Strategic Antagonism and the Flood Control Scandal: Blame-Seeking, Performative Accountability, and Institutional Routing in the Philippines

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Abstract: *This article examines strategic blame-seeking in democratic governance through the case of the 2025 Philippine flood-control corruption scandal. Drawing on blame-avoidance and blame-seeking literatures, populist performance theory, and scandal politics, the study asks: (RQ1) Why would an incumbent seek blame? (RQ2) What tactics enable this strategy? (RQ3) How did blame-seeking operate in the Philippine case? Using qualitative process tracing of presidential speeches, Independent Commission for Infrastructure (ICI) briefings, administrative records, investigative reporting, and Ombudsman/DOJ filings (July–November 2025), I identify a patterned strategy of strategic antagonism—moral denunciation, naming/shaming, selective enforcement, and narrative amplification—that converted scandal salience into short-term political insulation while limiting structural reform. The paper contributes to accountability theory by showing how performative moral signaling and institutional routing can make blame a political resource in polarized, clientelist contexts. Policy implications include statutory timelines for probes, open contracting, and strengthened investigatory independence to reduce the political returns to performative accountability.*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Blame is conventionally treated in political science as a political cost incumbents strive to avoid. Institutional design and administrative practice are often theorized as systems to diffuse responsibility and mitigate reputational and electoral sanctions when public policy fails (Weaver 1986; Peters 2018). Delegation, procedural complexity, and symbolic remedies are classic instruments of blame avoidance that reduce the visibility of executive culpability and insulate leaders from direct accountability (Weaver 1986; Scharpf 1997). Recent scholarship, however, has identified a distinct and countervailing logic: under certain structural and discursive conditions, actors may deliberately seek or exploit blame to achieve political ends (Flinders and Hinterleitner 2019). Rather than uniformly costly, blame can be instrumentally deployed as a performative resource that signals authenticity, delegitimizes rivals, and mobilizes constituencies.

This paper interrogates that logic through the Marcos administration's response to the 2025 flood-control corruption scandal in the Philippines. The scandal implicated multiple flood-control contracts and surfaced at a moment of heightened public sensitivity to climate-exacerbated flooding and infrastructure failure. The Independent Commission for Infrastructure (ICI) played a prominent investigatory role, issuing public briefings and naming suspect projects; the Office of the Ombudsman and the Department of Justice (DOJ) subsequently docketed graft and malversation complaints. The administration's public posture—emphatic moral denunciation, site visits to affected communities, and visible disciplinary actions—resembled a deliberate strategy of blame-seeking rather than classic blame-avoidance. And addresses three interrelated research questions: (RQ1) Why would a politician actively seek blame? (RQ2) What tactics and tools enable this strategy? (RQ3) How does blame-seeking manifest in practice in the Philippine case? The case is analytically instructive for three reasons. First, the contested flood-control projects implicated a highly salient public good protection from recurrent flooding that had been made painfully visible by recent extreme weather events and widespread displacement. Second, the institutional context combines clientelism, fragmented oversight, and a polarized media environment that amplifies performative politics; these structural features create both the incentive and the means for strategic blame-seeking, since procedural complexity enables selective routing of probes and delays in high-level adjudication. Third, the ICI's active investigatory role in mid-2025 produced a public institutional trace such as press

briefings, flagged project lists, and coordination communiqués that allows empirical measurement of executive rhetoric against documented investigatory steps.

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II.   THEORY AND LITERATURE

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2.1 Blame avoidance and institutional design

The literature on executive behavior treats blame as a calculable political cost and traces a repertoire of institutional and rhetorical devices designed to minimize that cost. At the institutional level, delegation and the creation of arm's-length bodies reallocate decision authority to entities whose technical mandate can be invoked to explain failure as an implementation problem rather than executive culpability (Weaver 1986). Overlapping jurisdictions and deliberately complex procedural architectures, such as multistage reviews, appeals, and interagency consultations, raise the transaction costs of attribution. When responsibility is routinized across multiple offices, citizens and opponents face higher informational and organizational barriers to pinning blame on a single actor (Scharpf 1997; Peters 2018). These structural features do not merely disperse responsibility; they create plausible deniability that executives can exploit politically.

