# Meltdown won’t melt real issue | Inquirer Opinion

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If the intent was to provoke shock and awe, Vice President Sara Duterte certainly hit all the marks as the nation was riveted by the newfound enmity she had flung at her erstwhile ally, President Marcos. From threatening to dig up the body of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. at the Libingan ng mga Bayani to dump it into the West Philippine Sea, to revealing thoughts of cutting off the President’s head, and categorically calling him unfit to govern, Duterte’s verbal assault effectively ended the political partnership that scored a landslide victory in the 2022 polls.

No tandem in recent memory has unraveled in such an ugly and public manner, with the Vice President directly assailing the highest official of the land as if he were a lowly government clerk or the hapless sheriff she had mauled when she was Davao mayor. It was a shaming spree, payback for what she perceived were political attacks on her mounted by the administration.

While Duterte’s threat to exhume the late dictator’s remains may have been mere braggadocio, the more concerning tirades were on Mr. Marcos’ performance in his post, which seeks to erode respect for the presidency. “Is it my fault that we are on this road to hell? Is it my fault that the current leader does not know how to be a President?” Duterte asked, without elaborating on Mr. Marcos’ lapses.

## Sense of entitlement

Her gripes on unfulfilled promises in the course of horse-trading that unfortunately characterizes Philippine politics meanwhile reflect the huge sense of entitlement that our officials have toward public resources, contrary to the code of ethics reminding them to live modest lives.

Why did the President renege on his promise to allow her priority use of the presidential chopper so she could go home to Davao City and have dinner with her kids, Duterte asked. In an apparent bid to portray herself as an aggrieved victim, the Vice President seems to have forgotten the frustrating daily commute that workers in Metro Manila have to bear to similarly get home to their family. These are the same taxpayers paying for those chopper rides, who expect officials to at least repay such privilege with good service and a full accounting of how their taxes were used.

Because when the din of this soap opera dies down, there remains the important matter that Duterte has so far refused to address: the issue of corruption and misuse of funds for the Office of the Vice President (OVP) and the Department of Education (DepEd) when she headed it.

Details on how the OVP had spent millions in confidential funds have become more surreal as more shocking revelations unspool in House hearings.

## Uncomfortable questions

On top of the already unprecedented use of P125 million in just 11 days comes the findings that P16 million of these funds were used by the OVP to rent 34 safe houses from Dec. 21-31, 2022, with one rental costing P91,000 a day. As well, the House committee learned, the OVP similarly spent P53 million for safe house rentals in 2023.

But why would the OVP, which is largely a ceremonial office, need safehouses, and so many of them? The excessive amounts allocated for informants for the OVP and DepEd also raised a similar question: why the need for these confidential agents when these two offices have no national security mandate? These are uncomfortable questions that the VP has so far eluded by simply refusing to attend the hearings.

Then there is the matter of Duterte’s alleged distribution of envelopes filled with cash to some DepEd officials who have a role in the bidding process for projects in the agency, a selective largesse that can be interpreted as bribery meant to influence the recipient’s decision in the bids. The Commission on Audit (COA) has meanwhile flagged the OVP’s certification about using P15.54 million to stage Youth Leaders’ Summits that, as military officials would testify in the House hearings, were actually counterinsurgency programs implemented and paid for by the Philippine army. Could such fudging of facts be the reason behind the VP’s earlier refusal to take an oath to speak only the truth before the House committee?

## Political persecution

The serious allegations on fund misuse that Duterte has repeatedly dismissed as political persecution must now be thoroughly investigated by the proper government agencies, given that the House hearings are conducted mainly in aid of legislation.

The proper agencies—COA, the Office of the Ombudsman, the Department of Justice—have the mandate to probe the veracity of these allegations guided only by concrete evidence and documents. The Vice President and other implicated officials must be given due process and all available platforms to explain and disprove the accusations leveled against them.

Needless to say, the Vice President has the obligation to respond to these allegations—in a mature and civil manner befitting her stature as the second highest official of the land. No amount of meltdown, squid tactics, and mudslinging will make these issues go away.