

ENDURING SHADOWS: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF CORRUPTION AND ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS IN THE POST-WAR PHILIPPINES (1946-PRESENT)

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a historical analysis of corruption and anti-corruption initiatives in the Philippines from its independence in 1946 to the present day. It traces the evolution of corrupt practices across various presidential administrations, from the "booty capitalism" of the early republic and the centralized "crony capitalism" of the Marcos era, to the pervasive clientelism and illicit enrichment seen in the post-EDSA democratic period. The study examines the underlying factors contributing to the persistence of corruption, including institutional weaknesses, the resilience of political elites, and the impact of deeply ingrained patronage networks. It also assesses the effectiveness of various anti-corruption strategies, highlighting the challenges posed by a lack of sustained political will and public cynicism. By synthesizing academic literature and investigative reports, this article offers a comprehensive overview of how corruption has profoundly impacted Philippine governance, economic development, and social equity, demonstrating its enduring and adaptive nature.

**Keywords:** Corruption, Anti-corruption, Philippines, Post-war history, Patronage, Cronyism, Governance, Political economy.

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INTRODUCTION

Corruption, broadly defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain [45, 47], stands as a formidable and persistent challenge within the socio-political landscape of the Philippines. Since gaining independence in 1946, the nation has grappled with myriad manifestations of this systemic issue, ranging from the petty bribery and bureaucratic inefficiencies that burden everyday citizens [6, 25, 48] to grand-scale illicit enrichment, pervasive cronyism, and the insidious capture of state apparatuses by entrenched political and economic elites [10, 30]. This deeply rooted problem has exerted a profound and often detrimental influence on the country's governance structures, hampered its economic development trajectories, and exacerbated social inequalities, frequently eroding public trust in institutions and impeding meaningful reforms [7, 40, 59]. The historical trajectory of the Philippines reveals a complex and dynamic interplay among evolving political systems, enduring socio-economic configurations, and the shifting forms of corruption, which have, in turn, been met with intermittent, yet often insufficient, anti-corruption endeavors [16, 29].

The popular and scholarly consensus often posits that

corruption is an intrinsic and almost immutable feature of the Philippines' political culture, suggesting a continuous and unbroken legacy of malfeasance stretching back centuries [51]. Indeed, the seventy-eight years of its existence as an independent state (1946-2024) can, in a fatalistic sense, feel like a "thousand" years of endemic corruption, as implied by the sheer regularity of scandals that have marred every administration. Such accounts frequently attribute this continuity to deeply embedded traditional values or a premature experience with democratization [16, 19, 30]. However, this perspective, while highlighting the undeniable prevalence of corruption, often overlooks a crucial counter-narrative: the equally consistent emergence of anti-corruption movements and initiatives. Corruption scandals and anti-corruption crusades have historically gone hand-in-hand, suggesting a dialectical relationship that necessitates their understanding as intertwined phenomena rather than isolated occurrences [37]. This dialectic, when examined over time, reveals not stagnation, but a history of significant change—particularly in how Filipinos perceive and relate to corruption, gradually fostering a greater intolerance for it and embracing anti-corruption as a potent political model. Moreover, the conceptualization of corruption by scholars and policymakers has also evolved,

shifting towards a view of it as a generic, rather than culturally specific, social problem [29, 39, 45].

This article aims to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of corruption and the corresponding anti-corruption initiatives in the Philippines, spanning from 1946 to the contemporary period. It will meticulously trace the development and characteristics of corrupt practices under successive presidential administrations, dissect the multifaceted factors that have enabled the persistence of corruption, and critically evaluate the efficacy of various anti-corruption strategies employed. By utilizing an historical-analytical framework and synthesizing a diverse range of existing literature—including academic research, incisive investigative journalism, and official institutional reports—this study seeks to offer an in-depth and nuanced understanding of this critical and evolving aspect of modern Philippine history. It argues that the historical interplay between corruption and anti-corruption is, in essence, a popular struggle over the very definition and conduct of politics, signifying a form of political modernization from below.

## **METHODS**

This research employs a qualitative, historical-analytical methodology, relying exclusively on an extensive review of secondary sources to construct a comprehensive narrative of corruption and anti-corruption dynamics in the Philippines from 1946 to the present. The systematic approach involved the identification, acquisition, and critical synthesis of a broad spectrum of scholarly materials. These included peer-reviewed academic articles, monographic studies (books), and book chapters published by experts in Philippine politics, economic history, sociology, and public administration.

