# After Pogos, Pigos next?

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President Marcos was widely praised last year for banning Philippine offshore gaming operators (Pogos) and ordering these companies that multiplied and thrived during the Duterte administration to wind up their affairs and cease operations by Dec. 31, 2024.

But concerns are rapidly growing that the Philippine inland gaming operators (Pigos) that were supposed to help fill up the gaming revenue and employment hole left behind by the departure of Pogos are causing their own set of serious problems.

And these triggered alarm bells with Senate President Francis Escudero now rightly demanding that Pigos be subjected to the same level of intense scrutiny as the now-outlawed Pogos.

This as they are both practically offering the same games of chance but that the former cater to foreigners and the latter to locals.

“I would like to see government practice the same attention to detail in assessing Pigo as it did with Pogo,” stressed Escudero, “An anomaly does not cease to be one because Filipinos are doing it.”

It may be recalled that the Marcos administration was pushed to ban Pogos, which mainly catered to bettors from China where gambling is prohibited, mainly because these have veered so far away from just gaming to become a hotbed for serious crimes including tax evasion, money laundering, and even torture and murder.

## Ownership structures

In their wake rose the Pigos that cater to local gamers and still sanctioned by the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corp. (Pagcor).

The gaming regulator said that as of July last year, there were 61 Pigo licensees, including the integrated resort and hotel casino operators that have put up complementary online gaming platforms offering sports betting, e-gaming, and bingo.

But the fear is that these are likewise not remitting the right revenues to the government and are giving rise to social ills such as gambling by minors considering the ease at which the games that they are offering can be accessed through mobile phone apps.

As Escudero pointed out, the surge in online gaming where bets can be easily and frequently placed through mobile phone apps means that “there is now a casino in every Filipino’s pocket,” thus the call for a sweeping financial and social audit of these internet gambling platforms to determine if these are ultimately doing more harm than good.

Escudero wants a detailed listing of their tax payments and the ownership structure of the companies providing the gaming services. Plus, he wants police reports on crimes that may be committed by addicted gamblers to give the public a true picture of the impact of their operations.

## Easy access to gambling sites

Indeed, the revenues are eye-popping with the lawmaker saying that total online bets could reach as much as P600 billion to P1 trillion a year.

However, he emphasized that the evaluation of the Pigos should go beyond mere “counting pesos and cents” to include the potential harm on Filipinos, similar to those that had led to the eventual ban on Pogos.

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino “Koko” Pimentel III shared similar apprehensions, especially the potential increase in the number of young children exposed to online gambling that has become more easily accessible since they are mere apps on mobile phones. “Online gambling has become so accessible that even e-wallet platforms, which are widely used for digital transactions, provide easy access to gambling sites,” said Pimentel, who is leaning toward the outright ban on Pigos, just like Pogos.

Pimentel noted that if left unchecked, gaming can result in addiction, academic neglect, and financial exploitation among young Filipinos.

Without hard data, however, these concerns and trepidation over Pigos are largely anecdotal and no direct link between these online platforms and the rise in criminality or addiction can be ascertained at this time.

## Front for criminal activities

An extensive and independent review by Pagcor and other concerned government agencies should be done to determine if Pigos are indeed as much a menace to society as Pogos and must similarly be banned.

Press Undersecretary Claire Castro recently assured the public that Mr. Marcos would not hesitate to axe Pigos—no matter the revenues being regularly brought in—if these are determined to be treading the same dangerous path and become fronts for criminal activities or tear the social fabric through irresponsible gaming.

“If the problems that happened due to Pogo operations happen again in the operation of Pigos, the President will not hesitate to implement a total ban of Pigos. But of course, we need data before that happens,” Castro said.

And while that review is being conducted, Pagcor can address immediate concerns by doubling down on its oversight over Pigos to make sure that they operate within their bounds and thus not go the way of the Pogos.