POLÍTIKA

CRITICAL ISSUES OF PHILIPPINE POLITY

3RD QUARTER

Democracy at a Crossroads: Reform, Resilience, and Public Trust

The Philippines faces a pivotal democratic test: rebuilding trust through independent oversight, transparent governance, digital literacy, and meaningful citizen participation. Moving beyond personality-driven politics is essential

Economic Security is National Security: Philippine Foreign Policy in the Penultimate Year of the Marcos Jr. Administration

The Philippines is aligning sovereignty, defense, and economic diplomacy in its penultimate year. Deeper partnerships with the United States, Japan, ASEAN, and other allies, alongside the Luzon Economic Corridor and Pax Silica

Legislative Developments and Updates

The administration's recalibrated agenda spans tax, energy, governance, and social reforms, but legislative progress remains uneven. With only one priority measure enacted and many bills still in bicameral, plenary, or committee stages, the remaining sessions will test whether proposals become lasting public benefits

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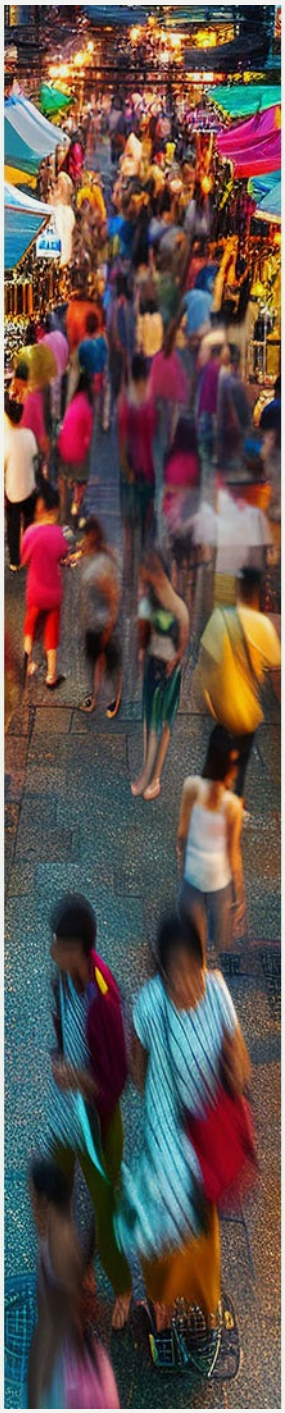

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OVERVIEW

The Third Quarter 2026 issue of Politika examines the Philippines at a consequential political and strategic crossroads. As the Marcos Jr. administration enters its penultimate year, the issue finds that democratic resilience, economic delivery, foreign policy credibility, and legislative reform are increasingly interconnected. Government initiatives in infrastructure, social services, agriculture, digitalization, and defense modernization demonstrate an effort to respond to public needs. Yet persistent corruption risks, institutional fragility, misinformation, political polarization, and falling confidence in national leadership threaten to weaken these gains.

Public opinion places the cost of living at the center of the national agenda: 71% identify inflation as urgent, and affordable food is the leading local expectation of national leaders. Government ratings reveal a major delivery gap, with strongly negative assessments on inflation, poverty reduction, corruption, wages, criminality, and gasoline prices. This dissatisfaction has unfolded alongside a polarized political environment in which Vice President Sara Duterte leads President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in trust, approval, and early 2028 preferences. Her majority-level ratings are anchored in an especially strong regional bias: 92% of respondents in Mindanao rate her favorably, helping sustain her sizeable national advantage. Even so, large nonaligned and undecided constituencies remain politically significant, leaving electoral competition open to shifts driven by policy performance and economic delivery.

The issue argues that rebuilding democratic legitimacy requires more than reactive responses to scandals or short-term policy announcements. It calls for durable safeguards: independent oversight, freedom of information legislation, open contracting, whistleblower protection, transparent public spending, citizen participatory auditing, and digital citizenship education. Digital tools can widen access to information and improve government monitoring, but they must be paired with media literacy and independent fact-checking to counter misinformation and manipulation.

On foreign policy, the Philippines is pursuing an assertive approach centered on sovereignty, defense modernization, and economic diplomacy. Alongside deeper security and economic ties with like-minded partners, particularly the United States and Japan, the government is advancing initiatives such as the Luzon Economic Corridor to improve infrastructure, logistics, connectivity, and investment across key growth areas. It is also positioning the Philippines through Pax Silica to strengthen cooperation in semiconductors, digital infrastructure, and resilient technology supply chains. These economic initiatives complement the country's response to the West Philippine Sea, where credible defense capabilities, principled diplomacy, and stronger alliances remain grounded in the 2016 Arbitral Award.

Legislatively, the administration's recalibrated agenda seeks to advance tax, energy, governance, social welfare, education, health, and environmental reforms. Progress is uneven, however, as many priority bills remain in committee or bicameral deliberation. Overall, this issue contends that the country's path forward depends on pairing effective economic delivery with transparent, participatory, and accountable institutions capable of sustaining reform across political transitions.

I. DEMOCRACY AT A CROSSROADS: REFORM, RESILIENCE, AND PUBLIC TRUST

The Philippines faces a pivotal democratic moment as corruption risks, political instability, and declining public trust expose institutional fragility during the Marcos Jr. administration's penultimate year. Although digitalization, open government initiatives, and growing civil society activism offer avenues for stronger accountability and citizen participation, lasting progress requires reforms that are transparent, preventive, and insulated from political interference. The country's democratic resilience will depend on replacing reactive, personality-driven governance with accountable institutions, digital literacy, and broad public engagement capable of sustaining reform across political transitions.

Emphasizing Urgency and Governance Balance

The Philippines urgently needs to replace reactive, personality-driven governance with independent oversight, preventive anti-corruption controls, and transparent institutions that can withstand political interference. Decisive executive action remains important, but lasting democratic reform depends on balancing it with public consultation, civil society scrutiny, and digital engagement so that government is both capable of acting and accountable to citizens. By institutionalizing transparency and broad participation, the country can rebuild trust and strengthen democratic resilience.

