

Philippines: Ferdinand Marcos Jr. succeeds Rodrigo Duterte and his clan completes the reconquest of power

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On July 25, 2022, Ferdinand Marcos Jr will deliver his first annual State of the Nation Address (SONA) before the National Assembly. On the eve of this address, we publish below an article written at the beginning of the month, after the inaugural speech of the new president on the occasion of his assumption of office, an article whose publication had been unfortunately delayed.

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On June 30, 2022, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, known as “Bongbong,” took office [[1](#)], completing his family’s return to power, thirty-six years after the overthrow in February 1986 of the dictatorship presided over by his father. Marcos Jr.’s “profile” is certainly different from that of his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, but his accession to the presidency does not herald a political liberalization of the regime.

Historical lineage

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. said in his inaugural speech that he must look to the future, yet he kept referring to his father, praising his accomplishments and following in the footsteps of his reign - the dictatorial regime of martial law (1972-1986). For the record, the martial law regime meant, among other things, corruption and looting of resources, massive attacks on press freedom, arrests, torture, killings and disappearances.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. also sang of national unity, but the father whose legacy he endorses not only suppressed popular movements, but also attacked and marginalized rival big families - even ordering the assassination of Benigno Aquino in 1983. Washington advocated the “modernization” of the Philippine state as part of its supposedly democratic policy of “Nation-Building” [[2](#)]. The recurrent reference in US policy to this notion has been masterfully shattered, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. Marcos privatized the state for the sole benefit of his clan and its allies, but since he made the Philippines an anti-communist bastion, all was forgiven in advance. Let the family dictatorship be.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. warmly praised the actions of his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte (who nevertheless shunned the inauguration, even though his daughter Sarah was elected vice president). Under his rule, in the name of the “war on drugs”, tens of thousands of people have fallen victim to

death squads and a policy of extra-judicial killings. The International Criminal Court is investigating these killings, so much so that Duterte has decided that the Philippines should leave this institution. The Philippine prosecutor Karim Khan has nevertheless reaffirmed the right of the ICC to continue its investigations, at least for the period during which the country was a member.

The ball is now in the court of “Bongbong” who seems reluctant to respond positively to the request of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) in support of the ICC. He has just put an end to the investigation of crimes committed during the dictatorship of his late father and aimed at recovering the stolen property... for which his mother remains indebted. Under Duterte’s rule, as before under Ferdinand Marcos Sr., the forces of repression have enjoyed almost total impunity - a historical continuity, once again, that the current president does not seem ready to combat.

As if being president and commander-in-chief of the armed forces were not enough, “Bongbong” has also reserved a ministry for himself, that of agriculture, the only sector he said he would reform during his campaign. He is already taking the issue of rice production in hand. Considerable public funding can be devoted to this essential sector, but it is not clear that small-scale producers and consumers will benefit. The Masagana plans aim to increase the productivity of hybrid varieties. In the 1970s, Masagana 99 was aborted, causing the bankruptcy of the rural banks and leaving farmers heavily in debt. There is also talk of tackling the coconut sector again. As journalist Maria Ceres Doyo recalls, the campaigns to tax coconut production in order to modernize it led, during the time of Marcos senior, to one of the biggest corruption scandals, again leaving small producers in debt for life [3]. Under these circumstances, Marcos Jr.’s self-appointment as Minister of Agriculture raises questions.

“Bongbong” said, without laughing, that he had not offended any of his rivals. Yet, as sociologist Randy David notes [4], armies of strategists and trolls spread lies and misinformation on a massive scale via social media “to wage the most divisive presidential campaign in the nation’s political history. Mr. Marcos Jr. could pretend to stay above the fray because his own partisans of hate were busy doing the attacking for him.” New technologies have made him more in line with the legacy of Duterte than his father.

The power of a clan

It is not a man, but a clan that has regained power 36 years after the “EDSA revolution [5]” on February 25, 1986, which forced Washington to exfiltrate to Honolulu the Marcos family, which fled with the cash: a fortune in art treasures, precious goods and dollars, the fruits of prevarication.

There is nothing secret about the return of the clan to power, as evidenced by the staging of his inaugural speech on June 30, the omnipresence of his mother Imelda (92) on that day and his celebration of victory among friends from the same world.

True to his mother’s “tradition,” Bongbong “has revived the ostentatious display of wealth during the inaugural ball and dinner at the Rizal Hall in Malacañang Palace on the evening of June 30. The glittering party that night was attended by a limited number of guests, among whom were the country’s well-heeled, elite members of high society. Each guest was given” as a unique and expensive gift “a gleaming gold medallion engraved with Mr. Marcos’ image”, “encased in a well-crafted, elegant-looking red box.” By distributing “images of himself carved in a gold medallion,” the new president inherits his mother’s “unbridled sense of entitlement and narcissism.” A touch of caution in this glitzy day, the ball and dinner were not covered by television [6].