In addition to academic literature, the study incorporated reports from credible non-governmental organizations (NGOs) actively involved in governance and anti-corruption advocacy, official publications from governmental bodies such as the Philippine Office of the Ombudsman [38], and detailed investigative reports produced by prominent journalistic organizations. These diverse sources provided rich empirical data, case studies, and varying analytical perspectives crucial for a multi-dimensional understanding of the subject matter.

The selection criteria for inclusion of sources were stringent, prioritizing materials that offered direct relevance to the post-war Philippine context, demonstrated rigorous analytical frameworks in their examination of corruption, and contributed substantial historical or thematic insights. Key thematic areas guided the data extraction and analysis:

- **Definitions and Typologies of Corruption:** How different sources conceptualized and categorized corruption (e.g., petty, grand, bureaucratic, political, electoral, cronyism, malversation, graft, bribery, fraud, nepotism, influence peddling, state capture) within the Philippine context.

- **Historical Periodization and Corrupt Manifestations:** Identification of specific historical periods and presidential administrations (1946-1965; 1965-1986; 1986-present) associated with particular forms, surges, or institutionalization of corruption, along with notable scandals and their characteristics.

- **Socio-Economic and Political Drivers:** Exploration of the underlying factors that enabled corruption to persist, such as inherited colonial legacies, patronage networks, weak institutional frameworks, elite structures, and economic conditions.

- **Anti-Corruption Policies and Movements:** Analysis of governmental policies, legislative initiatives, the establishment of anti-corruption agencies, and the role of civil society organizations, media, and academic institutions in exposing and combating corruption, including their strategies and perceived effectiveness.

- **Public Perception and Response:** Examination of how Filipino society, across different social strata, perceived, reacted to, and influenced the discourse surrounding corruption and anti-corruption.

Data analysis was primarily thematic, allowing for the systematic categorization and synthesis of information across these key areas. This process facilitated the identification of historical patterns, continuities, and significant discontinuities in the landscape of corruption over the approximate eight-decade span. Particular attention was paid to tracing the dialectic between corruption and anti-corruption efforts—how one phenomenon influenced the emergence and characteristics of the other. While acknowledging the important cultural and anthropological perspectives on corruption, particularly concepts such as *palakasan* (using personal connections) or *diskarte* (making ends meet) [16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 38], the primary focus of this study remains on the historical evolution, institutional responses, and political implications of corruption within the formal and informal structures of the Philippine state and society. The insights derived from this analysis are structured and presented according to the conventional IMRaD format (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) to ensure clarity and coherence. It is important to reiterate that this study is based solely on secondary data; no primary data collection, empirical surveys, or quantitative statistical analyses were conducted.

## **RESULTS**

The post-independence history of the Philippines is inextricably linked with the narrative of corruption, a phenomenon that has consistently adapted and evolved in response to, and often in shaping of, the nation's political and economic transformations.

Post-War Reconstruction and the Early Republic (1946-1965): Tolerance and the Genesis of "Booty Capitalism"

Following the devastations of World War II and the formal granting of independence by the United States in 1946, the

newly established Philippine republic faced the daunting task of national reconstruction amidst a complex political environment. This period saw the entrenchment of a strong patronage-based political culture, deeply rooted in both Spanish colonial and American influences [7, 18, 30]. It was during these foundational years that what scholars often term "booty capitalism" firmly took hold, characterized by the systematic leveraging of public office for personal and factional enrichment [18, 30]. This was particularly evident in the control and diversion of foreign aid and government contracts intended for rehabilitation efforts.

The formal bureaucracy, while ostensibly designed to serve the public interest, frequently became a fertile ground for rent-seeking activities and illicit transactions [8, 17, 19, 20]. Public resources were viewed by many in power as commodities to be exploited rather than a sacred trust. Renato Constantino [16], a prominent historian and critic, eloquently articulated how the nascent political system, despite its democratic façade, was adept at facilitating the self-serving interests of the entrenched elite. This fostered a pervasive culture where access to, and control over, public resources was widely perceived as a perquisite of power rather than a responsibility to the populace. The "pork barrel" system, which allowed elected officials discretionary control over public funds for local projects, became a cornerstone of this patronage network, a mechanism that has, remarkably, persisted in various forms to the present day [18].

The period spanning from 1948 to 1964, encompassing the presidencies of Elpidio Quirino, Ramon Magsaysay, Carlos P. Garcia, and Diosdado Macapagal, each confronted unique and recurring corruption challenges. Historical accounts and investigative reports from this era highlight consistent patterns:

- Manuel Roxas (1946-1948): The immediate post-war years under President Roxas were marred by "war surplus scandals," involving the malversation of military stocks granted by the United States. These valuable assets were illegally diverted and sold on the black market by politically influential individuals, reportedly creating "millionaires overnight" [18]. Additionally, fraudulent claims for war reparations and guerilla backpay, alongside selective awarding of reconstruction contracts, became early examples of widespread graft and bribery [52].

