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STABLE PHILIPPINE
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THE WAY FORWARD



STABLE PHILIPPINE ANTI-CORRUPTION INSTITUTIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

This Stratbase Occasional Paper examines the Philippines' response to recent corruption scandals, focusing on the proposal for an Independent People's Commission (IPC). It analyses the IPC's legislative progress, structure and alignment with global best practices, while highlighting challenges such as political influence and overlapping mandates. The paper offers recommendations for meaningful reform, emphasizing the need for independence, expanded scope, and clear functions to ensure effective, long-term anti-corruption efforts in the Philippines.

The Philippines has been under the international spotlight as of late owing to the tumultuous corruption scandals that have rocked the nation in 2025. These involved irregularities, mismanagement, and, in effect, corrupt behaviour regarding flood control projects across the Philippines, events that have eroded public opinion towards transparency and accountability in Philippine government agencies. While most of the responses towards these issues were highly politicised and related to investigating responsibility, one particular response worth discussing relates to ongoing discussions towards the creation of a stronger oversight agency. The most recent one is the proposal for the creation of an Independent People's Commission (IPC), a priority currently under the Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council (LEDAC) with support from both houses of Congress.

The IPC reflects global trends emerging in the 1990s on the rise of independent, highly influential agencies with anti-corruption components, or anti-corruption agencies themselves that have taken the lead on detection, investigation, education and prevention, monitoring, and asset recovery as

opposed to having multiple agencies cover these fronts. While the IPC is an innovative approach that reflects a growing commitment to respond to issues of corruption, critical observation can be made as to its limited scope, its independence, and its purpose.

This occasional paper discusses the following points. First, the Philippine context of corruption will be provided, outlining existing perspectives within the Marcos Jr. administration on transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption. Second, the paper discusses the proposed IPC that addresses the most recent corruption scandal involving flood control projects. Here, the paper outlines the benefits of a commission such as the IPC and its deficiencies in contrast to global anti-corruption trends, wherein the IPC is compared to integrity institutions such as anti-corruption agencies. The third section provides recommendations for a stronger commission, such as expanding the scope beyond infrastructure, among others. The final section presents the conclusion.

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CONTEXT

Corruption is systemic in Philippine society. The 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), released in February of this year, reflected the aftermath of the previous year's controversial flood-control project scandals, with a score of 32, the lowest since the start of the revised CPI in 2012 (100 is clean, 0 is very corrupt). This score showed a 1-point decline from 2024 and is the lowest the Philippines has recorded since the start of the revised CPI in 2012 (Transparency International 2026). Under the 2024 World Governance Indicators, the Control of Corruption indicator remained at 36.18 out of 100, a figure that has stayed relatively the same since 2014 (World Bank Group 2026).

Philippine corruption is characterised by three main types of corruption: grand corruption (involving the abuse of high-level power and large-scale siphoning of public funds); street-level corruption (involving petty bribes and extortion by low-level public officials such as police, inspectors, or clerks); and political corruption (the abuse of power across government resulting in cronyism, nepotism, or patronage systems). This is coupled with weak accountability mechanisms from overburdened courts, judicial administrative hurdles, and entrenched corrupt behaviour, preventing judicial decisions from being fully implemented.

While the Marcos Jr. administration did not explicitly run and win on an anti-corruption platform, graft and corruption have always been a top concern for the Philippine public. In a Stratbase-commissioned survey by Pulse Asia last December, fighting graft and corruption in government came out second among what Filipinos identified as their most urgent national concerns, with the first being the need for the government to control inflation (Pulse Asia 2025).

While one might argue that the Marcos Jr. administration intended to address corruption in its first few years through public procurement reforms, digital governance, and large-scale systematic changes aimed at preventing money laundering (Espiritu-Amador 2025),

corruption's widespread effects once again entered public consciousness when the President called out inefficiencies across flood control projects (Lacuata 2025) in his 4th State of the Nation Address (SONA). From the SONA, probes by the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee uncovered "ghost" projects found mostly in Bulacan (Abarca 2025) but also scattered nationwide. Beyond unfinished projects, the investigation committee also alleged the existence of a kickback scheme where up to 25% of contract values were used as bribes that left 30-40% for the construction of projects that ended up severely below par. As of today, hearings and probes by the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee are still ongoing with the most recent update being the Anti-Money Laundering Council's securing of freeze orders for more than PHP21.8 billion in assets linked to the flood control scandal.

