

A DEEPENING CRISIS IN ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

CenPEG 2025 Election Analysis
June 2025



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Published by the

Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)



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CenPEG Editorial Board

Policy Study, Publications, and Advocacy(PSPA) Desk

Unit 302, M-Place Bldg, 96 Maginhawa St., Teachers Village East,

Quezon City 1101, Philippines

Contact number: +63-9171141405

Email Address: cenpeg.info@gmail.com, info@cenpeg.org,

Website: www.cenpeg.org

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Executive Summary

The May 12, 2025 midterm polls in the Philippines – covering half the Senate and the full House of Representatives and LGUs – represented a critical juncture. With voter turnout reaching a record 82.2 percent, expectations for a political rebalancing were high. Instead, the elections reinforced the dominance of entrenched dynastic powers from the top to the local levels, exposed persistent electoral malpractices, and revealed serious flaws in election conduct and oversight.

Key highlights:

- The Duterte clan made a dramatic reassertion in national politics: former President Rodrigo Duterte won a Davao City mayoral seat (despite ICC detention), while Senate allies Christopher Go, Ronald “Bato” Dela Rosa, Imee Marcos, and Rodante Marcoleta secured victories.
- The Marcos–BBM camp retained a legislative majority but split internally as Imee Marcos defected from the dominant “Alyansa” bloc.
- International and local observer missions spotlighted systemic electoral breakdowns, including rampant red-tagging (218–1,445 cases), organized vote-buying (up to 16,000/vote), election violence (dozens killed), disenfranchisement, and technical malfunction of automated counting machines (ACMs)
- Disinformation and foreign interference were major contaminators, with nearly half of online discourse driven by fake accounts. While Chinese troll farms were flagged, subtler U.S. meddling also surfaced – through influence networks in media, NGOs, and security ties – shaping narratives aligned with U.S. strategic interests and undermining electoral sovereignty.

CenPEG's recommended **hybrid election model**, combining manual count with automated accuracy, the criminalization of red-tagging and vote-buying, transparency in campaign finance, and political dynasty reforms remain as urgent as ever.

I. The Rise, Fracture, and Resilience of Philippine Political Dynasties

In the years following the 2022 national elections, the Philippines witnessed the consolidation of what many analysts described as one of the most powerful political formations in its contemporary history: the Marcos-Duterte alliance. For a brief but critical moment, two of the country's most enduring dynastic clans merged their political capital, forging what some call a “mega-dynasty.”

At first glance, this alliance seemed to bring about political stability and overwhelming electoral mandate. Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., the scion of the once-deposed dictatorship, successfully rehabilitated his family's name and rode a

wave of historical revisionism and social media machinery to secure the presidency. His running mate, Sara Duterte — daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte — brought with her the formidable Mindanao-based political machinery that had risen to national prominence during her father's controversial yet highly popular administration.

Together, they swept the elections, capturing not only the presidency and vice presidency but also dominating both houses of Congress. The House of Representatives, long seen as a stronghold of entrenched political families, now saw nearly 70% of its seats occupied by dynastic politicians, most of whom owed allegiance — whether directly or tacitly — to either Marcos, Duterte, or both. The country's governorships followed a similar pattern, as almost every province was under the control of long-established local dynasties, many of whom recalibrated their loyalties according to the emerging mega-dynasty at the center.

But this overwhelming concentration of power did not mean the end of political conflict. Rather, it reflected an old pattern in Philippine politics: dynastic rivalry within the oligarchic class. While the Marcos-Duterte alliance initially appeared solid, underlying tensions slowly came to the surface.

By the time of the 2025 midterm elections, these tensions had grown more visible. The apparent unity that brought them to power began to fracture under the weight of their competing ambitions, policy divergences, and struggles for patronage control.

Sara Duterte, widely popular in her own right and seen by many of her supporters as a potential future president, was increasingly being viewed by the Marcos camp as a threat to their longer-term political control. As Marcos Jr. sought to strengthen his own administration's legitimacy and pivot foreign policy toward stronger ties with the United States and other Western powers, the Dutertes remained more aligned with their previous orientation toward China and a more nationalist-populist rhetoric.

The friction was not merely personal or ideological — it was systemic. Both camps were drawing from the same limited reservoir of local elite support, patronage resources, and political loyalties. In many regions, local dynasties were forced to choose between the two camps, or at times, sought to play both sides to maximize their own advantage. This created an increasingly unstable balancing act at both the national and local levels.

Moreover, with legal and accountability issues from the Duterte years resurfacing — including international human rights investigations and domestic probes into corruption and governance failures — the Marcos administration faced pressures to distance itself from its former allies. This distancing, however, further fueled resentment and distrust from the Duterte camp, which in turn threatened to destabilize the very coalition that had brought them both to power.

Despite these internal conflicts, what remains striking is the resilience of the oligarchic system itself. The political drama between Marcos and Duterte may dominate headlines, but beneath it lies a deeper continuity: that power in the

Philippines remains largely monopolized by a small network of political families who have perfected the art of surviving, adapting, and thriving within the structures of elite electoral democracy.

For decades, the failure to implement meaningful anti-dynasty legislation — despite clear constitutional provisions — has allowed these families to pass power from one generation to the next. The weakness of political parties, the prevalence of patronage and clientelism, and the severe socio-economic inequalities that leave millions dependent on political largesse have all combined to create a political order where dynastic competition substitutes for real democratic choice.

In this sense, the Marcos-Duterte fracture is not a disruption of the system but rather a reiteration of its core logic: that political power in the Philippines is a prize to be contested among families, not a mandate of public service accountable to the broader citizenry.

The public is left navigating a political landscape where names matter more than programs, where loyalty is often secured through favors rather than principles, and where political survival depends not on genuine democratic engagement but on the ability to manage alliances, distribute resources, and control narratives.