Administrative practice complements institutional design. Executives routinely deploy symbolic remedies, including commissions of inquiry, temporary suspensions, and public inquiries, that signal responsiveness while preserving the status quo. Symbolic remedies perform two political functions: they placate public outrage by producing visible action, and they buy time by initiating procedural sequences that delay substantive adjudication. Opacity in procurement, contracting, and internal deliberations further compounds the problem. Restricted access to documents and technical complexity make independent verification difficult, enabling competing narratives about causation to persist.

These mechanisms are especially potent where managerial competence and technical performance are central to political legitimacy. In such contexts, visible culpability is electorally costly, so institutional design becomes a defensive technology. It shapes incentives for information disclosure, structures who speaks authoritatively about problems, and determines which remedies are administratively feasible. Empirical work shows that blame-avoidance strategies are embedded in routine governance choices, including how agencies are structured, how responsibilities are allocated, and how information is released. Accountability thus becomes proceduralized rather than personal (Weaver 1986; Scharpf 1997; Peters 2018). This literature establishes the baseline expectation that institutional architecture matters for the political distribution of blame.

2.2 From blame avoidance to blame seeking

A growing body of scholarship reframes exposure as a potentially valuable political resource: blame seeking treats public attention as an instrument to be managed (Flinders and Hinterleitner 2019). Conceptually, blame seeking is not simply the inverse of avoidance; it is an active orientation that treats public attention as an asset to be mobilized. Four interlocking mechanisms explain how blame seeking can be instrumentally effective.

1. **Authenticity signaling.** Public acceptance of blame, or the appearance of moral outrage directed at others, can function as a credibility cue. In affective or polarized environments, voters often reward perceived moral commitment and willingness to confront wrongdoing; visible moral performance can therefore substitute for technocratic competence as a source of legitimacy (Thompson 2000).

2. **Delegitimation and scapegoating.** By naming and shaming specific actors, incumbents can redirect public anger away from systemic causes and toward identifiable villains, such as contractors, midlevel officials, or rival elites. Scapegoating concentrates blame on expendable targets while preserving the broader political coalition.

3. **Selective enforcement and institutional routing.** Procedural complexity can be exploited to calibrate who is punished and how quickly. Quick, visible sanctions against less protected actors demonstrate action. Routing investigations that implicate powerful figures through multiagency referrals or prosecutorial channels introduces delays and evidentiary hurdles that reduce immediate reputational damage.

4. **Media and mobilization effects.** Media amplification and civic mobilization sustain scandal salience and personalize accountability. When sympathetic outlets and civic actors reinforce the moral frame, the political returns to performative action increase (Entman 2004; Flinders and Hinterleitner 2019).

Blame seeking is therefore a contingent strategy. It requires credible signals, for example independent investigations or visible sanctions, and institutional levers that permit differential treatment of actors. It also carries risks. If exposure cascades upward or independent investigators produce evidence implicating core allies, the strategy can backfire. The literature thus treats blame seeking as a calculated gamble that trades uncertain long-term benefits of reform for more immediate gains in moral credibility and political mobilization.

2.3 Populist performance and media effects

Blame seeking intersects productively with literatures on populist performance and mediated politics. Populist performance theory emphasizes moral boundary making, framing politics as a struggle between the people and corrupt elites, and treats spectacle and denunciation as governing modalities that bypass institutional intermediaries (Mudde 2007). In this register, public denunciation of corruption is not merely rhetorical; it is a performative act that signals alignment with popular grievances and constructs the leader as the moral agent of redress.

The contemporary media ecology amplifies these performances in three ways. First, networked media accelerate the circulation of visual and emotive content, such as site visits, victim testimonies, and televised denunciations, that function as authenticity cues (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Second, media fragmentation creates selective amplification: partisan or sympathetic outlets can sustain the moral frame while critical outlets highlight theatricality, producing competing narratives that incumbents can exploit to consolidate core support (Brants and Van Praag 2018). Third, social media's affordances for rapid sharing and affective engagement increase the salience of scandal imagery, making performative acts politically potent even when substantive reform is slow.

