

Original Article

Structural and Cultural Barriers to Anti-Corruption: A Thematic Inquiry into the Philippine Political Landscape

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Article History:

Date received: May 13, 2026

Date revised: June 20, 2026

Date accepted: July 1, 2026

Recommended citation:

Gumela, B., & Miranda, A. (2026). Structural and cultural barriers to anti-corruption: A thematic inquiry into the Philippine political landscape. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 4(7), 351-359.
<https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2026.257>

Abstract. The devastating effect of systemic corruption shows the urgent need to understand why advanced legal frameworks fail to stop government wrongdoing. Studying this persistent implementation gap helps public administrators look past symbolic compliance and find real structural fixes that protect public funds. However, research on how informal political networks circumvent official legal systems is limited, as the topic is usually reduced to broad statistical measures. The main objective of this qualitative study was to examine how formal anti-corruption institutions handle the structural implementation gap in the Philippine government. Data were collected through a systematic analysis of academic literature (2012–2026) and official records, guided by the dual theoretical lens of Institutional Anomie Theory and Isomorphic Mimicry. The analysis revealed that the anti-corruption system is blocked by four main issues: first, executive patronage controls oversight bodies, turning them into administrative "janitors" that protect political allies; second, a slow judiciary with massive case backlogs lets corrupt officials outlast legal battles; third, local governance is dominated by political dynasties that bypass regional checks and balances; and fourth, the cultural value of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) pressures public servants to choose personal loyalty over official duty. The findings suggest that public administrators must move past paper reforms and performative investigations that only mimic accountability for show. Furthermore, oversight institutions must protect anti-corruption leaders from political pressure, clear court backlogs, and separate government contracts from elite networks to build true institutional integrity.

Keywords: Anti-corruption; Isomorphic mimicry; Philippine governance; Political patronage; *Utang na loob*.

The devastating effect of systemic government failure and corruption on the national scale is evident in the scholarly literature around the globe. Corruption, as defined by the Cornell Law School (2025), is the fraudulent and criminal acts involving the exploitation of entrusted authority for personal gain. It covers

various unethical acts such as bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, and extortion, which often result in the decline of institutional integrity, stifling economic development, and eroding public trust, thereby leading to civil unrest, economic stagnation, and compromised safety of the populace (Okoye et al., 2024; Ajayi & Oluranti, 2025). This unethical act is evident across global politics, and several scandals have garnered significant attention among netizens. In Malaysia, the “1MDB” scandal, which involves former Prime Minister Najib Razak, involves money laundering of around \$4.5 billion, resulting in accumulated debts and economic harm (Zreik, 2024; Shukri, 2024). In 2014, the rampant and infamous corruption scheme in Brazil was “Operation Car Wash,” in which high executives of the state-owned oil company Petrobras took bribes to award government contracts to construction firms at inflated prices. An investigation that exposed \$5 billion in illegal payments, leading to convictions of national-level politicians, including President Lula (Valarini, 2023; Portugal & Moraes, 2024). Similarly, in the Philippines, the “PDAF” or pork barrel scam showed that the public funds worth Php10 billion that were intended for basic services and development were diverted into ghost projects through fake organizations controlled by Janet Lim Napoles, involving lawmakers from both the Senate and House of Representatives (Batalla, 2024). As shown in Table 1, the major Philippine Corruption Scandals are exemplary cases that serve as a testament to the fact that, despite existing rules and laws, the machinery of the state can be steered and maneuvered by malign individuals in power.