The events surrounding the rise and fracture of the Marcos-Duterte mega-dynasty in the mid-2020s provide a vivid illustration of both the fragility and durability of the Philippines' oligarchic political order. As long as the underlying structures that enable dynastic rule remain unchallenged, the faces and factions may change, but the system itself will continue to reproduce elite domination — leaving the promise of genuine democracy still elusive for most Filipinos.

II. The BBM–Duterte Rivalry

1. Duterte's Political Resurgence: The Return of Strongman Politics in a Fragmented Oligarchy

In the volatile landscape of Philippine politics, few figures have demonstrated the ability to dominate national discourse as effectively as Rodrigo Duterte. Having left the presidency in 2022, Duterte's political future was, for a time, uncertain. Term-limited and facing international and domestic legal scrutiny over widely-known crimes against humanity committed under his bloody “war on drugs,” some observers speculated that the Duterte era had run its course. Yet, as the 2025 political cycle unfolds, Duterte's political resurgence defies conventional expectations, reaffirming the unique resilience of his brand of populist strongman politics within the Philippines' oligarchic order.

Unlike previous post-EDSA leaders who faded into relative obscurity after their terms, Duterte has actively repositioned himself as both a power broker and a populist icon. His strategy for political resurgence has unfolded on several fronts:

- i. **Regional Stronghold Consolidation.** Duterte's political base in Davao remains intact, anchored by deep patronage networks, business interests, and loyal local officials. This stronghold serves as both a sanctuary and a launchpad for broader national interventions.
- ii. **Continued Popularity and Narrative Control.** Duterte's enduring popularity — rooted in his law-and-order persona, anti-elite rhetoric, and "*tapang at malasakit*" populism — remains potent among large segments of the population disillusioned by traditional politics. His camp has deftly employed social media, grassroots mobilization, and public spectacles to keep his narrative alive.
- iii. **The Use of Legal and Institutional Tools.** While facing ICC investigations, Duterte has leveraged domestic institutions and legal mechanisms to protect himself and his allies from prosecution. At the same time, his supporters in Congress and the judiciary serve as a buffer against full legal accountability.
- iv. **Alliances with Local Dynasties.** Many provincial and municipal dynasties continue to find value in associating with the Duterte brand, both for protection and access to the Duterte network's still-considerable resources.

A. The Sara Duterte Factor.

A key element of Duterte's resurgence has been the national positioning of his daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte. Despite tensions within the Marcos-Duterte alliance, Sara remains one of the most popular political figures in the country. Her presence ensures that the Duterte name remains central to national political calculations.

She functions both as a protective shield for her father's political interests and as a vehicle for the Duterte family's potential return to executive power in 2028.

As relations with the Marcos camp sour, Sara's ability to distance herself while maintaining broad appeal strengthens the Duterte camp's independent leverage.

B. Fractures as Opportunity

Ironically, the ongoing rift within the Marcos-Duterte axis has provided the Duterte camp with new opportunities for resurgence. As the Marcos administration confronts challenges — including economic headwinds, foreign policy controversies, and governance questions — the Duterte camp positions itself as an alternative force that promises “strong leadership” and a return to what many supporters nostalgically view as the order and decisiveness of the previous Duterte presidency.

- **Exploiting Discontent:** Rising public dissatisfaction with inflation, foreign intervention, and perceived weakness in leadership has opened fertile ground for the Duterte camp to criticize and mobilize broader electoral support.
- **Reactivating Mass Base:** The Duterte machinery has actively sought to reignite its mass base, using issues such as national sovereignty, anti-Western sentiment, and moralistic rhetoric on crime and drugs.

C. The Persistence of Strongman Populism

At the core of Duterte's political resurgence is the persistence of **strongman populism** — a style that continues to resonate with a broad spectrum of Filipinos who feel alienated from the promises of liberal democracy. Duterte offers:

- A language of certainty amid instability;
- A personalistic leadership style framed as “tough but caring”;
- Simplistic solutions to complex problems, framed through the lens of discipline and control.

This brand of politics thrives on the country's unresolved social contradictions: mass poverty, entrenched inequality, weak state and political institutions, and a political culture steeped in patronage.

D. The Oligarchic Context: A Resurgence within a Closed System

Duterte's resurgence, however, does not represent a break from the oligarchic order. Instead, it reflects its flexibility. Within the Philippine political system, dynastic factions compete, form temporary alliances, and fracture — but the essential structure of elite domination remains at its core.

- Duterte's return does not challenge the oligarchic nature of Philippine governance; rather, it underscores how autocratic populism serves as one variant of elite rule.
- The Duterte brand functions as both populist grievance and dynastic strategy, enabling continued elite control over mass discontent.

Duterte's political resurgence signals that his brand of politics continues to exert gravitational pull in Philippine public life. Whether or not Duterte himself returns to formal power, his political machine remains operative; his narratives remain resonant; and his daughter remains well-positioned for future leadership.

More broadly, Duterte's resurgence reveals the continuing fragility of Philippine democratic institutions — vulnerable not only to authoritarian tendencies but to the recurring manipulation of mass discontent by powerful dynastic forces. As long as systemic reforms remain unaddressed — particularly the dismantling of political dynasties, reforming political parties, and breaking the cycle of patronage politics — the conditions that enable Duterte's brand of politics will continue to thrive.

2. The Marcos Bloc: Gains Amidst Internal Rift — Navigating Power in a Fragmented "Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas"

In the aftermath of the 2025 midterm elections, the Marcos political bloc emerges with a mixed, but instructive, balance sheet: on one hand, it has demonstrated its capacity to maintain significant legislative strength; on the other, it faces visible signs of

internal instability that reflect deeper currents of political fragmentation within the ruling camp.

