



IRI RAPID RESPONSE ASSESSMENT

2025 PHILIPPINES MIDTERM ELECTIONS

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IRI Rapid Response Assessment: 2025 Philippines Midterm Elections

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OVERVIEW

On May 12, 2025, the Republic of the Philippines held midterm elections to select members of both chambers of its national legislature, including twelve of its 24 senators in the upper house and 317 members of the lower House of Representatives. National elections were also held for local officials, including 81 provincial governors, 146 city mayors, 1,488 municipal mayors and their respective vice executives and councilors¹. More than 18,000 positions were at stake, underscoring the scale and importance of the elections.

The 2025 midterm elections unfolded at a pivotal moment in the Philippines' democratic trajectory, marked by public anxiety over economic hardship, perceived governance failures, intensifying internal divisions, escalating dynastic rivalries, and mounting concerns over foreign interference from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)². What began as a united front under the UniTeam coalition in the 2022 elections had by 2024 splintered into a high-stakes power struggle between President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and the Duterte political faction, led by former President Rodrigo Duterte and his daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte. This unraveling culminated in the controversial impeachment of Vice President Duterte in the lower house on charges of misuse of confidential funds and abuse of power, a political move widely seen as an attempt to sideline her ahead of the 2028 presidential race. As a result, the midterms became a de facto proxy battle between competing blocs within the ruling elite, transforming electoral contests into arenas for both public mandates and elite score-settling.

The infighting injected volatility into the political environment, destabilized alliances, fragmented the administration's coalition, and generated uncertainty around policy continuity. Given this climate, democratic institutions were increasingly vulnerable to internal factionalism and external manipulation by malign foreign actors, particularly from the CCP.

1 The autonomous region of Bangsamoro is expected to hold elections in October 2025.

2 According to an IRI national pre-election survey, only 40 percent of Filipinos believed the country was heading in the right direction, while 51 percent felt it was on the wrong path, reflecting significant public concern about the nation's trajectory. Economic concerns dominated the public's concerns, with 62 percent naming high prices and the cost of living as the most urgent problem, surpassing unemployment (30%) and corruption (28%). Center for Insights in Survey Research. *National Survey of the Republic of the Philippines: April–May 2025*. International Republican Institute, 2025.

In the context of intensifying maritime tensions in the West Philippine Sea, Philippine authorities and civil society actors have drawn attention to the risks of foreign-funded information operations, cyber intrusions, and covert support for alleged pro-Beijing candidates. These threats raised concerns among the government about the vulnerability of Philippine democracy to external manipulation, prompting the Philippine Commission on Elections (COMELEC) to bolster its cybersecurity protocols, monitor digital propaganda more stringently, and introduce new rules governing the use of artificial intelligence in political content ahead of the 2025 elections. A public opinion survey echoed these concerns, with 57 percent of respondents identifying the defense of Philippine sovereignty from China as an important election issue³. The COMELEC introduced new regulations to address digital threats, including a resolution that requires the registration of all official digital campaign platforms and mandates clear disclosure of content generated using artificial intelligence⁴.

The Philippines adopted automated voting in 2010; however, the automated voting and results transmission systems drew criticism due to recurring technical issues and significant delays in the transmission and announcement of results, fueling public skepticism about the credibility of the results. To modernize the electoral process and address these concerns, in 2025, the COMELEC introduced new technologies to improve voting, vote counting, results management, and results auditing. In preparation for the midterm elections, the COMELEC retired the older generation of Automated Counting Machines (ACMs) and procured a new set of machines intended to deliver faster, more accurate, and more transparent vote tabulation. These upgrades were presented as essential for strengthening the credibility of the elections and reinforcing public confidence. However, the procurement process drew criticism from civil society watchdogs, who pointed to the lack of competitive bidding. While the technological shift holds promise, these concerns highlight the

3 Center for Insights in Survey Research. *National Survey of the Republic of the Philippines: April–May 2025*. International Republican Institute, 2025.

4 Philippines, Commission on Elections. Resolution No. 11064: Guidelines on the Use of Social Media, Artificial Intelligence, and Internet Technology for Digital Election Campaign, and the Prohibition and Punishment of Its Misuse for Disinformation and Misinformation in Connection with the 2025 National and Local Elections and the BARMM Parliamentary Elections. 17 Sept. 2024.

critical importance of transparency, oversight, and stakeholder trust in the successful deployment of election technologies.