These dynamics have normative and empirical implications. Normatively, they complicate standard accountability expectations: visible moral action may satisfy democratic demands for responsiveness even when it substitutes for impartial adjudication. Empirically, they suggest that the political returns to blame seeking are mediated by media structures and audience segmentation. Performative denunciations are likelier to pay off where sympathetic media ecosystems and mobilized constituencies exist to sustain the moral frame.

2.4 Scandal politics and outcomes

Research on scandals emphasizes outcome heterogeneity. Exposure can lead to resignations, prosecutions, and institutional reform, but it can also be contained through scapegoating, framing contests, or tokenistic remedies that preserve systemic dysfunction (Hazan 2006; Brown 2014). Framing is central to these divergent trajectories. Which facts are emphasized, which actors are blamed, and which remedies are presented as legitimate determine whether a scandal catalyzes reform or dissipates as spectacle (Entman 2004).

Institutional design mediates these outcomes. Where oversight institutions are weak, procedurally fragmented, or subject to capture, selective enforcement and routing become practicable, enabling performative accountability to substitute for structural correction (Hedman and Sidel 2000; Hutchcroft 1998). Conversely, where investigatory bodies are independent, well resourced, and supported by transparent information systems, for example open contracting platforms, scandals are more likely to produce durable corrective measures.

2.5 Theoretical expectations

From these literatures I derive three conditional expectations relevant to the research questions:

H_{01} Incumbents will pursue blame seeking where anti-elite sentiment, affective polarization, and performance-oriented legitimacy elevate the political returns of moral signaling.

H_{02} Blame-seeking tactics will fuse high-visibility moral rhetoric with selective administrative measures and procedural routing that shield politically significant actors.

H_{03} Media fragmentation and civic mobilization will mediate whether blame seeking yields political insulation rather than reputational collapse.

These expectations guide the empirical analysis of the flood-control corruption scandal in the Philippines case.

III.   METHODS AND DATA

3.1 Research design

The study employs qualitative process tracing and thematic discourse analysis to reconstruct causal mechanisms linking executive rhetoric, administrative measures, institutional investigations, and political outcomes (Collier 2011). Process tracing is appropriate for unpacking sequences of events and identifying plausible causal mechanisms in complex political episodes. The temporal scope covers July–November 2025, capturing the ICI's public escalation, presidential interventions, administrative responses such as suspensions and reassignments, media coverage, civic mobilizations, and initial prosecutorial filings.

3.2 Data sources

Primary and secondary materials include official presidential communications, including transcripts of televised addresses and press releases from the Presidential Communications Office (PCO), July–November 2025; Independent Commission for Infrastructure (ICI) materials, including press statements, field reports, and public briefings documenting investigations into flood control contracts; Office of the Ombudsman and DOJ filings, including public notices concerning

graft complaints and malversation charges; investigative journalism and national news reporting from major outlets documenting revelations, public reaction, and institutional developments; and civil society and policy analyses, including UP CIDS briefs and think tank commentaries. These sources provide a public documentary record that enables reconstruction of the scandal's chronology and triangulation of rhetorical and administrative moves. Internal deliberations and confidential communications were not accessible; claims about intentionality are therefore inferential and grounded in documented sequences rather than privileged internal sources.[1]

3.3 Analytical procedure

The analysis followed four steps: chronology construction to establish temporal sequencing; thematic coding of rhetoric and administrative action; process tracing to identify plausible causal linkages among rhetoric, elite reactions, and administrative outcomes; and triangulation across institutional and media sources to minimize single-source bias. The coding frame distinguished rhetorical themes, such as denunciation, moralization, and victim alignment; administrative tactics, such as suspension, referral, prosecution, and reassignments; and institutional routing, such as direct agency action, multiagency referral, and transfer to Ombudsman/DOJ. To enhance transparency, I maintained a coding log that recorded the source, date, and excerpt for each coded item and, cross-checked press reports against primary institutional documents (ICI briefings, Ombudsman filings) to reduce reliance on single sources. The analysis emphasizes observable sequences and documentary traces rather than speculative claims about private deliberations.

3.4 Limitations

The study relies on publicly available materials; internal deliberations and confidential communications were inaccessible. Consequently, the analysis infers plausible causal pathways rather than proving causal mechanisms with experimental precision. The absence of elite interviews and internal memos constrains claims about intentionality; however, consistency across multiple independent sources provides credible grounding for the central claims.

