



April 12, 2016

## Philippines 2016 Presidential Election

The 2016 presidential election in the Philippines, set for May 9, will determine a successor to Benigno Aquino III. Aquino, who is limited by the Philippine Constitution to one six-year term, will step down in June. He has received relatively strong approval ratings (around 50%) in recent national surveys, reflecting popular support for his efforts to promote economic growth and combat corruption, although persistent poverty and corruption remain public concerns. The election may have implications for U.S. interests in the Philippines and in the region, including the strengthening of bilateral security relations through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), Manila's handling of maritime territorial disputes with China, and the threat of Islamist extremism on the southern major island of Mindanao.

By some measures, the Philippines is a vibrant, if still developing, democracy, particularly its civil liberties, civil society, and electoral processes. Nevertheless, corruption and abuses of power, often perpetrated by politicians, powerful political families, and local clans, as well as weak judicial institutions and what some analysts refer to as a "culture of impunity," continue to affect Philippine politics. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) ranked the Philippines 54<sup>th</sup> out of 167 countries in terms of the level of democracy in 2015 (up from 75<sup>th</sup> in 2012), placing it in the "flawed democracy" category. The Philippines has an estimated 55 million registered voters, and had a voter turnout of 75% in the 2010 presidential election.

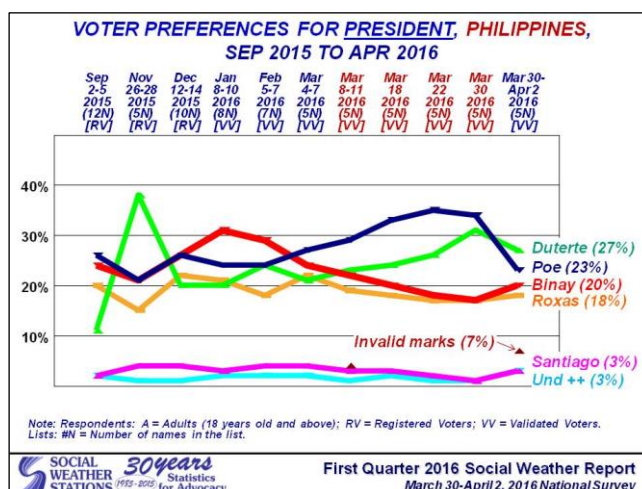
Presidential politics in the Philippines largely are based upon personalities rather than ideology or party platforms. Name recognition, character, and approachability are especially important to Filipino voters. Political parties and groupings tend to be tenuous and shifting. Members of Congress sometimes switch party affiliations, and each of the leading candidates for the 2016 presidential election has had close political ties to one or more opponents. They have not articulated deep policy differences. The candidates mostly support recent moves to strengthen the U.S.-Philippines security alliance as well as the assertion of Philippine territorial claims in the South China Sea (which the Philippines refers to as the West Philippine Sea).

### The Candidates

**Jejomar Binay** is the Vice-President of the Philippines. He was mayor of Makati, the financial center of Metro Manila, for 21 years. Although he serves as Vice-President, he is not politically allied with President Aquino. In the Philippines, the candidates for president and vice-president run in separate elections and the winners may represent different political parties. **Rodrigo Duterte** is mayor of Davao City. Duterte has a reputation for being tough on crime, and some critics fear what they perceive as his authoritarian tendencies. **Senator Grace Poe** is the

daughter of the late Fernando Poe, Jr., an actor who lost to Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in the 2004 presidential election, which was tainted by allegations of fraud. **Manuel "Mar" Roxas II**, grandson of former President Manuel Roxas (the first president of the independent Philippine Republic), has served in the Senate and in the cabinets of three administrations. Aquino and Roxas are members of the Liberal Party, the largest political party in the Philippines.

Although Poe has led the race in some recent surveys, each of the top three contenders has taken the lead at some point in the past few months. A presidential candidate needs only a plurality of votes to win, raising the possibility of a victory that is not decisive.



Source: Social Weather Stations, April 2016

## National Issues

### Maritime Disputes with China

In 2013, the Philippines filed for arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), asserting that aspects of China's maritime claims and actions in the South China Sea violate UNCLOS. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague is expected to make rulings on the case in spring or summer of 2016. Some analysts believe that if the tribunal rules partly or entirely in the Philippines' favor, China may ignore the ruling and/or take further assertive actions.

The main contenders for president support international legal action against China; however, territorial disputes reportedly are not a top issue among many Filipino voters, and some candidates also have proposed rebuilding cooperative relations with Beijing, with which the Philippines has significant economic ties. Binay has expressed support for resuming diplomatic talks with China and expanding economic relations, including possible joint oil exploration in disputed sea areas. Duterte has proposed

reopening bilateral dialogue with China and expressed support for U.S. military assistance, but not at the expense of Philippine sovereignty. The policy views of Roxas appear to be most in line with those of Aquino, who has ardently supported the U.S.-Philippine alliance and upheld a relatively strong stance against China.