Given its significance and potential to reshape the legislative balance of power ahead of the 2028 presidential election, the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted a rapid response technical election assessment. The assessment aimed to evaluate key aspects of the election, including the political environment, election administration, implementation of new vote-counting technologies, and election day processes. IRI's evaluation also included an initial assessment of CCP-led foreign influence in the election. This report summarizes the observations and analysis of IRI's technical team, which was made possible with generous support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).



A voter checks the list of registered voters outside a polling station during the 2025 Philippine midterm elections.

METHODOLOGY

Thematic analysis of the pre-election environment began in April 2025. The five-person technical team was led by the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Senior Director for Asia, Johanna Kao and IRI's Director for South Asia, Stephen Cima. The team also included IRI's Senior Advisor for Elections, Jessica Keegan, IRI's Senior Director for Public Opinion Research, Sonja Gloecke and IRI's Senior Operations Manager for Asia, Erica Kim. The team conducted its activities in accordance with IRI methodologies for international election observation, including IRI Protocols for Assessing Foreign Interference in Elections, Philippine laws, and the [Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Observers \(DoP\)](#).

Prior to election day, the team met with over 30 stakeholders, including COMELEC officials, political candidates, academia, journalists, civil society, diplomatic corps, "citizens' arms" of the COMELEC responsible for oversight, and other international monitoring organizations. On election day, the team observed approximately 28 polling centers with clustered precincts in Pampanga and Tarlac provinces, as well as in Metro Manila, including the implementation of new automated voting machines, results management, and auditing systems. In contravention of precepts within the DoP that international observers should have unfettered access to polling sites, on May 10, IRI received notice from the COMELEC that its technical team would not be permitted inside polling precincts on election day. Nevertheless, due to the open nature of clustered precincts, the majority of which are in school classrooms and are open and visible to the public, this late decision did not impede IRI's ability to observe opening, voting and closing proceedings.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Elections in the Philippines are governed by the Omnibus Election Code (1985), the Automated Election System Law, the Fair Elections Act, and the Party-List System Act. The COMELEC, an independent constitutional body, oversees voter registration, election management, enforcement of election laws, and resolution of disputes.

While the Election Code outlines procedures for voting, counting, and proclaiming results, many stakeholders have criticized its outdated or weakly enforced provisions, particularly those related to campaign finance, vote buying, penalties for violations, and electoral violence. There are also vague rules around candidate disqualifications and insufficient guidelines for automated voting. Notably, the legal framework also lacks regulation addressing the dominance of political dynasties. Though attempts have been made to pass an anti-dynasty law, Congress has shown little political will.

The Philippines employs a complex mixed electoral system that combines plurality and proportional representation. Elections occur every three years, covering staggered national and local posts. The President and Vice President are elected separately by direct popular vote under a first-past-the-post system, each serving a single, non-renewable six-year term.

The bicameral Congress consists of a Senate and House of Representatives. The Senate's 24 members are elected nationwide, limiting regional representation; senators serve six-year terms, with half elected every three years through plurality-at-large voting. The House has 317 members, with 80 percent elected from single-member districts (first-past-the-post) and 20 percent via a party-list system for marginalized sectors. Local elections, including those for governors, mayors, and councilors, also use first-past-the-post rules.

FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

Electoral interference by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) involves various tactics to sway political outcomes in favor of Beijing. These include covert funding of pro-China parties or candidates, as well as media campaigns aimed at undermining critics and co-opting politicians through business ties or future incentives. The CCP also supports sham elections in authoritarian regimes by supplying voting infrastructure and election monitoring that lacks credibility, also known as “zombie missions”, thereby legitimizing allies and undermining global electoral norms⁵.

While not all of these tactics were visibly deployed during the 2025 Philippine elections, the CCP’s interference remains multifaceted and is increasingly evident across several domains in the country. Specifically, tactics such as illicit campaign finance and information manipulation, which aim to influence processes, undermine the principles of democratic elections, or sway results at the local and national level, were particularly concerning.

During the assessment, stakeholders expressed deepening concern over the CCP’s expanding influence operations, which pose a threat to electoral integrity and democratic governance in the Philippines. For example, there was credible evidence of coordinated information operations targeting the Philippines aimed at promoting pro-China narratives and discrediting critics of the CCP. These campaigns utilized social media platforms, employing troll farms and influencers to disseminate propaganda⁶.