IV.   EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This section reconstructs the scandal's unfolding, links public rhetoric to administrative moves, and traces the mechanisms by which the administration converted scandal salience into short-term political insulation. The narrative emphasizes temporal sequencing, documentary traces, and process-tracing evidence. I summarize institutional statements and press reporting rather than reproducing verbatim institutional transcripts.

4.1 Chronology: escalation, naming, and procedural routing

July–August 2025: Investigative revelations and public shock.
In July and August 2025 investigative reporting documented irregularities in flood control procurement across multiple regions. Journalists identified recurring patterns of noncompetitive bidding, contract splitting into subthreshold lots, unusually high unit prices for earthworks and drainage components, and repeated use of the same contractor networks across geographically dispersed projects. The reporting coincided with a season of destructive monsoon rains and flash floods that produced vivid images of displacement and property loss. The juxtaposition of human suffering and allegations of procurement abuse created a potent moral frame: the public narrative quickly moved from technical procurement failure to moral betrayal.

Two features of this early phase are important for later sequencing. First, investigative reporting supplied concrete documentary leads to procurement notices, contract addenda, and payment vouchers that made public claims verifiable and actionable. Second, the timing of revelations, immediately after visible flood damage, heightened affective salience and created a receptive audience for moral denunciation. These conditions set the stage for institutional actors to convert journalistic leads into formal investigatory traces.

September 2025: ICI publicization and the institutional evidentiary anchor.
In September the Independent Commission for Infrastructure (ICI) assumed a public investigatory posture. Rather than confining its work to closed audits, the ICI issued press briefings, released a list of flagged projects, and conducted

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[1] The analysis draws exclusively on publicly available presidential communications, ICI briefings, Ombudsman/DOJ filings, and investigative reporting from July–November 2025; internal deliberations and confidential communications were not accessible. Claims about intentionality are therefore inferential and grounded in documented sequences rather than privileged internal sources.

site inspections whose field reports and audiovisual records were made public. The ICI's publicization was consequential because it converted journalistic allegations into an institutionalized record that could be cited by executive actors and media alike.

By producing a count and a flagged-project list, the ICI created a durable evidentiary anchor that made subsequent moral denunciations harder to dismiss as mere rhetoric. The institutional trace also created a procedural pathway: referrals to the Ombudsman and DOJ could be documented and tracked, enabling administrative actors to claim responsiveness while preserving adjudicatory distance.

October 2025: Presidential denunciation, staging, and the credibility cascade.

In October the presidency moved from rhetorical condemnation to visible moral performance. Televised addresses and press statements framed the scandal as a moral crisis and used language that characterized implicated actors as greedy and unaccountable. The President conducted staged site visits to affected communities; photographs and video of these visits—leaders listening to victims, inspecting damaged embankments, and promising swift justice—circulated widely on broadcast and social media. These images functioned as authenticity cues: they signaled proximity to suffering and a willingness to confront wrongdoing in moral terms rather than technocratic ones (Thompson 2000).

The administration cited the ICI's findings when announcing follow-up actions, which allowed visible sanctions to be presented as evidence based. The rhetorical strategy combined institutional citation with moral performance: the ICI's public lists supplied the evidentiary basis, while presidential staging supplied the authenticity cues that resonated with affective publics.

Late October–November 2025: Administrative referrals, containment measures, and prosecutorial signaling.

As public pressure intensified, administrative measures followed. The ICI transmitted referral packages—sworn affidavits, procurement records, field transcripts—to the Office of the Ombudsman and the Department of Justice (DOJ). The Ombudsman and DOJ docketed graft and malversation complaints against selected individuals. The ICI also requested immigration lookout bulletin orders (ILBOs) for a set of persons of interest, signaling an escalation from naming to containment measures.

At the same time, several high-profile referrals were transmitted with cautious legal phrasing that preserved prosecutorial distance while activating oversight channels. The ICI's transmittals emphasized that referrals were made in an investigatory posture and that further evidence could be accepted, underscoring the procedural posture of routing rather than immediate adjudication.

Synthesis of sequencing.