Political Discourse

Political discourse after the 2026 SONA has centered on the need to institutionalize transparency, digital engagement, and civil society participation amid leadership upheavals, corruption scandals, and declining trust. Digital tools such as DBM Compass and Project DIME can strengthen real-time public oversight, but misinformation and polarization require equal investment in digital literacy, independent fact-checking, and responsible online engagement. Stratbase therefore advocates open contracting, whistleblower protection, participatory auditing, media pluralism, and transparent feedback mechanisms that show how public input shapes policy, arguing that democracy depends on an informed and active citizenry working with accountable institutions.

The need for informed, responsible political discourse makes it essential to examine where Filipinos obtain the news and information that shape their views.

Source of News

The recent Pulse Asia survey on the Sources of News describes a political information system dominated by social media, one that can amplify pro-Duterte messaging and make disinformation harder to challenge. Internet use reached 87% nationally in September, up from 85% in July, and 84% of users went online more than once a day. Every internet user reported checking social-media accounts, while 96% used the internet to consume government or political news. Facebook was nearly universal among these users at 100%, and YouTube ownership rose from 73% to 79%. This concentrated, high-frequency platform environment is a serious democratic vulnerability: coordinated narratives, misleading claims, and attacks on opponents can be repeatedly distributed through the same channels that citizens use daily for political information.

The news-source findings show why this vulnerability matters. Eighty-two percent of Filipinos identified the internet as a source of news, and 79% specifically named Facebook, compared with just 2% who cited online news sites. Among internet users, 94% got news through Facebook, versus 63% through YouTube, 22% through TikTok, and only 4% through news websites. The gap suggests that political information is often encountered through platform feeds rather than sought directly from editorial news outlets, where reporting standards, attribution, and corrections are more visible. This shows the existence of an ecosystem especially conducive to the rapid, repeated circulation of unverified and partisan content, allowing Duterte-aligned narratives to shape attitudes without equivalent exposure to independently reported scrutiny.

Mindanao is the clearest illustration of the overlap between a heavily social-media-based news environment and the Duterte bloc's exceptional regional strength. Internet access in Mindanao stood at 83%, 87% cited the internet as a news source, and 85% named Facebook, all indicating that Facebook is a dominant regional conduit for political communication. At the same time, 77% of Mindanao respondents supported or were inclined to support the group of Sara Duterte, Rodrigo Duterte, Bong Go, and their allies, compared with 39% nationwide. The results therefore suggest that a highly networked, Facebook-centered audience may help sustain an entrenched Duterte political base by reinforcing favorable narratives and insulating supporters from adverse information.

Table 1
Overall Sources of News
In Percent/ Multiple Response, up to 3 allowed: **PHILIPPINES**
(September 17-23, 2026)

PulseAsia RESEARCH INC.

In Percent								
		LOCATION				CLASS		
CATEGORY	RP	NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
INTERNET	82	92	79	76	87	92	82	75
Facebook	79	88	75	74	85	88	78	74
YouTube	42	60	43	39	32	48	41	44
TikTok	11	18	11	4	14	10	11	13
Online news sites	2	6	1	1	0	4	2	0
X/Twitter	0.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other social media sites	0.2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
TELEVISION	66	61	76	62	51	74	69	35
National	59	61	73	38	46	64	61	31
Local	11	0	9	25	8	10	12	5
Family / Relatives	34	23	29	29	47	36	31	55
RADIO	22	8	11	43	32	11	22	31
National	6	8	6	3	6	6	6	5
Local	17	0	6	40	28	5	17	28
Friends / Acquaintances	22	18	22	26	20	15	21	30
NEWSPAPER	0.3	2	0	0	0	1	0	0
Broadsheet	0.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
National	0.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Local	0.02	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tabloid	0.2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
National	0.2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Local	0.01	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
None	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0

The Marcos Jr. Administration in Its Penultimate Year: Claimed Achievements and Positive Interventions

As the Marcos Jr. administration entered its fifth year, it cites interventions designed to address Filipinos' leading concerns, including inflation, wages, jobs, poverty, and public safety. Its claimed accomplishments include efforts to stabilize the prices of essential goods, expand transport, energy, and digital infrastructure, create jobs, modernize agriculture and strengthen food security, improve peace and order, deepen international partnerships and OFW protection, broaden healthcare and education access, provide targeted social assistance, and advance climate resilience. However, the durability of these gains depends on overcoming corruption risks, institutional weakness, political volatility, and public distrust through transparent, accountable, and participatory governance.

Realities on the Ground

Awareness and Trust Ratings of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte According to the Social Weather Stations

The September 2026 SWS survey found near-universal awareness of both President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte, but sharply different trust ratings. Marcos was known by all respondents, yet only 36% expressed much trust, compared with 40% who expressed little trust and 22% who were undecided; Duterte, known by 99%, received 56% much trust, 26% little trust, and 17% undecided. Marcos's much-trust rating fell substantially from 64% in July 2024, although it improved modestly from 34% in June 2026, while Duterte's rating remained comparatively stable despite declining from 65% in July 2024. Marcos's strongest support came from older adults, Class ABC respondents, rural residents, and Balance Luzon, whereas distrust was highest among younger, urban, college-educated, Visayan, and Mindanaoan respondents. Duterte's support was strongest in Mindanao, the Visayas, among adults aged 25–34, and among Class E and lower-educated groups, underscoring a polarized political environment in which she retained a broader national trust advantage.

Awareness, Performance, and Trust Ratings of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte According to Pulse Asia

Pulse Asia's September 2026 survey shows a sharp divide in public assessments of the country's top officials: although both President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte are universally known, Marcos received 30% approval versus 49% disapproval and 29% trust versus 48% distrust, while Duterte posted 54% approval versus 27% disapproval and 55% trust versus 27% distrust. Marcos's negative ratings were widespread, peaking in Mindanao, the Visayas, and among Class E respondents, with only the rest of Luzon showing a modest approval edge; Duterte, meanwhile, earned majority approval across all socioeconomic classes and particularly strong support in Mindanao, the Visayas, and Class E. The parallel between performance and trust ratings indicates that perceptions of governance and personal credibility are closely linked, leaving Duterte with a broad confidence advantage while Marcos confronts deeply entrenched public dissatisfaction.