Investigations have uncovered networks of fake accounts spreading content favorable to China, particularly concerning territorial disputes in the West Philippine Sea. Such efforts aimed to sway public opinion and influence political outcomes in favor of candidates and interests aligned with the CCP. Stakeholders noted that Beijing’s strategic engagement is particularly concerning in areas like Cagayan, Palawan, and Subic, where Chinese entities

5 van den Ven, Johan, Christopher Magiera, and Benjamin Weber. *China’s Approach to Influencing Elections and Political Processes to Its Strategic Advantage*. Edited by J. Michael Cole, International Republican Institute, Feb. 2024, <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/chinas-approach-to-influencing-elections-and-political-processes-to-its-strategic-advantage.pdf>.

6 Cruz, Maricel. “Coordinated Socmed Network Amplify Pro-China Messages.” *Manila Standard*, 5 Feb. 2025, <https://manilastandard.net/news/314554243/coordinated-socmed-network-amplify-pro-china-messages.html>.

have exploited weaknesses in the regulation of infrastructure investments to channel illegal campaign finance to the CCP's preferred candidates covertly⁷.

These concerns were further reinforced ahead of the 2025 elections when authorities arrested a suspected Chinese operative allegedly carrying espionage equipment near the COMELEC. The individual was reportedly in possession of surveillance tools and sensitive electronic devices, stoking long-standing fears that CCP-linked actors are seeking to infiltrate Philippine institutions and interfere with electoral processes. Additionally, individuals associated with Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs), many of which have connections to CCP actors, have been implicated in funding or influencing local political campaigns. High-profile cases, such as Bamban Mayor Alice Guo's alleged ties to POGOs and espionage networks and former Cagayan provincial Governor Manuel Mamba's open alignment with pro-China rhetoric, underscore how local actors have become conduits for foreign election interference, undermining democratic safeguards from within.

Manifestations of CCP political interference in the Philippines represent a broader, systemic challenge that demands urgent and coordinated responses. Addressing this threat requires vigilant oversight, stronger legal frameworks to regulate foreign influence in domestic politics, enhanced transparency in campaign financing, and sustained international cooperation to uphold electoral integrity and defend democratic institutions from authoritarian encroachment.

7 Custer, S., Burgess, B., Solis, J. A., Sritharan, N. and D. Mathew. (2024). Beijing's Big Bet on the Philippines: Decoding two decades of China's financing for development. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary.

CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT

The 2025 Philippine midterm elections underscored the entrenched power of political dynasties, which continue to dominate the political landscape and hinder democratic progress.

Despite constitutional provisions aimed at prohibiting political dynasties, the absence of enabling legislation has allowed these familial power structures to persist. A 2022 Ateneo School of Government study revealed that approximately 80 percent of Congress members and almost 50 percent of local government officials hail from political families, a trend that remained evident in the 2025 elections⁸.

In many parts of the country, particularly areas long dominated by political families, voters faced subtle pressures to support incumbent families, which are often tied to local patronage systems and the provision of government assistance. This systemic corruption contributed to widespread vote-buying, especially at the local level, where political loyalty is frequently exchanged for material benefits.

The COMELEC documented over 800 cases of vote-buying during the 2025 campaign period, with several high-profile incidents implicating prominent figures, including senatorial candidate Camille Villar and various local officials⁹. These patterns underscore the enduring influence of political dynasties and the structural weaknesses that continue to erode electoral integrity and voter autonomy.

Compounding these issues is the persistent weakness of political parties in the Philippines, which often function as personal vehicles for elite interests rather than as platforms for coherent policy agendas. The lack of party discipline, ideological coherence, and grassroots representation has allowed political dynasties to co-opt party structures and manipulate electoral processes with minimal accountability. Meanwhile, the party-list system, originally designed to amplify the voices of marginalized and underrepresented sectors,

8 Mendoza, R.U., Yap, J.K., Mendoza, G.A.S., Jaminola III, L., & Yu, E.C. (2022). Political dynasties, business, and poverty in the Philippines. *Journal of Government and Economics*, 7, 100051. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jge.2022.100051>

9 Villanueva, Rhodina. "Comelec: Vote-Buying Complaints Reach 806 Cases." *The Philippine Star*, 17 May 2025, www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/05/17/2443652/comelec-vote-buying-complaints-reach-806-cases

has come under increasing criticism for being exploited by political elites and dynastic proxies. In many cases, party-list groups are backed by powerful families or economic interests, undermining the system's intended purpose and distorting the proportional representation it was meant to ensure.