THE INDEPENDENT PEOPLE'S COMMISSION

While lawmakers continue to grapple with the ongoing developments regarding the flood control scandal, one of the foremost solutions proposed by the Philippine government is the establishment of an Independent People's Commission for Infrastructure (IPC). This priority was first announced under the Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council (LEDAC) last 20 December 2025 as part of a host of other transparency measures prioritised by the LEDAC such as the Anti-Dynasty Bill, the Party-List System Reform Act, and the Citizen Access and Disclosure of Expenditures for National Accountability (CADENA) Act.

Under the Senate of the Philippines, the bill, SB 1512, is currently pending the second reading, under special order from 12 November 2025. Under the House of Representatives, several bills have been filed of varying natures, all under the second reading since 18 March 2026.

IPC PROPOSED STRUCTURE

Under a structure endorsed by the Department of Economy,

Planning and Development (DepDev), an IPC's primary mandate would be to investigate infrastructure project anomalies that may arise. Most versions of the bill incorporate a five-member commission, which would include a retired Supreme Court Justice as chairperson, and the four other members consisting of Certified Public Accountants, an engineer or architect who can advise on technical details, an academic representative primarily versed in public administration and/or public policy, and a representative from a reputable non-governmental organisation.

Some of the main powers proposed under the IPC bill involve both investigations and enforcement power where the following can be done:

- *Motu proprio* investigations (official investigations taken without formal requests)
- Issuing of subpoenas
- Accessing of records, sites, contracts, and documents
- Recommendation on the freezing of assets
- Issuing preventive suspension orders to government officials involved

Under the coordinating element of the proposed IPC, the commission has the power to act as a coordinating body where it can enter agreements with the Ombudsman, the Commission on Audit, the Department of Justice (DOJ), and other agencies for joint investigations and data sharing. However, prosecution would still fall under the remit of the Ombudsman and the DOJ.

While some bills directly address the creation of an independent anti-corruption commission for all purposes (HB 639, HB 6398, HB 6834), the majority of the bills filed under the House of Representatives still pertain to a commission mandated specifically for the investigation of infrastructure-related project anomalies (HB 4453, HB 5699, HB 5798, HB 6322, HB 6967, HB 7240, HB 8637).

These proposals for an IPC stemmed from concerns on the Independent Commission of Infrastructure (ICI) created under

Executive Order 94 which investigated flood control and other infrastructure projects carried out in the last 10 years. The ICI was an ad-hoc three-member committee formed by President Marcos in the wake of graft and corruption exposed through the flood-control scandals. While Malacañang stated that the report has been submitted to the Ombudsman and the DOJ, many have been dissatisfied with the way the flood control probe has been conducted (Cabato 2026). As of now, the status of the bills currently remains a priority, but they have not moved from the second reading in Senate and the House of Representatives.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

The proposal for an IPC has its fair share of benefits, detriments, and consequences. These three will be discussed alongside analysis on strengthening oversight agencies. Later in this section, an evaluation of the proposed IPC will be discussed, and further on, recommendations will be provided.

THE GOOD

Worldwide trends since the 1990s have seen the rise of anti-corruption agencies (ACAs) alongside the focus of aid donors on issues that mar sustainable reform such as corruption (Doig 1995). Across Southeast Asia, the rise of anti-corruption agencies has been studied on a comparative basis, mainly through looking at organisational characteristics that make or break the success of these ACAs. In a sense, the proposal for an independent commission is the Philippines playing catch-up to these trends. One of the measures of success, as seen in the two most successful anti-corruption agencies in Southeast Asia, Singapore's Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) and Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), is their strong widespread support from the public.

