

ASIA

How the Philippines' brutal history is being whitewashed for voters

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MANILA — The months leading up to the start of the Philippine presidential campaign in February were marked by a flurry of activity on social media, including TikTok, where a challenge circulated of young people recording their elders' reaction as they played “March to a New Society” — an anthem associated with martial law under ousted Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

It was a period that drove the country into debt, saw thousands of political enemies rounded up and tortured and prompted a mass “People Power” uprising in 1986 against the excesses and corruption of the Marcos family.

But the elderly Filipinos did not shudder or recoil. Instead, they bobbed their heads, sang and marched along as those behind the camera giggled. Some even saluted.

“I tried this trend on my Papa and it's legit,” wrote one girl on a video of her father marching.

Over three decades since a people's revolution toppled the elder Marcos, his son, 64-year-old Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., is within reach of the presidency, leading polls for the May election. His popularity has benefited from a years-long, carefully crafted campaign to rewrite history, harnessing the power of social media to blur the lines between fact and fiction.

As social media giants like Facebook and Twitter play cat-and-mouse with coordinated keyboard warriors who spread disinformation, prop up political clients or smear their opponents, historical whitewashing is finding new homes. Pro-Marcos propaganda is now proliferating on platforms like TikTok and YouTube that appeal primarily to Gen Z, ushering in a new era of fun, hip, glossily edited content that is harder to regulate online.

In the global war on the truth, the Philippines is especially vulnerable. About 99 percent of its population is online, and over half find it difficult to spot fake news. President Rodrigo Duterte rose to power in 2016 aided by a keyboard army and online hate campaigns, forever changing the online landscape.

Journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa, who has called for tech platform accountability not just in the West but around the world, says the situation is more urgent than ever.

“If these social media platforms don’t put [up] guardrails, if they allow facts and lies to be treated equally ... they will push us off the cliff and we will lose our democracy,” Ressa warned in an interview.

The old dictatorship is now being upgraded and modernized, peppered with songs and emoji. Through the power of social media, one of the Philippines’ most despised families is being rehabilitated into one of its most revered.

“Bongbong Marcos is as if Marcos Sr. rose from the dead,” said historian Alfred McCoy at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who documented the Marcos dictatorship. “He is a surrogate for his father.”

A spokesman for Marcos Jr. did not respond to a request for comment.

Rewriting history

The Marcoses’ online revisionism project dates back to the 2000s through the family’s presence on Friendster, Flickr and other now defunct websites, [researchers found](#). Key to the messaging is that the family has been unfairly maligned, that President Ferdinand Marcos was not a corrupt kleptocrat but one that brought his country glory, wealth and infrastructure in the course of his two decade reign, playing down the human rights abuses during that period.

The effort to rewrite history ranges from the serious to the absurd. On Wikipedia, members of the Wiki Society of the Philippines — a group of volunteer editors monitoring pages related to the country — find themselves at the forefront of the information battle, routinely scrubbing efforts to change content on the Marcoses’ pages. A key focus over the year has been the words “dictator” and “kleptocrat,” which users have tried to delete dozens of times.

Wikipedia volunteers find themselves sometimes in “edit wars,” going back and forth with Marcos defenders for hours in the hopes of restoring the truth.

“Wikipedia has rules, and because [it] has rules, it’s sort of the last safe space on the Internet where you can’t just push your narrative,” one volunteer editor, Remi De Leon, said.

Administrators have also marked Marcos Sr.’s and Jr.’s pages as “semi-protected,” meaning anonymous and new users cannot edit them without approval.

Cute, catchy and misleading

The disinformation has pushed into other fronts, where unlike Wikipedia, citations and proof are not required. YouTube and TikTok follow Facebook as the leading sources of online disinformation, according to fact-checking collective [Tsek.ph](#). Among the most widely spread falsehoods are claims that no arrests were made under Marcos's martial law, and that no cases were filed against the Marcos family in court.

YouTube is rife with Philippines-linked conspiracies — from claims that French astrologer Nostradamus predicted Marcos Jr.'s presidency to a now widely believed tale that the Marcos family inherited tons of gold, which will be redistributed if they return to power.

On TikTok, with its time limits, content is shorter and punchier in how it glorifies and romanticizes the Marcos family. Archival photos and video are reframed with music and captions to evoke amusement and sympathy, like setting Ferdinand Sr.'s photos to Madonna's "Material Girl," or pairing news footage of his wife, Imelda, weeping with crying emoji.

Philippine campaign strategist Alan German, who runs Agents International Public Relations, says this platform has been particularly effective with Filipino voters, who choose candidates that will delight and entertain — "the guys who make noise," he said. "They're literally dancing and singing their way into our ballot."

Troll farms and influencers

Multiple studies and reports have detailed how Duterte's weaponization of social media has helped silence critics amid a bloody drug war and dismal [coronavirus](#) pandemic response. The Marcos family now stands to benefit from that model, especially as Duterte's daughter Sara Duterte-Carpio is running for vice president alongside Marcos Jr. — consolidating their online networks.

