

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Fragile Recovery of Philippine Democracy: Uneven Stabilization under the Marcos Jr. Administration

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Abstract

This paper examines the Philippines' democratic backsliding under President Rodrigo Duterte (2016 - 2022) and evaluates early, uneven signs of stabilization under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (2022 - present). Utilizing the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset and recent scholarship in the field, this study examines how Duterte-era autocratization, characterized by executive aggrandizement, violence, lawfare, and digital disinformation, has led to the Philippines' classification as an electoral autocracy. Despite the Marcos Jr. administration's achievements in mitigating media harassment and its series of rulings that appear to favor civil liberties, fundamental inadequacies in the rule of law, information integrity, and electoral quality remain unresolved. The Philippine democratic recovery is characterized by its fragility and partiality, which are contingent upon the interplay among institutional reform, societal mobilization, and political incentives. The study identifies potential pathways for meaningful democratic restoration and the risks that could trigger renewed autocratization.

Introduction

Since its democratic transition in 1986, the Philippines has maintained competitive elections but has encountered challenges in consolidating liberal democratic institutions. The presence of clientelism, the weakness of political parties, and repeated episodes of executive overreach created structural vulnerabilities that were subsequently exploited during the Duterte presidency. During the Duterte administration, a discernible pattern of gradual, legalistic autocratization emerged, marked by mounting pressure on independent media outlets, intimidation of civil society organizations, politicization of institutions, the dissemination of disinformation to incite polarization, and the manipulation of the electoral environment.

V-Dem indicators demonstrate that by 2022, the Philippines had reached its nadir in terms of liberal democracy during the post-Marcos era, and it was designated as an electoral autocracy. During the period in which elections were being conducted, there was a conspicuous absence of measures implemented to ensure the safeguarding of human rights and the establishment of a level playing field. The election of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in 2022 did not immediately reverse this democratic decline.

Instead, it ushered in a period of tentative stabilization, but not a clear democratic turnaround. The present study analyzes this fragile recovery, emphasizing both the institutional and social dimensions of resilience and the remaining challenges that will shape the country's democratic trajectory.

Theoretical Lens: Backsliding, Polarization, and Democratic Resilience

The paper aligns with V-Dem's conceptualization of democratic backsliding as the gradual deterioration of liberal institutions, often initiated by elected executives employing legal or quasi-legal mechanisms. The phenomenon of backsliding manifests within the context of institutional and social dimensions.

1. Institutional Drivers of Backsliding

The institutional forces that have contributed to the observed backsliding in the Philippines can be largely attributed to a series of expansive actions taken by the executive branch. These actions have included an augmentation of presidential authority, which has occurred in a manner that has effectively undermined the functions of institutions responsible for checks and balances. This has been achieved through the strategic co-option, pressure, or circumvention of these institutions, resulting in a weakening of accountability mechanisms and a concomitant erosion of protections for fundamental rights, regulatory independence, and institutional oversight.

This dynamic was further compounded by the strategic exploitation of the legal system, a practice often referred to as "lawfare," which aimed to dissuade journalists, activists, and political adversaries through the selective prosecution of certain individuals and the imposition of regulatory constraints, thereby creating a nebulous distinction between legitimate law enforcement and political repression. These dynamics operated in conjunction with electoral manipulation, encompassing the utilization of disinformation networks, clientelist mobilization, and coercive local strategies that distorted the electoral playing field. Coordinated disinformation campaigns, which escalated significantly in 2016, have been shown to reshape public perceptions, intensify polarization, and delegitimize watchdog institutions (Arugay and Mendoza 2025). Collectively, these mechanisms systematically diminished the intensity of political competition and consolidated the advantage held by the executive branch within institutions that were established to guarantee impartiality and justice.

2. Social Drivers of Backsliding

The social factors that contribute to democratic regression in the Philippines are characterized by the escalation of polarization, which has led to the exacerbation of in-group/out-group divisions, the hardening of partisan identities, and a decline in tolerance for opposition. This has resulted in citizens becoming more inclined to rationalize abuses by favored leaders and to harbor distrust towards institutions associated with opposing camps. This antagonistic climate was reinforced by persistent information disorder, fueled by coordinated disinformation networks that distorted public debate, legitimized illiberal narratives, and undermined the credibility of watchdog institutions such as the press, civil society, and the courts. In the long term, these disruptions contributed to the erosion of norms, thereby weakening public commitment to pluralism, accountability, and the protection of

rights. Furthermore, they led to a reduction in the political costs incurred by illiberal actors. Consequently, democratic regression became increasingly entrenched within the political structure.