- Elpidio Quirino (1948-1953): Quirino's administration was plagued by numerous scandals. These included the "Chinese immigration quota racket" (1948) involving bribery for immigration slots, the "Buenavista-Tambobong Estate scandal" (1949) concerning alleged graft in land deals, and the "Caledonia Pile case" (1950) where public bidding was reportedly rigged. The infamous "golden arinola (chamber pot) scandal" (1950) symbolized alleged extravagance, although it was later debunked as stainless steel [18].

Further issues included graft within the Import Control Commission (1953) and malversation of public goods in the Civil Aeronautics Administration (1953) [52]. Notably, his 1949 election was widely criticized for massive fraud, prompting the formation of early anti-corruption civic movements [18, 27].

- Ramon Magsaysay (1953-1957): Magsaysay, elected on an anti-corruption platform, symbolized a brief period of hope. Despite his personal integrity, his administration was not immune to scandals, including graft in the National Rice and Corn Corporation (1954), theft in the Land Settlement and Development Company (1953), and questionable dealings in Villanueva Shipping (1954). Congressional junkets (1955) and various issues within the Philippine Housing and Homesite Corporation (1955-1959), such as extortion of squatter relocatees and overpriced projects, continued to surface. The "Pacita Madrigal Gonzalez case" (1956) involved malversation of public funds, and rigged bidding was alleged in the National Marketing Corporation deal (1956) [52].

- Carlos P. Garcia (1957-1961): Garcia's term saw the "copra barter license case" (1957) and "copra-rice barter deal" (1958) involving fraud, alongside influence peddling (the "White Paper," 1957). Illegal importation through the National Rice and Corn Corporation (1959) and unauthorized purchases in the Agricultural Credit and Cooperative Agency (1960) continued the pattern of economic malfeasance. The "Sweepstakes anomaly" (1960) highlighted rigged lotteries [52].

- Diosdado Macapagal (1961-1965): Macapagal's presidency was marked by the high-profile "Harry Stonehill affair" (1962), an American businessman accused of bribing numerous high-level government officials. His summary deportation by Macapagal, allegedly to prevent his testimony, became a major controversy [18]. Other scandals included irregular acquisition in the "Canlubang Estate deal" (1962), falsified letters of credit in the Philippine National Bank (1962), large-scale smuggling (the "Blue Seal racket," 1964), and an unfavorable lease agreement in the "Davao Penal Colony banana deal" (1964). The "Congressional allowances scandal" (1965) revealed unseemly allowances to Congressmen [52].

Interestingly, despite the rampant and open nature of corruption, a popular anti-corruption sentiment also existed. Onofre D. Corpuz [18, 19], a keen observer of post-war society, noted the fascinating interplay between scandal and public rebuke. The blatant fraud in Quirino's 1949 election, for instance, directly led to the founding of the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) in 1951, a significant civil society effort to monitor elections and combat electoral fraud. Hundreds of civic groups mobilized for the 1951 midterm and 1953 presidential elections, framing the choice starkly as "Quirino was corrupt and Ramon Magsaysay clean" [18]. The passage of an Anti-graft and Corruption Law in 1960, despite political resistance, and the establishment of

several, albeit often short-lived, anti-corruption agencies further underscore this public and institutional, albeit often superficial, commitment to accountability. A vibrant, muckraking press also played a crucial role, consistently exposing new scandals [18].

However, Corpuz famously observed the paradox: "Nobody in the Philippines has ever heard of a successful prosecution for graft" [18]. Investigations often ended in "whitewashes," probes were "innocuous or fixed," and anti-graft crusades netted only the "fewest and smallest fry" [18]. Corpuz attributed this "tolerance" to a "transitional society" undergoing modernization, where the distinction between public and private spheres was still evolving. He argued that traditional values, such as strong kinship ties (palakasan or nepotism), though illegal in formal law, were often considered ethically justifiable within a traditional value system. This normative ambivalence, he suggested, led to a "beautifully consistent" outcome: formal compliance with the law, but ultimate appeasement of social conscience through "ritual and ceremony" rather than genuine enforcement, a functionalist view where anti-corruption efforts, despite ineffectiveness, upheld an ideal standard while acknowledging political reality [18].