A. Consolidating Senate Gains

One of the most critical indicators of the Marcos bloc's continued relevance is its performance in the Senate. Backed personally by President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (BBM), pro-administration candidates secured six out of the twelve contested Senate seats, allowing the Marcos camp to preserve its legislative influence. This victory reinforces BBM's ability to:

- Sustain legislative control over key policy initiatives;
- Block or dilute any potential moves from rival factions to challenge executive authority;
- Ensure relative protection from possible impeachment threats or formal investigations that could emerge from political adversaries.

These gains affirm that, despite growing tensions within the ruling coalition, the Marcos name retains a significant electoral base, fortified by regional alliances, incumbent advantages, and a carefully managed campaign machinery that effectively deployed state resources and media access.

B. The Imee Marcos Defection: A Family Rift with National Implications

However, the post-election period has been marked by an unexpected and highly publicized political rift from within the Marcos family itself. Senator Imee Marcos's defection and open criticism of the BBM leadership have exposed serious divisions that go beyond mere sibling rivalry. Imee's move has several layers of significance:

1. **Intraparty Volatility.** Imee's departure from BBM's inner circle has deepened the volatility within the administration's own coalition. While the Marcos name remains powerful, her independent positioning signals competing centers of power even within the family brand.
2. **Strategic Realignment.** Imee has begun to cultivate alternative alliances — quietly aligning with discontented sectors within the ruling camp, as well as with some remnants of the Duterte faction. Her defection may serve as a launching pad for her own future political aspirations, or as leverage in intra-elite bargaining processes.
3. **Erosion of Unified Messaging.** With Imee challenging key policy directions of her brother's administration — from foreign policy shifts to economic priorities — the Marcos bloc now faces difficulties in projecting a coherent and unified governance narrative to the public and the political class.

C. The Fragmentation of the "Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas"

The internal contradictions within the Marcos bloc have also reverberated across its broader coalition, the **Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas**. Originally conceived as a grand alliance of Marcos loyalists, allied dynasties, technocrats, and business elites, the coalition now shows unmistakable signs of fragmentation:

- **Factional struggles:** Competing interests among local dynasties, power brokers, and national figures have begun to strain internal coherence. These factions differ not only in personal ambitions but in their approach to governance priorities and foreign alignments.
- **Weak programmatic cohesion:** Like many political alliances in the Philippines, the Alyansa functions largely as a tactical convenience rather than as a programmatic political party. Bereft of a strong ideological glue, the coalition remains vulnerable to shifts in loyalty and defections.
- **Emerging rival blocs:** The growing rift with the Duterte camp, combined with Imee's rebellion, opens the space for the formation of alternative power centers within and adjacent to the Alyansa, setting the stage for intensified intra-elite competition ahead of the 2028 presidential race.

D. A Balancing Act for BBM

For President Marcos Jr., the gains in the Senate offer short-term stability, but the emerging fractures present long-term governance and political risks:

- He must now navigate growing pressures from within his own political house while fending off potential coalition breakdowns.
- His administration faces the difficult task of managing policy coherence amid competing factions pushing divergent agendas, especially on key foreign policy and economic issues.
- The lingering conflicts between President Marcos Jr. and both the Duterte political bloc and members of his own family threaten to weaken the political alliance that helped him rise to power in 2022. If these rifts persist or worsen, they could undermine the unity and stability of his administration.

Strength Amid Fragility

The Marcos bloc's performance in the 2025 midterms reflects a central paradox in Philippine oligarchic politics: continued elite dominance coupled with persistent internal factionalism. While the Marcos camp retains significant institutional control, it now presides over a coalition marked by fragile alliances, personal rivalries, and shifting loyalties.

The internal volatility of the Marcos bloc underscores the broader structural problem of Philippine governance: power continues to revolve around personalist, familial, and dynastic calculations rather than stable, programmatic, and accountable political institutions. As the country moves closer to the 2028 elections, these dynamics will

likely intensify, further exposing the contradictions within the ruling elite and the unresolved crisis of Philippine democracy.

III. Election Administration & Format

1. Call for a Hybrid Election System

For over a decade, the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG) has consistently and vigorously pushed for the institutionalization of a **hybrid election system (HES)** – one that effectively integrates manual public counting at the precinct level with the efficiency and speed of automated transmission. This position stems from CenPEG's long-standing critique of full automation since 2010, which it views as lacking the transparency, verifiability, and public confidence essential to democratic processes.

Unlike the current fully automated system, where counting is conducted by machines often beyond the scrutiny of citizens, the HES proposes to restore public visibility in the vote tabulation process, particularly at the precinct level. By ensuring that vote counting is witnessed by voters, poll watchers, and media, the system is expected to enhance public trust and mitigate the risk of automated manipulation or opaque technical failures. This approach not only affirms the democratic principle of citizen participation in safeguarding the vote but also strengthens electoral integrity in light of persistent technical vulnerabilities observed in past elections.

CenPEG's advocacy finds resonance in other watchdog groups and electoral reform coalitions that argue for a return to more transparent and participatory election practices. The current model – relying entirely on proprietary technology – has bred a culture of dependence on private contractors while leaving critical processes hidden from the public eye.

2. Technical Performance and Concerns on ACM Reliability

The 2025 midterm elections once again exposed persistent technical issues in the deployment of automated counting machines (ACMs). Numerous reports from various regions cited a familiar litany of malfunctions: paper jams, overvotes being flagged, scanner hypersensitivity, and delays in transmission. While the Commission on Elections (Comelec) was quick to assert that these glitches did not decisively affect the overall results, the recurrence of such failures has eroded public confidence and raised legitimate questions about the system's reliability.

Moreover, serious alarm was triggered by revelations concerning **Miru**, a provider under evaluation. Concerns centered on its use of software that had not yet secured certification – a non-negotiable requirement under Philippine law. Election watchdogs such as Democracy Watch, along with transparency advocates, expressed deep apprehension that such lapses could compromise the integrity of the electoral process even before voting began.