3. Resilience

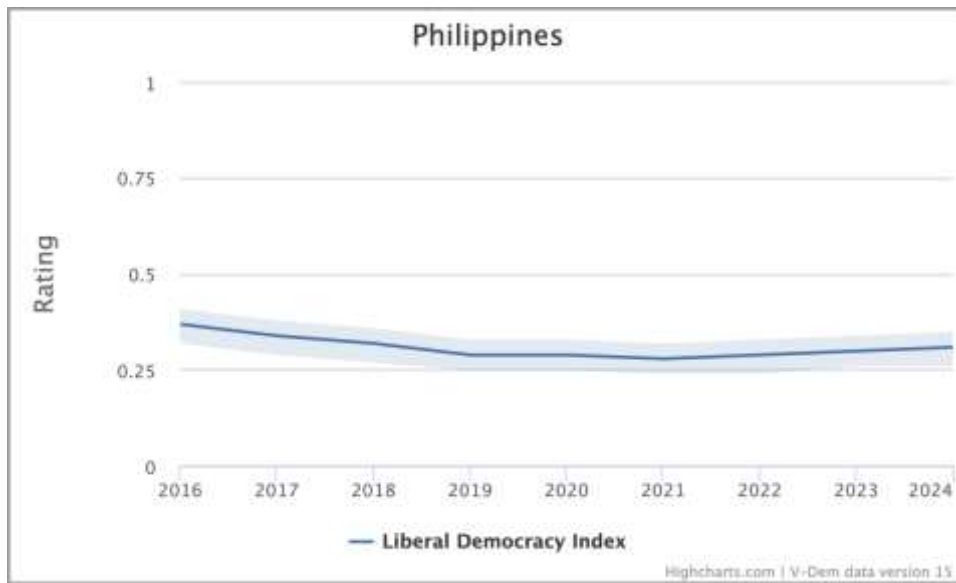
The concept of democratic resilience, as it pertains to the Philippines, signifies the capacity of institutions, civic actors, and social norms to withstand or counter democratic erosion. This resilience is most evident in pockets of judicial independence, where courts have occasionally resisted executive overreach in high-stakes cases. These openings are reinforced by investigative media, supported by transnational press-freedom networks, which continue to expose abuses even as national checks weaken. The concept of resilience is evident in various societal entities, including civil society organizations engaged in rights advocacy, election monitoring, and anti-corruption efforts. Electoral competition, despite its inherent distortions, provides a platform for opposition and reform-oriented leaders to emerge, albeit within a constrained environment. Subnational reform coalitions, wherein local governments and civic partners engage in experimentation with participatory and transparent governance models, are another manifestation of resilience. The confluence of these factors engenders opportunities for democratic recovery that are meaningful, albeit uneven and contingent.

Empirical Trends from V-Dem (2016 – 2024)

V-Dem's 2025 update encapsulates the depth and persistence of the decline that began during the Duterte administration and the subsequent partial stabilization under Marcos Jr.

The Liberal Democracy Index for the Philippines indicates a precipitous decline from 2016 to 2021, reaching its nadir in 2022 at approximately 0.284 (see Figure 1). While there has been a slight uptick in 2023 to approximately 0.287, this movement reflects stagnation rather than a significant democratic rebound. The country's current score is significantly below its early-2000s peak of approximately 0.44, thereby underscoring the extent of institutional deterioration and the limited scope of recent stabilization efforts. In this context, the Philippines remains categorized as an electoral autocracy in 2025, reflecting continued deficiencies in rights protections, judicial independence, and oversight.