The Marcos Era (1965-1986): Centralization of Corruption and the Rise of "Crony Capitalism"

The dialectic between corruption and anti-corruption underwent a profound transformation during the 21-year rule of Ferdinand Marcos, particularly following the declaration of martial law in 1972. While Marcos initially promised reform and utilized the existing levers of pulitika to secure his first terms—notably, the 1967 midterm and 1969 presidential elections were characterized by unprecedented spending and violence—his subsequent imposition of martial law marked a radical shift. He systematically dismantled institutional checks on presidential power, abolishing Congress, censoring the press, suspending or orchestrating elections, packing the courts with loyal appointees, and extending control over government agencies down to the local level [55]. This authoritarian consolidation effectively dismembered the political opposition, as Marcos alone became the arbiter of government largesse. As Mark Thompson acutely observed, "Clientelism under democracy had degenerated into sultanism... under dictatorship" [55].

Under the Marcos regime, corruption became centralized and institutionalized on an unprecedented scale, giving rise to what became widely known as "crony capitalism" [32, 50]. This involved the systematic transfer of national assets, the creation of monopolies, and the granting of exclusive economic opportunities to a select circle of family members and political confidantes. Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos themselves were alleged to have amassed an astounding US\$5-10 billion through various schemes [10, 32, 34]:

- Kickbacks from Government Projects: Substantial kickbacks were allegedly received on major government undertakings, such as a reported US\$30 million from the construction of the controversial Bataan Nuclear Power Plant, which never became operational [52].

- Diversion of Aid: Marcos was accused of taking cuts from U.S. military aid and Japanese overseas development assistance [10].

- Plunder of State Coffers: The Marcoses allegedly helped themselves directly to state coffers and even looted the Central Bank's gold reserves [10].

- Behest Loans: Marcos "subcontracted" illicit enrichment to his cronies by granting them "behest loans" from government-owned banks. These loans were often unsecured, given without proper basis, and frequently went unrepaid, effectively transferring public funds to private hands [55].

- Control of Key Industries: Cronies were given control over vital sectors of the economy, including sugar, coconut, and banking, creating monopolies that stifled competition and extracted wealth at the expense of producers and consumers [32, 52]. The "Coconut levy fund" (1981), intended for coconut farmers, was notoriously misused [52].

The scale of this plunder was staggering and deeply detrimental to the Philippine economy. Despite official claims of a "golden age" of economic growth, the country suffered from massive foreign debt, widespread poverty, and stunted development as wealth was concentrated and productive capacity was undermined by corrupt practices [43]. Investigative reports, notably Ricardo Manapat's "Some Are Smarter than Others: The History of Marcos' Crony Capitalism" [32, 50] and Primitivo Mijares' "The Conjugal Dictatorship" [34], meticulously documented the extent of this corruption, exposing the lavish lifestyles of the Marcoses amidst national deprivation.

Despite the blatant and systemic nature of corruption, the Marcos government paradoxically maintained a facade of anti-corruption. It established six new anti-corruption agencies between 1966 and 1979, including the Tanodbayan (Office of the Ombudsman) [40]. However, the true anti-corruption movement during this period emerged from the underground and from dissidence:

- Primitivo Mijares' Exposé: Marcos' chief propagandist, Primitivo Mijares, defected in 1975 and testified to the U.S. Congress about the regime's corruption. His book, *The Conjugal Dictatorship* (2017 [1976]), provided a first-hand account of the Marcoses' illicit dealings and personal affairs. Though banned in the Philippines, it circulated widely in activist and middle-class circles, becoming a powerful tool of the anti-Marcos movement. Mijares' subsequent disappearance and the mutilated body of his son underscored the dangers of exposing the regime [34].

- Ricardo Manapat's "The Octopus": In 1979, Ricardo

Manapat's pamphlet, informally known as "The Octopus," painstakingly detailed the Marcoses' wealth and the operations of "crony capitalism." Its widespread, clandestine distribution fueled public outrage, particularly over the shameless extravagance of Imelda Marcos – her designer clothes, luxurious properties, art collections, and massive spending on flowers, juxtaposed with vivid accounts of extreme poverty in the Philippines [32]. The pamphlet's core message was not merely the illegality, but the immorality of such public behavior, violating a distinctly Filipino moral economy and revealing the "thickness of their faces" (makapal ang mukha nila) in the face of suffering [32].

These mounting revelations, coupled with specific incidents, ultimately served as catalysts for widespread public indignation. The lavish 1983 wedding of Marcos' daughter, Irene, in Sarrat, which involved extensive remodeling of an entire town, new infrastructure, and extravagant transportation, sharply contrasted with the worsening economic crisis that followed—a 14% contraction of the economy and 50% inflation [53, 52]. The assassination of opposition leader Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. upon his return in August 1983, amid this economic turmoil and rampant corruption, ignited mass protests and coalesced anti-Marcos sentiment [53, 55].