The chronology reveals a patterned sequence: investigative journalism produced documentary leads; the ICI institutionalized those leads through public lists and field reports; the presidency amplified the ICI's findings through moral performance and site visits; administrative referrals and prosecutorial filings followed, with visible sanctions targeted at less protected actors and procedural routing used for politically sensitive cases. This sequencing—naming early, routing later created both the credibility conditions for moral denunciation and the procedural levers for selective enforcement.

4.2 Presidential staging and rhetorical mechanics

The presidency's rhetorical strategy fused moral denunciation, victim alignment, and institutional citation into a single, choreographed performance aimed at converting scandal salience into political advantage. Each feature performed a distinct functional role—framing, credibility, and evidentiary legitimacy and was deliberately timed and shaped so that public perception of decisive leadership could be sustained even as substantive adjudication proceeded through slower institutional channels. The three features were deployed in a deliberate sequence that amplified their combined effect. Investigative reporting produced documentary leads; the investigatory body publicized those leads to create an institutional anchor; the presidency staged moral denunciation and victim visits that cited the anchor; and administrative referrals and selective sanctions followed, with sensitive cases routed into slower channels. Each element reinforced the others: moral rhetoric made institutional outputs salient, victim alignment made rhetoric credible, and institutional citation made rhetoric defensible.

Moral simplification.

Complex procurement processes and technical audit findings were reframed as moral transgressions. Rather than foregrounding procurement rules, the presidency used moral language that simplified causation into a binary of virtuous victims and corrupt perpetrators. Moral simplification has two political effects. First, it makes the scandal cognitively

accessible to broad audiences who may not follow technical procurement debates. Second, it creates a moral demand for visible action, which the administration could supply through targeted suspensions and publicized administrative measures.

Victim alignment as authenticity cue.

Site visits and photographed interactions with affected families functioned as authenticity signals. Visual proximity to suffering is a potent cue in affective politics: it signals empathy and moral commitment in ways that textual policy statements do not (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). The presidency's staged visits were therefore not incidental; they were central to the credibility cascade that linked institutional findings to public trust in executive action.

Institutional citation to bolster credibility.

The presidency repeatedly cited the ICI's flagged lists and field reports when announcing administrative measures. This citation served two functions. First, it anchored moral denunciation in an institutional trace, making the rhetoric appear evidence based. Second, it allowed the presidency to claim responsiveness while preserving procedural distance: by citing the ICI, the administration could point to an ostensibly independent investigatory body as the source of findings, even as it retained discretion over which cases to prioritize publicly.

Together these rhetorical mechanics—moral simplification, victim alignment, and institutional citation constituted a performative repertoire that converted scandal salience into a political resource. The repertoire was effective because it combined affective resonance with an evidentiary veneer.

4.3 Elite backlash, reframing, and amplification dynamics

Public naming and shaming provoked predictable elite backlash. Business associations, investor groups, and allied political figures criticized the administration's tone and warned about investor confidence. These elite counterattacks took multiple forms: formal statements, op-eds, and private lobbying. The administration's response to elite criticism is analytically revealing because it shows how backlash can be repurposed as political capital.

Reframing elite criticism as confirmation.

Rather than treating elite pushback as a liability, the administration and sympathetic media reframed it as evidence of entrenched resistance to reform. Business warnings about investor confidence were presented as proof that an "establishment" was defending its privileges. This reframing turned elite criticism into a confirmatory signal that reinforced the antielite frame and mobilized constituencies predisposed to distrust corporate and political elites.

Amplification through sympathetic channels.

Media fragmentation meant that sympathetic outlets amplified the administration's antielite narrative while critical outlets emphasized theatricality and selective enforcement. The coexistence of these narratives allowed the administration to consolidate core support even as critics questioned the depth of reform. In effect, elite backlash fed the administration's moral frame and increased the political returns to performative action.

Strategic provocation.

There is evidence that naming and shaming were calibrated to provoke elite responses that could then be reframed. Publicly naming contractors and projects created opportunities for those actors to defend themselves publicly, which in turn allowed the administration to depict such defenses as self-serving. This dynamic provocation followed by reframing amplified scandal salience and strengthened the administration's antielite posture.

