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Jada Fraser

Today we'll be speaking with Professor Claudio about the recent Philippine presidential election and the new president-elect, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.

Lam Tran

We will be focusing on domestic implication[s] for the Philippine people, as well as implication[s] for the U.S.-Philippine Alliance, and broader regional implication[s], including the state of democracy in Southeast Asia.

Jada Fraser

Professor Claudio, we're really excited to have you on the Asia in Washington podcast today. It's really an honor to have the chance to talk with you about an important regional power in Asia.

Lisandro Claudio

Thank you for having me, Jada and Lam.

Jada Fraser

So, to begin, yesterday saw the election of President-elect Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., the son and namesake of the late Philippine dictator. He won the country's presidency by a landslide after securing around 60% of the vote, giving him the strongest mandate for president since his father's rule 36 years ago. Can you summarize for our listeners the background of the major candidates for both the president and the vice president elections? And then could you also go into some of the defining debates of the election and where the president-elect falls on those issues?

Lisandro Claudio

First, not to muddle the discussion, I'll just focus on the top two candidates for the president and the vice president, because it ended up becoming a two-person race for the presiden[cy]. Usually, it's more than that, but this particular race was really just a two-person race. So, for the president, you had, of course, the now – unfortunately – president-elect or presumptive president, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. against the incumbent vice president, "Leni" Leonor Robredo. And, by the way, it has to be mentioned that vice presidents are elected separately from the president. So, this incumbent vice president has been the de facto leader of the opposition against the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, since that president's election in 2016. And between Vice



President Robredo and Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is seen as the kind of continuity candidate. So, Rodrigo Duterte did not endorse him, but he's running based on tropes that are similar to the tropes that informed the Duterte campaign, meaning kind of nostalgia for strongman rule, this idea of strength, this idea of discipline. Whereas Leni Robredo – who ran as an independent but her background is with the Liberal Party – she is essentially the liberal democratic candidate. And with respect to foreign policy, Leni Robredo is seen as somebody who is going to challenge China, whereas Fernando “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. is a continuity candidate and he is perceived as close to China.

Now, I use the passive voice intentionally here and I'm vague about the people who see the election in this manner because the candidates – or the candidate, the leading candidate himself – has been vague about his policy. He ran a largely empty campaign. So, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. refused to be interviewed by the media, he did not attend debates, and his policy positions are extremely vague. Instead, what he's done is he has really projected himself on TikTok. And what he's done there is he's shown videos of him being a loving father to his son, Ferdinand Marcos III. So, that's the presidential race and then the vice-presidential race, you have the running mate of Vice President Robredo, Senator Francis Kiko Pangilinan, against Sara Duterte, who was initially perceived to be the front-runner for the presidency. In initial surveys, her ratings were a lot better than Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s, but prior to the finalization of the slate of candidates, she decided to slide down to vice president in the ticket of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., and that gave him a significant bump, in particular, in Mindanao, which is the bailiwick of the Dutertes. He got like a 15% bump in his ratings in Mindanao. So, this is something that's interesting to talk about, but I think one of the reasons why the Marcoses have been restored is because of the Dutertes. In a way, the Dutertes gave the Marcoses the presidential palace.

Lam Tran

Very interesting. So, our next question could be more focusing on the conduct [of] this particular election that you have touched a little bit on in our previous question. The Marcos family has spent decades whitewashing their crimes when the Philippines were under martial law by using sophisticated disinformation method[s] and emphasizing the supposed stability of that time. Many voters are too young to remember that period, enabling Marcos Jr.[’s] disinformation campaign to work particularly well on social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok. Can you describe the political environment surrounding this election and some of the campaign tactics that have been used? How was the conduct of this election compared to the previous election? Was this election conducted in a more or less democratic manner?