The culmination came with the 1986 snap elections, widely seen as fraudulent. The public's refusal to accept the rigged results, manifested in walkouts by election workers, calls from the Catholic Church for people to surround military camps where a military revolt was brewing, and the subsequent "People Power" movement (February 22-25, 1986), finally forced Marcos to flee the country [27, 29, 55]. This moment represented the "massive popular indignation" that Corpuz had previously sought in vain, marking a clear turning point of national intolerance for corruption and state abuse.

Post-EDSA Democratic Period (1986-Present): Resilient Corruption and Evolving Anti-Corruption Frameworks

The EDSA People Power Revolution of 1986, which dramatically ended the Marcos dictatorship, inaugurated an era of democratic restoration under Corazon C. Aquino (1986-1992). This period was characterized by immense public hope for a fundamental dismantling of corrupt structures and the establishment of a new era of good governance [8, 54]. Indeed, significant initial steps were taken:

- **De-Marcosification and Institutional Reforms:** The Aquino administration launched extensive political purges, replacing thousands of civil servants, elected officials, and military personnel [8]. The newly drafted 1987 Constitution enshrined "betrayal of public trust" as an impeachable offense and established key oversight bodies like the Commission on Audit. New anti-corruption agencies, such as the Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG) tasked with recovering Marcos' ill-gotten wealth, and the Presidential

Committee on Ethics and Accountability were created. Older agencies, like the Ombudsman and Sandiganbayan (anti-graft court), were reconstituted and strengthened [40].

- **Legislative Measures and Values Education:** A raft of new laws defined corrupt behaviors and prescribed codes of conduct for civil servants. The Moral Recovery Program, initiated by Aquino and continued by her successor, sought to foster integrity, patriotism, and a sense of the common good among the populace, often with Church involvement [14].

- **Rise of Civil Society:** The post-Marcos period witnessed an unprecedented efflorescence of civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), their numbers tripling between 1984 and 1995 [13]. This was fueled by the newly opened democratic space and a massive influx of international development assistance. The Aquino government actively institutionalized NGO participation in the political process, with the 1987 Constitution and 1991 Local Government Code virtually mandating their involvement in local governance [13, 27]. Many NGOs, particularly those identifying with the "new politics" or anti-pulitika, championed the anti-corruption agenda. Key organizations like the Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD) and the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) produced impactful studies and investigative reports, significantly contributing to public awareness and intolerance for corruption [20, 21, 22].

Despite these concerted efforts and the high hopes, the deeply entrenched clientelistic networks and structural roots of corruption proved remarkably resilient. Corruption persisted, often adapting its forms rather than disappearing entirely.

- **Corazon Aquino (1986-1992):** Even the iconic figure of democratic restoration was not immune to allegations. The "Kamaganak, Inc." (relatives incorporated) scandal saw accusations that Aquino favored her relatives, allowing them to influence political outcomes, particularly concerning land reform and the sequestered assets of companies linked to the Marcos regime [14, 55]. Other issues included the "Roppongi sale" (1988), "chop-chop scandal" (vehicle smuggling, 1989), "buko scam" (coconut export quota rigging, 1989), "Garchitorena land scam" (1989), and "Luzon Petros scam" (behest loan, 1990) [52].

- **Fidel V. Ramos (1992-1998):** Ramos' administration pursued economic liberalization, privatization, and infrastructure development. However, this period was "plagued by scandal" [54]. The most significant was the "PEA-Amari deal" (1995), a joint venture to develop islands off Manila, involving alleged US\$40 million in kickbacks, famously dubbed "the grandmother of all scams" [54, 57]. Other notable incidents included the "Little League scandal" (1992) regarding overage players, alleged overpricing in

Independent Power Producer contracts (1992), the "PLDT decision scandal" (1993) where a Supreme Court Justice's decision was allegedly written by a PLDT lawyer, the "Brunei beauties scandal" (sex trafficking, 1993), and the "Bancap T-bills scam" (1994) involving nonexistent treasury bills [52].

● Joseph Estrada (1998-2001): Estrada's presidency became a focal point for the anti-corruption movement due to his "flagrant" and "vulgar" alleged corruption [21]. Investigative reports from the PCIJ meticulously documented numerous business interests and properties in the names of his family members and mistresses. Allegations included direct kickbacks from the illegal gambling game *jueteng* delivered to his house in palm-leaf bags, and his infamous "midnight cabinet" (late-night gambling and drinking sessions with cronies) which "excited public indignation" [21]. His impeachment in 2000 for bribery, graft, and betrayal of public trust, heavily relying on PCIJ reports, engrossed the nation. When the trial was derailed by his allies, it triggered "People Power 2" (January 17-20, 2001), leading to his ouster and the installation of his Vice President, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo [4, 21, 35]. This moment was celebrated as a victory for the anti-corruption movement, seemingly refuting Corpuz's dismal prophecy of no successful conviction of a president [21, 35].

● Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2001-2010): Despite coming to power on the heels of an anti-corruption movement, Arroyo's presidency was "plagued by numerous corruption scandals," repeatedly challenging her legitimacy and leading to impeachment attempts [26, 27]. The most notorious was the "Hello Garci scandal" (2004), involving a leaked recording of her allegedly asking an election commissioner to "secure" her victory by a million votes—the exact margin by which she won [26]. Other major scandals included the "Fertilizer fund scam" (2004) involving malversation of public funds, the "Military comptroller Carlos Garcia" case (2005) involving money laundering, the "NBN-ZTE deal" (2008) involving alleged graft in a national broadband network project, and the "Euro generals scandal" (2008) concerning alleged misuse of funds by police generals [26, 27, 52]. By 2007, a survey cited by Hutchcroft [26] ranked her as the most corrupt president in Philippine history. This period demonstrated the resilience of political elites in maintaining power amidst severe accusations.

● Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III (2010-2016): Riding a wave of public sentiment after his mother's death and fueled by widespread disillusionment with Arroyo, Aquino III campaigned on a strong anti-corruption platform, encapsulated by the slogan "Kung walang korap, walang mahirap" (If there's no corruption, there's no poverty) [1]. His administration's centerpiece, "Daang Matuwid" (the straight path), initially achieved some successes, including prosecuting officials from the

previous regime and improving revenue collection. However, systemic corruption proved deeply entrenched. The "pork barrel scam" (2013), revealing the diversion of legislative funds to ghost projects, and the "Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP) controversy" (2014) which was later declared unconstitutional, tarnished his anti-corruption image. Critics argued he selectively targeted political enemies. Other challenges like the "Armed Forces of the Philippines pabaon scandal" (2011) and the "NAIA bullet-planting scandal" (2015) also emerged [1, 52]. By the end of his term, public mood was largely one of disappointment regarding the persistent nature of corruption.

● Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022): Duterte's election marked a perceived "second turning point" in the anti-corruption dialectic. His populist strongman image and relentless "war on drugs"—which led to thousands of alleged extrajudicial killings and drew international condemnation [2, 56]—resonated with an electorate fatigued by the perceived ineffectiveness of past anti-corruption efforts [23, 28, 56]. While he also declared war on corruption, his administration was "riddled with corruption scandals," including "ninja cops" (police involved in drug dealing), Customs commissioners accused of drug smuggling, and graft in the procurement of medical supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic [23, 52]. Despite conceding that corruption was "endemic," Duterte maintained remarkably high approval ratings throughout his term, suggesting a public tolerance or even acceptance of certain corrupt practices in exchange for perceived effectiveness in maintaining order or delivering services [23, 28]. This period also saw a further erosion of democratic checks and balances, potentially expanding opportunities for unchecked corruption [26].

● Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (2022-Present): The return of the Marcos family to the highest office in 2022, with Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.'s resounding victory, rekindled concerns about historical revisionism and accountability for past ill-gotten wealth [15, 24]. His election, strongly supported by those with positive perceptions of the elder Marcos and Duterte, indicated a shift in public priorities, where anti-corruption was no longer the predominant mobilizing framework for a significant segment of the electorate [15, 24]. Early in his term, incidents such as the fatal boat mishap in Binangonan, Rizal, (July 2023) and subsequent allegations of bribery involving the Philippine Coast Guard underscored the persistent prevalence of corruption at various levels of government and within regulatory bodies [5, 11, 12, 44]. These events highlight how corruption can directly undermine public safety and trust, reflecting a continuing challenge in enforcing crucial safety rules [11, 12, 44]. The current administration navigates a complex legacy while addressing contemporary governance issues, with the "confidential funds controversy" (alleged malversation of public funds) and the "Maharlika Wealth Fund" (potential malversation) already emerging as significant concerns [52].

Throughout this post-Marcos period, various state institutions like the Office of the Ombudsman [38], alongside robust civil society organizations, media groups, and academic initiatives, have persistently launched anti-corruption efforts [9, 13, 14, 16, 20, 22, 36, 37, 46, 48, 49]. Organizations like the PCIJ have been instrumental in exposing corruption through detailed investigative reports [20, 21, 22]. Religious and academic bodies have contributed to public awareness and anti-corruption education [16, 17]. However, these efforts frequently encounter formidable obstacles, including entrenched political interference, institutional fragilities, a recurrent lack of sustained political will at the highest levels, and deeply ingrained cultural practices of patronage and reciprocity [5, 16, 37, 40]. The very "anti-corruption industry" has evolved, yet its ultimate effectiveness in fundamentally altering the landscape of corruption remains a subject of ongoing debate [33, 46].