Further, weakening political parties is the prevalence of "turncoatism" or the ability of politicians to switch parties before or after an election to align themselves with the ruling administration or whichever party holds the most power in Congress, affording new opportunities to power or government resources. This long-standing feature of Philippine politics promotes patronage over policy, undermines accountability, hinders the development of the party system, and erodes trust in political institutions. In 2024, ahead of the midterm elections, several politicians switched their political affiliation¹⁰. To address weak political systems and encourage adherence to ideological platforms, the Philippines' Congress should consider enacting laws that disqualify or penalize candidates who switch parties immediately before or after an election.

The campaign period was also marred by violence, with the Philippine National Police recording 100 election-related incidents resulting in 20 deaths. The Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) experienced the highest number of incidents, highlighting the volatile nature of local political contests. Notably, some COMELEC officials were among the victims, with several ambushed and killed in the lead-up to the elections¹¹.

Despite these challenges, the 2025 elections saw the emergence of independent and reform-minded candidates who managed to break through the dynastic stronghold. Their success, though limited, indicates a growing public appetite for political diversity.

10 Philippine Daily Inquirer. "5 from PDP-Laban among 32 Turncoats to Marcos Party." Inquirer.net, 12 Nov. 2023, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1848240/5-from-pdp-laban-among-32-turncoats-to-marcos-party>. Accessed 30 May 2025

11 Sigales, J. "PNP logs 20 deaths, 31 injuries in latest tally of poll-related incidents" Inquirer.net, 15 May 2025, <https://www.inquirer.net/443920/pnp-logs-20-deaths-31-injuries-in-latest-tally-of-poll-related-incidents>

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

The 2025 Philippine midterm elections highlighted significant concerns regarding political campaign finance, expenditures, and reporting, particularly the non-enforcement of existing regulations and the politicization of ‘ayuda’ programs, such as government-provided financial assistance aimed at supporting low-income and vulnerable populations. While two-thirds (66%) of Filipino voters expressed confidence in the COMELEC’s ability to organize the elections, over half (51%) believed campaign finance rules were frequently broken¹².

For example, weaknesses in the election law permit unrestricted campaign spending before the official campaign period, creating a loophole that candidates understandably exploit to gain early visibility. This practice raises concerns about the fairness of the electoral process, as it favors wealthy candidates and entrenched political dynasties. According to the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), before the official campaign period began in February 2025, candidates collectively spent over ₱10 billion on television and radio advertisements¹³. Las Piñas Representative Camille Villar and Senator Imee Marcos each aired ads worth over ₱1 billion, accounting for a significant portion of the total expenditures.

Under Section 80 of the Omnibus Election Code, candidates are prohibited from campaigning outside the designated period. However, judicial precedent contradicts the Code, allowing individuals to campaign before the official period as long as they have not filed their certificates of candidacy¹⁴. To ensure transparent and compliant reporting practices, the Election Code should be amended to require that finance reporting begins when individuals file their candidates’ Certificate of Candidacy (COC) and receive their Certificate of Nomination and Acceptance (CONA).

12 Center for Insights in Survey Research. *National Survey of the Republic of the Philippines: April–May 2025*. International Republican Institute, 2025.

13 Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism. “2025 Candidates Posted over P1 Billion Worth of TV, Radio Ads Even before Filing COCs.” *PCIJ*, 13 Jan. 2025, <https://pcij.org/2025/01/13/2025-candidates-billion-pesos-worth-television-radio-ads-before-october-candidacy-filing/>. Accessed 4 June 2025.

14 *Penera v. Commission on Elections*. G.R. No. 181613, Supreme Court of the Philippines, 25 Nov. 2009. Supreme Court E-Library, <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/1/50691>

As required by law, all candidates are required to submit their Statements of Contributions and Expenditures (SOCs) within 30 days after the elections (by June 11, 2025). For the first time, the COMELEC decided to publish on its website all SOCs for public scrutiny¹⁵. While the published reports likely do not reflect the totality of candidates' expenses, as candidates often reduce actual amounts spent to avoid disqualification, nevertheless, COMELEC's reform sought to bring more transparency to the process.