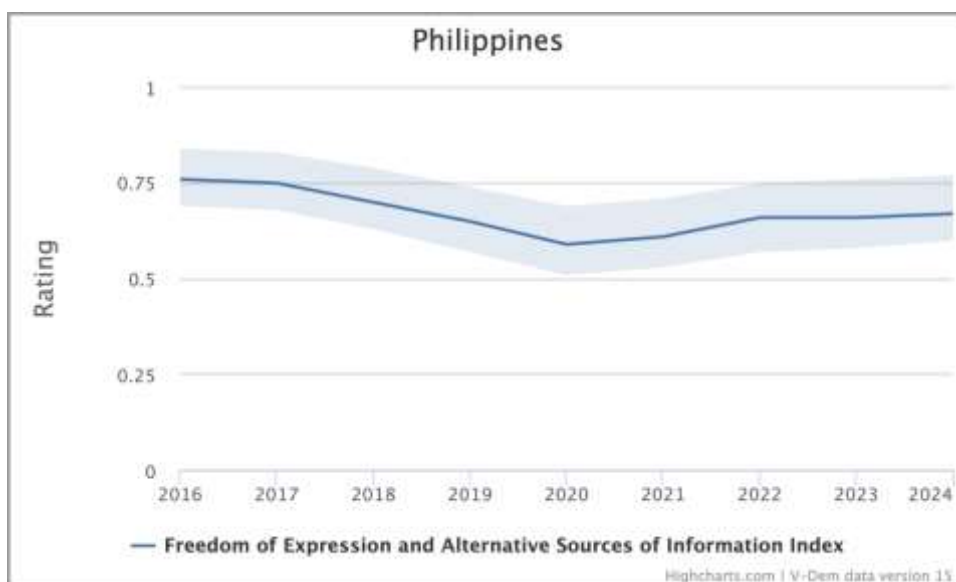
Figure 1: Liberal Democracy Index of the Philippines (2016 - 2024)



Source: Varieties of Democracy Country Graph, 2025.

Across a range of dimensions, V-Dem indicators demonstrate a consistent pattern of institutional and rights-based deterioration during the Duterte years. As illustrated in Figure 2, there was a precipitous decline in freedom of expression between 2016 and 2020. This period coincided with a proliferation of media harassment, online trolling, and legal intimidation directed at journalists (Magno and Teehankee 2022).

Figure 2: Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index of the Philippines (2016 - 2024)

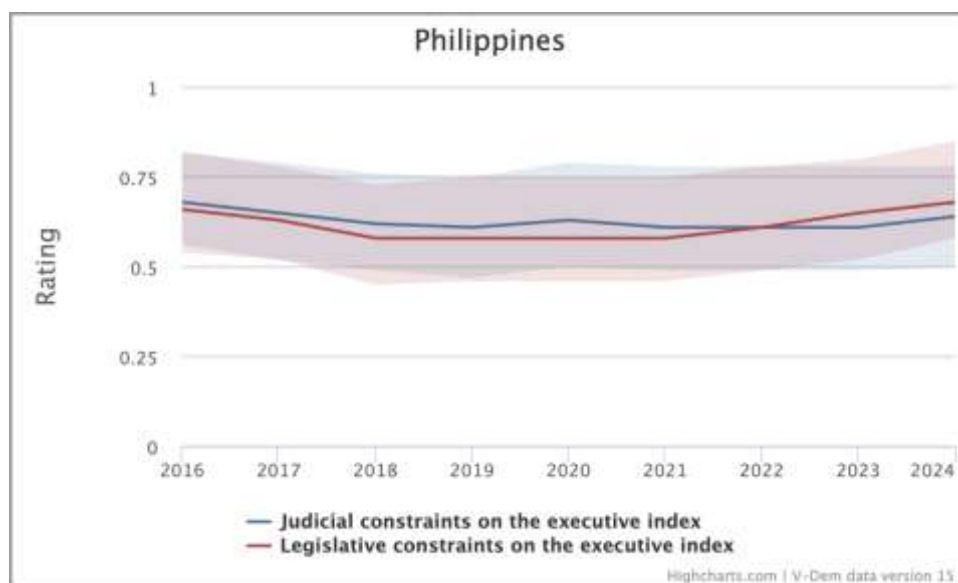


Source: Varieties of Democracy Country Graph, 2025

Concurrently, constraints on the executive branch from the judicial and legislative branches were seen as weakening, as Congress and oversight bodies came under political pressure (see Figure 3). Duterte's allies in Congress blocked ABS-CBN's franchise renewal and threatened the abolition of the Commission on Human Rights, episodes demonstrative of the diminishing space for independent institutions (Magno 2021). Concurrently, there was a marked erosion of civil liberties, driven by the violence and impunity associated with the drug war. This dynamic engendered a pervasive climate of fear and effectively normalized coercive governance.

Electoral integrity was also compromised. The Clean Elections Index underwent a persistent decline from 2022 to 2024, reflecting entrenched vote-buying, political violence, and the growing influence of digital manipulation. These trends are consistent with the Philippines' classification as an electoral autocracy, where constitutional checks are effectively nullified and legal mechanisms are systematically employed to skew the electoral landscape and muzzle dissenting voices (Dressel and Bonoan 2019). When considered collectively, these developments exemplify a well-established autocratization trajectory: initially weakening the information environment, subsequently neutralizing watchdog institutions, then consolidating executive power, and finally distorting elections to entrench authority.