The European Union's election observation mission for the mid-term elections also echoed these concerns. Their post-election report cited irregularities in election regulation and oversight, particularly in relation to the accreditation of election observers, access to precincts, and lack of transparency in the transmission of votes. These issues highlight the systemic opacity embedded in the current automated election system, especially in areas that remain shielded from effective third-party oversight.

Taken together, these developments further underscore the urgency of rethinking the country's reliance on a wholly automated system, especially one managed with minimal public accountability and insufficient safeguards. They also amplify the demand—long raised by CenPEG and other civil society organizations—for systemic reforms anchored on transparency, auditability, and citizen oversight.

IV. Voter Participation & Systemic Disenfranchisement

1. Record Voter Turnout: A Paradox of Engagement

The 2025 midterm elections marked a historic 82.2 percent national voter turnout, widely celebrated by the Commission on Elections (Comelec) as evidence of democratic vitality and heightened political awareness. Civic engagement appeared to reach new heights, with massive mobilizations, particularly among youth, sectoral groups, and issue-based movements pushing for accountability and change.

However, this unprecedented turnout also warrants closer scrutiny. While such numbers may reflect legitimate enthusiasm, the sudden surge in voter participation in several regions—especially traditional political bailiwicks—has raised red flags among watchdog groups, analysts, and reform advocates. In certain areas, unusually high turnout rates were reported alongside anomalous patterns: clustered voting, uniform block votes for specific candidates, and a suspicious lack of spoiled ballots.

These patterns indicate to vote padding, command voting, or systematic manipulation, especially in contexts where machine glitches were prevalent, transparency was limited, and election monitoring was hampered. Some localities that historically showed middling participation suddenly reported near-perfect turnout—often accompanied by lopsided results favoring entrenched political families or administration-aligned candidates. In such cases, high turnout becomes not a badge of democracy, but a potential mask for electoral engineering.

The contrast is especially stark when compared with the persistently low overseas voter turnout (18.12 percent), where systemic disenfranchisement and logistical hurdles dominate. At home, by contrast, inflated participation rates—when not matched by robust transparency and independent auditing—risk becoming a tool for legitimizing manipulated outcomes.

CenPEG has long warned that transparency must accompany turnout. Without mechanisms for public counting, random manual audits, and citizen oversight, the integrity of high participation figures remains vulnerable to manipulation. In a country

where political dynasties and vote-buying remain widespread, a record turnout is not always synonymous with clean elections. It may, in some places, signal the opposite.

2. The Overseas Voting Crisis

While millions of Filipinos at home made their voices heard at the ballot box, the same could not be said for their compatriots abroad. The overseas voting process in 2025 was marred by systemic failures that amounted to what many watchdogs have described as a silent but massive disenfranchisement.

Multiple reports indicated technical breakdowns in the online voting platform, especially in high-concentration areas like the Middle East and North America. Compounding the problem were convoluted registration protocols, limited information campaigns, and bureaucratic hurdles that discouraged or prevented eligible voters from participating. In some instances, absentee ballots were not received on time or were excluded entirely from final counts, leading to frustrations among overseas voters and advocates alike.

Despite their recognized contributions to the Philippine economy through remittances and transnational civic engagement, overseas Filipinos remain among the most marginalized in the electoral process. The failure to ensure their participation in 2025 exposed serious governance lapses and a lack of political will to treat overseas suffrage as a priority. The crisis also underscores the inadequacy of Comelec's current overseas voting infrastructure—digital or otherwise—and the absence of consistent oversight mechanisms to protect migrant voting rights.

3. Logistical Barriers to Access at Home

While the high domestic turnout is commendable, it masked significant logistical and structural barriers that hindered equitable access to the vote—especially among the working poor and urban laborers.

A major issue was the continued refusal to declare election day a national non-working holiday, a policy gap that disproportionately burdened wage earners, contractual workers, and daily wage laborers who could not afford to miss work. This made voting logistically difficult and, in many cases, practically impossible. For millions of Filipinos, especially those in highly urbanized areas, the cost of participation was too high, forcing a choice between daily survival and civic duty.

Additionally, persistent malfunctions of automated counting machines (ACMs) led to long queues, extended waiting times, and in some cases, voters being turned away due to delays or mismanagement. These problems were most acutely felt in overcrowded precincts in Metro Manila and other densely populated urban centers, exacerbating an already unequal experience of democratic participation.

These barriers point to a continuing democratic deficit in how elections are conducted, particularly for the socioeconomically marginalized. Without structural reforms to improve electoral access—including but not limited to holiday declarations, expanded early voting options, and improved ACM deployment—claims of inclusive participation will remain superficial at best.

V. Electoral Violence, Coercion, and Red Tagging: Normalizing Democratic Erosion

Despite repeated assurances of orderly conduct and peaceful elections from state authorities, the 2025 midterm elections were once again marred by systemic violence, coercion, red tagging, and outright vote buying—realities that undermine the credibility of electoral outcomes and further entrench authoritarian and dynastic rule in many parts of the country.

1. On-the-Ground Intimidation: Democracy at Gunpoint

Election-related violence remains an unresolved and deeply rooted issue in Philippine politics. Estimates of fatalities linked to the 2025 elections range from at least 10 to over 240, depending on the source, with most of these incidents concentrated in rural areas dominated by political clans or warlord families. These killings and attacks are not isolated events but are part of a longstanding culture of impunity that characterizes Philippine elections—especially in marginalized and militarized provinces.