Table 1. *Major Philippine Corruption Scandals (Quimpo, 2025)*

Era / Year	Scandal Name	Estimated Amount Corrupted/Lost
1970s–1986	Marcos "Ill-gotten Wealth"	\$5B to \$13B (High estimates reach \$30B)
1973–1982	Coco Levy Fund Scam	₱70B+ (Estimated current value of assets)
2000	Juetengate (Estrada)	₱400M (Annual kickbacks from illegal gambling)
2004	Fertilizer Fund Scam	₱728M (Entire fund allegedly diverted)
2007	NBN-ZTE Deal	\$130M (Alleged overprice for kickbacks)
2013	PDAF (Pork Barrel) Scam	₱6B+ (Diverted to "ghost" NGOs)
2021	Pharmally Scandal	₱1B to ₱4B (Estimated overpricing/wastage)
2025–2026	Flood Control Scam	₱79B to ₱180B (Estimated cost of "ghost projects")

In the international setting, numerous studies show that developing countries emphasize the adoption of the best-practices cycle, often yielding little to no significant impact in combating corruption. According to Andrews et al. (2017), as cited by Cheromoi and Sebaggala (2025), most of the third world or developing countries specifically countries in Sub-Saharan Africa such as Uganda, Nigeria and Malawi (Tsanis & Stouraities, 2025); fragile states such as Afghanistan and South Sudan (Partaw & Demerew, 2024); Southeast Asian and South Asian countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh (Dutta, 2026) engage in Isomorphic Mimicry or a political version of “fake it until you make it,” but without the “making it”. This is a sophisticated process in which governments perfect laws against corruption, such as creating an Anti-Corruption Commission, complete with a fancy building, logo, and website emphasizing effectiveness to gain international donors. However, these institutions are powerless and tolerate the corruption that sustains unethical acts under the seal of official legitimacy (Sakib & Mollik, 2023). Therefore, these institutions have little political support and functional governance to operate effectively. This results in paper-tiger agencies that appear awesome or formidable on paper but have weak capabilities (Mkhize, 2025).

In the Philippine setting, the implementation gap remains the most prevalent and complex challenge for public administrators. Notably, the country is renowned for having one of the most advanced and comprehensive legal frameworks in Asia, owing to the numerous programs and laws it has enacted. One of the prominent independent bodies created under the 1987 Constitution is the Office of the Ombudsman, which is mandated to ensure public accountability and serve as a watchdog against corruption and inefficiency among civil officials (Neverio, 2025). The current thrust of said office is the adoption of a digital system and AI-supported verification, and its most recent accomplishment was the prevention and investigation of irregularities involving 16 DPWH personnel in flood control projects (Gregorio, 2025; Patinio, 2025). Moreover, another law that supports this legal architecture is the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act, or RA 3019, whose objective is to promote morality in public service and ensure that each government office is treated as a public trust. It encompasses prohibited acts such as soliciting or accepting gifts, neglecting duties, and giving unwarranted benefits to stakeholders (Mondez & Cruz, 2024). Another law passed is the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials (RA 6713), which requires government officials to prioritize the public interest over personal interests, maintain a simple lifestyle, and follow the eight key norms of personal conduct (Office of the Ombudsman, 1989).

This disconnect highlights a deeply entrenched "culture of formalism" within the Philippine bureaucratic

landscape, where the state excels at enacting world-class, rigorous legal frameworks yet remains structurally incapable of implementing them. This administrative facade allows institutions to claim regulatory sophistication on paper, satisfying both local statutory mandates and international oversight bodies, even as informal elite networks continue to capture public resources with minimal friction. Consequently, the legal architecture serves less as an active deterrent to malfeasance and more as a symbolic mechanism of institutional legitimacy, leaving a widening gap between *de jure* statutory rules and *de facto* political behavior.

To explain this process, the study is conceptually guided by Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT) by Messner and Rosenfield (2009). This framework posits that systemic corruption occurs when a society's cultural goals heavily override the institutionalized, legal means of achieving them, leading to a breakdown in social regulation. Therefore, the main goal of this study is to explore and describe the lived experiences of public administrators and accountability watchdogs navigating the structural implementation gap within the Philippine anti-corruption ecosystem, as guided by the following research questions:

1. How do executive appointments and political patronage affect the independence and operations of anti-corruption institutions in the Philippines?
2. How do severe judicial backlogs and long case delays protect corrupt officials from legal accountability?
3. In what ways do local political dynasties weaken formal checks and balances to create areas of political impunity?
4. How do informal cultural values, particularly *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), cause public officials to prioritize personal loyalties over statutory laws?
5. How are alternative procurement and bidding methods used by state agencies to divert public resources to political allies and donors?

