

PERSPECTIVE

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Singapore | 11 April 2019

Philippine Mid-term Elections: A Duterte Double

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 13 May, the Philippines will hold elections for all local and provincial positions, all seats in the House of Representatives, and half of the 24 seats in the Senate.
- If the current opinion polls prove accurate (as they have in the past):
 - President Rodrigo Duterte and his daughter Sara Duterte, even though neither is running for national office, will be the biggest winners nationally;
 - the composition of the new Senate will be more favourable to President Duterte and his campaign for a new federal constitution; and
 - the new *Hugpong ng Pagbabago* (HNP) party coalition led by Sara Duterte will be well placed for the 2022 presidential and legislative elections.

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INTRODUCTION

The 13 May mid-term elections in the Philippines, with over 18,000 elected positions to be decided, will be the second largest exercise in democracy in Southeast Asia this year after the 17 April elections in Indonesia. To the chagrin of drinkers and bettors, on Monday 13 May, the “selling, furnishing, offering, buying, serving, or taking intoxicating liquor” will be prohibited across the Philippines as will the “holding of fairs, cockfights, boxing, horse races or any other similar sports.”¹

The coverage of Philippine mid-term elections in the post-Marcos era invariably focusses more on the Senate than the House of Representatives or sub-national positions and are seen as a partial referendum on the serving president even though their name does not appear on the ballot. The results are read to see the current electoral strength of the hundreds of family dynasties that dominate politics at the local and provincial levels and provide the vote banks for national parties and candidates, and for indicators for the presidential election in three years. This time the enduring popularity of President Duterte and the recent rise to national political prominence of his daughter Sara Duterte will strengthen these four characteristics. Some have gone as far to say that these mid-term elections will be “arguably the most consequential elections in generations, if not our entire history.”²

FOCUS ON THE SENATE

While local, provincial and House of Representatives’ elections are the domain of local political dynasties, the election of half the Senate is the only true national-level vote in Philippine mid-term elections. The 12 candidates that get the largest number of votes nationally will win a six-year term in the Senate. The Senate, reflecting its national character, has been the most common stepping stone for presidential and vice-presidential candidates. In 2016, five of the six vice-presidential candidates were serving senators. Leni Robredo, who won, was a serving member of the House of Representatives.

Due to the limit of two successive Senate terms, four of the incumbent senators will have to step down, and one, Alan Peter Cayetano, is running to succeed his sister Pia for the House of Representatives in his family’s Taguig City bailiwick. Pia Cayetano is running again for the Senate after being barred from doing so due to term limits in 2016.

Table 1: 12 Senators Facing Re-election or Term Limits

Name	2013 Coalition	Party	2019 Election
Grace Poe	Team PNoy		Seeking re-election as Independent
Loren Legarda	Team PNoy		Cannot run for Senate due to term limits, running for House of Representatives
Alan Peter Cayetano	Team PNoy		Running for House of Representatives
Francis Escudero	Team PNoy		Cannot run for Senate due to term limits, running for Governor of Sorsogon
Nancy Binay	UNA		Seeking re-election as Independent
Edgardo Angara	Team PNoy		Seeking re-election under HNP
Bam Aquino	Team PNoy		Seeking re-election under Otso Diretso
Aquilino Pimentel	Team PNoy		Seeking re-election under HNP
Antonio Trillanes IV	Team PNoy		Cannot run for Senate due to term limits
Cynthia Villar	Team PNoy		Seeking re-election under HNP
JV Ejercito	UNA		Seeking re-election under HNP
Gregorio Honasan II	UNA		Cannot run for Senate due to term limits

The Senate has been the most effective check on the power of the presidency among the three other co-equal branches of government in the first half of the Duterte administration. The current House of Representatives features a massive super-majority aligned with the president (and now his daughter Sara), which will likely feature a super majority of similar scale after the midterms. Many leading legal minds see that the Supreme Court has also been very accommodating of the president including their removal on questionable grounds of their own chief justice who had earned the ire of the president³, and providing a sweeping precedent for the president to declare martial law.⁴ In contrast, the Senate has blocked key presidential campaign promises including the reintroduction of the death penalty and the adoption of a new federal constitution. Senators aligned with the Liberal Party like Franklin Drilon, Francis “Kiko” Pangilinan and Risa Hontiveros and Independent senators like Grace Poe and Panfilo “Ping” Lacson have been at the forefront of these moves and the holding of Senate investigations and hearings into issues that have put pressure on the Duterte administration.

