

ASEAN and the Philippines in the midst of U.S.–China Tension

By KIBA Saya

1. Support base of the new President of the Philippines

In May 2022, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. (hereafter referred to as Marcos) won the Philippines presidential election and was officially declared the new President. With a voter turnout of 82% and a total of 31.6 million votes (58.77%), the most votes ever cast for a candidate in an election, Marcos became the first president to win a majority of the popular vote in a presidential election since his father, Ferdinand Marcos, who imposed a developmental dictatorship, was ousted in 1986 and the country made a transition to democracy. Marcos’ opponent in the presidential race, former Vice President Leni Robredo, who came in second, received 28.0% of the vote. If we look at the vote shares of prior presidents, such as Fidel V. Ramos in 1992 (23.6%), Joseph Estrada in 1998 (39.9%), Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in 2004 (39.9%), Noynoy Aquino in 2010 (42.1%), and even the highly popular Rodrigo Duterte in the 2016 election (38.6%), one cannot fail to see the overwhelming support for President Marcos in the last presidential election.

However, how did he gain such an overwhelming majority of the popular vote? To answer this question, we must turn our attention to his running mate, Sara Duterte, who won the vice-presidential election with an even higher vote share (61.3%). She is a daughter of former president Duterte. Marcos ran for vice president in the 2016 election but lost to Leni Robredo. If we compare the results of 2016 and 2022, we can see that Marcos’ electoral support in the southern Philippines (especially in Mindanao), where he lost to Robredo in the 2016 election, has overwhelmingly increased in the last election. The base of Marcos’ electoral support is generally found in the northern regions, whereas the former President Duterte’s support base is in the south. The alliance forged by Marcos and Sara Duterte as candidates for the presidential and vice-presidential elections, respectively, might well be the reason for the remarkable increase in support for Marcos in the southern part of the country, a traditional electoral stronghold of the Duterte family. Unlike in previous elections, support for Marcos did not vary based on voters’ educational background, income, and social classes. He garnered majority support from almost all age groups (18 to 64 years old). That means that he also received support from people who lived under his father’s dictatorship.

2. The appraisal of Duterte's presidency was an issue at stake in the 2022 presidential election campaign

Why did Marcos receive so much support and what were the issues at stake in the last election? As things turned out, we can say there were no such "issues." Like in many countries besides the Philippines, the "issues" created during election campaigns focus mainly on how to mitigate social cleavage. Social cleavage is internal divisions in society that occur along three main lines: 1) demography and social diversity (e.g., ethnicity, religion/faith, class/stratum, etc.); 2) political perspectives (e.g., values such as ideologies, political actions such as voting and organizational activities, etc.); and 3) organizational closure (e.g., trade unions, churches, political parties, etc.). In the Philippines, issues at the mass level are mostly of type (1). However, issues at the elite level are mostly of type (2) and (3) due to a remaining strong left-leaning ideology in the country. Elections usually revolve around such issues that politicians, political blocs, NGOs, churches, and others exploit during election campaigns to mobilize the masses at the local level. However, in the past years, the widespread diffusion of social media reshaped the reality of elections. During Duterte's campaign for the presidential election in 2016, he did not rely solely on mobilizing his traditional electoral power base to win support, but also directly reached out to the masses through social media.

In the Philippines, political parties do not play a central role. They are organized and on an ad hoc basis during elections by teaming up with high-profile individual candidates. This practice gives rise to the phenomenon of "bandwagon politics," where members of the House of Representatives switch to the president's party en masse following an election. Moreover, as the president's tenure of office is limited to a single six-year term and parties are weak, policy continuity in elections is hardly an issue.

In the 2016 election, Duterte was elected on the single-issue platform of improving peace and order and the war on drugs. Unlike his predecessors, who saw a drop in their approval ratings in the latter half of their terms, making them lame ducks, he retained an approval rating of nearly 80% throughout his full term.

In view of the above, Marcos, during his election campaign, sought to capitalize on the popularity of Duterte and his daughter by making assertive statements about his public commitments and policies. In fact, as Duterte enjoyed 80% support in public opinion until the end of his term, Marcos had no choice but to follow in his footsteps. This may explain why he boycotted all public debates and media interviews throughout entire campaign period, shunned confrontation against his political opponents, and kept the slogan "unity." The Marcos camp made use of social media during the election but did not campaign on a single issue like Duterte. The 2022 election did not revolve around any specific issue, and if there was any, it focused on an appraisal of Duterte's presidency.

Thus, we can summarize the main traits of the Marcos' presidency as follows: 1) he became the first "majority president" to win an election without uttering a single statement about implementing firm policies; 2) he is greatly indebted to the Dutertes; 3) he has to be sensitive to public opinion while accounting for the interests of his own family, cronies, as well as those of the Dutertes; and 4) although he is expected to pledge continuity with his

predecessor's policies, he obviously cannot be like him. Further, as he made no public commitments right from the start of his campaign, he must strive to break away from the previous administration and prove his worth while considering the interests of his cronies and keeping a close eye on public opinion. This stance, however, is vulnerable to strong pressure and may lead to dangerous forms of political transactionalism.