Second, the Philippines' practice of "ayuda," referring to government-provided financial assistance from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), is designed to offer relief, especially during crises; however, concerns have been raised about its politicization and partisan distribution. IRI heard reports that some politicians abused state resources by using ayuda distributions to bolster their public image or leveraging ayuda as "institutionalized vote buying". For example, during the distribution of cash grants under the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation (AICS) and Ayuda para sa Kapos ang Kita Program (AKAP), there were instances where politicians' names and images were displayed, leading to perceptions that the aid was personally provided by them.

Though the COMELEC prohibits the distribution of ayuda ten days before election day, the ban did little to mitigate the welfare program from political influence. There were also claims that political affiliations influenced beneficiary selection. While ayuda programs play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable populations in the Philippines, ensuring their non-partisan implementation remains a critical challenge that requires ongoing attention and action. These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive reforms in campaign finance laws to ensure a level playing field for all candidates.

¹⁵ Depasupil, William B. "Comelec to Publish Candidates' SOCs." The Manila Times, 23 May 2025, www.manilatimes.net/2025/05/23/news/national/comelec-to-publish-candidates-socs/2118939

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Prior to the midterm elections, the COMELEC introduced new innovations aimed at modernizing and enhancing transparency in the electoral process. This included procuring new Automated Counting Machines (ACMs), reforming procedures for results management to enable faster transmission of results, publishing candidates' financial reports, intensifying efforts to combat vote buying, and launching the "Digital Bayanihan" initiative to improve digital literacy and strengthen safeguards against online manipulation. For the first time, the COMELEC also adopted internet voting for overseas voters in 75 countries and early voting hours for senior citizens and pregnant women. The introduction of mall voting was also a novel approach to enhance voter accessibility.

Despite these advancements, the election faced several challenges, including abuse of state resources and insecurity. There were numerous reports of abuse of the ayuda welfare program and cash handouts between candidates and voters, particularly in Misamis Oriental, Apayao, Negros Occidental, and Baguio provinces where an incumbent party-list group's first nominee was allegedly seen distributing P100¹⁶. Reports showed that 78.7 percent of recorded election violations were linked to red-tagging incidents, which involve labeling individuals or groups as communists or terrorists without substantial evidence, often leading to harassment or violence¹⁷. The elections were also marred by other acts of violence, including politically motivated attacks that resulted in casualties and incidents in areas classified as "red category" in the BARMM. Political tensions between President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte also reached a fever pitch when, in November 2024, Duterte threatened to assassinate President Marcos and others. Subsequently, the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) recommended filing criminal charges against Vice President Duterte for inciting sedition, and in February 2025, she was impeached by the lower House of Representatives¹⁸.

16 Sampang, Dianne. "Comelec Receives 4 Reports of Vote Buying." INQUIRER.net, 22 Feb. 2025, <https://www.inquirer.net/429936/comelec-receives-4-reports-of-vote-buying-for-2025-polls>

17 International Observer Mission. Zero In: Electoral Violence and Red-tagging in the 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections. International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines (ICHRP), May 2025. <https://ichrp.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/ZERO-IN-Electoral-Violence-Red-tagging-3.pdf>

18 Reuters. "Philippines Law Agency Recommends Filing Criminal Charges Against VP Duterte over Threat." Reuters, 12 Feb. 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-law-agency-recommends-filing-criminal-charges-against-vp-duterte-2025-02-12/>

On election day, generally, the polls were well-administered, administrative processes were followed according to procedure, and voting was orderly but not without some notable challenges. For example, ballot management and voting did not ensure the secrecy of the vote. The ballot size exceeded the size of the “privacy folders” provided, and there was often overcrowding by unauthorized poll watchers who crowded voters while they filled out their ballots, compromising the secrecy of the vote. The illegal distribution of campaign materials inside and around polling centers, including pre-filled sample ballots, was also a concerning observation.

Technology malfunctions with ballot scanners were also an issue. However, in the polling centers where IRI’s technical teams observed, ACM machines were repaired or replaced, and voting was not significantly disrupted. The COMELEC reported 311 instances of technology malfunctions on election day, claiming it was an improvement from previous elections¹⁹.