4.4 Administrative measures, selective enforcement, and institutional routing

Administrative responses combined visible sanctions with procedural routing that insulated politically valuable actors. The pattern of action can be decomposed into three interrelated tactics.

Rapid, visible sanctions against peripheral actors.

The administration and investigative bodies pursued quick suspensions, temporary blacklisting, and administrative charges against midlevel officials and contractors who lacked strong political protection. These measures were publicized in press releases and media reports, supplying immediate proof of action. Rapid sanctions served a symbolic function: they signaled responsiveness and demonstrated that the state could punish wrongdoing.

Procedural routing for powerful figures.

Cases implicating politically connected figures were often routed through multiagency referrals, statutory review periods, and prosecutorial channels that lengthened timelines. The ICI's practice of transmitting referral packages for appropriate action, without conclusive findings, exemplified this approach. The cautious legal phrasing used in some transmittals preserved prosecutorial distance while activating oversight channels. Procedural routing thus created buffers that could be politically exploited.

Calibrated evidentiary disclosure.

The administration and the ICI released selected documents—flagged project lists, procurement summaries, and field transcripts while withholding or delaying full disclosure of underlying procurement files and internal deliberations. This calibrated disclosure allowed the state to demonstrate action without exposing the full chain of decision making that might implicate higher-level actors. Calibrated disclosure thus functioned as a governance technology that balanced public visibility with political shielding.

Consequences of selective enforcement.

Selective enforcement produced immediate political benefits: visible action satisfied public demands for accountability, and the administration's moral performance was reinforced by tangible sanctions. However, selective enforcement also preserved political networks and deferred high-stakes adjudication. Over time, this pattern risks eroding institutional impartiality and public trust if procedural routing becomes a persistent mechanism for shielding allies.

Media ecology, civic mobilization, and feedback loops

The scandal unfolded within a fragmented media ecology and an active civic sphere. These contextual features mediated the political returns to blame seeking.

Media fragmentation and selective amplification.

Partisan and sympathetic outlets amplified the administration's moral frame, while critical outlets emphasized theatricality and the limits of performative remedies. Social media accelerated the circulation of emotive imagery—victim testimonies, site visit photographs, and document snapshots creating viral moments that sustained public attention. The coexistence of competing narratives allowed the administration to consolidate core support while critics continued to press for substantive reform.

Civic mobilization and moral authority.

Civic actors, including faith-based organizations and civil society groups, organized rallies, petitions, and vigils that kept the scandal salient. Religious political actors in particular lent moral authority to calls for accountability, increasing the pressure on investigatory bodies to act visibly. Civic mobilization created a feedback loop: public pressure increased the returns to visible moral performance, which in turn reinforced mobilization among constituencies predisposed to antielite frames.

Feedback dynamics and political incentives.

The interaction of media amplification and civic mobilization created incentives for the administration to sustain performative action. Visible sanctions and moral performances generated further media coverage and civic engagement, which increased the political payoff of continuing the strategy. This feedback dynamic helps explain why performative accountability can persist even when substantive institutional reform is slow.

4.6 Mechanisms of conversion: how blame became political capital

The Philippine flood-control scandal converted exposure into political capital through four mutually reinforcing mechanisms—authenticity signaling, naming and shaming, selective enforcement via institutional routing, and elite-backlash amplification which together produced short-term political insulation for the incumbent while deferring structural accountability.

1. **Authenticity signaling**. Televised denunciations, staged site visits, and widely circulated images of leaders with victims functioned as *credibility cues* that reframed the president as the moral agent of redress rather than the culpable manager. In affective political environments, such visual and performative acts shorten cognitive distance for audiences and increase tolerance for procedural delays; in the case of flood control scandal, presidential staging made procedural buffering politically palatable by foregrounding empathy and resolve.

2. **Delegitimation through naming and shaming**. The Independent Commission for Infrastructure's (ICI) publicization of press briefings and a flagged-project list translated journalistic leads into an institutional evidentiary anchor that media and the presidency repeatedly cited. By concentrating blame on named contractors and intermediary networks, the administration reallocated culpability away from executive responsibility and toward identifiable villains, sustaining scandal salience while preserving executive standing.