Lisandro Claudio

I'd like to address the disinformation bit first, and I want to zoom out. The Marcoses have been lying since the 60s. So, when the first Ferdinand Marcos got elected in '65, during his first term, he ran, I guess, a kind of pseudo-reformist campaign, but even at that time, he was already lying. So, for example, during that time, he came out with an authorized biography. And in that authorized biography, there was a claim there that he saved Australia from the Japanese, because he delayed the advancement of the Japanese army in Southeast Asia, and thereby single-handedly saved Australia. So, this information is very old. And then when he became president, of course, in 1972, he started to control the media. So, a lot of baby boomer voters now who are voting for Ferdinand Marcos Jr., one of the reasons why they don't know exactly what was happening during the first Marcos regime was because they started reading the newspapers in the 1970s. And the newspapers during that time were completely controlled by the Marcoses. And then, of course, you know, there was a return to democracy in '86, people started to combat some of the disinformation, but they didn't do a good enough job. In fact, President Corazon Aquino decentralized the writing of textbooks, such that we ended up having really poor-quality history textbooks in public schools.

Then, of course, eventually, the Marcoses discovered social media. And they were one of the first political families to discover how potent a tool this was. I remember the first time I saw pro-Marcos propaganda on social media was as early as 2010. And, at that time, I was dismissing these ideas as fringe ideas, but slowly from the fringe – this is kind of like the alt-right narrative in the United States – these were fringe ideas that are now at the center of political discourse. So they've always been ahead of the curve, and, in this particular election, that was evidenced by the fact that they had the most effective use of TikTok as a platform. And TikTok is interesting, because you don't really need to engage in disinformation in TikTok in order to make yourself look palatable. If you watch most of Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s videos on TikTok, he's not lying there. Actually, what he's just doing is he's hanging out with his son. And so you can't flag it as disinformation. But what it does, nonetheless, is that it sanitizes the legacy of the Marcoses. So, that's the first part of the question.

The second part of the question is the conduct of this election. Every Philippine election will have some level, of course, of guns, goons, and gold. It appears that in this election, you have the kind of vote-buying that you've seen before, although it depends on the area. You also get a lot of areas where local politicians are uncontested, and in those particular cases, there's very little vote-buying. There seems to be evidence of more breakdowns in the voter computing machines. I think, at least twice the breakdowns we saw in the previous two elections. So, these things, they're still resolving themselves. But it looks like this has been a kind of normal election in that sense that it's probably messier at the margins. But I know that certain members of the



opposition now may want to challenge the results of the election. But I think it's quite clear, even if there was probably vote-buying, that Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has a mandate, unfortunately.

Jada Fraser

So, getting into some of the issue areas that voters care about and how, or whether, they have featured in the election campaigns of the different candidates: we've seen a public opinion survey that nearly half of Filipino respondents emphasize that unemployment and hunger are of top personal concern, as well as education, and barely a third of respondents identified crime and social order issues as a top concern, even though this has been the centerpiece of the outgoing Duterte administration's policy agenda. Both Marcos Jr. and Robredo have made vague pledges to improve health care and fight poverty. Marcos Jr. indicated he would protect Duterte from prosecution by the International Criminal Court for Duterte's extrajudicial drug wars, and signaled that he would possibly continue these killings. Moving forward, what do you think are the president-elect's priorities on his domestic policy agenda? And to what extent will Duterte's War on Drugs continue to be carried out?

Lisandro Claudio

So, this data is quite normal. That survey is divided into two parts: one, what are your concerns on a personal level, and second, what should be the priorities of our elected officials? So, in both cases, the answers have to do with what we call in the Philippines 'gut issues': inflation, hunger, employment, etc. So, that will be a constant. And the only reason why criminality was so high in 2016 was because of the immense signaling power of Rodrigo Duterte as a candidate. He's singular in that sense in that he was able to really change the narrative of Philippine politics. But even he wasn't able to change that narrative permanently, as you see, because at this point, we're still going back to these gut issues.

What is Ferdinand Marcos going to do? As I said, he's been very vague. He's been clear on a couple of issues. One issue he's clear on is that he will not allow Rodrigo Duterte to be prosecuted in the ICC. When it comes to the killings, I think he's been quite vague there as well, but I don't expect him to be as violent as Rodrigo Duterte. Rodrigo Duterte's bloodlust has been incomparable in the history of the Philippines. He is possibly our really first bona fide 'Criminal Against Humanity.' I think the Marcoses are kleptocrats, but it is debatable as to whether or not they are mass murderers. So, what we will likely see is a kind of normalization of certain elements of state violence. And by normalization, I don't mean that it will no longer be violent – it has always been violent – but normal relative to the kind of increased violence that you saw under Duterte. Economically, what I see is that there is a chance that – and there's already some indication of this – that business will be jittery, because the Marcoses are known to be capricious. If you are in with them, you're doing well; if you're out, you're going to do poorly.