As with the 2013 mid-term elections and the Aquino administration, the 2019 mid-terms are expected to deliver a Senate more aligned with the Duterte administration and with fewer strong opposition voices. In 2013, three senators aligned with the opposition United Nationalist Alliance (UNA) won against nine from President Aquino’s “Team PNoy” (Table 1). This time, Antonio Trillanes, a very vocal critic of the president, will step down due to term limits while another fierce opposition critic Senator Leila de Lima remains incarcerated for the foreseeable future awaiting trial on questionable charges brought against her in early 2017.

If recent opinion polls are correct, only one opposition senate candidate, Mar Roxas, will win against eight HNP candidates, and three independent candidates. The most recent

opinion polls show that HNP candidates most closely associated with the president such as Bong Go, Ronald “Bato” dela Rosa and Francis Tolentino are surging in popularity. Bam Aquino of the opposition Liberal Party and Aquino dynasty is sagging.

Table 2: Leading Senatorial Candidates

Name	Party Coalition	Dec 2018 Rank	Jan 2019 Rank	Feb 2019 Rank
Grace Poe	Independent	1	1	1
Cynthia Villar	HNP/Duterte	2	2	2
Pia Cayetano	HNP/Duterte	3-4	3-6	5-7
Lito Lapid	Independent	5-7	3-6	3-7
Nancy Binay	Independent	5-7	3-7	7-10
Edgardo Angara	HNP/Duterte	3-4	3-9	3-5
Aquilino Pimentel	HNP/Duterte	5-7	5-11	9-14
Bong Go	HNP/Duterte	14-16	6-12	3-5
Jinggoy Estrada	HNP	8-15	6-12	10-15
Mar Roxas	Otso Diretso	8-15	7-14	8-12
Imee Marcos	HNP/Duterte	8-15	7-15	9-14
Ramon Revilla Jr.	HNP	8-14	8-15	8-13
Bam Aquino	Otso Diretso	10-16	10-15	13-17
Serge Osmena	Independent	8-13	10-15	15-18
Ronald dela Rosa	HNP/Duterte	8-15	11-16	5-8
JV Ejercito	HNP/Duterte	9-16	15-16	15-18
Juan Ponce Enrile	Independent	17-18	17-18	16-18
Francis Tolentino	HNP/Duterte	17-18	17-18	11-15

Source: Pulse Asia Nationwide Surveys on 2019 Senatorial Candidates.

Re-electionist senator Aquilino “Koko” Pimentel, a leading federalism advocate and head of the PDP-Laban party that Duterte ran under in 2016, foresees that the Senate reconfigured by the 2019 mid-term elections will be more favourably disposed towards a federal constitution.⁵ John Nery, a leading columnist critical of the president, fears a new Duterte-aligned super-majority in the Senate could lead to the expulsion of Senator de Lima and even impeachment of Vice-President Leni Robredo, the current chair of the opposition Liberal Party.⁶ Otso Diretso senatorial candidates are now warning that an HNP senate super-majority would allow the Duterte administration to “virtually do anything they want.”⁷

LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

Today, as head of the new HNP coalition, Sara Duterte is the second most important national political figure after her father.⁸ This despite her never having held national political office. At the beginning of 2018, HNP did not exist. Sara Duterte’s primary political role then was

as Mayor of Davao City, a position she took over from her father in 2013 when he was barred from re-election due to term limits. By mid-2018, HNP had sidelined and largely absorbed PDP-Laban, become the dominant force in the House of Representatives, and played the decisive role in replacing the PDP-Laban Speaker of the House Pantaleon Alvarez with Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and the PDP-Laban Senate President Aquilino “Koko” Pimentel with Vicente “Tito” Sotto III.⁹ Sara Duterte is the central figure in the Senate race fronting the vast majority of the HNP Senate slate election rallies. She can afford to be largely missing from Davao City during her campaign for re-election as mayor as in 2016 she won over 99 per cent of votes cast. Under the current constitution, in 2022, Sara Duterte cannot run for re-election as mayor due to term limits.

The creation and rapid rise to dominance of HNP and Sara Duterte’s heading of the HNP mid-term Senate campaign could well be a dress rehearsal for a Sara Duterte bid for the presidency in 2022. Despite her deferring of all questions about a run for the presidency until at least 2021¹⁰, many leading national and local elected officials are already touting her as the next president. These include senators Panfilo “Ping” Lacson and Edgardo “Sonny” Angara and former president and current Mayor of Manila City Joseph “Erap” Estrada.¹¹

The nature of the HNP coalition is both indicative of the fluid, ephemeral nature of political parties in the Philippines, and could well provide a solid base for a 2022 presidential bid by Sara Duterte. HNP is both a recently created regional Mindanao party based in Davao City and led by Sara Duterte and the peak party in a large and expanding national coalition of political dynasties and their associated political parties. The senatorial slate of 13 candidates endorsed by HNP is a combination of HNP candidates from the Davao region and candidates from parties and dynasties associated with HNP nationally.