Comparative Perspective

The September 2026 SWS and Pulse Asia surveys consistently show Vice President Sara Duterte holding a substantially stronger public position than President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. While both are nearly universally known, Duterte posted majority trust and approval ratings, whereas Marcos faced net-negative trust and performance assessments. Duterte's support was strongest in Mindanao, the Visayas, and among lower-income respondents, while Marcos performed relatively better in Balance Luzon and among Class ABC groups. Overall, the findings point to divergent political bases: Duterte retained a broader, more cohesive reservoir of confidence, while dissatisfaction with Marcos extended from perceptions of trustworthiness to evaluations of his administration's performance.

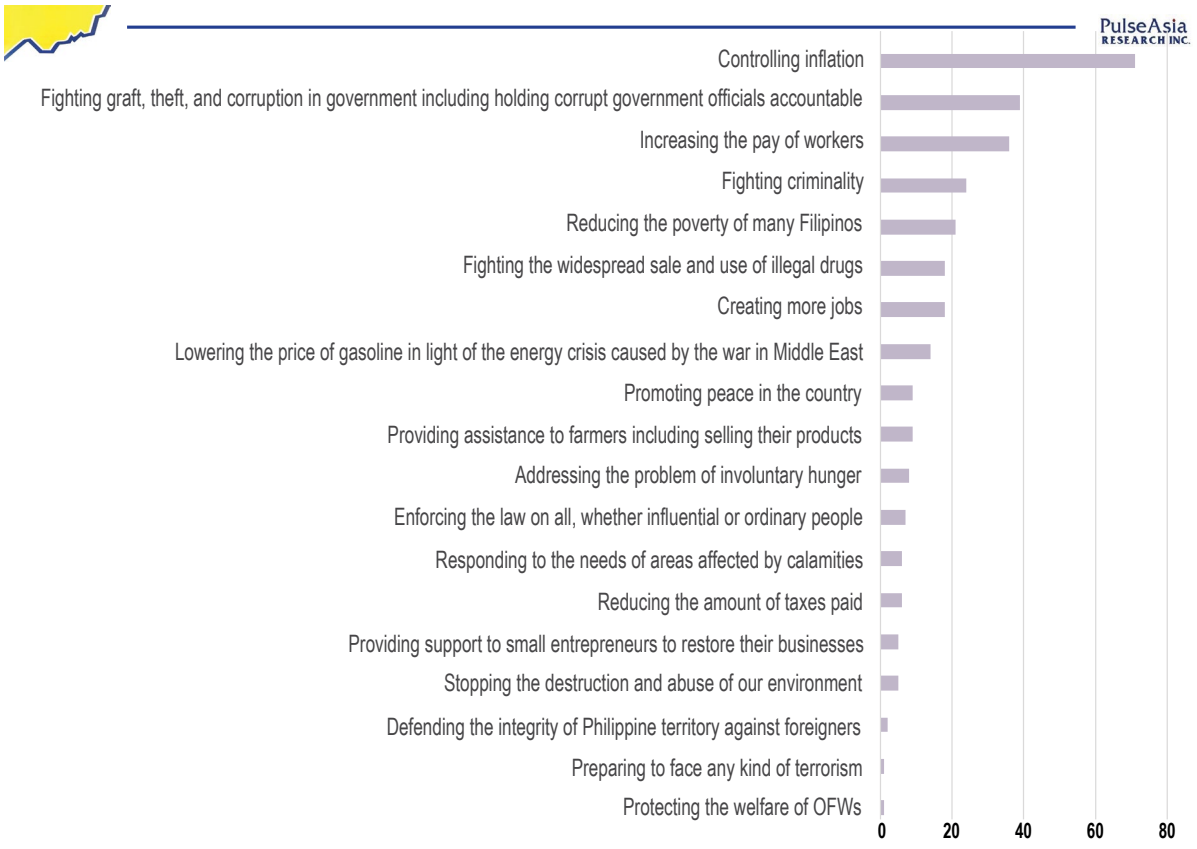
Duterte's sizeable national advantage is anchored above all in Mindanao, where an overwhelming 92% of respondents rate her favorably. This exceptionally strong regional base helps keep her overall trust and approval ratings high even as her support is more mixed in Metro Manila and Balance Luzon. The finding shows that her national standing is not distributed evenly across the country; rather, it is substantially sustained by concentrated loyalty in Mindanao, reinforced by additional support in the Visayas and among lower-income groups. In comparative terms, this gives Duterte a durable reservoir of confidence that Marcos lacks, particularly as dissatisfaction with the administration remains broad across key economic and governance issues.

On the Most Urgent National Concerns

Inflation overwhelmingly dominated Filipinos' urgent national concerns in September 2026, with 71% identifying it as an issue requiring immediate government action, far ahead of corruption (39%) and workers' pay (36%). Concern over rising prices cut across all regions and socioeconomic groups and increased sharply from 57% in July, reflecting intensifying

pressure on household purchasing power. While inflation unified the national agenda, other priorities varied by circumstance: corruption was most salient in Metro Manila and the rest of Luzon, criminality in Mindanao, and poverty and job creation among Class E respondents. Over the longer term, inflation rose 17 points from September 2025, while concern over corruption declined but remained the second-ranked issue, underscoring a public agenda increasingly centered on the cost of living alongside continuing demands for better governance, incomes, jobs, and security.

Table 2
Overall Most Urgent National Concerns
In Percent / Multiple Response, up to 3 allowed: **PHILIPPINES**
(September 17 - 23, 2026)



On Food Inflation and Self-Rated Poverty

Food inflation has become the most immediate expression of economic insecurity for Filipino households. In the September 2026 Pulse Asia survey, 98% reported that the goods and services they regularly purchase had become more expensive, up from 93% a year earlier. Food accounted for the pressure among 94% of affected respondents, while concern over rice rose from 60% to 80%, showing that inflation has reached the staple most central to daily consumption. Higher fuel, transport, and electricity costs compound this burden by increasing both food distribution costs and the share of household budgets consumed by essentials. Inflation is therefore experienced not as an abstract economic indicator but as a direct decline in purchasing power and food adequacy.