3. The third mechanism, **selective enforcement via institutional routing**, is the governance technology that made performative claims credible without systemic disruption. Rapid, visible sanctions—suspensions, temporary blacklists, and administrative charges against less protected actors provided *proof of action*, while multiagency referrals, cautious transmittals to the Ombudsman/DOJ, and statutory review periods created buffers for politically sensitive cases. Calibrated disclosure—releasing flagged lists and field transcripts while withholding deliberative procurement files allowed the state to demonstrate responsiveness while limiting exposure of high-level networks.

4. E**lite backlash as confirmation** closed the loop. Public criticisms from business groups, investor-oriented commentators, and allied elites were reframed by the administration and sympathetic outlets as evidence of entrenched resistance to reform. Rather than undermining the presidency, elite pushback was repurposed as a confirmatory signal that validated the antielite frame and mobilized core constituencies, turning opponents' defenses into political fuel and deepening polarization in ways favorable to the incumbent.

These mechanisms operated *synergistically* and sequentially: investigative reporting produced leads; the ICI institutionalized them into public lists; presidential staging supplied authenticity cues; and calibrated administrative and prosecutorial moves produced visible sanctions while routing sensitive cases into slower channels. The result was a patterned strategy of **strategic antagonism**—a deliberate fusion of moral rhetoric, targeted administrative action, and narrative amplification that converted scandal into short-term political insulation. Policy responses should therefore prioritize investigatory independence, statutory timelines for referrals and prosecutions, and open-contracting transparency to reduce the political returns to performative accountability.

4.7 Short-term outcomes and institutional consequences

Short-term political outcomes included the maintenance of core presidential support and the appearance of decisive action through high-visibility suspensions and prosecutorial filings against peripheral actors. Polling snapshots reported in national media indicated stabilized presidential approval among core supporters in the immediate aftermath of the scandal's exposure. The administration's moral performance and visible sanctions satisfied demands for responsiveness among key constituencies.

Institutionally, however, systemic reforms lagged. Open contracting platforms, expedited adjudication mechanisms, and strengthened investigatory independence did not follow immediately. The ICI's ongoing investigative and coordination efforts revealed substantive irregularities but also underscored how lengthy legal and administrative processes constrain swift, comprehensive redress. The result was **performative accountability**: symbolic sanctions and public inquiries that delivered short-term legitimacy benefits while leaving deeper institutional drivers of procurement vulnerability largely intact.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Why incumbents seek blame: political logic and contextual enablers

The Philippine political context, which is characterized by clientelism, personalistic leadership norms, and a fragmented media ecosystem, creates conditions under which blame seeking can be politically rational. When publics reward moral performance and anti-elite frames, and when political networks can be selectively insulated by procedural complexity, presidencies may find it instrumentally advantageous to embrace moral denunciation. The Marcos administration's approach demonstrates how occupying the stage during scandal can convert vulnerability into a platform for delegitimating rivals and reinforcing authority.

Blame seeking is particularly attractive when performance-oriented legitimacy, that is the perception that a leader is morally committed and decisive, yields higher returns than technocratic competence. In polarized environments, authenticity signals can mobilize core constituencies and blunt elite criticism. The political calculus is thus shaped by the relative salience of moral performance versus managerial competence in the public's evaluative criteria.

5.2 Tactics and institutional levers of strategic antagonism

The observed tactical repertoire aligns with theoretical expectations for blame-seeking: high-visibility denunciation and site visits, rapid suspension and administrative charging of less protected actors, routing of probes concerning powerful figures through multistage institutional processes, and rhetorical reframing of elite backlash as confirming

evidence of entrenched resistance. The ICI's public investigative role added evidentiary weight that enhanced the credibility of visible sanctions while the procedural architecture facilitated shielding where necessary.

These tactics exploit institutional features, including overlapping jurisdictions, protracted adjudicatory timelines, and discretionary referral powers, that make selective enforcement practicable. The political calculus is straightforward: visible action against expendable actors satisfies public demand for accountability while procedural routing protects politically valuable networks.