In several localities, the presence of armed groups—whether private militias or rogue elements of law enforcement—was documented as a source of intimidation. These groups were frequently deployed to enforce local command votes or silence opposition supporters. In areas under political dynasties, threats, harassment, and violence formed the background of an election process that was anything but free. For voters in these communities, casting a ballot often meant risking one's safety or livelihood, highlighting the continuing failure of the state to ensure safe and democratic spaces for political participation.

2. Systematic Red Tagging: A Weapon Against Dissent

Perhaps more alarming was the sheer scale and institutionalization of red tagging, which emerged as one of the most insidious tools used to discredit, harass, and silence progressive candidates and activists. According to independent monitors, at least 218 confirmed cases of red tagging were documented during the campaign period, while local civil society groups claim the actual number could be as high as 1,445 incidents.

Red tagging—where individuals and organizations are without basis accused of links to communist insurgency—served as a strategic tool of political suppression. Candidates from progressive parties and independent movements were often the targets, especially those critical of the administration or advocating for land reform, labor rights, and demilitarization. The practice not only endangered the lives of those targeted but also created a chilling effect across the electorate. Voters were deterred from supporting certain candidates out of fear of reprisal or surveillance.

This systematic deployment of red tagging points to a blurring of lines between state security policy and partisan political interests, suggesting that the electoral arena is increasingly shaped not by democratic debate, but by militarized repression.

3. Vote Buying as Electoral Norm: Democracy for Sale

Meanwhile, vote buying continues to be a normalized, even expected, feature of Philippine elections, particularly in impoverished urban and rural communities. The 2025 elections revealed both the scale and brazenness of this practice. Recorded incidents showed cash offers ranging from PHP500 to as high as PHP16,000 per vote, often bundled with groceries, mobile load, or even employment promises. These operations were not limited to obscure candidates; even those backed by major coalitions were implicated.

Despite existing laws criminalizing vote buying, enforcement remains virtually nonexistent. Cases rarely proceed beyond complaints, with local authorities often complicit or indifferent. The Commission on Elections (Comelec) has proven largely ineffective in addressing the issue, citing lack of resources and the difficulty of evidence-gathering. In effect, vote buying has evolved into a systemic mechanism of political control—an institutionalized form of coercion that undermines the democratic will by commodifying electoral choice and weaponizing poverty.

Taken together, these phenomena—violence, red tagging, and vote buying—undermine the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and reveal a deeper crisis in the country's political system. They also demonstrate how democratic processes are being hijacked by coercive and corrupt practices, reinforcing elite dominance and closing spaces for genuine representation.

CenPEG reiterates the urgent need for comprehensive electoral reform, stronger accountability mechanisms, and a political culture that values participation over patronage, dissent over suppression, and transparency over transactionalism.

VI. Disinformation and Foreign Influence: Undermining Electoral Sovereignty in the Digital Age

The 2025 midterm elections unfolded not only in physical precincts and local campaigns but also in a hyper-politicized digital arena increasingly dominated by manipulation, deception, and transnational interference. Disinformation, fake engagement, and covert foreign influence coalesced to create a volatile media environment—one where truth became secondary to narrative control and public opinion was shaped by algorithmic warfare rather than informed debate.

1. Proliferation of Fake Accounts: Manufactured Consensus, Digital Deception

One of the most alarming developments in the 2025 electoral cycle was the proliferation of fake and inauthentic accounts across major social media platforms, particularly Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube. Independent studies estimated that nearly half of all online election-related discourse was driven by such accounts, many of which were part of coordinated, automated networks designed to boost select candidates and drown out dissenting views.

These networks were instrumental in promoting the narratives of the Marcos and

Duterte blocs, amplifying revisionist content, demonizing critics, and manufacturing the appearance of popular support. More concerning is the sophistication and reach of these operations—targeting not only voters in the Philippines but also diasporic communities abroad. The result was a digital environment saturated with memes, doctored videos, and emotionally charged propaganda, which reduced complex policy debates into viral misinformation warfare.

The growing use of artificial intelligence, bots, and data-driven profiling further tilted the playing field, privileging those with financial and technical resources. For less-funded, grassroots candidates, the digital space became nearly impenetrable—a battleground already captured by algorithmic disinformation.

2. Allegations of Chinese Troll Farms: Geopolitics in the Electoral Battlefield

Adding another layer of complexity was the emergence of allegations pointing to foreign interference, most notably through alleged Chinese-funded troll farms and covert political financing. While state agencies have yet to fully substantiate these claims, intelligence warnings and independent digital forensics revealed patterns consistent with geopolitical influence operations.

In April 2025, a Philippine Senate hearing revealed a contract and 930,000 cheque from the Chinese Embassy in Manila to Infinitus Marketing Solutions, a Makati-based firm that allegedly ran troll farms to spread pro-Beijing narratives and influence public discourse on contentious issues like the West Philippine Sea and national elections. Senate and National Security Council officials described this as a covert influence operation consistent with geopolitical interference.

Intelligence agencies—including the NSC and the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency—issued warnings about “indications” or “Chinese state-sponsored groups” engaging in information operations in the Philippines, aimed at both discrediting pro-administration actors and bolstering pro-China candidates.

Additionally, independent digital forensics supported these concerns: a complaint to the Commission on Elections presented traffic logs, metadata, bot-activity reports, and network patterns—especially on X/Twitter—indicating coordinated, foreign-backed disinformation campaigns amplifying pro-Duterte or pro-China content.

Although the Philippine government has launched investigations, state agencies have not yet fully verified or concluded the scope of these claims. Intelligence officials and digital forensics experts, however, have flagged patterns consistent with covert geopolitical influence operations.

These operations reportedly supported narratives favorable to candidates sympathetic to Beijing's interests, particularly in relation to maritime disputes, trade policies, and the Philippines' foreign policy orientation. The intent appears to go beyond merely influencing candidate preference—it is about shaping the broader public discourse, eroding trust in formalistic democratic institutions, and weakening national resolve on sovereignty issues.