This pressure has made food affordability the public's principal test of government responsiveness. Controlling inflation was identified by 71% of Filipinos as requiring urgent government action, and 35% said national leaders should primarily make rice, meat, and fish more affordable. The demand is particularly acute among Class E respondents, 55% of whom prioritized affordable food, and among Metro Manila residents, where 43% did so. These patterns indicate that food-price pressures cut across social groups but fall most heavily where incomes are most constrained or living costs are highest. Effective government action must therefore address not only retail food prices but also the energy, transport, and supply-chain costs that sustain them.

Table 3
Overall Goods or Commodities With Price Increase in the Past Three Months
In Percent / Multiple Response, up to 3 allowed: **PHILIPPINES**
(September 2025 and September 2026)

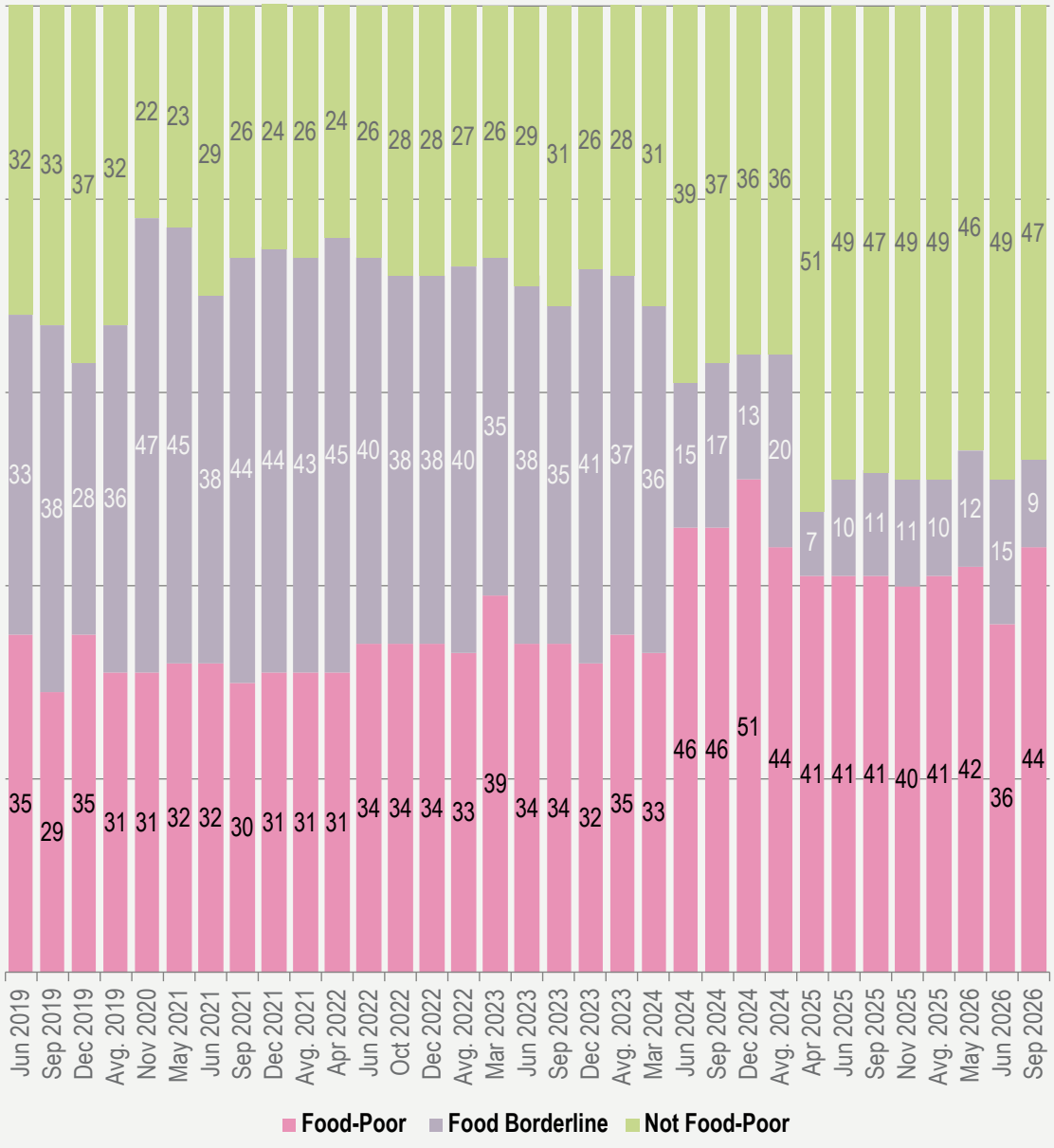
PulseAsia RESEARCH INC.

GOODS OR COMMODITIES WITH PRICE INCREASE		In Percent							
			LOCATION				CLASS		
		RP	NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
TRANSPORTATION EXPENSES	September 2026**	48	27	46	55	60	54	46	60
	September 2025	35	23	24	46	55	33	35	38
	Change*	+ 13	+ 4	+ 22	+ 9	+ 5	+ 21	+ 11	+ 22
Gasoline/Diesel	September 2026**	34	21	35	29	44	45	33	31
	September 2025	23	16	20	17	37	24	25	13
	Change*	+ 11	+ 5	+ 15	+ 12	+ 7	+ 21	+ 8	+ 18
Fare or Transportation	September 2026**	17	6	13	28	21	12	16	32
	September 2025	13	7	4	30	23	9	12	26
	Change*	+ 4	-1	+ 9	-2	-2	+ 3	+ 4	+ 6
LPG	September 2026**	33	56	50	8	11	43	35	13
	September 2025	32	46	45	8	14	38	34	11
	Change*	+ 1	+ 10	+ 5	0	-3	+ 5	+ 1	+ 2
MEDICINE AND OTHER HEALTH NEEDS	September 2026**	10	8	7	16	14	9	9	20
	September 2025	16	14	15	23	16	15	16	19
	Change*	- 6	-6	-8	-7	-2	-6	-7	+ 1
WATER	September 2026**	7	23	5	2	6	7	7	9
	September 2025	17	26	23	10	4	18	17	13
	Change*	-10	-3	-18	-8	+ 2	-11	-10	-4
FOOD	September 2026**	94	85	93	97	97	86	94	98
	September 2025	91	81	88	97	98	87	91	98
	Change*	+ 3	+ 4	+ 5	0	-1	-1	+ 3	0
Rice	September 2026**	80	60	75	87	94	58	81	87
	September 2025	60	39	49	82	79	52	59	79
	Change*	+ 20	+ 21	+ 26	+ 5	+ 15	+ 6	+ 22	+ 8
Other foods aside from rice	September 2026**	53	47	46	67	60	51	52	67
	September 2025	65	62	64	72	65	62	63	82
	Change*	- 12	-15	-18	-5	-5	-11	-11	-15
ELECTRICITY	September 2026**	57	71	63	54	41	68	59	35
	September 2025	56	71	65	41	42	64	58	34
	Change*	+ 1	0	-2	+ 13	-1	+ 4	+ 1	+ 1