The National Citizens’ Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) also reported election violence in Silay City, where supporters of opposing mayoral candidates were involved in a shooting, resulting in three deaths. Violence was also reported in several municipalities of Lanao del Sur, Negros Occidental and in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao del Norte²⁰.

IRI noted that while the COMELEC introduced many new redundancies to ensure political parties and other poll watchers receive precinct-level election results in real time, the “Citizens’ Arms” of the COMELEC – namely the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), which observes and reports on the quality of the process – at times blurred their roles with the COMELEC. In addition, there does not appear to be a formal mechanism in place for PPCRV to file a complaint if discrepancies arise between its parallel vote tabulation and the COMELEC’s official results.

19 Bordey, Hana. “311 ACM Issues in Eleksyon 2025 Lower Compared to Previous Polls – Comelec Head.” GMA News Online, 12 May 2025, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/946075/acms-performed-well-in-eleksyon-2025-comelec-lente/story/>

20 National Citizens’ Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL). *Bantay ng Bayan Bulletin* #1. May 12, 2025. Accessed May 22, 2025. [https://namfrel.org.ph/2025/bulletin/2025NLE%20NAMFREL%20Bantay%20Ng%20Bayan%20Bulletin1%20\(May%2012,%2012nn\).pdf](https://namfrel.org.ph/2025/bulletin/2025NLE%20NAMFREL%20Bantay%20Ng%20Bayan%20Bulletin1%20(May%2012,%2012nn).pdf)

The COMELEC allocated five polling precincts per classroom, which, in some cases in the Manila metro region, resulted in extreme overcrowding and long wait times. In high-density neighborhoods, some voters waited in line one to two hours to vote, and in sweltering conditions.

Despite these challenges, Filipinos demonstrated remarkable resolve to participate in the midterm elections. In total, 57,350,968 out of 69,673,653 registered voters turned out to participate (82%), marking a historic increase from previous midterm elections and signaling Filipinos' enthusiasm for their democracy²¹.



Ballot secrecy folders are arranged on school desks to serve as voting booths during the 2025 Philippine midterm elections.

21 Abad, M. "Voter turnout hits 82.2% in 2025, a record high for midterm polls" Rappler, 15 May, 2025. <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/elections/voter-turnout-comelec-report-may-2025/>

RESULTS

The 2025 midterm election results delivered several unexpected upsets at both the national and local levels, significantly reshaping the political landscape and recalibrating expectations ahead of the 2028 presidential race. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s Senate slate underperformed, falling short of securing a dominant bloc in the upper chamber. This outcome has likely curtailed any immediate efforts to impeach Vice President Sara Duterte, whose removal would have required a strong Senate majority and signaled waning momentum for the Marcos administration. More broadly, the results exposed the limitations of the administration's political machinery and reflected growing public disillusionment with entrenched power structures, elite infighting, and perceived governance failures.

In contrast, the opposition experienced a notable resurgence. Two high-profile critics of both the Marcos and Duterte camps, former Senator Bam Aquino and former vice-presidential candidate Kiko Pangilinan, won Senate seats, defying pre-election expectations and signaling a renewed viability for independent and reformist voices. Their victories may mark the reemergence of a more centrist political current, offering an alternative to the increasingly polarized landscape dominated by dynastic blocs.

Top 12 Senatorial Winners based on National Certificates of Canvass May 12, 2025²²

1 PARTY PDPLBN GO, BONG GO 6.33% 27,121,073	2 PARTY KNP AQUINO, BAM 4.89% 20,971,899	3 PARTY PDPLBN DELA ROSA, BATO 4.85% 20,773,946	4 PARTY LAKAS TULFO, ERWIN 4.00% 17,118,881	5 PARTY LP PANGILINAN, KIKO 3.58% 15,343,229	6 PARTY IND MARCOLETA, RODANTE 3.56% 15,250,723
7 PARTY IND LACSON, PING 3.53% 15,106,111	8 PARTY NPC SOTTO, TITO 3.46% 14,832,996	9 PARTY NP CAYETANO, PIA 3.40% 14,573,430	10 PARTY NP VILLAR, CAMILLE 3.19% 13,651,274	11 PARTY NPC LAPID, LITO 3.13% 13,394,102	12 PARTY NP MARCOS, IMEE 3.11% 13,339,227

22 Philstar.com. "LIST: Final Senatorial Ranking in the 2025 Elections." The Philippine Star, 16 May 2025, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/05/16/2443547/list-final-senatorial-ranking-2025-elections>

At the subnational level, several long-entrenched dynasties suffered losses to independent or first-time challengers, particularly in urbanized districts where civic engagement and media scrutiny were higher. While political clans have retained dominance in many provinces, their grip appears to be loosening in pockets of the electorate that are more attuned to issues of transparency, public service delivery, and local-level accountability. Though limited in number, these local upsets serve as early indicators of an electorate that, when presented with credible alternatives, is increasingly willing to challenge the status quo.