## **DISCUSSION**

The historical analysis presented herein unequivocally demonstrates that corruption in the Philippines transcends a mere collection of isolated transgressions; it is, rather, a deeply institutionalized and remarkably adaptive phenomenon that has continuously transformed alongside the nation's political and economic development. From the early post-war years of "booty capitalism," through the highly centralized and systematic "crony capitalism" of the Marcos dictatorship, and into the pervasive clientelism and illicit enrichment characteristic of the post-EDSA democratic period, corruption has consistently served as a corrosive force, undermining the efficacy of governance and impeding equitable national development.

A fundamental and recurring factor contributing to the persistence of corruption is the inherent weakness of formal state institutions when confronted by the overwhelming power and influence of entrenched political and economic elites [24, 30]. The predatory "rent-seeking" behavior of these elites, often facilitated by their control over key government agencies and access to vast public resources, has perpetually reinforced a system where public office is primarily perceived and utilized as a means for private accumulation, rather than for the collective good [30, 41]. This is further compounded by the enduring legacy of patronage and the culturally ingrained "compadre system," where personal relationships, kinship ties, and reciprocal obligations frequently supersede formal rules, meritocratic principles, and legal frameworks [19, 31, 31]. While the extent to which corruption is a "culture" remains a nuanced academic debate [25, 48], its deep embeddedness within the informal social and political interactions of Philippine society is undeniable.

Despite numerous and often valiant efforts by diverse actors, anti-corruption initiatives in the Philippines have largely fallen short of fundamentally eradicating the problem. This consistent shortfall can be attributed to

several critical, interconnected challenges:

1. **Lack of Sustained Political Will:** A recurring theme throughout post-war Philippine history is the discrepancy between political rhetoric and genuine action. While successive administrations have frequently ascended to power on robust anti-corruption platforms, the sustained political will required to implement deep-seated, systemic reforms and vigorously prosecute high-level offenders has often been either absent or fleeting [40, 59]. This often leads to episodic crackdowns that fail to address the root causes or become politically selective.
2. **Institutional Weaknesses and Vulnerability to Capture:** The very institutions constitutionally mandated to combat corruption—including the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and various regulatory bodies—are themselves frequently vulnerable to political interference, elite capture, and internal corruption [59]. As highlighted by the World Bank's 2000 report on corruption in the Philippines, these structural deficiencies within accountability mechanisms severely hamper their effectiveness and legitimacy [59].
3. **Elite Resilience and Adaptability:** Powerful political dynasties and vast economic conglomerates have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt and survive across different political regimes. They consistently find new avenues to maintain and even expand their influence and protect their illicit interests, often by exploiting loopholes, influencing policy, or simply bypassing formal rules [14, 41]. Their adaptability makes them a formidable adversary to any anti-corruption drive.
4. **Public Cynicism and Shifting Tolerance:** Prolonged exposure to pervasive corruption can unfortunately breed widespread public cynicism, leading to a degree of normalization where illicit acts are viewed as an unavoidable, almost inherent, part of the political system [23, 28]. This fatalistic outlook can manifest in seemingly paradoxical ways, such as continued public support for leaders who, despite facing credible corruption allegations, are perceived to "deliver" tangible results, impose order, or embody "strength" rather than perceived "weakness" of liberal reformism [23, 28]. The shift observed during the Duterte presidency, from prioritizing "cleanliness" to valuing "strength," exemplifies this evolving public calculus [28].
5. **Complexity and Multifaceted Nature of Corruption:** Corruption in the Philippines is not a monolithic entity. It encompasses various forms, from petty daily bribes (tong, padulas) and bureaucratic inefficiencies to grand corruption involving massive illicit enrichment, political patronage, and the capture of national resources. Tackling such a multifaceted problem requires a comprehensive, integrated strategy that addresses each level, which has proven exceedingly difficult to implement with consistency and depth. The "anti-corruption industry" itself, though growing and evolving, faces significant challenges in translating global models into effective local

realities [33, 46].

