possibly benefit and consolidate further the Marcos and Duterte alliance” following behind-the-scenes negotiations over the spoils of war next year.

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*Featured image: Frontrunner Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr with his sister Maria Josefa Imelda ‘Imee’ Marcos in a file photo. Photo: WikiCommons*

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