Moreover, this study fills a critical gap in the literature by providing an empirical, theory-driven analysis of how informal clientelistic networks directly overpower *de jure* legal systems, a dynamic often overshadowed by purely statutory or compliance-focused legal reviews. Also, these findings will help public administrators, legislative bodies, and oversight institutions design more resilient institutional frameworks that insulate anti-corruption leadership from political influence, strengthen judicial throughput, and decouple state procurement from elite networks (Mendoza et al., 2025).

Methodology

Research Design

The paper employs an exploratory qualitative research design to examine implementation gaps and administrative bottlenecks that hinder or slow down anti-corruption measures in the Philippines. According to Lim (2025), qualitative research is used to provide a nuanced, comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence a perspective on a phenomenon within a specific setting. Rather than relying on statistical data, this method uses interviews and case studies to understand institutional dynamics (Skarbek, 2020). Meanwhile, the exploratory design is defined as a flexible, open-ended approach to investigating a problem that is not yet clearly defined or understood (Mason et al., 2010). It is suitable for this study because the problem is not a lack of laws but the underlying, informal aspects of their implementation through government politics. Given that these gaps are often undocumented, this design provides flexibility to identify the specific bottlenecks that official or numerical data may overlook.

Data Gathering Procedure

The study gathered its data exclusively from secondary sources through a systematic search of documents or document analysis to ensure an objective and comprehensive assessment (Morgan, 2022). The research process includes a systematic search across possible online databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Scopus, and government websites, as shown in Table 2. Also, the researcher maintained the reliability and validity of the findings by adhering to the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria during the final analysis.

Table 2. Sources of Data Consulted for this Study

Database / Source	Type(s) of Source	No. of Relevant Search Results	No. of Sources Used in the Study
Scopus	High-impact Journal Articles (Political Science & Law)	14	8
Google Scholar	Journal articles, institutional & periodic reports	16	11
ResearchGate	Peer-reviewed journal articles and pre-prints	21	11
SAGE / Routledge / Brill	Specialized Social Science Journal Articles	7	4
Oxford / UC Press	Scholarly Books and Monographs	4	1
Wiley / EBSCO / PAIS	Academic Journals and Scholarly Books	4	1
Government Website(s)	Institutional reports, legislative acts, and protocols	5	5
Google (General Search)	Online reports, book chapters, and gray literature	10	2
Adonis Abbey / Others	Niche Journal Articles and Documentaries	12	5
Total		87	47

Data Analysis Procedure

After selecting the most relevant literature, it will undergo thematic analysis to organize and present the findings. According to Ahmed et al. (2025), Thematic Analysis allows the researcher to identify all narratives and capture the appropriate datasets available across various literature platforms. The researcher adopted the proper procedure, according to Braun and Clarke (2020), of Reflexive Thematic Analysis. This process began with all identified segments or phrases from the secondary sources and accounts being formatted in a table for analysis, followed by a familiarization stage through repeated reading to become deeply familiar with the information. Afterward, the data underwent initial coding to detect patterns, correlations, and specific factors. Following this, the codes were clustered into broader candidate themes, which were then reviewed against the entire dataset. In the next stage, the identified theme names were refined to accurately represent the collected data, and the finalized themes were renamed to reflect their definitions and relevance to the study's objectives. Lastly, the findings for each identified theme were converted into a report file. Thematic Analysis is appropriate for this study because it effectively links the research objectives to the identified gaps and failures in the Philippine anti-corruption platforms by cross-referencing the gathered information.

Ethical Considerations

As this study relies exclusively on the analysis of secondary sources and existing literature, no human participants were involved, ensuring participant protection from physical or psychological risk. Ethical integrity was maintained by ensuring that all data collected were handled confidentially and used solely for academic purposes. Furthermore, the researcher strictly adhered to proper citation and referencing protocols to acknowledge the original authors of the secondary data, thereby upholding data integrity and preventing plagiarism. All analyzed documents were sourced from public domains or authorized academic databases to ensure the legality of the data collection process.