Lam Tran

So, just switching a little bit from the domestic policy front to the foreign policy front. Although you mentioned that a lot of Marcos' polic[ies] so far [have] been pretty vague, in the early years of the Duterte administration, the Philippines drew closer to China, in part to reduce Manila[']s dependence on Washington, but also due to Duterte's strong anti-American sentiments.

However, resentment toward unsuccessful Chinese infrastructure projects, coupled with increasingly negative public opinion toward China, had prompted Duterte to reverse his course and turn back to Washington. So, what main factors will shape the president-elect's policy stance and strategies towards both China and the United States, and what are the implications for the United States- Philippine Alliance?

Lisandro Claudio

Again, I think it's going to be the Philippine military, as with Duterte. So, one of the reasons why Duterte's pivot to China was unsuccessful is because the Philippine military is used to working with the Americans. So, when the Duterte says something like, you know, 'I'll buy guns from China,' or, 'I'll buy arms from Russia,' the generals don't like that, because there are interoperability issues. They've been using American equipment since the foundation of the Philippine army practically. It's not very easy to shift your military allegiances in that context. And I think Bongbong Marcos is also going to have to deal with that if he tries to pivot to China. It's still not clear whether or not he's more pro-China than Duterte. It has to be said that, on a personal level, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is a lot more Westernized than Rodrigo Duterte. He's a kind of anglophile, he spent a lot of time in Hawaii – of course, his father was very close to Ronald Reagan. And this is a family that kind of seeks the legitimacy of the West, at least on a cultural level. Whereas the Dutertes did not care. They styled themselves as a parvenu clan, that really couldn't care less about what white people, you know, in their words, think about them.

Jada Fraser

Yeah, it's actually really interesting, Professor Claudio. A fact that I only just learned recently, and I feel like not a lot of people are aware of, is that the United States military conducts more joint exercises with the Philippines' military than any other ally in Asia. Which is really striking. You hear a lot about the US-Japan Alliance, you know, [the] US-Korea Alliance, but the military ties might be strongest with the Philippines' military.

Lisandro Claudio

So, an analogy I like to make – at least with the Duterte administration – was Secretary Delphine Lorenzana was a kind of equivalent of Jim Mattis in the United States, in the sense that, you had a really disruptive president, but you had a Secretary of Defense who was firmly entrenched in



the old alliances and kept those going. And my suspicion is that Ferdinand Marcos Jr. will probably have to appoint someone, like Lorenzana, who is from the defense establishment.

Jada Fraser

That's a good signal as far as these leader-level figures with penchants for doing things that are shocking and surprising, and can create ripple effects in relationships, being held in place by more 'establishment' people in their cadre. So, zooming out, but also zooming in at the same time a little bit, in addition to the national positions – elections for the presidency, vice presidency, 12 out of the 24 Senate seats – the May 9th election also saw votes cast for House of Representatives and all local posts from governor down to town councilor. So, I wanted to ask if you're observing any significant trends that are emerging from these elections for lawmakers at the national and the local levels, if we're seeing convergence or divergence?

Lisandro Claudio

Yeah, so, in a sense, it's a regular Philippine election because this election seems to be fattening the political dynasties. But this is a very preliminary observation, but I think it is better for dynasties than even previous elections. So, for example, in Ilocos Sur, the warlord there, Chavit Singson and his family, they won 15 posts in that province – in Ilocos Sur. Ilocos Norte is now completely controlled by the Marcoses. So, all top posts: the governor, the vice governor, and both district representatives, they're Marcoses. Even the first district which was once dominated by another political dynasty, the Fariñas family, since the 1990s, has now been claimed by the Marcoses. If you look at Muslim Mindanao, there was some hope that with the establishment of the Bangsamoro autonomous region of Muslim Mindanao, that the MILF, 'Moro Islamic Liberation Front,' which is now entering government, would be able to win a couple of elected positions in order to displace dynasties there, but it looks as if their influence is only limited to Cotabato.