Figure 3: Judicial and Legislative Constraints on the Executive Index of the Philippines (2016 - 2024)



Source: Varieties of Democracy Country Graph, 2025

The Marcos Jr. Administration: Plateau, Partial Recovery, and Persistent Vulnerabilities

The Marcos Jr. administration can be characterized as a period of fragile stabilization, neither maintaining the intensity of Duterte's previous actions nor reversing them decisively. Although overt repression has been mitigated, the institutional environment remains fragile, marked by compromised oversight mechanisms, an overabundance of information, and disparate constraints on executive actors.

Preliminary indications from the Marcos Jr. administration indicate a limited relaxation of the authoritarian atmosphere that prevailed during the final years of the Duterte administration. The prevalence of anti-media rhetoric has decreased, and there has been a decline in the number of recorded killings of journalists. These developments have contributed to a slightly less hostile environment for the press (Hutt 2025). This shift is evidenced by the cessation of the Liberal Democracy Index's downward trend and a modest positive shift in 2023. At the event level, court rulings that demonstrate support for press freedom, most notably the acquittals of Maria Ressa, suggest the presence of pockets of judicial independence and a degree of institutional resistance to past patterns of lawfare. While media practitioners acknowledge some improvements, they also emphasize that the fundamental causes of repression remain largely unaddressed and that substantial reforms are still required in the broader information ecosystem.

These changes are reflected in V-Dem's slight uptick in judicial and legislative constraints on the executive branch, suggesting a limited recalibration of horizontal accountability. Nevertheless, these advancements, while noteworthy, do not signify a comprehensive systemic transformation. Instead, these phenomena signify a transition in the political discourse and the emergence of discrete countervailing actions within state institutions. The overall situation can be characterized as one of fragile stabilization, indicating a shift away from rapid autocratization towards a state of tenuous stasis or early-stage liberalization. However, this shift does not entail the deep institutional changes necessary to reverse the trajectory of democratic decline.

Despite modest improvements since 2022, the Philippines remains classified by V-Dem as an electoral autocracy. This classification reflects persistent deficiencies in rights protections, institutional constraints, and electoral integrity. Disinformation infrastructures, many of which played a crucial role in shaping the 2022 electoral landscape, continue to distort public debate and reinforce illiberal narratives, weakening citizens' ability to hold power to account. This dynamic perpetuates the vulnerability of the information ecosystem, as evidenced by the persistence of organized networks of digital manipulation and commercialized disinformation production. A 2025 national survey revealed that 67% of Filipinos expressed concern over online disinformation (Barreiro Jr. 2025). This concern is particularly salient in the context of the ongoing discord between the two highest-ranking officials of the land. The period of heightened conflict and controversy culminated during Vice President Sara Duterte's impeachment proceedings, which occurred a month subsequent to the arrest of her father, former President Rodrigo Duterte. As the political crisis intensified, there was a proliferation of information disorder, with online platforms being inundated with false and misleading narratives targeting rival factions, activists, and journalists. (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism 2025).

In the context of these conditions, the political crisis surrounding Sara Duterte's impeachment over allegations of graft, misuse of public funds, and high crimes, followed by the decision of the Supreme Court to void the complaint on constitutional and due-process grounds (Al Jazeera 2025; Flores 2025), revealed the contention for both the fragility and resilience of democratic institutions. On the one hand, the high court's decision highlighted the significance of constitutional safeguards and the rule of law in preventing political persecution. This judicial intervention can be interpreted as a manifestation of resilience. Conversely, popular skepticism was reinforced by the belief that institutional mechanisms can deliver substantive accountability in cases involving powerful figures.

The arrest of former President Rodrigo Duterte, as ordered by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged crimes against humanity during his war on drugs (International Criminal Court 2025), signifies the emergence of external mechanisms to ensure accountability for grave violations of international law. This development offers a potential avenue for achieving justice when domestic accountability mechanisms are ineffective or unavailable.

Furthermore, the Marcos Jr. administration has not demonstrated any significant progress in addressing the issue of corruption. The intensification of governance pressures following the exposure of a large-scale corruption scandal involving flood-control infrastructure was evidenced by audits and investigative reports that revealed thousands of anomalous, substandard, and ghost projects (Gomez 2025). The aftermath of the incident included resignations at the cabinet level, shifts in congressional leadership, inquiries into the incident, sustained protest mobilizations, public demands for accountability, and even discreet murmurs of a possible coup.