Results and Discussion

Structural Capture

The consistent failure of the established anti-corruption agencies and laws in the Philippines was linked to a deeply embedded patronage system in which the President serves as the Chief Patron of the nation (Mendoza et al., 2025). This is reflected in the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), where the Philippines scored a stagnant 33 out of 100, ranking 115th globally (Transparency International, 2025). It is noteworthy that a study by Teehankee (2012) found that the executive branch's power to select or appoint leadership in various government agencies creates a sense of gratitude, which eventually recruits and captures these institutions.

A modern example of this capture is seen in the management of discretionary funds. In early 2026, the Commission on Audit (COA) issued a Notice of Disallowance for ₱73 million in 2022 confidential funds, highlighting how executive resources can be shielded from standard oversight (Castro, 2026). This is often reflected by the shifting alliances within the legislative branch (the Senate and Congress), where political survival frequently outweighs party ideology. Although the president ran under Partido Federal ng Pilipinas (PFP), the executive branch consolidates power through Lakas-CMD, a party led by the President's cousin, Congressman Martin Romualdez. Following the 2022 elections, Lakas-CMD transitioned from a minority party to a dominant majority, growing from approximately 12 seats to over 110 by 2025, as shown in Table 3 below. This growth represents control of roughly 35% of the 316-member House of Representatives.

Table 3. *Growth of Lakas–CMD in the House of Representatives (Lalu, 2025)*

Period	Number of Seats	% of House (316)
Pre-2022 Election	12	3.8%
May 2023	71	22.5%
2025	110	35%

The rapid consolidation of legislative power shown above illustrates how political parties function as vehicles for executive influence rather than as independent checks and balances. Therefore, these leaders, especially in anti-corruption agencies, are hesitant to investigate the very administration or personnel that put them in power. Therefore, an ombudsman or commissioner acts like a janitor who cleans up the administration's messes or mistakes rather than a watchdog over its excesses. It is supported by the findings of Batalla (2024) that, instead of the law prevailing, the Philippine Administration is engaged in selective persecution (targeting enemies) and particularistic concealment (covering allies). Also, the study by Teehankee and Calimbahin (2022) found that Philippine political parties are predatory because these organizations are not built on shared ideologies for public service but are instead used by elite groups as platforms to win elections and gain exclusive access to the national budget. Once they attain the seat of power, these factions use anti-corruption laws as weapons to reward their sympathizers, cohorts, or associates, and to punish their enemies, thereby turning the tools of justice they created into instruments of resource capture and theft (Jackson & Amundsen, 2022). This systemic issue is further complicated by a cycle of personalistic dependency which, according to the studies of Kreuzer (2009) and Knox and Peters (2023), occurs when a certain politician provides direct financial assistance for scholarship or medical bills using public funds, rendering the citizen feel a personal indebtedness to the politician rather than the state. Therefore, the same logic applies to local government units, where local chief executives, such as governors and mayors, are discouraged from supporting the investigations because they rely on the approval of the president or congressmen for the release of local infrastructure and projects (Buendia, 2022). This web of personalistic dependency acts as a barrier that prevents the established transparency rules from functioning to curb corruption, thereby maintaining control and dictating the distribution of resources and justice (Hutchcroft, 2014).

Judicial Stagnation

Dressel et al. (2023) point out that the Philippine judiciary suffers from enormous backlogs, with even the Supreme Court alone carrying pending cases awaiting resolution, which slows the justice system. As shown in Table 1, while the annual inflow of cases remained relatively stable at around 3,600 to 5,000 new filings, the Supreme Court continues to face a heavy backlog of unresolved matters. The data for 2021 highlights a highly efficient period, during which the Court achieved a 110% clearance rate, resolving 3,975 cases against 3,603 new filings. However, despite reaching a peak output of 4,294 disposed cases in 2024, the Court still entered 2025 with thousands of pending cases. Because the overall disposition rate consistently hovers between 19% and 22%, approximately 80% of the total judicial workload remains unresolved and carries over to the following year (Supreme Court Judiciary Annual Report, 2025). This persistent accumulation shows the systemic inefficiencies and delays faced by every court in the country.