*Note: *Change = Figures of UB September 2026 minus Figures of UB September 2025.*

Self-rated food poverty, according to the SWS September survey, reveals the human consequence of these cost pressures. Families that describe their food situation as “mahirap” (44%) are reporting a perceived inability to secure adequate food, while the sizeable borderline group signals widespread vulnerability even among households not currently identifying as food-poor. Changes in self-rated food poverty across survey rounds should thus be read as movements in household resilience: a decline may reflect temporary relief, but it does not establish lasting food security when many families remain vulnerable to another price increase, income loss, or emergency. The discussion consequently frames lower food prices, stronger incomes, and protection against price shocks as mutually necessary conditions for reducing both reported deprivation and the risk of households slipping into food poverty.

Table 4
Self-Rated Food Poverty: Families Whose Food is “Mahirap”
In Percent: **PHILIPPINES**
(June 2019 to September 2026)



SOCIAL WEATHER STATIONS Founded 1985 Statistics for Advocacy

Third Quarter 2026 Social Weather Report
2026 National Survey

On the Comparative Ratings of the National Administration on Selected National Issues

The ratings indicate that the national administration is weakest on the issues Filipinos consider most urgent, particularly the cost of living and household welfare. Inflation, identified by 71% of respondents as requiring immediate action, received just 10% approval and 81% disapproval, worsening from July. Performance was likewise viewed negatively on corruption, the second-ranked concern, with 15% approval and 70% disapproval. On workers' pay, another leading priority, only 29% approved while 49% disapproved; job creation also remained net-negative at 32% approval and 44% disapproval. Assessments were similarly poor on poverty reduction (11% approval, 67% disapproval) and gasoline prices (14% approval, 65% disapproval). These results show that public dissatisfaction is concentrated on the everyday economic pressures and governance concerns most central to citizens' lives.

Table 5
Comparative Performance Ratings of the National Administration on Selected National Issues
In Percent: **PHILIPPINES**
(July and September 2026)

PulseAsia RESEARCH INC.

Selected National Issues	Approval		Change*	Undecided		Change*	Disapproval		Change*
	Jul 26 (A)	Sep 26 (B)	Sep 26 Minus Jul 26 (B-A)	Jul 26 (C)	Sep 26 (D)	Sep 26 Minus Jul 26 (D-C)	Jul 26 (E)	Sep 26 (F)	Sep 26 Minus Jul 26 (F-E)
Protecting the welfare of OFWs	46	52	+ 6	27	27	0	28	21	- 7
Responding to the needs of areas affected by calamities	42	40	- 2	26	25	- 1	31	35	+ 4
Defending the integrity of Philippine territory against foreigners	34	33	- 1	32	34	+ 2	34	34	0
Providing assistance to farmers including selling their products	33	35	+ 2	33	31	- 2	35	34	- 1
Preparing to face any kind of terrorism	29	30	+ 1	35	39	+ 4	37	31	- 6
Fighting criminality	24	24	0	20	19	- 1	56	57	+ 1
Promoting peace in the country	26	23	- 3	24	29	+ 5	50	47	- 3
Creating more jobs	31	32	+ 1	24	24	0	45	44	- 1
Enforcing the law on all, whether influential or ordinary people	28	27	- 1	29	31	+ 2	43	42	- 1
Stopping the destruction and abuse of our environment	30	28	- 2	32	34	+ 2	38	38	0
Increasing the pay of workers	31	29	- 2	22	21	- 1	47	49	+ 2
Lowering the price of gasoline in light of the energy crisis caused by the war in the Middle East	20	14	- 6	21	21	0	59	65	+ 6
Reducing the amount of taxes paid	20	20	0	26	30	+ 4	54	50	- 4
Providing support to small entrepreneurs to restore their businesses	26	26	0	36	39	+ 3	38	35	- 3
Addressing the problem of involuntary hunger	23	22	- 1	25	29	+ 4	53	49	- 4
Fighting graft and corruption in government	16	15	- 1	16	15	- 1	68	70	+ 2
Reducing the poverty of many Filipinos	15	11	- 4	24	22	- 2	61	67	+ 6
Fighting the widespread sale and use of illegal drugs	14	13	- 1	16	16	0	70	71	+ 1
Controlling inflation	12	10	- 2	12	10	- 2	77	81	+ 4

On the Actions National Government Leaders Must Primarily Do to Address Local Community Concerns

The local community findings reinforce the broader performance gap: citizens are asking national leaders to deliver on the same economic and governance priorities where the administration receives its weakest ratings. Affordable food prices are the leading local demand at 35%, mirroring inflation's position as the most urgent national concern and the administration's 10% approval and 81% disapproval rating on inflation control. Calls for jobs and livelihoods (26%) correspond with net-negative ratings on job creation and wage increases, while the 24% prioritizing anti-corruption reflects the administration's 15% approval and 70% disapproval on fighting graft. Accessible education and health care also remain important local expectations. Taken together, the results show that public confidence will depend on visible improvements in food affordability, incomes and employment, clean government, and basic services, tailored to regional and socioeconomic differences.

Table 6
Actions National Government Leaders Must Primarily Do to Address Local Community Concerns
In Percent / Single Answer Only: **PHILIPPINES**
(September 17 – 23, 2026)

PulseAsia RESEARCH INC.