5.3 Risks, limits, and long-term consequences

Strategic antagonism contains inherent risks. If subsequent evidence directly implicates core political allies or the executive itself, the performative frame may collapse, and political costs may become severe. Repeated reliance on selective enforcement can erode institutional impartiality and civic trust, eventually reducing the political returns to performative accountability. Over time, performative remedies that fail to produce structural correction can deepen public cynicism and weaken the legitimacy of oversight institutions.

Moreover, the strategy is contingent on media and mobilization dynamics. If independent media and civic actors sustain scrutiny and demand substantive reform, the short-term gains from blame seeking may be offset by long-term reputational damage. The strategy therefore represents a calculated gamble: it can produce immediate political insulation but at the cost of deferred institutional vulnerability.

5.4 Comparative and theoretical implications

The concept of strategic antagonism contributes to broader debates about accountability and populist performance. It shows how institutional design can be repurposed to produce political insulation rather than systemic correction. Comparative work should examine whether similar patterns appear in other contexts where (a) investigatory bodies can be publicly mobilized, (b) media ecosystems are fragmented, and (c) political networks can be shielded through procedural routing. The theory predicts that blame seeking will be more viable where these three conditions coincide.

VI.   POLICY RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Policy recommendation

To reduce the political returns to performative blame seeking and increase the likelihood that scandals produce substantive reform, policymakers should consider three interlocking reforms.

1. **Statutory timelines for probes and adjudication.** Legislated deadlines for investigatory and prosecutorial stages would limit the ability of actors to exploit procedural buffers for political shielding. Time-bound processes reduce the political utility of routing and delay.
2. **Open contracting and procurement transparency.** Mandating open contracting platforms and proactive disclosure of procurement documents reduces informational asymmetries that enable selective narratives and makes independent verification feasible. Transparency constrains the space for naming without evidence and reduces opportunities for collusive contracting.
3. **Strengthened investigatory independence and resourcing.** Ensuring that oversight bodies, including audit offices, anti-graft agencies, and commissions, have statutory independence, secure budgets, and professionalized investigative capacity reduces the political capture of investigatory processes and increases the credibility of findings.

These reforms are complementary: timelines reduce delay, transparency reduces opacity, and independence reduces capture. Together they make visible action more likely to translate into substantive correction rather than symbolic spectacle.

6.2 Conclusion

The 2025 Philippine flood control scandal demonstrates that blame can be repurposed as a political asset when institutional visibility, moral performance, and procedural levers are combined in a deliberate strategy. By fusing moral denunciation, institutional naming, selective enforcement, and narrative amplification, political actors can convert scandal salience into short-term insulation from accountability while leaving the structural drivers of procurement vulnerability intact. The case shows that visible action and moral rhetoric can satisfy immediate demands for responsiveness even when substantive reform is deferred, and that procedural routing can protect politically valuable networks from rapid adjudication.

Recognizing the micro mechanisms of sequencing, routing, and amplification clarifies why some scandals catalyze durable change while others dissipate as spectacle. Sequencing matters because early institutional naming creates an

evidentiary anchor that legitimates moral performance. Routing matters because multiagency referrals and statutory review periods create temporal buffers that can be used to shield allies. Amplification matters because media fragmentation and civic mobilization shape which audiences accept performative remedies as sufficient. Together these mechanisms explain how performative accountability can produce political returns without necessarily producing institutional correction.

Policy responses should therefore target the mechanisms that make strategic antagonism effective. Time-bound investigatory and prosecutorial deadlines reduce the political utility of delay. Proactive procurement transparency and open contracting platforms shrink the informational asymmetries that enable selective narratives. Strengthening the statutory independence and resourcing of oversight bodies reduces opportunities for procedural capture. Implemented together, these reforms would make visible action more likely to translate into substantive correction rather than symbolic spectacle.

For scholars, the case opens three research priorities. First, comparative tests should assess the generalizability of strategic antagonism across political systems, media ecologies, and institutional designs. Second, research should identify the boundary conditions under which performative accountability produces durable institutional change rather than cyclical spectacle. Third, mixed-method studies that combine process tracing with interviews and internal documents can illuminate the decision calculus behind blame-seeking choices and distinguish intentional strategy from reactive politics. Advancing this agenda will sharpen both theoretical understanding and practical remedies for ensuring that scandal exposure leads to genuine accountability rather than temporary political advantage.

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