And then, my favorite story about Philippine politics was [about] the crusading lawyer who ran against an established political dynasty and cult leaders in the Dinagat Islands, called the Ecleo family. Her name is "Kaka" Bag-ao, and she has such an inspiring story, because she beat them initially for a position in Congress, and then she became the governor of Dinagat Province. And in this election, she lost. So, my favorite source of hope when I tell people that there's still hope in the Philippines, that's now gone as well, because the dynasty there came back. So, even there, it's very depressing. And I was talking about Ilocos Norte in particular. It goes to show that the Marcoses are not just powerful nationally, they remain a local political dynasty.



Lam Tran

Yeah, that's very interesting. Just a quick follow up question from that: when you [mentioned] that this whole election has strengthened the Marcos dynasty currently in the Philippines right now, I also wanted to [note] that this is the first time in three decades that both candidates on the same ticket for the presidency and the vice presidency have both won. So just, going forward, seeing that there is this really strong dynamic for the Marcos administration, what are the potential sources of opposition in the Philippines right now, and how do you assess their strength moving forward?

Lisandro Claudio

I'll answer that question directly in a bit, but I want to first talk about the cleavages within the Marcos coalition, because, effectively, the coalition that elected Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is a coalition of some of the greediest families in the Philippines. These are: the Marcoses; the Arroyos, the family of former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo; the Estradas, the family of former President Joseph Estrada, who was a convicted plunderer; then, of course, you have the Dutertes. So, there are many mouths to fill in this coalition, and there might not be enough booty, and there might not be enough positions to go around. So, that is their inherent weakness. They were able to coalesce in this election because they were very afraid of a return to the Liberal Party, because the Liberal Party, when they were in power, sent Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to jail. And so, they were deathly afraid of the return of the Liberal Party under Leni Robredo, so they coalesced. But now that they're in power, it's going to be very difficult to maintain that coalition. And those are the cracks that I think the opposition should be able to exploit in the near future.

With respect to the opposition, Vice President Leni Robredo lost decisively, but there was so much energy around her campaign. So, my suspicion is that Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. has more supporters, but there is more intense support for Vice President Leni Robredo, and this is evidenced by her rallies, which were in the hundreds of thousands all across the Philippines. She didn't give a concession speech yesterday, but she gave a kind of speech that was more or less resigned that they were going to lose – but she said that this coalition is a coalition that will continue to function. She was signaling that she hoped that this coalition would continue to function. It's a beautiful speech. She said, 'Once you've opened people's eyes, it's very hard to shut them, and we will continue our struggles.' So, this pink revolution – because that was her color – I think, will continue, because this base is very energized, and it is a liberal democratic base. Finally, we have a liberal democratic base. Because, under Rodrigo Duterte, there was no liberal democratic base. Everybody was disillusioned, and there was 91% support for Rodrigo Duterte. I think this 20% to 25% support for Leni Robredo will become your initial base for growing a liberal democratic constituency in the Philippines.



Lam Tran

Moving forward a little bit, what do you think about [the] legacy of Duterte's six years in the office? Did he substantially change the way Filipino[s] view their government? And also how would the legacy of Marcos Sr. be laid out under his son's term in the office?

Lisandro Claudio

Yes, well, in terms of legacies, I want to talk about economics a little bit. The legacy is that he has sustained a growth trajectory of the Philippines, and it's a kind of constant now in Philippine politics that, regardless of what happens in politics, that the economy has some level of stability. So, in that sense, we're becoming quite similar to Thailand: the politics can be a big mess, there are regime changes left and right, there might be extreme polarization, but the economic managers are largely doing the same thing. Apart from the kind of the huge dip that occurred during – the recession that occurred during COVID-19 – it seems as if the economy is going to be back on track, and, probably next year, we're going to be returning to, you know, 5% to 6% growth, which we now take for granted in the Philippines, right? So, on an economic level, it's kind of continuity.