Base: Total Interviews, 100%								
In your opinion, what should national government leaders primarily do to address the concerns in your local community? Please choose one answer only		LOCATION				CLASS		
	RP	NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
Have more affordable food prices in your area such as for rice, meat, fish	35	43	36	31	34	26	34	55
Create more jobs and livelihood opportunities	26	23	19	33	34	31	25	25
Lessen or eliminate corruption to provide better services to the community	24	27	23	30	20	29	25	15
Provide accessible education and healthcare services	25	7	22	7	13	14	16	6

Sa iyong palagay, ano ang pangunahing dapat gawin ng mga pangunahing pinuno ng pamahalaan upang matugunan ang suliranin sa inyong lokal na komunidad? Maaaring pumili ng isang sagot.

Filipinos' Interest in the 2028 Elections, with Regional and Socioeconomic Variations

According to Pulse Asia Research, Inc., Filipinos are entering the May 2028 electoral cycle with unusually strong early engagement: 89% express interest even though the elections were still about 20 months away, and 57% are truly interested. This attention is broad across socioeconomic groups and regions, but its intensity is uneven—Mindanao shows the strongest engagement (97% interested; 82% truly interested), followed by the Visayas, while the rest of Luzon has the lowest level of firm interest (40% truly interested) and the highest share who are only somewhat interested (45%). With just 4% disinterested and 7% undecided, the results indicate a politically attentive electorate, although regional differences suggest that campaign messaging and mobilization will resonate with voters at different levels of intensity.

Voter Preferences for President in the 2028 Elections

A one-on-one Duterte–Robredo contest would give voters the clearest comparison between the country's two most distinct political alternatives. The September 2026 survey shows Sara Duterte leading Leni Robredo, 53% to 34%, but the 13% undecided vote and sharply divided regional patterns indicate that the outcome remains open. Duterte's strength in Mindanao and the Visayas contrasts with Robredo's lead in Balance Luzon and narrow edge in Metro Manila, ensuring that both candidates would need to compete for support beyond their core bases.

For the electorate, a direct contest could encourage a more substantive choice based on competing records, policy priorities, and approaches to governance rather than a fragmented field driven by personalities and vote-splitting. It should also place greater weight on the concerns citizens identify as urgent, particularly inflation, jobs, wages, poverty, corruption, and basic services. As an early two-candidate test rather than a forecast, the survey underscores that voters would benefit most from a campaign in which Duterte and Robredo present clear, evidence-based programs and are held accountable for how they would address everyday economic pressures and strengthen democratic institutions.

Disinformation and malign influence operations may also shape voter preferences. The May 2026 Pulse Asia survey recorded Robredo's presidential-preference rating at 41%.

Statement that Best Describes One's Political Preference (SWS)

The political preference findings help explain the early 2028 presidential race: Sara Duterte's 53% to 34% advantage over Leni Robredo reflects the Duterte bloc's position as the largest declared affiliation, but it also exceeds its 36% partisan base. Her strongest electoral margins in Mindanao and the Visayas align with the regional foundations of Duterte support, while Robredo's leads in Balance Luzon and narrow edge in Metro Manila correspond with the comparatively stronger presence of Marcos-aligned, Robredo-aligned, and nonaligned voters in those areas. Crucially, 34% of Filipinos identify with no political group, and 13% remain undecided in the presidential matchup. These voters underscore that the contest remains fluid: Duterte holds a strong early advantage, but no political camp commands a consolidated national majority.

Individuals, Political Figures, or Groups that Filipinos are Inclined to Support or are Already Supporting (Pulse Asia)

The two findings point to a fragmented electorate in which broad nonalignment coexists with a durable Duterte base. While 42% of Filipinos say they neither support nor are inclined to support any listed personality or group, 39% identify with or lean toward the Duterte bloc, far exceeding support for the Marcos administration (7%) and the liberal or progressive opposition (8%). This pattern is consistent with the political preference results, where the Duterte family and its allies comprise the largest declared bloc at 36%, but nearly as many respondents identify with no political group (34%). Duterte support remains especially concentrated in Mindanao and among lower-income voters, whereas nonalignment is strongest in the Visayas and Balance Luzon and remains substantial across social groups. Taken together, the surveys show that established political loyalties, particularly the Duterte base, retain importance, but no camp has secured a consolidated national majority; the expanding unaffiliated electorate remains central to the country's political competition.

Conclusion

Democratic resilience in the Philippines will be judged less by promises or personalities than by whether institutions can deliver visible, fair, and accountable results. As the 2028 election approaches, voters are entering the campaign period with high interest but deep frustration over inflation, food prices, wages, poverty, corruption, and basic services. The gap between these priorities and the administration's weak performance ratings makes public trust a central electoral issue: candidates will need to show credible programs for easing household pressures while demonstrating how they will protect public funds, enforce accountability, and make government more responsive to citizens.

The emerging electorate is politically fragmented rather than fully captured by any one camp. Early preferences show strong regional bases and a substantial advantage for the Duterte bloc, yet this advantage rests on uneven and concentrated support, particularly in Mindanao, while large shares of Filipinos remain nonaligned or undecided. Building a broad, credible coalition is therefore imperative. It must unite reform-minded forces, local leaders, civil society, business, labor, and communities across regions around a practical program of affordable food, better jobs and wages, clean government, effective public services, and the defense of democratic institutions. Such a coalition should engage Duterte supporters respectfully rather than dismiss them, while persuading unaffiliated and undecided voters through visible performance,

transparent records, and policies that respond to everyday pressures. A one-on-one 2028 contest grounded in evidence-based proposals, responsible digital discourse, independent fact-checking, and genuine public participation can shift politics away from personality-driven competition and toward a clearer choice about economic security, clean government, and institutions capable of sustaining reform across administrations.

II. ECONOMIC SECURITY IS NATIONAL SECURITY: PHILIPPINE FOREIGN POLICY IN THE PENULTIMATE YEAR OF THE MARCOS JR. ADMINISTRATION

As the Marcos Jr. administration entered its penultimate year, the Philippines stands at a critical juncture in its foreign policy and security trajectory. The evolving regional order and persistent sovereignty challenges have compelled the government to recalibrate its diplomatic and security strategies. This narrative examines the administration's approach to foreign policy and security, highlighting key developments, institutional reforms, and policy recommendations that will shape the nation's international standing and resilience.