This can be said as true for the proposed IPC as well. On 10

December 2025, twenty Philippine business groups showed their joint support for SB 1512 and HB 4453, which jointly pushed for the establishment of an IPC (Senate version) or an Independent Commission Against Infrastructure Corruption (ICIAC). Admittedly, the groups have acknowledged that the proposed independent commission is meant to establish a stronger version of the ICI initially established by the President's Executive Order:

“A fully empowered IPC (Independent People's Commission) or ICAIC (Independent Commission Against Infrastructure Corruption) will strengthen the capacity of the Ombudsman and the Department of Justice to pursue corruption cases more effectively and restore credibility to the pursuit of integrity in public service. At present, the ICI functions only in an advisory capacity. It may request the presence of resource persons and recommend courses of action — whether the filing of charges, the seizure of assets, or the issuance of hold-departure orders — but it cannot act decisively on its own...” (De Castro 2025)

Broad support from the public is a necessary component of strong anti-corruption agencies, as public support can be a buffer against unpredictable political will and attitudes (Byrne et al. 2010). An interesting correlation found in the literature is that anti-corruption agencies are more empowered by higher levels of distrust and unpopularity towards other government agencies (Xu & Xu 2024). This is a perception that the proposed independent commission can leverage as discussions progress.

As a given, political support is a necessary component as well, especially in establishing a truly independent watchdog. This can be represented through its inclusion in the LEDAC as a legislative priority as well as its endorsement by the DepDev and the former Senate President (Senate of the Philippines 2025). While it may seem counterintuitive to rely on the government to prop up an anti-corruption agency, there is general political support for the creation of these oversight bodies, though questions regarding the powers of this agency are where fierce debates usually form.

THE BAD

Despite the show of support for the creation of the IPC, apprehensions on the usefulness of the bill in relation to broader established government agencies and the possibility of duplication within its mandates have arisen. In an interview with a Philippine news organization last 8 December, Presidential Communications Undersecretary Claire Castro raised issues regarding the possibility of duplicate functions with the DOJ and the Ombudsman, whose powers and mandates involve the conducting of hearings, evaluating probable causes, and the filing of cases before the Sandiganbayan and courts (Romero 2025). This duplication of mandates will cause more harm than good because of ambiguity towards roles, especially when large cases arise. Beyond the possibility of issues of constitutionality as mentioned by Undersecretary Castro, issues on duplication of functions and responsibilities especially towards anti-corruption may cause fragmented responses and gaps in enforcement (Pillay 2017).

Current trends and shifting political winds also affect the progress of the bill towards enactment. While the bill has progressed significantly across the Upper House, the bill lacks momentous support from the Lower House, where several members have been implicated in the flood control scandal. There is natural apprehension across the legislative body about the passing of a bill that might investigate them in the future. This waxing and waning of political will, which Quah (2017) argues is the most “critical ingredient” to an effective anti-corruption agency, is the key factor to success and to the implementation of three other factors for success: 1) adequate resources and administrative support like personnel, 2) legal powers, independence and autonomy without political interference, and 3) widespread public support to protect the agency from possible hindrances to carrying out its mandate.

One other problematic aspect of the current proposal is its reactionary nature. Literature reveals that while reactionary anti-corruption responses can be effective to an extent (Lehtinen et al. 2022), a long-term strategy is integral to firmly anchored anti-

corruption initiatives (Pope & Vogl 2000). The reactionary form of the bills currently proposed in both houses implies the creation of an agency that is likely to receive reduced funding after issues of infrastructure anomalies are long past.

THE UGLY

In its worst form, the proposed independent commission is looking to end up as another bureaucratic entity that would worsen the public's views on public sector integrity. One of the biggest issues that will be faced by the commission will be its independence from political influence. The success of independent oversight agencies would also depend on the ability of anti-corruption agencies to be politically insulated. Under the Hong Kong ICAC, the Commission is an entity independent from the civil service. This independence is also a model hosted by the Singaporean Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB). Literature discusses political influence manifesting in several ways, such as threats to terminate work, the dismissal of senior staff, the reduction of mandates or enforcement powers, defunding, and isolating these agencies across other existing agencies where cooperation would be beneficial (Quah 2017). For some countries, these oversight bodies have been reduced to being used as attack dogs against political opponents, generally undermining public confidence in the nation's foremost anti-corruption body (ibid).

But the real loss that would come from the creation of an independent commission without foresight towards the nation's long-term policing needs would be the chance to establish a truly independent and powerful national anti-corruption agency that would be able to effectively crack down on public sector corruption. Instead, the political energy that supposedly should have been channeled into meaningful policy change would result in the creation of an agency that is narrow in scope (in this case, focused only on infrastructure anomalies), redundant, unable to prosecute, and understaffed, which ultimately would lead to yet another failed initiative to address systemic corruption.