The implications are grave: if left unchecked, foreign disinformation infrastructure

could become a permanent fixture in Philippine electoral politics, undermining not only the autonomy of domestic decision-making but also the legitimacy of the democratic process itself.

3. Domestic Cynicism and the Shadow Economy of Campaign Finance

At the core of the disinformation crisis lies another festering issue: unregulated, opaque, and sprawling campaign finance systems. In its post-election assessment, the European Union Election Observation Mission described the Philippine campaign finance environment as "insufficiently regulated and lacking transparency," a condition that incentivizes the weaponization of misinformation.

Candidates and political parties, often with deep financial war chests and access to undisclosed funding sources, channeled vast resources into large-scale digital advertising and influencer contracts, further muddying the waters between genuine public discourse and paid propaganda. The lack of transparency around these funds—where they originate, how they are spent, and who benefits—feeds public cynicism and disempowers voters, especially those who view elections as a contest of machinery rather than merit.

This opaque financial landscape allows shadow advertising agencies and digital mercenaries to operate unchecked, crafting disinformation campaigns that are indistinguishable from organic content. As a result, the electoral space is not only polluted but also structurally skewed in favor of those who can afford to manipulate it.

The Digital Threat to Democracy

The 2025 elections demonstrate that the Philippines is now firmly in the grip of a hybrid warfare model, where traditional vote-buying and coercion are increasingly complemented by digital disinformation, foreign manipulation, and campaign finance opacity. These developments demand urgent reforms—not only in cybersecurity and electoral regulation, but in the broader architecture of information sovereignty and media accountability.

CenPEG calls for comprehensive legislation and independent oversight mechanisms to address the evolving threats of digital authoritarianism, foreign interference, and unregulated political financing—challenges that now define the frontline of democratic defense.

VII. Observer Mission Appraisals: Consensus on Crisis, Contestation of Credibility

The 2025 midterm elections were among the most heavily scrutinized in recent history, attracting both international and domestic observer missions. Their findings converged on a sobering diagnosis: the elections fell short of fundamental democratic standards. Far from a celebration of civic engagement, the electoral exercise was described as marred by state coercion, electoral violence, vote manipulation, and a system skewed to favor entrenched powers.

1. International Reports: Failing the Test of Global Democratic Norms

The International Observer Mission (IOM) organized by the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines (ICHRP) issued one of the most damning appraisals. It concluded that the midterms did not meet international standards for free and fair elections, citing widespread state intimidation, dynastic control, foreign interference, and systematic human rights violations. Their final report painted a picture of a deeply compromised democratic process, especially in areas under military or paramilitary surveillance, where voters were subjected to subtle and overt forms of coercion.

Adding to the credibility crisis was the experience of the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), which faced restrictions on precinct access, limiting their ability to conduct independent verification. In its preliminary report, the EU EOM highlighted irregularities such as vote buying, red tagging, election-related violence, and a troubling lack of transparency in precinct-level procedures. The mission flagged the structural flaws in electoral law and regulation, especially around campaign finance and media manipulation.

Chancellor Rhiannon of Peace with Justice, a co-convenor of the IOM, issued a stark indictment of the polls: “This election failed the most basic democratic principle—that citizens should be free to vote without fear, coercion, or manipulation.” Her words resonated with widespread testimonies from rural communities, where political machinery, not genuine consent, shaped outcomes.

2. Local Watchdog Findings: A Ground-Level Diagnosis of Electoral Decay

Domestic watchdogs corroborated these international assessments with granular, on-the-ground data. Kontra Daya, Vote Report PH, and NAMFREL reported extensive incidents of voter intimidation, disinformation through fake campaign advertisements, red tagging of progressive candidates, and direct interventions by political bosses. Their documentation revealed a systematic blurring of lines between governance and partisan control, especially in strongholds of traditional dynasties and administration-backed candidates.

These groups flagged the use of state resources—both military and civilian—for political ends, which they argued created an uneven playing field that disadvantaged grassroots candidates, civil society advocates, and independents. They also noted the increased difficulty of monitoring elections in remote areas where violence, fear, and disinformation operated with impunity.

Despite this growing body of critical evidence, the Commission on Elections (Comelec) stood by its assessment that the elections were generally successful. While Comelec acknowledged vote-buying as “a serious concern,” it downplayed the extent of systemic disenfranchisement and pointed to legal constraints and outdated election laws as barriers to full enforcement. Comelec officials defended the high voter turnout as a sign of public trust, a position increasingly at odds with the consensus among impartial observers.

A Crisis of Democratic Credibility

The convergence of local and international observations suggests not a few procedural lapses but a deep crisis in electoral credibility. What emerged in the 2025 midterms was a political landscape where state intimidation, elite capture, unregulated financing, and information warfare shaped the electoral field more than voter agency or democratic deliberation.

CenPEG recognizes the indispensable role that observer missions play in diagnosing democratic erosion and upholding electoral integrity. Their findings must not be dismissed as external interference but seen as critical inputs for urgent electoral reform. Without substantive changes to the electoral system, institutional checks, and campaign regulation, the Philippines risks further drifting into managed democracy – where elections occur regularly, but real choice is systematically denied.

VIII. CenPEG Analytical Assessment: A Deepening Crisis in Electoral Democracy

Drawing on field observations, partner reports, and expert analysis, the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG) evaluated the 2025 midterm elections against three essential pillars of democratic process: (A) Technical integrity and administration, (B) Political environment and equity, and (C) Oversight, transparency, and reform. Across all three, the election revealed structural deficiencies, raising profound questions about the state of Philippine electoral democracy.