The persistent challenges related to corruption can be attributed to the inherent deficiencies in the horizontal accountability framework. The legislature, which is dominated by pro-administration coalitions, offers limited oversight of executive actions. Collectively, these persistent vulnerabilities exemplify the discrepancy between the marginal enhancements in political discourse and the comprehensive institutional reforms necessary for democratic reestablishment. The development accentuates a fundamental tension within the Philippine democratic framework, wherein the discourse oscillates between procedural-legalism and the pursuit of institutional integrity, juxtaposed against the imperative for genuine accountability. This discourse is further exacerbated by the pervasive influence of disinformation, the intricacies of elite politics, and the absence of robust internal constraints. The result is a political landscape that has stabilized but not democratized, with core illiberal features still firmly embedded.

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The depth of backsliding under Duterte, and the fragility of recovery under Marcos Jr., reflect long-standing structural weaknesses in the Philippine political system. Institutionally, personality-driven political parties engender limited programmatic accountability, while historically weak mechanisms of checks and balances create opportunities for executive dominance. These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by the phenomenon of penal populism, whereby the public's heightened demand for order, intensified by the pervasiveness of crime narratives, has engendered a widespread acceptance of coercive governance. This phenomenon has been associated with democratic erosion in comparative studies (Iglesias 2025). Concurrently, the proliferation of digital information has precipitated a decline in public trust in institutions and has engendered a pernicious

distortion of electoral incentives through the implementation of persistent disinformation campaigns. These dynamics contribute to social polarization and the erosion of norms, with declining public commitment to democratic principles reducing the political cost of illiberal actions. The severity of backsliding and the precariousness of the current stabilization can be explained by a combination of structural, informational, and societal factors.

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Pathways to Democratic Recovery

Meaningful recovery requires coordinated action across institutions and societal actors. First is as follows. This necessitates a multifaceted approach that enhances both the integrity and accessibility of the legal system. This includes the promotion of rights-oriented strategic litigation, aimed at challenging abuses of power and reinforcing constitutional protections. Additionally, it encompasses the assurance of transparency and merit-based judicial appointments, with the objective of safeguarding the judicial bench from political influence. Concurrently, the augmentation of legal aid services and the modernization of court administration through enhanced case management, digitalization, and optimized resources can mitigate vulnerabilities to interference and guarantee that justice is expeditious, credible, and universally accessible.

Second is safeguarding the information ecosystem. The enhancement of the information environment necessitates the implementation of comprehensive reforms that address both structural vulnerabilities and public engagement. This includes the implementation of enhanced regulatory frameworks for political platforms, ensuring transparency in political advertising, and the mitigation of coordinated inauthentic behavior that distorts public discourse. Concurrently, the implementation of media freedom reforms is imperative to ensure the protection of journalists and to safeguard the autonomy of reporting against potential legal or political persecution. These measures should be complemented by sustained support for fact-checking initiatives and media literacy programs, enabling citizens to better recognize disinformation and participate in a healthier, more informed public sphere.

Third is revitalizing electoral integrity. The revitalization of electoral integrity necessitates the fortification of oversight mechanisms and technological safeguards in electoral processes. This

objective entails the enhancement of campaign finance transparency, encompassing real-time disclosures that curtail the covert influence of financial capital in political processes. Additionally, it necessitates the establishment of a more autonomous and adequately resourced Commission on Elections (COMELEC), endowed with the capacity to enforce electoral regulations impartially and manage the increasingly intricate operations of election administration. Moreover, the effective regulation of deepfakes and AI-enabled manipulation is imperative to safeguard voters against emergent forms of digital deception that jeopardize the fairness and credibility of the electoral process.

Fourth is empowering civil society and subnational governance. To that end, the present study proposes a framework for fostering broad issue coalitions that link rights advocacy, transparency initiatives, and improvements in service delivery. This framework enables civic actors to mobilize wider constituencies for democratic reform. Concurrently, local governance innovations—ranging from participatory budgeting to open contracting and rights-based policing—can function as pragmatic exemplars for national-level transformation, thereby illustrating how accountability and citizen engagement can thrive even within a constrained democratic environment.

Fifth is forming effective narrative of change. The reconstruction of public demand for democracy necessitates the establishment of a nexus between abstract democratic principles and the quotidian concerns of citizens, such as security, economic opportunity, and fair treatment. It is imperative to illustrate that rights and accountability are inextricable from daily life and indispensable for attaining safety, prosperity, and justice for all.