TRUE, MEANINGFUL ANTI-CORRUPTION REFORM

Beyond theoretical understandings of meaningful anti-corruption reform that result in change, an understanding of the amount of work across policy, public administration, behaviour, culture, and systems is needed. There is a huge amount of literature on what effective anti-corruption agencies will look like, and in the context of the proposed independent commission, several recommendations in this section will be fleshed out.

1. If the creation of an independent commission is unavoidable, consider expanding its scope beyond the infrastructure sector. Amongst competing priorities and political events in the legislative body, great momentum is necessary to move an anti-corruption bill across both houses. In this case, it would be a wise use of time, resources, and political will to argue for the creation of an independent commission that would encompass a sector beyond infrastructure. This is also an acknowledgement of the systemic and widespread need to address corruption across all sectors and all fronts.
2. The independent commission must have access to documentation, the power to question witnesses, and to hold public hearings. This is a suite of recommendations that comes from literature (Pope & Vogl 2000) on how to strengthen independent oversight agencies, which require robust operational independence and comprehensive enforcement powers.
3. Functions between the Ombudsman and the proposed Independent Commission must be clearly delineated. In many countries with strong oversight agencies, the functions of the Ombudsman and their respective anti-corruption body are clearly delineated. Under Hong Kong's widely successful ICAC, the Ombudsman focuses on bureaucratic delays, maladministration, and unfair practices within the public sector. However, the ICAC clearly homes in on bribery, extortion, and other corrupt practices

and behaviour (ICAC 2026). While this requires structural change in functions especially with the Philippine Ombudsman's role, the two distinct bodies work along side by side as cases and occurrences frequently overlap between maladministration and corrupt practices. This suggestion is frequently cited across Southeast Asian anti-corruption agency literature as well, where the Ombudsman is frequently burdened with anti-corruption and non-corruption-related functions, which significantly takes up most of its resources (Quah 2017).

4. Insulation from political influence is the key to a successful independent commission. This recommendation is arguably the most important political aspect in the establishment of an independent commission. However, it is the most difficult. Under the context of the Philippine bureaucracy, this may seem impossible. However, in future iterations or proposals towards an oversight agency like an independent commission, bills proposed must incorporate lengthy mechanisms that would explicitly focus on the issue of independence and clear delineations from the Philippine civil service.

CONCLUSION

Pope and Vogl (2000) provide insight into the challenges of establishing an effective anti-corruption institution: "While an effective national anticorruption agency that enjoys the public's trust and that is respected by business is difficult to establish and maintain, it is all too easy to undermine." Heeks (2011) also discusses mismatching expectations between ideal forms of oversight agencies and the gap that exists between reality and constrained resources. In the Philippine government's proactive attempts to address corruption by the establishment of commissions, offices, and other bodies, it must be cognizant of political and administrative considerations, taking into account the ability for an organization to be isolated from political influence, duplicity across other existing agencies, the depth and breadth of its scope, and its power.

“ TRUE, MEANINGFUL ANTI-CORRUPTION REFORM REQUIRES COMPREHENSIVE CHANGE ACROSS POLICY, ADMINISTRATION, CULTURE, AND SYSTEMS. IT DEMANDS INDEPENDENT INSTITUTIONS, CLEAR MANDATES, ROBUST ENFORCEMENT POWERS, AND INSULATION FROM POLITICAL INFLUENCE TO ENSURE LASTING IMPACT AND PUBLIC TRUST... ”

Under the context of the proposed independent commission, the reactionary attempts to address infrastructure may be well-intentioned. However, it begs the question as to whether this is a useful endeavour worth investing political capital, time, and resources for that would result in high possibilities for success, or possibly yet another under capacitated agency with no real enforcement teeth. As criticism towards the Independent Commission for Infrastructure created by President Marcos Jr. continues to grow, it might be worthwhile to rethink this legislative priority and establish a good, solid foundation for a stronger, independent national anti-corruption agency in the future, one that is well-endowed administratively, with widespread public trust, as well as intensely isolated against all forms of political influence. While this is an ideal, this momentum has started, and through discourse, it is only a matter of time.



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