Overall, the 2025 election results revealed a fragmented but dynamic political terrain. Elite rivalries remain entrenched, and institutional weaknesses persist, but signs of democratic renewal are also emerging.



A poll worker applies indelible ink to a voter's finger after casting their ballot during the 2025 Philippine midterm elections.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Philippines has an opportunity to improve its electoral processes before the October BARMM elections and the 2028 Presidential elections by taking steps to enact reforms in the near term. In the spirit of international cooperation and to help the Philippines build trust in its political and electoral institutions, IRI offers the following recommendations:

- ***Strengthen Legal and Institutional Defenses Against Foreign Interference.*** Establish clear legal frameworks to detect, deter, and penalize foreign electoral interference. This includes regulating foreign-linked campaign finance, enhancing transparency in local government partnerships, and strengthening the capacity of institutions like the COMELEC and the Department of Foreign Affairs to oversee compliance and respond to threats. Robust cybersecurity protocols must also be implemented to protect the electoral infrastructure. Expand intelligence-sharing and diplomatic collaboration to identify and mitigate covert influence operations at local and national levels.
- ***Enhance Political Accountability and Transparency.*** Amend the Electoral Code to raise limits on campaign expenditures, extend the requisite campaign finance reporting period to begin at the inception of candidacy, to disincentivize covert campaign finance practices. Sanction perpetrators of vote-buying schemes, including abusers of state resources.
- ***Improve Election Administration.*** Continue investments in building the COMELEC's capacity to enact and enforce electoral reforms, including: investments to ensure ballot secrecy; transparent procurement and implementation of election technologies; countering election-related propaganda; and empowering officials to sanction election-related offenses.
- ***Strengthen the Philippines' Political Party System.*** In the near term, address the long-stalled anti-dynasty legislation by enacting an enabling law to enforce constitutional provisions prohibiting political dynasties. This would promote political pluralism and empower independent candidates.

CONCLUSION

The 2025 Philippine midterm elections revealed both the resilience and the vulnerabilities of the country's democratic system. Despite improvements in electoral transparency and administration by the COMELEC, as well as the strong role played by independent citizen observers, the elections underscored deeper structural weaknesses. Persistent challenges, including the entrenchment of political dynasties, uneven enforcement of election laws, CCP-led information manipulation, and outdated campaign finance laws, continue to erode public trust in democratic institutions.

Of particular concern is the growing pattern of foreign interference by the CCP, which has expanded its influence through opaque investments, covert political engagement, and local-level manipulation. These activities not only erode electoral integrity but also pose long-term risks to Philippine national security by shaping subnational policy outcomes in ways that bypass regulatory oversight. Without comprehensive legal reforms to define, monitor, and prohibit malign foreign influence, and without stronger institutional frameworks to enforce safeguards, the Philippines' democratic trajectory remains at risk, especially as it approaches the pivotal 2028 presidential elections.

For the United States, the Philippines' ongoing political volatility and exposure to foreign interference, particularly from authoritarian actors, present both challenges and critical opportunities for deepened engagement. The U.S. can help bolster the Philippines' democratic resilience by providing technical assistance on election security and citizen oversight, enhancing institutional capacity to detect and counter foreign influence, and facilitating civil society partnerships that safeguard democratic space. Legislative reforms promoting transparency and regulatory oversight of foreign political activities are also essential to reinforcing a rules-based regional order. As part of this broader effort, the U.S. should prioritize support to Local Government Units (LGUs) and civil society, particularly in politically significant and strategically sensitive areas. Strengthening the capacity of LGUs and civil society to uphold democratic norms at the local level will be vital in insulating communities from external manipulation and ensuring that democratic gains are sustained. In doing so, the U.S. advances both Filipino democratic aspirations and its own strategic interest in a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific.

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