Policy Priorities and Leadership Style

President Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy combines assertiveness, economic diplomacy, and diversification of foreign relations: defending national sovereignty, modernizing defense capabilities, and advancing economic diplomacy through stronger ties with the United States, Japan, ASEAN, and other partners. The administration has used multilateral forums, trade initiatives, and international summits to pursue investment, digitalization, climate resilience, infrastructure, and broader diplomatic influence. Its approach is constrained, however, by China's actions in the West Philippine Sea, trade and institutional vulnerabilities, and corruption concerns that can limit the gains from new partnerships. Its effectiveness will depend on balancing security resolve with economic pragmatism and credible domestic governance.

Navigating Geopolitical Opportunities and Constraints

The Philippines has expanded its international engagement by seeking a United Nations Security Council seat, deepening ties with ASEAN, and negotiating new labor and economic agreements. These efforts have opened opportunities for broader diplomatic influence and employment for Filipinos abroad.

However, the administration faces significant constraints. China's assertiveness in the West Philippine Sea remains a central challenge, testing the government's resolve to defend sovereignty while managing economic and security risks. Internal debates over trade fairness and institutional vulnerabilities, as well as corruption scandals, have also limited the administration's ability to fully capitalize on new partnerships and policy space.

Public Sentiment and Political Legitimacy

Public sentiment broadly supports defending Philippine sovereignty and working with like-minded partners in the West Philippine Sea under the 2016 Arbitral Award, giving the administration a strong basis for principled diplomacy, credible defense, and deeper cooperation with trusted allies. Political legitimacy depends on translating that support into transparent, participatory policymaking: using digital and consultative tools to capture public views, clearly reporting how those views shape decisions, and enabling citizens to scrutinize foreign-policy outcomes. As the country marks the Award's tenth anniversary, the central task is no longer to establish the legitimacy of Philippine rights, but to protect them through sustained capability-building, accountable leadership, and public trust.

Foreign Policy and Economic Security

Beyond traditional defense and security cooperation, the Philippines is increasingly advancing economic security as a core component of national security by leveraging economic diplomacy to attract investment, strengthen industrial capabilities, and secure critical supply chains. This approach is reflected in the Luzon Economic Corridor (LEC) and Pax Silica, which provide platforms for economic cooperation with key strategic partners, particularly the United States and Japan.

On September 10-11, the Philippines, United States, and Japan co-hosted the inaugural LEC Investment Forum, bringing together around 600 investors, industry leaders, and government officials to advance investment opportunities in infrastructure, energy, digital connectivity, and advanced manufacturing. The LEC partnership also expanded to 13 members with the inclusion of the European Union and Spain, expanding opportunities for international investment and cooperation. Meanwhile, the Philippines' participation in the US-led Pax Silica initiative since April 2026 reinforces its economic diplomacy efforts through cooperation in AI, semiconductors, critical minerals, and other strategic technology supply chains.

These initiatives demonstrate how the Philippines is leveraging its geopolitical position and expanding diplomatic relationships to advance its economic interests. By translating strategic partnerships into concrete investments in technology and infrastructure development, the country has opportunities to strengthen its competitiveness, reduce vulnerabilities to external disruptions, and support long-term economic growth. Their success, however, will depend on sustained partner commitments and the effective implementation of planned projects and investments.

Further, foreign-policy preferences are increasingly formed in a vulnerable digital information environment. With 82% of Filipinos obtaining news from the internet, online platforms have become a principal channel through which the public encounters reporting, official claims, commentary, and potentially coordinated disinformation about the West Philippine Sea, bilateral trade, foreign investment, and the Philippines' alliances. This does not establish that online disinformation alone determines public opinion; however, it increases the risk that misleading or selectively framed content can amplify uncertainty, polarization, and distrust around high-stakes foreign-policy choices.

Table 7
Most Important Partners for Philippine Economic Security
In Percent / Multiple Responses, Up to 3 allowed: **PHILIPPINES**
(September 17 – 23, 2026)

PulseAsia RESEARCH INC.

Which of the following countries or organizations should the Philippines work with in defending the West Philippine Sea? You may choose up to three	Base: Total Interviews, 100%							
		LOCATION				CLASS		
	RP	NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
United States	73	81	72	73	69	59	73	85
Japan	62	71	65	53	57	67	62	57
Australia	35	31	32	38	43	43	36	34
Canada	30	27	32	37	24	24	28	48
South Korea	21	22	25	14	18	18	20	20
Great Britain / United Kingdom (UK)	20	25	12	29	26	26	20	28
European Union	14	13	11	18	18	18	15	3
Taiwan	14	9	14	4	25	25	14	5
China	11	10	15	8	9	9	12	3
India	2	1	3	4	1	1	3	1
UNAIDED								
Others	0.3	2	0	0	0	2	0	0
Can't say	0.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Refused	0.03	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
None	0.3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

PR2, Q39. Aling sa mga sumusunod na bansa ang pinakamahalagang katuwang ng Pilipinas para sa seguridad sa ekonomiya sa gitna ng mga pandaigdigang panganib?

This context is important in interpreting China's low standing in the economic-security survey. Only 14% identified China as an important economic-security partner, compared with 73% for the United States and 62% for Japan. The gap is consistent with public concern over China's conduct in the West Philippine Sea and with the broader preference for partnerships perceived as supporting Philippine sovereignty and resilience. Yet, because most citizens receive news online, the China rating should also be read as a measure of sentiment formed in a contested information environment, not simply as a settled assessment of economic interests. Disinformation may deepen negative perceptions, obscure the distinction between economic engagement and strategic dependence, or circulate misleading claims about Philippine alliances and maritime rights.

Protecting public trust therefore requires proactive, evidence-based communication. Government agencies should publish timely, accessible, and verifiable information on maritime developments, trade exposure, investment agreements, and the economic rationale for diversification; coordinate with independent media and fact-checkers to counter false narratives; and make clear that diversification is not disengagement from China, but a strategy to reduce overdependence while defending Philippine rights under the 2016 Arbitral Award.

Economic Diplomacy and International Partnerships

Economic diplomacy remains central to the administration's foreign policy, using trade agreements, foreign investment, and international summits to advance growth, resilience, digitalization, climate action, and infrastructure development. However, gains from these partnerships face risks from greater import competition under the U.S.–Philippines tariff deal, leadership uncertainty, and global trade tensions, making it essential to protect local industries and sustain investor confidence while maximizing international cooperation.