1. Technical Integrity and Administration: Automation Without Accountability

On a superficial level, the 2025 midterm elections appeared to proceed in a technically efficient manner, with Automated Counting Machines (ACMs) deployed in most precincts and ballots cast with minimal delays in urban areas. However, this administrative normalcy belied underlying weaknesses that significantly undermined trust in electoral automation.

Numerous precincts reported frequent ACM malfunctions, scanner hypersensitivity, paper jams, and transmission failures. In many cases, technical glitches disrupted voting or delayed canvassing, and alarmingly, some machines operated using uncertified software – a breach of both transparency and legality. These incidents not only eroded public confidence but raised legitimate concerns about the credibility of machine-generated results, particularly in hotly contested districts.

CenPEG further observed that absentee and overseas voters were effectively marginalized. Many were disenfranchised by a convoluted registration process, poor logistical coordination, and the persistent failure of online systems. This systemic neglect disproportionately affected overseas Filipinos – many of whom are politically engaged but rendered voiceless by institutional indifference.

In sum, technical reliability was not matched by institutional transparency,

weakening the credibility of the automated election system and demonstrating the urgent need for a hybrid model that ensures both efficiency and verifiability.

2. Political Environment and Equity: Democracy Subverted by Power Structures

While technical administration is a key metric, the deeper failure of the 2025 elections lies in the political environment itself. The landscape remains overwhelmingly dominated by dynastic blocs, particularly the Marcos and Duterte political families, whose influence continues to constrict democratic contestability.

This entrenched dominance was further consolidated through the use of state resources, political intimidation, and the machinery of red-tagging. Violence and harassment disproportionately affected progressive candidates and grassroots campaigns, with evidence of coercion in rural strongholds where the presence of armed groups shaped voter behavior.

Simultaneously, vote-buying reached record levels, with documented offers of up to PhP16,000 per vote. Such practices have become normalized to the point of being systemic—an informal mechanism for controlling outcomes that bypasses policy debates and renders electoral platforms irrelevant.

Moreover, the elections were saturated with massive disinformation campaigns. CenPEG's media monitoring found that coordinated digital operations, including foreign-linked troll farms, were instrumental in promoting regime-aligned narratives, demonizing opposition figures, and manipulating public discourse. This distortion of truth eroded the electorate's capacity to make informed decisions, reducing the elections to a spectacle of influence rather than a deliberation of national vision.

These trends reflect a democracy hollowed out from within, where the facade of electoral choice conceals a deeply inequitable and manipulated contest.

3. Oversight, Transparency, and Reform: Institutional Inertia Amid Crisis

The third pillar—oversight and transparency—saw some of the most glaring failures. The Commission on Elections (Comelec) exhibited patterns of defensiveness and opacity, resisting scrutiny at critical junctures. The denial of full access to European Union election observers and the obstruction of independent software inspections were not merely procedural decisions but emblematic of an institution averse to accountability.

Comelec's reliance on outdated electoral laws, combined with a lack of will to implement reforms, has created a regulatory void. Despite repeated calls from watchdogs and civil society to harmonize the Omnibus Election Code, strengthen campaign finance rules, and institutionalize safeguards against digital manipulation, no meaningful legislative or administrative progress has been achieved.

Campaign finance remains fragmented and poorly enforced, enabling a shadow economy of political advertising, digital propaganda, and illicit funding sources. This unregulated environment favors wealthy and dynastic candidates, further marginalizing reformist and independent actors.

Urgent Imperative for Electoral Transformation

CenPEG's comprehensive evaluation of the 2025 elections reveals an electoral system on the brink of democratic breakdown. While procedural aspects may provide a veneer of legitimacy, the core pillars—technical integrity, political equity, and transparent oversight—are fundamentally compromised.

CenPEG renews its call for **urgent electoral reforms**, including:

- The **adoption of a Hybrid Election System (HES)** to combine automation with manual transparency;
- Strengthened safeguards against political violence, red-tagging, and vote-buying;
- Digital regulation to counter disinformation and foreign interference;
- And a comprehensive overhaul of campaign finance and election laws to restore public trust.

IX. Key Policy Recommendations: Charting a Democratic Path Forward

In light of its comprehensive assessment of the 2025 midterm elections, the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG) puts forward a set of strategic policy recommendations aimed at addressing the root causes of electoral dysfunction and democratic regression in the Philippines. These recommendations are not merely reactive; they are grounded in years of electoral research and advocacy, and represent a clear roadmap for restoring public trust, expanding participation, and dismantling elite capture of the political system.

1. Adopt a Hybrid Election Model: Combine Transparency with Technological Efficiency

At the heart of CenPEG's advocacy is the implementation of a Hybrid Election System (HES). This model balances the visibility and verifiability of manual vote counting—conducted publicly at the precinct level—with the efficiency and speed of automated tabulation. Unlike the current opaque digital infrastructure, a hybrid model enhances resilience against technical failures, deters manipulation, and strengthens citizen oversight. By restoring the physical audit trail and community involvement, it re-centers the electoral process on democratic accountability.

2. Criminalize Red Tagging and Vote Buying: End Impunity, Protect Voter Rights

To restore electoral integrity, the Philippines must enact strong, enforceable laws penalizing red-tagging, vote buying, and vote selling. These practices—deeply entrenched and politically weaponized—have normalized coercion and commodification of votes, particularly among the vulnerable. Clear definitions, harsh penalties, and swift action by empowered investigative bodies are essential to disrupt

this culture of impunity. Red-tagging, in particular, should be formally criminalized as a human rights violation that undermines political freedom and endangers lives.

3. Modernize and Harmonize the Election Code: Build a Coherent Regulatory Framework

The current electoral landscape is governed by a patchwork of outdated statutes, Comelec resolutions, and executive orders. This legal fragmentation creates regulatory grey zones that are easily exploited by political actors. CenPEG calls for a comprehensive, harmonized Election Code that unifies these elements into a single, modernized framework. This must include updated penalties, clearer enforcement mandates, and alignment with international norms—especially in campaign regulation, disinformation control, and electoral dispute resolution.