Sixth is enforcing anti-corruption measures. The Marcos Jr. administration's capacity to translate rhetoric into genuine institutional reform may be assessed by examining its enforcement of anti-corruption measures in public works and infrastructure. The flood-control scandal necessitates three immediate institutional requirements for change. The first component of the proposed system is the transparency and public accessibility of project inventories. The second component is the swiftness and impartiality of criminal and administrative investigations targeting middlemen, contractors, legislators, and even individuals in positions of authority. The third component is systemic reform in procurement and contracting, stronger independence, and mechanisms for audit and citizen monitoring. These reforms will make anti-corruption measures appear less performative but more credible and trustworthy. The swift resolution of recent public works scandals is an essential component of effective anti-corruption efforts, as it demonstrates that abuses of power will not be tolerated. In addition, strong institutional deterrence, which is achieved through the certainty of consistent punishment of offenders, is crucial. The implementation of these measures can contribute to the restoration of public trust, the reinforcement of accountability norms, and the demonstration that integrity in governance is an essential foundation for democratic recovery.

Conclusion

The presidency of Duterte has illustrated the rapid dissolution of democratic institutions when confronted with a coordinated strategy of coercion, legal warfare, and disinformation. The normalization of extrajudicial violence, the politicization of legal and regulatory tools, and the industrial-scale manipulation of the information environment collectively precipitated a prolonged episode of autocratization in the Philippines. While the Marcos Jr. administration has moderated the most aggressive forms of repression, as evidenced by reduced anti-media rhetoric, selective judicial

pushback, and a halt in the Liberal Democracy Index's steep decline, these shifts represent stabilization rather than democratic renewal. Key illiberal structures remain intact, and the country continues to exhibit the defining traits of an electoral autocracy, with limited checks on executive power and persistent distortions in the public sphere and electoral arena.

Consequently, the Philippines finds itself at a critical juncture in its history. The present moment of tentative equilibrium has the potential to evolve into a more entrenched authoritarian drift if institutional weaknesses remain unaddressed and if disinformation networks, clientelist politics, and inadequate accountability persist in shaping political incentives. Conversely, it could serve as a foundation for a gradual democratic recovery, but only if state institutions, civil society, media, reformist local governments, and international partners act in coordinated and mutually reinforcing ways. This necessitates not only the active resistance of novel forms of coercion and manipulation but also the proactive reconstruction of public trust. This reconstruction can be achieved through the implementation of credible investigations and the assurance of public restitution, thereby reinforcing the capacities of oversight bodies. Absent deliberate reform, the inertia of the prevailing system may perpetuate illiberalism rather than establish a reversible causal pathway.

The potential of the present stabilization to serve as a foundation for democratic restoration, or its mere function as a respite preceding an escalation in autocratization, hinges on the navigation of the ensuing years, particularly with regard to anti-corruption measures. The Philippines has demonstrated authentic, albeit disparate, democratic resilience, as evidenced by independent court rulings, the prevalence of vibrant civil society networks, and the emergence of local innovation. However, these assets must be activated, protected, and institutionalized to wield substantial influence. The opportunity for democratic renewal remains, albeit with limited scope, necessitating the sustained commitment of political actors, active societal engagement, and institutional dedication. The trajectory of the region in the coming years will be contingent on the successful scaling and alignment of these sources of resilience, which are essential in counteracting the entrenched forces of autocratization.

This study makes a significant contribution to the academic discourse on democratic backsliding and fragile recovery in the Philippines. By synthesizing V-Dem data with event-level evidence, it offers a comprehensive illustration of how institutional erosion and societal dynamics converged under the administration of President Duterte. Additionally, it sheds light on how selective pockets of resilience have shaped the tentative stabilization witnessed during the Marcos Jr. administration. The study underscores the multidimensional nature of autocratization, encompassing coercive governance, lawfare, disinformation, and weakened checks and balances. It also identifies the judicial, media, civil society, and subnational actors that have persisted in providing opportunities for democratic renewal. However, the analysis is subject to several limitations. First, V-Dem's annual temporal granularity may obscure short-term shifts. Second, challenges arise in isolating causal effects amid overlapping political developments. Third, a need exists for deeper subnational analysis to capture variation across local governments, security environments, and civil society ecosystems. These constraints underscore the value of future work that integrates more granular datasets, qualitative field research, and comparative subnational perspectives.■

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This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

“Post-2023 Thailand: Democratic Backsliding from Authoritarian Resilience and Elite Compromise”

979-11-7584-060-7 95340

Date of Issue: 12 February, 2026

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