Security Challenges and Defense Modernization

The Philippines has significantly expanded its network of alliances, strategic partnerships, and Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activities (MMCAs), strengthening its role as a key security partner in the Indo-Pacific. Manila has concluded or advanced Visiting Forces Agreements (VFAs), defense cooperation arrangements, and procurement partnerships with countries including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States. At the same time, the Philippines elevated relations with India and South Korea to a Strategic Partnership, Japan to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and Vietnam to an Enhanced Strategic Partnership, while deepening engagement with Brazil, Egypt, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates. These diplomatic gains have been complemented by a growing tempo of MMCAs and Maritime Cooperative Activities (MCAs), enhancing interoperability and maritime domain awareness among like-minded partners. Together, these developments reflect the Philippines' emergence as a central node in the Indo-Pacific's evolving network of security partnerships and maritime cooperation.

Insights

As the Marcos Jr. administration enters its penultimate year, its foreign policy increasingly treats economic security as inseparable from national security. The government has paired a firmer defense of Philippine sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea with deeper strategic and economic ties with the United States, Japan, ASEAN, and other like-minded partners. Initiatives such as the Luzon Economic Corridor and Pax Silica illustrate this approach by linking diplomatic partnerships to infrastructure, energy, digital connectivity, advanced manufacturing, semiconductors, and more resilient technology supply chains. Public sentiment supports this direction: 73% of Filipinos identify the United States and 62% Japan as important economic security partners, compared with 14% for China. The central objective is diversification rather than disengagement, reducing exposure to external shocks while converting the Philippines' geopolitical position into durable investment, industrial capability, and employment opportunities.

The durability of this strategy, however, will depend on effective domestic execution as much as on external partnerships. Defense modernization, maritime cooperation, and institutional upgrades in consular, visa, crisis-response, and OFW services can strengthen the country's capacity to protect its people and interests, but promised gains must be implemented transparently and insulated from corruption, policy uncertainty, and global trade disruptions. The administration should therefore sustain regular strategic reviews, protect local industries facing greater import competition, communicate foreign-policy outcomes clearly, and use consultative and digital mechanisms that allow citizens to scrutinize how partnerships serve national priorities. A foreign policy grounded in the 2016 Arbitral Award, credible capabilities, accountable governance, and broad public confidence can strengthen both the Philippines' regional standing and its long-term economic resilience.

III. LEGISLATIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND UPDATES

The Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council met in August 2026 to recalibrate their list of priorities for the remaining two years of the administration. Of the new list of 58 priorities, 33 are targeted for passage by June 2027. The bills are a mixture of fiscal and tax reforms, governance and transparency measures, economic and industry reforms, infrastructure and energy measures, and social welfare, education, health, and environmental legislation.

Central to the proposal is the DOF's ProGRESS Tax Reform Package, which seeks to provide tax relief to workers and small businesses while making the tax system more progressive and generating additional revenues. In turn, it introduces higher taxes on sweetened beverages, tobacco and e-cigarette products, single-use plastics, non-essential goods, and other wealth-based taxes to offset the revenue losses from the proposed tax relief measures.

Another comprehensive legislative proposal is the amendment of the Electric Power Industry Reform Act (EPIRA), which encompasses several measures, including the abolition of systems loss charges, strengthening of the Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC), and the enactment of the proposed *Sariling Kuryente* Act.

Taken as a whole, the recalibrated priorities show that the Government is seeking to advance its fiscal and economic agenda while pairing potentially unpopular measures with reforms that provide more direct benefits to the public. The ProGRESS package, for instance, combines tax relief for workers and small businesses with higher taxes on selected products and wealth-based taxes to generate additional revenues to support government programs. The inclusion of measures on education, health, social protection, agriculture, and the environment could help make the broader reform agenda more acceptable to the public. With two years remaining in the Administration's term, the priorities also appear geared toward establishing reforms that can form part of its policy legacy, particularly in areas such as taxation, energy, infrastructure, and social services.

Legislative Status

As of the suspension of session on October 12, 2026, among the top 33 priority measures, one has been enacted into law, one bill has bypassed the Bicameral Conference Committee after the Senate version has been adopted by the House of Representatives, four have been approved by the committee and three are still pending with the Bicameral Conference Committees, one has been approved by both chambers, three have been approved by the Senate and are awaiting the approval of the lower house, eight have been approved by the House and pending Senate approval, including all three bills under EPIRA, while the rest are still at the plenary or committee levels.

1. Amendments to the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act - Enacted into law as RA 12325 on September 7, 2026
2. National Reintegration Law / Bagong Balikbayan Act – Senate version adopted by the House of Representatives
3. Amendments to the Government Assistance to Students and Teachers in Private Education (GASTPE) Act - Bicameral Conference Committee Report Approved

4. National Center for Geriatric Health Act - Bicameral Conference Committee Report Approved
5. Amendments to the OSAEC and CSAEM Act / Child Online Safety and Protection Act - Bicameral Conference Committee Report Approved
6. Presidential Merit Scholarship Program - Bicameral Conference Committee Report Approved
7. Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS) Act - Pending with the Bicameral Conference Committee
8. People's Freedom of Information / Right to Information Act - Pending with the Bicameral Conference Committee
9. Amendments to the Masustansyang Pagkain Para sa Batang Pilipino Act / Expanded National Nutrition Program Act - Pending with the Bicameral Conference Committee

Progress on the other 25 common legislative agenda items are slower, with only 13 bills approved between the two chambers. None have been passed in both.

Nonetheless, with several measures already at advanced stages in Congress, the Administration is likely to focus on moving these measures forward in the remaining sessions of Congress, particularly those that have already gained ground in either chamber or are already under bicameral consideration. However, given that Congress is preoccupied with the passage of the 2027 national budget and the Senate impeachment trial for the remaining session days of the year, it remains to be seen how much legislative attention can be given to these priorities before the end of 2026.

The Second Regular Session of the 20th Congress commenced on July 27, 2026. Congress went on recess beginning October 10, 2026, with sessions scheduled to resume on November 9, 2026.

POLÍTIKA

CRITICAL ISSUES OF PHILIPPINE POLITY

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