3. Foreign policy of the Marcos administration

Against the background depicted above, what foreign policy will the Marcos administration pursue? Before answering this question, we must first examine the internal situation of the Philippines. In the 1960s, the Philippines was dubbed a "show window of American-style democracy." The saying still holds true, and with the automation of voting and counting in 2010, the level of trust in the electoral system and the electoral management bodies further increased and election results are rarely disputed by the losing candidates. Unlike other countries, where invalid or "stolen" elections are a source of conflict, the electoral democracy in the Philippines is remarkably stable. Although the Philippines under Duterte administration was viewed by some as "pro-Chinese," Filipinos look with little or no envy on the authoritarian regime of the People's Republic of China. This attitude, coupled with sympathy for their compatriots living abroad (accounting for 10% of the population), makes them very sensitive to such foundational values as "freedom" and "human rights."

Long before the rise of China as a global geopolitical power, the Philippine elites and middle class harbored ambiguous feelings towards the alliance with the U.S. and "did not want to depend entirely on their Western ally." In this respect, it is worth noting that the present Constitution of the Philippines enacted in 1987 states: "The State shall pursue an independent foreign policy." Some segments of the elites also frequently advocated for "ASEAN-centrism." However, the definition or general explanation of what an "independent foreign policy" specifically means has not been defined, even by the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs. The reality is that diplomatic, security, and even cultural policies in the Philippines still depend heavily on the U.S. government.

Since 2010, however, while maintaining their neutral stance towards China, the Philippine elites began questioning their subordinate relationship with the U.S. and raised doubts on the reliability of their ally. Consequently, they began to speak and act differently, both within and outside the country, depending on the context and their partners' attitude. The perception of the Chinese threat in the Philippines, at the mass level, began to increase each year since around 2012, as the dispute over the Scarborough Shoal area deepened. In addition to these internal factors, President Marcos faces a triple bind: 1) gaining recognition from the U.S. government to rehabilitate his family's international status and reputation, 2) accounting for public opinion toward China, and 3) dealing with a security environment setting that requires a certain amount of caution in what he says are, even within the ASEAN bloc, issues due to the situations in Myanmar and Ukraine. Under such difficult conditions, the Marcos' administration relies on several technocrats, including a career diplomat and a former military chief, appointed as foreign and defense ministers, respectively.

Against this background, what were the actions of President Marcos during the first six months of his tenure? In his first State of the Nation speech on July 25, he addressed public opinion by stating that he would not “preside over any process that will abandon even one square inch of territory of the Republic of the Philippines to any foreign power,” and seeking to distance himself from his predecessor, President Duterte, he added that “the Philippines shall continue to be a friend to all, an enemy to none.” In the first 6 months, he also traveled to six countries, paying state visits to Indonesia and Singapore in September, and attending the UN General Assembly in New York, the ASEAN summit in Cambodia, and the APEC summit in Thailand. In August, the Marcos and U.S. administrations agreed on the expansion of sites for military installations under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The facilities targeted for expanded use might include bases located in Palawan and Luzon. With regards to China–U.S. relations, Marcos plans to visit China in January and the U.S. sometime in 2023 to reaffirm the country’s neutral stance towards the two world powers.

However, when the U.S. government started to request that the Philippines “play its part” in the Taiwan question, a wave of concern over involvement in a potential conflict swept through the country. In the Philippines, a member of the armed forces dies every three days for counter-insurgency operations. Under these circumstances, one cannot blame Filipinos for refusing to sacrifice themselves on the altar of a foreign power’s interests. Another example of their commitment to preserving the life of their fellow citizens was during the Iraq War, when the then incumbent Arroyo administration ordered a full-scale withdrawal of Philippine troops from Iraq in response to the kidnapping of Filipino civilians in the region. In the Philippines, the security of the numerous Filipinos living and working abroad is taken very seriously. For this reason, it would be unthinkable for the public opinion to accept involvement in a Taiwan contingency.

4. The Philippines as a member of ASEAN

The Philippines’ basic stance towards U.S.–China relations is similar to that of other ASEAN countries, which do not want to side with either party. The opportunistic choice of supply sources for defense equipment and infrastructure support is neither due to diplomatic balance, nor hedging, but stems from the necessity of increasing their experience levels, and improving their contracting and negotiation skills. What the Philippines wants is not “high-quality infrastructure,” but “the ability to choose wisely among multiple options.” What the Philippines probably wants is “quality rulemaking” rather than “high-quality infrastructure.” Japan should seize the opportunity the ASEAN summit or related meetings provides to discuss, together with non-OECD-DAC countries (e.g., China, India, etc.), the development of common rule-making, or norms-making, or at least checklists-making to secure quality of any foreign economic investment and developing aid (e.g., human rights, environmental consideration, resettlement, labor environment, monitoring, etc.), to promote transparency in development cooperation in entire Southeast Asia. These talks should be hosted in countries such as Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia; the ASEAN+3 countries (China, Japan, and South Korea) should be invited to discuss the creation of “conditions conducive to a good

investment/aid environment for all countries.”

Although the Philippine is not a model of “democracy,” it has the “potential elements that might support democracy” on the ground, such as a culture of giving, spirit of sharing and donation, high level of voluntary association membership which is a source of social capital (trust in institutions and others), management of electoral democracy for a mere 26 years ago, high sense of political efficacy, etc. These can be good reasons to facilitate future exchanges between Japan and the Philippines to share common value of freedom and democracy.

(This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by KIBA Saya, Associate Professor, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, at the 94th Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on November 30, 2022.)