This takes a huge impact on anti-corruption efforts since this delay is fatal, as a single case takes three to ten years to resolve, or so-called “justice delayed, justice denied” (Amoroso et al., 2020; Atencia & Galang, 2025). Empirical data from the Office of the Ombudsman reinforces this matter, as cited by Argosino (2025), reporting a 47.49% conviction rate in the Sandiganbayan as of September 2025; this indicates that even when cases reach the anti-graft court, more than half do not result in a conviction. Consequently, the accused official often has enough time to complete their term, run for government office again, or leverage their power and influence to have the cases filed against them dismissed. This low-level functional implementation renders the law and the anti-corruption measures created meaningless, since the judicial system is too slow to hold the powerful accountable (Barbabela, 2025).

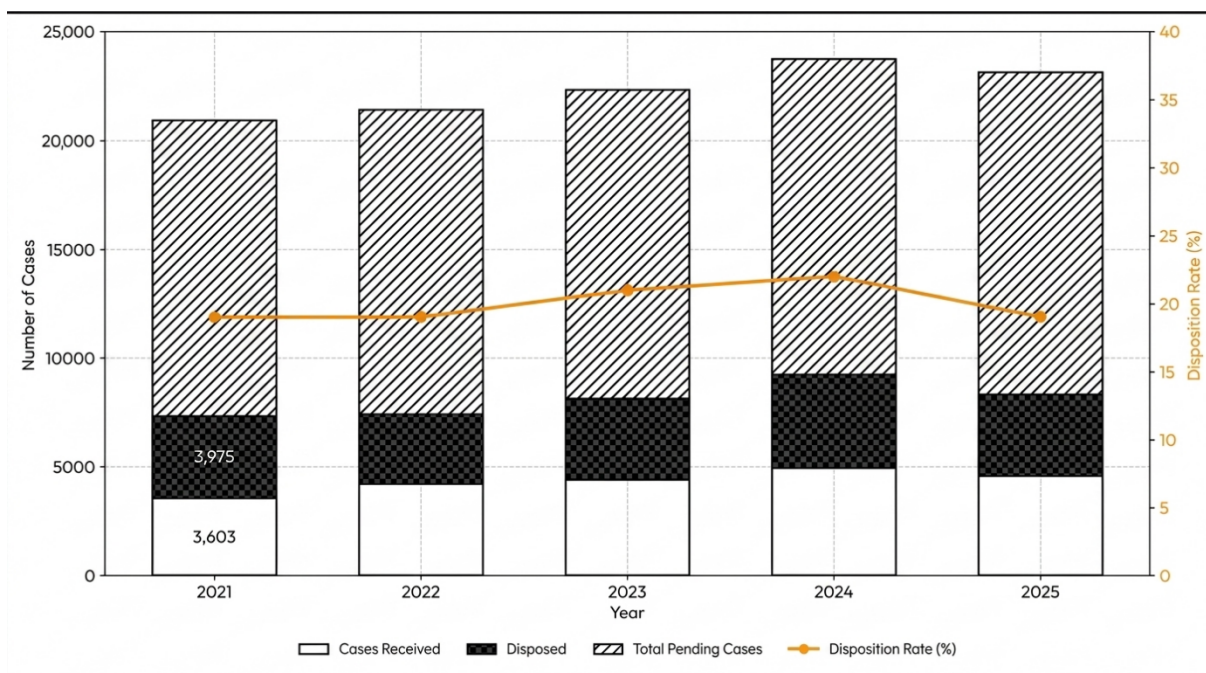


Figure 1. Supreme Court Caseload, 2021-2025 (Supreme Court Judiciary Annual Reports)