4. Enhance Overseas and Absentee Voting: Empower the Disenfranchised

The disenfranchisement of overseas and absentee voters in 2025 was not accidental—it was systemic. To correct this, the state must introduce secure, transparent online voting platforms with audit trails and user accountability; simplify the registration process, including digital enrollment; declare election day a public holiday to maximize participation; and institutionalize grievance redress mechanisms for Filipino migrant workers. Overseas voters, many of whom are politically conscious, should be seen as stakeholders—not logistical burdens.

5. Strengthen Campaign Finance and Information Integrity: Level the Electoral Playing Field

CenPEG emphasizes the urgent need for campaign finance reform, especially in the digital age. All political ad spending—on traditional and online platforms—must be subject to mandatory real-time public disclosure. Social media must be regulated to prevent coordinated disinformation campaigns, including micro-influencer astroturfing networks that mimic grassroots support. Platforms and candidates alike should be held accountable for the spread of manipulated content. Information integrity is now central to electoral legitimacy.

6. Break the Dynastic Chains: Institutionalize Political Inclusion

The structural dominance of political dynasties undermines genuine contestability. CenPEG reiterates the long-standing call to pass and enforce an Anti-Dynasty Law, in accordance with the 1987 Constitution. Measures must restrict inter-familial candidacies within overlapping jurisdictions, especially in successive or simultaneous office-holding. Public financing, party reform, and equitable access mechanisms must be implemented to create space for first-time, reform-oriented, and marginalized candidates to enter the political arena.

7. Facilitate Unimpeded International Observation: Institutionalize Transparency

Credible elections demand unhindered international scrutiny. CenPEG urges the government to honor its democratic obligations by allowing full access to international

observers, including precinct-level monitoring and independent verification of electronic systems. Invitations should be issued early and aligned with international observer protocols. Transparency is not a threat to sovereignty; it is a signal of a mature, accountable democracy.

From Reform to Democratic Renewal

The 2025 elections were a wake-up call. They exposed a democracy in decline—technically fragile, politically captured, and normatively adrift. But they also present an opportunity. CenPEG's policy recommendations are meant to steer the electoral system back toward legitimacy, participation, and fairness. These are not merely procedural fixes—they are interventions necessary to rebuild the republic from the ground up.

CenPEG stands ready to work with all democratic forces—inside and outside institutions—to ensure these reforms are not just proposed, but enacted. The future of Philippine democracy depends on nothing less.

There should be a creation of an independent, multisectoral citizens' body empowered to observe, monitor, and report on all phases of the electoral process, and to recommend policy and institutional reforms. This proposed body must be shielded from partisan interests and composed of civil society, academic, professional, and grassroots representatives. Although it may require constitutional amendment or enabling legislation, its establishment would provide a critical layer of democratic oversight and public participation.

X. Conclusion and Forward Path: Reclaiming Democratic Credibility Before 2028

The 2025 midterm elections unfolded as a paradox. On one hand, the remarkable 82.2 percent voter turnout reflected a politically engaged and vigilant citizenry. On the other hand, this very civic energy was betrayed by an electoral process still captured by entrenched oligarchic power, dynastic consolidation, and systemic abuse. The overwhelming presence of traditional political clans—particularly the Duterte bloc's resurgence and the Marcos camp's internal fractures—underscored the fragile and uneven nature of Philippine democratic resilience.

While the elections provided the appearance of procedural normalcy, they were hollowed out by deep-rooted problems: automated voting plagued by technical failures and software irregularities, widespread vote-buying, violent coercion in rural strongholds, systematic red-tagging of dissenting candidates, and massive digital disinformation amplified by domestic and foreign actors. Far from being isolated incidents, these are symptoms of a broader democratic malaise—a system where political contestation is stifled, participation is manipulated, and public trust is repeatedly eroded.

The fractured alliance between Marcos Jr. and the Duterte faction—though currently coexisting within the same corridors of power—only reflects elite volatility rather than

democratic pluralism. The absence of genuine alternatives and structural constraints on reform-minded candidates have left voters with choices constrained by patronage, coercion, or misinformation. Without decisive reform, the 2028 presidential elections risk becoming yet another elite power shuffle, rather than a moment of democratic renewal.

To reclaim electoral credibility and safeguard democratic futures, the Philippines must move swiftly and decisively. The reforms advocated by CenPEG—spanning electoral system overhaul, anti-dynasty legislation, digital regulation, campaign finance transparency, and institutional independence—offer a coherent, evidence-based pathway toward restoring political integrity. These reforms are not simply about improving the mechanics of elections; they are about reshaping the political architecture so that democracy can become more than a ritual—it must become real.

The road to 2028 is critical. The next three years represent a closing window of opportunity to intervene in the country's accelerating slide toward authoritarian relapse and elite monopolization. The time for incrementalism is over. What is required is broad-based civic mobilization, legislative courage, and institutional transformation to ensure that future elections are not only participatory, but also free, fair, and genuinely representative.

CenPEG stands by its mandate to provide independent research, policy alternatives, and grassroots advocacy. The call now is for all sectors—civil society, youth, labor, overseas Filipinos, independent media, and principled public servants—to join in forging a democratic path forward that is inclusive, accountable, and just. The credibility of the 2028 elections—and indeed, the fate of Philippine democracy—hangs in the balance.###

RELEVANT ELECTION-OBSERVER & NEWS SOURCES

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Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)

Unit 302, M-Place Bldg, 96 Maginhawa St., Teachers Village East,
Quezon City 1101, Philippines

Contact number: +63-9171141405

Email Address: cenpeg.info@gmail.com, info@cenpeg.org,

Website: www.cenpeg.org