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The 2025 flood disaster or 'flood control' scandal triggered months of protests and brought to light a problem that had been building up for decades: massive shortcomings in the planning, implementation and monitoring of flood protection projects. Many of the bridges and dykes intended to provide protection are dilapidated, construction projects remained unfinished, and many supposed protective measures turned out to be phantom projects. The conclusion: The vulnerability of marginalized sections of the population, to extreme weather events in particular, was not strategically reduced, but deliberately increased. And the criticism of the squandering of public funds and the anger towards corrupt politicians and political dynasties grew.

Foto: Emmalyn Liwag Kotte

`Flood-Control´ Scandal

Nepotism and corruption are deeply entrenched within the system of political and economic elites and dynasties. Consequently, many people are deeply frustrated by so-called ghost projects and inflated invoices in the field of flood protection. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. first addressed the scandal in his annual State of the Nation Address (SONA) in 2025. He described numerous flood-control projects as substandard or existing only on paper, and announced that those responsible would be held to account. Both the political camps of the Marcos Jr. government and its political opponents from the Duterte family, including Vice-President Sara Duterte, have since been attempting to exploit the scandal for their own ends and are fuelling the debate.

Around 20 typhoons hit the Philippines every year. At the same time, regions are subsiding due to groundwater extraction or tectonic changes, whilst sea levels are rising. Effective flood protection is therefore particularly important. Exclusive construction projects often benefit, whilst marginalised settlements, islands and rural areas remain insufficiently protected. The population is thus exposed to natural disasters year after year, with significant consequences for people, the environment and the economy.

Mass protests

Since September 2025, people from a wide variety of sections of the population have repeatedly demonstrated against corruption and nepotism, and in favour of stronger and more responsible disaster management. On 4 November 2025, the flooding caused by Typhoon Tino devastated numerous residential areas and infrastructure in and around Cebu City. The Mananga and Butuanon rivers burst their banks despite extensive government spending and legal safeguards. The disaster highlighted the high vulnerability of the densely populated region to extreme weather events and intensified public criticism of the 'flood control' scandal. Many people questioned why, despite extensive government spending on flood protection projects, serious flooding continued to occur. In November, people across the country organized themselves, primarily via social media. Over 600,000 people – spanning all age groups, political affiliations, religious denominations, and levels of education or income – took to the streets. The protests took on the character of a popular movement. They were directed against corruption in the country, and there were calls for the rule of law and political accountability; some demanded the President's resignation.

The scale of the scandal

International climate compensation funds are transferred directly to the Philippines by the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank and are channelled into the national budget. Each year, ministries (departments), state institutions and LGUs (Local Government Units; provinces, cities, municipalities, neighbourhoods/barangays) receive budget allocations from these funds. Members of Parliament were able to set aside flood protection funds from the national budget for their constituencies and later draw them down for projects. Many are accused of embezzlement, which subsequently took place in various ways:

For example, district offices of the DPWH (Department of Public Works and Highways – Ministry of Public Works and Highways) borrowed building licences from construction companies in order to carry out flood-control projects themselves. The construction companies pocketed around 5 per cent of the project funds; however, the projects were never built. In some cases, entire staffs of district offices lined their own pockets. Thus, 14 million Euros were spent monthly (2024–2025) on flood control projects by the DPWH.

Another practice involved construction companies receiving the bulk of the project funds allocated, with MPs earning 20–30 per cent in commissions (kickbacks). The construction companies were often linked to the politicians through family or personal ties. These construction projects were often not carried out at all, or only carried out inadequately.

Government response

Both the HoR (House of Representatives) and the Senate launched investigations. As the individuals involved had links to companies or contractors themselves, the investigations quickly became controversial and were brought to a swift conclusion. In September 2025, the government established the ICI (Independent Commission for Infrastructure). Vince Dizon became the new DPWH Minister and was tasked with investigating flood defences and restructuring the ministry. Jesus Crispin Remulla (former Minister of Justice) was appointed Ombudsman; he is able to take independent action against corrupt politicians.

Up until March 2026, the ICI investigated the past decade and focused exclusively on corruption in 421 flood protection projects. It found that the majority of the projects were 'ghost' constructions and that those involved had gained substantial financial benefits. They also identified several high-ranking politicians, such as Zaldy Co (construction contractor, former chair of the Budget Committee in the House of Representatives), who are alleged to be implicated in the scandal. The findings of the investigation were handed over to the Ombudsman's office. However, the Ombudsman has come under criticism as he mainly takes action against political opponents of the Marcos government.

Demands from civil society

Civil society actors and churches have long been drawing attention to the abuses in the country. From 2025 onwards, the churches called for demonstrations and described the corruption in flood protection as a moral failure that endangers human lives, damages infrastructure and undermines trust in the state. Other civil society organizations also called for comprehensive reforms to prevent corruption. Projects should be planned on a scientific basis, be more focused on nature-based solutions and cross-sector citizen participation, and be independently audited. Budgetary decisions should be more transparent and publicly accountable. In addition, they called for, amongst other things, the disclosure of corporate and contract data, stricter anti-corruption measures, a Freedom of Information Act and an independent ombudsman to investigate corruption.

Family dynasties and corruption

The power of family dynasties can be traced back to Spanish and US colonial rule, when colonial rulers entrusted the administration of the territories to regional families. These families gained political and economic influence and promised the population 'protection' in exchange for loyalty and subservience. Today, there are over 100 influential family dynasties across the country, whose members are holding key positions in business, politics and society and control local and national politics.

In the wake of the 'Flood Control' scandal, the Philippines fell by six places in the global Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 2025 to its worst-ever ranking (120th out of 182, with 32 out of 100 points). The scandal hampered economic growth and eroded investor confidence.

SONA 2026 – one year on

By the time of SONA 2026 on 27 July, over 30 people had appeared in court, including DPWH staff, as well as Senator Jinggoy Estrada and former Senator Bong Revilla. The scandal is more far-reaching than previously thought, according to Rappler: some members of the Marcos cabinet, dozens of members of the HoR and local officials – from mayors to councillors – were reportedly linked to companies and are alleged to have enriched themselves through multi-million-peso infrastructure projects. Key figures in the scandal included Marcos Jr.'s cousin and Speaker of the House of Representatives, Martin Romualdez, who resigned in September 2025, and Budget Minister Amenah Pangandaman, who resigned in November 2025. During the 2026 State of the Nation Address (SONA), the President emphasized that proceedings against Romualdez would be initiated shortly.

Within the state apparatus, initial steps were taken to tackle corruption. The House of Representatives (HoR) abolished the 'small committee' of influential MPs who continued to process individual amendments even after the draft budget had been adopted. For the first time, the budget debates were broadcast live; two budget and transparency websites were set up for the DPWH. The DPWH removed local flood protection projects (approx. 13 billion Euros) from its draft budget and has 26.7 billion Euros at its disposal in the 2026 national budget. At the same time, international climate protection funding was provisionally suspended. Furthermore, the price targets for building materials were adjusted in order to reduce absurd project costs. The cut DPWH funds only offset a fraction of the losses incurred.

Whilst the government and the opposition continue to address the issue, mass protests subsided in early 2026. In view of the annual typhoon season, which begins in June, the question arises as to how the population will react to the next major disaster. A renewed mobilization of the protest movement seems entirely possible given the persistent discontent.

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