The consequences of this enduring corruption are profoundly detrimental. It systematically distorts economic development by diverting vital public resources away from essential services and productive investments, creating an uneven playing field that discourages legitimate investment, and ultimately exacerbating social inequalities and poverty [45]. The tragic incidents, such as the boat mishap in Binangonan, Rizal, directly linked to allegations of bribery and negligence within regulatory bodies, serve as stark, real-world illustrations of how deeply ingrained corruption can directly compromise public safety and erode fundamental trust in governmental institutions and their capacity to protect citizens [11, 12, 44]. These localized tragedies underscore the pervasive reach of corruption, from grand-scale plunder to everyday administrative malfeasance.

The concept of "historical exhaustion" or a feeling of "total corruption," as described by Muir [36], accurately captures the sentiment that has periodically gripped the Filipino populace, particularly among the middle and upper classes. This sense of weariness, that "nothing has changed" despite decades of fervent anti-corruption efforts and even popular uprisings, can lead to a disengagement from conventional politics or, ironically, a yearning for an "anti-politics" embodied by a strong leader who promises to cut through the perceived rot, regardless of their own adherence to democratic norms [36]. The shift in public discourse, from condemning corruption as a specific transgression to viewing it as a pervasive "cancer" on the body politic that must be "excised" [21], reflects a growing intolerance but also risks an "anti-corruption fundamentalism" [29]. This fundamentalism, as articulated by Huntington [29], risks rejecting politics altogether by insisting on "unreasonable puritanical standards" that ignore the complex social realities and practical necessities of political compromise and negotiation.

Corpuz's prescient argument from decades ago—that Philippine politics must be understood within its own unique historical, social, and economic context rather than being judged solely by "alien standards" derived from Western models [19]—remains profoundly relevant. To insist on an ideal standard that is impossible to meet given the prevailing realities, he warned, leads to a "never never land of Filipino politics," where laws are passed but unenforced, and pronouncements remain empty [19]. The tension between the formal-legalistic understanding of corruption (abuse of public office) and a more culturally embedded understanding, where practices like *diskarte* (making ends meet) blur the lines between necessity and illegality, is a crucial aspect of this dilemma. The focus group discussions convened by the Committee for the Evangelization of Culture (CEC) in 2002, revealing how ordinary Filipinos engaged in nuanced discriminations regarding various "corrupt"

acts based on context, need, and perceived harm, underscore this complex reality at the communal level [17]. For many Filipinos, particularly those facing scarcity, the line between corruption and *diskarte* is not always clear, and they "cannot afford to be precious about it" [17].

## CONCLUSION

The historical narrative of corruption and anti-corruption in the Philippines since 1946 is one of relentless churning, not stagnation. While the incidence of corruption scandals has been chronic and widespread across every administration, the public's perception and tolerance for corruption have demonstrably shifted over time. From the functionalist "tolerance" observed in the early republic to the galvanized "intolerance" that culminated in the People Power revolutions, and the subsequent, more nuanced (and sometimes cynical) responses of the democratic period, Filipino society has undergone a significant "moral education." This dialectic—the interplay between the pervasive reality of corruption and the persistent efforts to combat it—has fundamentally shaped the nation's political development, driving a unique form of political modernization from below.

The legacy of corruption in the Philippines is deeply rooted in weak state institutions, the enduring power of political dynasties, and a historically ingrained culture of patronage and clientelism. These factors have allowed corrupt practices to adapt and proliferate, undermining good governance, hindering economic progress, and perpetuating social inequalities. Anti-corruption efforts, though numerous and often passionate, have faced significant headwinds, primarily due to a lack of consistent political will, the vulnerability of oversight institutions, and the sheer resilience of corrupt networks. The emergence of a global anti-corruption framework, while providing new tools and perspectives, has also introduced the challenge of "anti-corruption fundamentalism," which, by disembedding corruption from its social context, risks fostering cynicism and a rejection of actual, complex political realities.

Moving forward, addressing corruption in the Philippines necessitates a paradigm shift beyond mere episodic crackdowns or the imposition of idealized external standards. A truly effective anti-corruption strategy must be comprehensive and sustained, focusing on fundamental institutional strengthening, promoting transparency, and enhancing genuine accountability across all levels of government. It requires nurturing a robust culture of integrity, not just through legal frameworks but also by acknowledging and engaging with the complex social and economic realities that shape everyday behaviors. Empowering independent oversight bodies, fostering an active and critical civil society, and cultivating a citizenry that demands both accountability and pragmatic solutions are paramount.

Ultimately, the struggle against corruption in the Philippines is a continuous battle for the very soul of its

politics—a contest over the acceptable boundaries of public behavior and the true purpose of public office. Recognizing the historical trajectory of change, even amidst perceived continuity, is crucial. It underscores that while the journey is long and arduous, progress is possible, and the nation's capacity for political self-assertion and moral deliberation remains a potent force for future transformation.

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