Nationally, HNP is based on the coalition between the Marcos dynasty, the Macapagal-Arroyo dynasty and Duterte one. This same coalition was behind the 2016 victory of Rodrigo Duterte. Sara Duterte, Imelda Marcos and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo were the central figures in the deposing of Alvarez as House Speaker. Sara and Imee in matching outfits have released a joint campaign video.

The HNP campaign rallies serve both to present the coalition’s senatorial slate to voters and for local and provincial elected officials to show their support for HNP and Sara Duterte. Local political dynasties and their current elected officials often compete with each other to host HNP rallies and to get access to Sara Duterte. The opposition Otso Directo campaign sorties are largely starved of local political and logistical support even in areas of traditional strength for the Liberal Party.¹² Mar Roxas, the best placed Otso Directo senatorial candidate is largely running his own campaign separate from the other seven focussed on the Visayan bailiwicks of the Roxas political dynasty. The capital of Capiz province in the Visayas is Roxas City.

If HNP is able to maintain the expanding coalition of local political dynasties that are supporting the coalition’s mid-term election rallies, maintain its super-majority in the House of Representatives and establish one in the Senate, then the path to the 2022 presidency will be quite straight for Sara Duterte, if she chooses to run. The coalition of local dynasties supporting HNP in this mid-term election is wider and more nationally representative than the Team PNoy coalition in 2013 or the coalition behind Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. It is very

hard now to see how the diminishing coalition aligned with the Liberal Party headed by the current vice-president Leni Robredo can mount a serious national challenge in 2022. HNP's largest challenge after the mid-terms is more intra-mural – keeping the allied political dynasties satisfied – than from the Liberal Party and larger *dilawan* opposition. Three years, of course, is a very long time in politics and if President Duterte's sustained high levels of support seriously falter, then the current dire political situation of the opposition could improve.

Accentuating the Local

The election of Rodrigo Duterte as president in 2016 accentuated the local dynastic base of Philippine national politics in new and profound ways. Rodrigo Duterte was the first president to be elected directly from holding a local political position. He is also the first president in the post-Marcos era to have no national profile of note before running for the office. Before the 2016 election, he had only held a national political position once due to term limits blocking him from running again for mayor of Davao City. From 1998 to 2001, he was the member of the House of Representatives for a district in Davao City, during which time he admitted being bored and skipping many sitting sessions.¹³ Reflecting this background, the Duterte presidency has been very mayoral in nature with many of his inner circle and supporters still referring to him as Mayor Duterte or *tatay* (father). His signature war on drugs is the elevation for the first time of a common mayoral practice to the national level.¹⁴

If Sara Duterte does become the next Philippine president, the staple of local politics would be witnessed for the first time at the national level; the direct transfer of elected position from one dynastic member to another due to term limits. Sara Duterte's career as vice-mayor and mayor of Davao City has shadowed that of her father and the constraint of term limits. 2022 may see this replayed at the national level. With Joseph "Erap" Estrada, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Benigno Aquino all facing legal challenges from the respective succeeding administrations, President Duterte, particularly due to his very bloody war on drugs, may well want the security of being succeeded by his daughter.

¹ See <http://www.comelec.gov.ph/?r=2019NLE/Resolutions/res10429> for more details.

² <https://opinion.inquirer.net/119792/our-most-important-elections-yet>

³ <https://www.bworldonline.com/ibp-to-sc-reverse-quo-warranto-petition/>

⁴ <https://www.rappler.com/nation/174819-sc-ruling-martial-law-duterte-nationwide>

⁵ <https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2019/226349-pimentel-sees-hope-federalism-shift-senate-2019-elections>

⁶ <https://opinion.inquirer.net/120356/senators-who-can-say-no-to-duterte> ; under the 1987 Constitution, the president and vice-president are elected separately.

⁷ <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1103422/diokno-warns-on-big-senate-win-by-admin-bets>

⁸ President Duterte has stated that Sara Duterte now "calls the shots" when it comes to national politics, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/224317-duterte-says-sara-calls-the-shots>

⁹ <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/208287-women-behind-fall-pantaleon-alvarez-speaker-house-representatives>

¹⁰ <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/685538/sara-duterte-it-s-pointless-to-talk-about-2022-presidential-bid-for-now/story/>

¹¹ <https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2019/224543-erap-estrada-nudges-presidential-run-sara-duterte>; <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/02/20/1895257/sara-duterte-2022-why-not>

¹² <https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2019/227436-pangilinan-says-local-leaders-supporting-otso-diretso-fear-retaliation-government>

¹³ <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/134492-congressman-rodrico-duterte-davao-city>

¹⁴ For more details on Duterte's mayoral presidency, please see https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_44.pdf

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