Furthermore, the bottleneck begins long before the trial stage; as of mid-2025, the Ombudsman was still handling 805 pending fact-finding cases (Murcia, 2026), clearly illustrating the long duration of a graft case, which remains in the preliminary stages before ever seeing a courtroom. Additionally, Hussin et al. (2025) noted above that law enforcement agencies in the Philippines often prioritize political expediency or act in ways that please current political leaders, placing them above their constitutional duties. This is supported by the findings of Riambon et al. (2025), which indicate that in the Philippines, investigators are afraid and hesitant to pursue cases against their politically connected individuals. Instead of acting as unbiased enforcers of the law, the police and other law enforcement agencies can become tools used to protect the interests of those in power, further eroding the anti-corruption mechanisms that are supposed to guarantee and protect (Batalla, 2019). Hence, this environment makes it nearly impossible for anti-corruption agencies to remain independent and effective, as they are constantly operating within a slow, judicial, and biased enforcement system that is politically manipulable.

Dynastic Impunity and Localized Malgovernance

According to Davis et al. (2024), malgovernance is a major effect of political dynasties. As indicated in House Bill 1580, or "The Anti-Political Dynasty Act," introduced by the late Senator Miriam Defensor Santiago (2013), when one clan controls a local area for an extended period, the imperative "checks and balances" are compromised, as law enforcement and independent auditors often cease to function autonomously. According to the Philippine Center of Investigative Journalism, as cited by Ballerda et al. (2024), this systemic failure is reflected in the 2022 Midterm Election data, which reveals that an overwhelming 87% (71 out of 82) of provincial governors belong to established political dynasties. By the 2025 election cycle, this trend has intensified, with dynastic representation in the House of Representatives reaching 67% (PCIJ, 2025).

A critical nuance in this data is the rise of "obese dynasties"—families where multiple members hold office simultaneously. Research indicates that the poorest 20 provinces in the Philippines are almost exclusively governed by such dynasties, creating a direct correlation between political concentration and poverty (Mendoza et al., 2024). Because the dynasty controls local jobs and resources, those tasked to monitor corruption are often part of the family's political network. This results in impunity where the law exists but is never leveraged against the ruling family (Yu, 2021; Castro, 2025).

In essence, these political dynasties seize power as a personal asset, leading to institutional decay (Davis et al., 2023). Garrido (2025) provides a comprehensive look at how this manifests in government "ritual investigations." This serves as a prime example of Isomorphic Mimicry, where the government mimics the form of the law without

the functional "teeth" required for conviction. Table 4 outlines the key legislative inquiries from 2022 to the present that characterize this phenomenon.

Table 4. Record of High-Profile Legislative Inquiries and Outcome Gaps (2022–2026)		
Committee	Subject of Investigation (2022–Present)	Functional Outcome
Senate Blue Ribbon Committee	DepEd Laptop Scandal (2022-2023): Overpriced, entry-level laptops for teachers.	Recommended administrative charges; most high-ranking officials avoided criminal prosecution.
House Committee on Good Government	Sugar Importation Fiasco (2022): Unauthorized "Sugar Order No. 4" involving the agriculture department.	Lead officials resigned but were eventually cleared by the executive, illustrating "particularistic concealment."
Senate Blue Ribbon Committee	Pharmally Final Resolutions (2023): Follow-up on pandemic procurement anomalies.	While plunder was recommended, the case remains mired in the "slow-motion" judicial system with no top-tier convictions.
House Quad-Committee	POGO and EJK Nexus (2024-2025): Massive probe into illegal gambling, human trafficking, and drug-war killings.	Produced significant televised testimony, yet the transition to Sandiganbayan cases is hindered by fact-finding backlogs.
House Committee on Justice	OVP Confidential Fund Inquiry (2025-2026): Alleged misuse of ₱125M in secret funds within 11 days.	Resulted in COA Notices of Disallowance (₱73M/₱375M) and impeachment complaints

The high-profile committee investigations itemized in Table 4 empirically demonstrate the operational mechanism of "ritual investigations," where the theater of accountability supersedes actual legal enforcement. Legislative probes like the DepEd Laptop Inquiry or the high-stakes OVP Confidential Fund trials yield extensive media exposure and generate massive public discourse, yet their substantive outcomes consistently end in non-binding administrative recommendations or unresolved institutional standoffs. This structural gap reveals that these oversight mechanisms operate as performative exercises designed to project a facade of statutory rigor to citizens and international watchdogs, while the underlying elite coalitions strategically deploy "particularistic concealment" to insulate functional resource-capture networks from substantive criminal penalties.