Bongbong’s older sister Imee is a senator, a powerful institution in the Philippines with only 24

members. Relatives were placed in key positions, such as Ricardo de Leon, who was appointed Marcos' chief security coordinator. This former police lieutenant-colonel had fled with the Marcos family in 1986. As for Juan Ponce Enrile (98), he became Chief presidential legal counsel (CPLC). A lawyer, he had been the damned soul of Ferdinand Marcos Sr., thinker of martial law, then presiding over the Philippine Coconut Authority and its juicy profits when, with the wind changing, he joined the minority military rebellion that initiated the "February 1986 revolution". Since then, he has been able to pursue a timely political career. From father to son, the circle is now complete.

The Marcos clan, assured for the time being of the cooperation of Vice President Sara Duterte, the very first member of the cabinet to be appointed after the May elections, even if she only receives a consolation prize: Secretary of Education, when she would have preferred the portfolio of Defense [7]. He has the support of key families, a majority in the House of Representatives (the Parliament) and the Senate, and the "goodwill" of institutions such as the Supreme Court. The independent press is under pressure - the news website Rappler.com is threatened with a ban.

We should not expect the misnamed "international community" to pressure Marcos to respect rights and freedoms in the archipelago. Joe Biden is relieved to be able to deal with a "rational" character, after the trying experience of the erratic Duterte presidency. The latter had, however, fallen in line by renewing with Washington the bilateral security pact (the Visiting forces agreement) that allows the US Navy to use Philippine military bases and ending at the eleventh hour - June 23! - to talks begun in 2018 with Beijing on joint exploration of gas and oil reserves in the Philippine exclusive economic zone, citing Chinese demands that are incompatible with the Philippine Constitution.

As in the days of martial law, the important thing in Washington's eyes is that Manila sides with the United States in the geopolitical confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific region. As a sign of goodwill, Joe Biden was represented at Ferdinand Marcos Jr's inaugural address by Douglas Emhoff, the husband of US Vice President Kamala Harris. As Sophie Boisseau du Rocher wrote on June 25, 2022, in a note from Ifri (French Institute of International Relations) [8] "in order to best preserve interests with its former colony, the United States has no choice but to come to terms with the Marcos family" while it wants to "reinvest more actively in the region (...) to counter the growing influence and ambitions" of Beijing.

No return to democracy

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. inherited from the Duterte presidency an anti-terrorist law that is particularly liberticidal and favors the use of *red-tagging* - the all-out accusation of being a communist agent against NGO associations, media or opposition personalities, lawyers and trade unionists, whistle-blowers and community activists.

Rodrigo Duterte has waged a dirty war on drugs by inciting the police to "kill" alleged drug dealers - NGOs denounce several tens of thousands of extrajudicial executions - and has used every means at his disposal to silence critics. He has persecuted former senator Leila de Lima, imprisoned since 2017 on drug trafficking charges - de Lima's main accusers recanted their statements just before the elections. He harassed the opposition media. Rappler, run by Nobel Peace Prize winner (2021) Maria Ressa, is still under an injunction from the stock exchange authorities to close down, on the pretext of the acquisition of a foreign shareholding in the company's capital (prohibited by law, but disputed by Rappler), when the latter has already been converted into employee shareholding (a large international campaign is underway in defense of Rappler).

Bongbong said during the campaign that he opposed the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into his predecessor's war on drugs. However, the investigation was suspended in

November 2021 and has now been reopened by the new ICC chief prosecutor, Karim Khan. He believes that justice works well in the Philippines and that the intervention of an international judicial authority is not necessary. He shows no willingness to fight the policy and culture of impunity that allows the forces of repression to do as they please.

With the return to power of the Marcos clan, international solidarity with the progressive forces in the Philippines unfortunately loses nothing of its topicality and urgency.

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- Traduction DeepL et Pierre Rousset.
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Footnotes

[1] In the Philippines, a newly elected president does not take office until two months after his election

[2] The “rebuilding of nations” after World War II with Germany and Japan as examples.

[3] <https://opinion.inquirer.net/154589/coco-levy-monumental-sin-against-coco-farmers>

[4] <https://opinion.inquirer.net/154625/ferdinand-marcos-jr-s-inaugural-speech>

[5] Named after the avenue where the rebel military barracks and the demonstrators were located: Epifanio de los Santos.

[6] Rufa Cagoco-Guiam:
<https://opinion.inquirer.net/154695/father-and-son-like-mother-like-son>

[7] Michael L. Tan :
<https://opinion.inquirer.net/154698/st-please>

[8] <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/notes-de-lifri/asie-visions/elections-aux-philippines-enjeux-dun-retour-clan-marcos>