### Mindanao Peace Process

In 2014, the Aquino Administration and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a Muslim separatist insurgency based in western Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, signed a peace agreement, the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). The accord, which would provide for substantial political and economic autonomy for the Moro people, has met some political resistance, particularly in the Philippine Congress. Some analysts argue that the CAB would reduce the threat of Islamist extremism in the region and help enable the Philippine military to turn its focus toward the country's international maritime borders. Of the top four candidates for president, Roxas, who has inherited Aquino's policy agenda, has expressed the most support for the CAB. Duterte has promoted the idea of a federal system that would serve the interests of the Moros. Poe and Binay have suggested renegotiating aspects of the agreement in ways that may provide for less autonomy. Both have advocated greater economic development in the region through investment and trade.

### Backgrounds of the Leading Candidates

Vice-President **Jejomar Binay** is a member of the United Nationalist Alliance Party, which he organized as he launched his bid for the presidency. Binay served as presidential campaign manager for Fernando Poe, Jr. in 2004. The Vice-President has maintained popular support despite allegations that he engaged in graft as Mayor of Makati, which are the subject of a Senate investigation. Binay maintains that the charges are politically motivated.

Binay represents financial and trade interests but also has populist appeal. He supports amending the Philippine Constitution to allow greater foreign ownership of property and cutting income and corporate taxes. The Vice-President, who comes from a humble background, also is known for his anti-poverty positions, experience as a human rights lawyer, and close ties to the late President Corazon Aquino, who led the "People Power Revolution" that brought down authoritarian president Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. Binay also is president of the Boy Scouts of the Philippines.

**Rodrigo Duterte** has served as Mayor of Davao, the fourth most populous municipality in the Philippines, for a cumulative total of 22 years. Duterte, whom Binay considered as a possible vice-presidential running mate, comes from a local political family. Populist in orientation, his three goals are to "stop corruption, stop criminality, and fix government." Duterte gained popularity for aggressively combatting crime in Davao, which is located in southern Mindanao. However, some human rights groups assert that his approach, including strongly supporting the police and military in maintaining order, has led to human rights abuses, including hundreds of extra-judicial killings.

**Grace Poe** issued a "20 point platform" that some analysts say is similar to the programs and policies of President Aquino, although she has pushed for lower tax rates, which Aquino has opposed. The senator is seen as pro-business and pro-trade and is popular with the country's middle class and intellectuals. Both the Liberal Party and the conservative Nationalist People's Coalition, the second largest political party in the Philippines, have courted her. Poe served as chairperson of the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board from 2010 to 2012. Some Filipinos say Poe, a senator since 2013, lacks a solid track record and is unprepared for the job of chief executive. Nonetheless, Poe enjoys name recognition. In addition to her famous father, the late Fernando Poe, Jr, her mother, Susan Rocés, is a Filipina actress.

As senator, Poe has advocated for women and children and has fought government corruption and misconduct, at times placing her at odds with Binay and with the Aquino Administration. She has chaired a Senate investigation into the Mamasapano incident (see below) which implicates both President Aquino and Manuel Roxas. Poe, who was adopted as a newborn, has faced legal challenges—some say politically motivated—based upon claims that she does not have proof of being a natural-born Filipino and that she has not met the 10-year residency requirement for presidential candidates. A graduate of Boston College, Poe lived in the United States for more than a decade and a half, returning to the Philippines in 2005.

**Manuel "Mar" Roxas**, a Wharton-educated, former investment banker, served as Secretary of Trade and Industry under former Presidents Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and also as a Senator of the Philippines (2004-2010). He lost a vice-presidential bid to Jejomar Binay in 2010. Roxas served in the Aquino Administration as Secretary of Transportation and Communications (2011-2012) and Secretary of the Interior and Local Government (2012-2015). He has the endorsement of Aquino and the backing of many voters who support Aquino's policies as well as some members of the country's financial elite.

Roxas has faced criticism related to two national events and for his perceived shortcomings as cabinet secretary. Some Filipinos faulted his handling of disaster relief following Super Typhoon Yolanda in November 2013. He has received some blame for a poorly-coordinated military raid in January 2015 in Mamasapano, Maguindanao province that resulted in the killing of a wanted Malaysian terrorist but also in an unwanted firefight with MILF combatants and the deaths of 44 Philippine paramilitary soldiers. Although Roxas reportedly was not directly involved in the mission, some Filipinos argue that as Interior Secretary, he bore some responsibility. Other issues related to his record in government include ongoing problems with transportation infrastructure in Manila and nationally.

---

**Thomas Lum**, Specialist in Asian Affairs

IF10387

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.