



## INSIGHT: SOUTHEAST ASIA

# Philippines begins drastic 'cleansing' of corrupt cops



### THE TAKEAWAY

On January 4, the Philippines' interior secretary, Benjamin Abalos Jr., announced his government's intent to cleanse the corruption-tainted Philippine National Police (PNP), calling on top-ranking officials to tender "courtesy resignations" for their alleged involvement in the country's illegal drug trade. Critics and human rights group are skeptical of the government's shortcut method of "cleansing" the PNP and criticized the move for giving an easy exit to rogue cops, rather than investigating them and filing appropriate charges.

### IN BRIEF

Abalos Jr. urged police generals and colonels to resign after a series of anti-drug probes found top-ranking officers in the PNP and the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) were implicated in the illegal drug trade. The interior secretary argued that the resignations were the quickest way to oust rogue cops infecting the government's anti-drug campaign — launched in October 2022 — and address the high degree of corruption among PNP forces. The move is designed to circumvent the

lengthy process of sanctioning guilty cops. Abalos Jr. also argued that the policy will help restore public trust in the anti-drug campaign and the police itself. Those resigning would continue working while their records are assessed by a five-member evaluation committee. If found guilty, police would have their resignation accepted, while those found not guilty would be reinstated. Police who don't submit their resignations would be considered "questionable." Abalos Jr.'s directive was recommended by the PNP chief, who resigned the day after the announcement and urged his subordinates to follow suit. Since then, nearly 600 ranking officers have filed their voluntary resignations, with 400 more resignations expected, according to the PNP chief.

### IMPLICATIONS

During the 2022 presidential election campaign, President "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. had promised to continue the war on drugs unleashed by his political ally, former president Rodrigo Duterte. Marcos Jr. pledged, however, to act less punitively than Duterte and within the framework of the law. His anti-drug campaign is meant to focus on prevention,

rehabilitation, and an explicit targeting of illegal drug cartels, a contrast from Duterte's bloody war on drugs that led to the death of over 12,000 people, including alleged drug dealers and people who use drugs. Marcos Jr. said that cleansing the police was his government's way of approaching the war on drugs differently, implying that he is following on the promise he made in 2022.

Cleansing the PNP is just one of several moves by Abalos Jr. to fight the Philippines' drug problem. His announcement regarding mass resignations sent a warning to the PNP, signalling the government's hard-ball stance on corruption and any illegal drug links that may have been overlooked under the previous government. The announcement prompted mixed reactions from the PNP and human rights critics. Within the PNP, some were apprehensive and resistant to the call, while most obliged and considered it good for the organization. Human rights watchdogs have [criticized](#) the policy as unfair, stating it provides an off-ramp to crooked officers, and bypasses investigation and accountability.

## WHAT'S NEXT

### 1. Commission on Human Rights needs more attention, resources

The Philippines' Commission on Human Rights (CHR), whose mandate is primarily to probe state abuses and enhance democratic checks and balances, was deliberately weakened by poor leadership and a lack resources under Duterte. Marcos Jr. has, to date, appointed only three out of four commissioners. If the government is serious about its human rights commitments, a fully functioning CHR will be critical to promote and protect human rights.

### 2. EU tariff perks at stake

Under the EU's Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), set to expire in 2023, the Philippines benefits from zero tariffs on around 6,200 products. The GSP+ incentive is conditional upon the beneficiary country upholding its human rights standards. During Duterte's regime, the European Parliament urged the European Commission, the executive body of the EU, to immediately initiate a process to temporarily withdraw the privileges if no improvements were made on human rights. The European Commission has now proposed a new GSP+ to take effect in 2024. The Philippines will need to reapply to benefit from the program's perks. For the Philippines to qualify for this scheme, Marcos Jr.'s government will have to comply with the requirements of the new legislation, which prioritizes having a plan of action on human rights, in addition to the ratification of more than 30 human rights conventions.

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