Since 2016, troll operations have grown more adept at skirting [takedowns](#) for coordinated inauthentic behavior. They no longer do the copy-paste jobs seen from Duterte supporters in the past, German, the campaign strategist, said. Instead, they act like real people, maintaining personalized accounts, sharing photos and videos, and joining groups.

The modern troll network is led by a moderator and runs like a call center, he explained. A moderator alerts their staff — typically composed of 10 people, each of whom can handle dozens of accounts — to the agenda of the day, such as news items to react to or what criticism to stem.

Others lean on micro-influencers or "key opinion leaders," who have a few thousand followers. They are picked by candidates based on socioeconomic class, age and location, depending on the demographic the political client needs to reach. The market rate is 4 to 6 cents per like, follower or subscriber.

An influencer with 10,000 followers could earn between \$5,800 to \$6,800 on a monthly retainer during election season, German said — more than 10 times greater than an average teacher salary.

One digital creative shared a job offer sent by an agent for a “political candidate” with The Washington Post on the condition of anonymity, citing the sensitivity of the matter. It entailed running a Facebook page and posting material every day, with messaging “seeded” from the agency.

“You will be coordinating with an associate of mine for brainstorming of plans but the rest relies on your creativity to create content,” the message read. “There will be minimal interface with the client.”

Winning over the next generation

Researchers say the change in strategy — more authentic content, focused on Gen Z-friendly platforms — isn’t just about avoiding takedowns. It also intentionally speaks to the next generation, solidifying the Marcos family in people’s hearts beyond just Bongbong as the next president. At the heart of the campaign is his eldest son, Ferdinand Alexander, who is running for Congress.

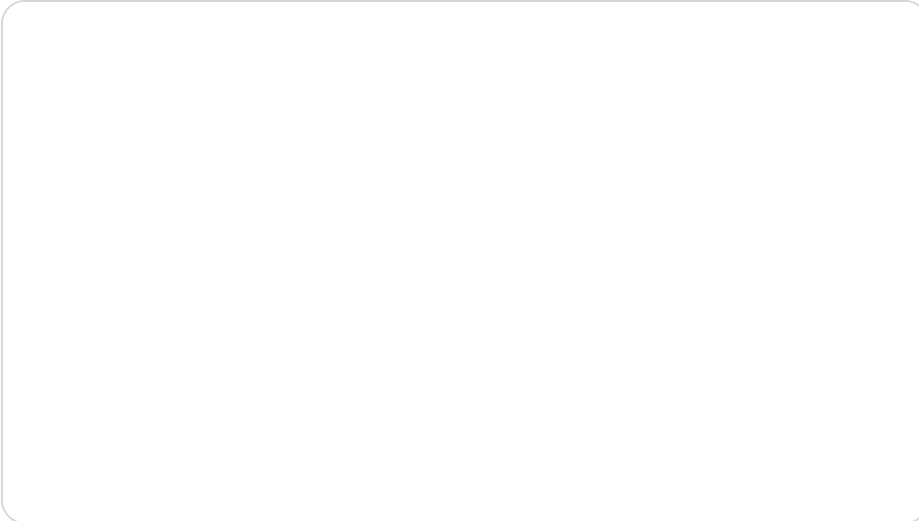
The 27-year-old, nicknamed Sandro, is a rising online star. Whole accounts are dedicated to fan cams of him, with photo and video run through filters and love songs. Some posts lean into fan fiction, where a viewer can pretend they are in an arranged marriage with him, or that they are being fought over by Sandro and his brothers.

J

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11:11 2.22.22 — I promise no matter what happens. I'll always be here for you. Thankyou for inspiring me & helping me through some of the worst moment. Your smile always make my day. I'm so proud of you in everything luviee. [@sandromarcos7](#)



11:13 PM · Feb 22, 2022



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Experts say these posts, however, are not just from ordinary fans but rather “people” working for Sandro’s own family. Some clues to the inauthenticity of the content include the volume and pace at which they’re released, and access to raw material — which include baby photos and seemingly intimate video, like Sandro dancing with his mother.

TikTok users are often teenagers, well removed from the baggage of martial law. The family’s strategists realized its millennial heir had “great potential to be an influencer,” John Nery, a columnist and co-convenor at the Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation, said.

The teen heartthrob fits with the Marcoses’ goal of deepening their family’s celebrity status. Pro-Marcos TikToks show the family “having fun, playing up how close they are to each other,” he said, but also show a gilded life that is entirely aspirational for Filipinos.

That life, however, is exactly what Marcos Jr. is promising for his supporters as he will “unite” the Philippines and make it “rise again” — in a conscious echo of so many other authoritarian populists around the world.

The strongman model plays well in a country with rising socioeconomic disparities, argues McCoy, the historian. He and others expect a Marcos victory to be worse for the Philippine economy and further weaken institutions, including the press.

The opinions of experts, however, can be no match for 30 seconds of TikTok, such as in one video viewed more than 50,000 times, where a toddler simply chants “Bring back Marcos!”

It drew over 800 commenters, most of whom replied with a similar sentiment: “We’ll bring him back, baby,” they said. “For your future.”