The Impact of Cultural Values on Governance

As Montiel (2024) claims, the strong Filipino value of *utang na loob* or debt of gratitude is one of the powerful forces in political culture that creates a moral obligation for public officials to protect or serve those who have helped them in the past. Therefore, this culture creates a significant obstacle, as these political loyalties override institutional rules. If a public officer prioritizes being a benefactor over the law, his mandate and integrity in fulfilling his duties are effectively lost (Lindberg et al., 2022; Muhdiarta, 2025).

This situation is further exacerbated by Jocson's (2026) findings, which indicate that leaders often win elections with extensive social and financial debts to friends and donors who supported the campaign. Considering that a presidential campaign in the Philippines can cost between ₱5 billion and ₱50 billion, the pressure to return favors is immense (OpenEdition, 2022). Upon entering office, these supporters request favors such as government contracts, positions, or protection from legal inquiries, and these politicians face heavy psychological pressure to comply (Hamada & Agrawal, 2023). Since the Filipinos value *utang na loob* and the mentality of *bahala na*, these politicians usually risk and approve the requests of the donors, even if they are unethical in nature. Additionally, Guth (2024) explains that Filipinos' important cultural value of being helpful and loyal to each other contributes to the persistence of corruption. Because these socio-cultural structures are strong, they serve as a shield for corruption activities. Hence, the investigator might find it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain evidence because the community's culture of solidarity protects the person in power (Yeboah-Assimiah et al., 2016).

Conclusion

A lack of laws does not cause the persistent struggle against corruption in the Philippines; rather, it is the gap between laws created on paper and their implementation in practice. Although the country has already established modern, competitive institutions, such as offices and various laws and codes, these frameworks often function as mere paper tigers. This study shows that the real obstacles to fully implementing these initiatives lie in the country's political, judicial, and cultural systems, which often prioritize personal gain over public service. At the national level, the President's executive power as the "Chief Patron" often includes appointing and overseeing anti-corruption agencies. Instead of acting as independent watchdogs, these offices are used as tools to protect allies and target political rivals. Likewise, these problems are reflected at the local level, where powerful

political dynasties bypass checks and balances, treating government resources, especially public funds, as their own personal assets. Additionally, these political failures are further exacerbated by biased enforcement and a slow judicial system. Hence, the result is a delay that allows these corrupt officials to complete their terms or hide evidence against these anti-corruption agencies long before the court reaches a decision. Significantly, the most difficult barrier to change is the conflict between the established government rules and traditional values. Notably, Filipinos have a strong sense of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), which creates moral pressure that often forces officials to prioritize loyalty to benefactors during political campaigns over their official duties. For anti-corruption efforts to succeed, the Philippines must move beyond the ongoing "ritual investigations" that only catch small offenders and consider the elites. Real progress requires a system in which institutional leadership is truly independent of political influence and in which the cultural bonds of loyalty no longer serve as a shield for misconduct.

Contributions of Authors

BDG: conceptualization, data gathering, data analysis, validation

ACM: proposal writing, data gathering, supervision

Funding

The study was self-funded.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this research.

Acknowledgment

This study would not have been possible without the unwavering support of the researchers' families and friends, who provided continuous encouragement. Heartfelt appreciation is extended to the grammarian for meticulously ensuring error-free sentence structure and to the validators for ensuring the study's accuracy. Above all, the researchers thank the Almighty God for the wisdom and strength that made this endeavor possible.

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