On a political level, of course, there has been significant discontinuity, because President Duterte has changed the language of Philippine politics. From 1986 to roughly 2016, the kind of keywords in Philippine politics were, 'transparency,' 'reform,' 'democracy.' That was the kind of narrative propelling Philippine politics. But from 2016 onwards, the narrative propelling Philippine politics has centered around the keywords of 'strength,' 'discipline,' 'unity.' He has ensured the continuity of an authoritarian subcurrent in Philippine politics, which I think the Marcoses are picking up on.

Jada Fraser

So, an overriding issue in this election – and you just exactly touched on it – is the long-term survival of Philippine democracy and the health of democracy in Southeast Asia, to a greater extent. Democracy has already regressed significantly in Southeast Asia in the past decade, especially after the coup in Myanmar in February 2021. So, further democratic backsliding in the Philippines – which is one of the world's most populous democracies and the oldest democracy in Southeast Asia – would exacerbate this trend. I'm curious to hear what your assessment of the current state of democracy in the Philippines in particular is, and then in Southeast Asia in general, and what are some of the potential avenues for governments to support democracy building and civil society in the region? What do you see that role as being?



Lisandro Claudio

One of the reasons democracy is backsliding in the Philippines – and also in Southeast Asia, but more particularly in the Philippines – is because the US has really stopped caring about the Philippines. In the 1990s and even before that, the foreign policy establishment in the United States thought about the Philippines much more. Of course, that's because of colonial legacies, but it was also because, geostrategically, they saw the importance of the Philippines. And it seems as if these days, because of domestic dysfunction in the United States, and also because of a lack of appreciation for how strategic Southeast Asia is, and the Philippines is, relative to China, that the State Department is no longer as concerned with the Philippines. You see this, I mean, just in terms of media coverage, for example, or just how often the State Department people talk about the Philippines. It's an afterthought. And that's really dangerous, because if you are going to contain the rapid expansion of China, you cannot treat the Philippines as an ally in name only. The Philippines has to be a kind of priority ally. I hate to cite the foreign policy of a US president who I don't like, but the way George W. Bush framed it is that the Philippines is a major non-NATO ally. Right? Remember, there is a mutual defense treaty between the US and the Philippines, which really makes it on that tier below NATO in terms of importance to the United States. And the United States should return to that relationship, I think, because Southeast Asia could be a bulwark against an expanding China.

Lam Tran

Just to completely switch gear[s] again. Many of our listeners are students and young professionals. So, what advice would you have for those interested in pursuing a career in Asia Studies, especially for international students who want to pursue their career outside of their countries?

Lisandro Claudio

Yeah, I think it's important to leave Southeast Asia, or Asia, and learn about other places. But it's also important to keep those connections. At least here in the United States, I think there are two predominant ways to think about Asia. One is to think about Asia as [an] identity, and that's kind of informed by ideas of diversity and multiculturalism within the United States, and I think that's relevant for conversations within the United States. But there's another way to think about Asia, which is to think about Asia as [a] “place,” as [an] “existing place,” that you need to engage constantly. And I think for Asians who are studying in the United States, those two conceptions of Asia need to be thought of together and held in tension, because that's a very productive tension. Ultimately, my advice is people should go back. People should continue engaging in these societies as democratic projects, especially, you know, when you look at a country like the Philippines. It's not just a place where my ancestors came from, it's not just a place where my



parents are from. It is a living democratic project that people need to help because it is an ailing democratic project.

Jada Fraser

Well, thank you so much, Professor Claudio, especially ending on that note, I think is really inspiring and hopefully it gets people really thinking about what it means to study countries that you're not from and create connections between the two and make sure you're continuously re-centering yourself in both place and identity. I really liked the way that you differentiated those ideas. That brings us to the close of this episode, we want to remind our listeners that you should definitely go buy Professor Claudio's most recent book, which is titled *Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking the State in Twentieth-Century Philippines*.

Lam Tran

Thank you, Professor Claudio again for your time and insight. It's truly been a pleasure and we very much look forward to hearing more from you in the future.

Lisandro Claudio

Thank you very much. The pleasure was mine.

Jada Fraser

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