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People hold placards during a protest in Rizal Park in Manila, Philippines, Sept. 21, 2025, denouncing what they call corruption linked to flood control projects. (OSV News/Reuters/Lisa Marie David)

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Manila Philippines — September 23, 2025
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Clergy and religious along with lay Catholic faithful came out in droves at an anti-corruption rally in the Philippines capital of Manila Sept. 21 that drew tens of thousands of protesters.

This and other nationwide protests were spurred by a pledge from Philippine President Fredinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. in July to expose and pursue prosecutions for dishonest projects in the typhoon- and monsoon-prone island nation's flood control works. They were found to be rife with corruption.

Marcos is the son of the predominantly Catholic country's former dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, whose amassed billions have been ascribed to questionable practices.

The president urged the public to demonstrate peacefully and express outrage over being robbed by the government. Indignant over the nearly 10,000 seriously problematic — some nonexistent — flood-control projects worth $9.5 billion, he told reporters at a news conference Sept. 15 that if he were not president, he would march.

In the days leading up to the demonstration, the Philippine bishops' conference, Manila's cardinal and other church leaders also called on the faithful to attend the rally scheduled for Sept. 21, the 53rd anniversary of martial law instituted by Ferdinand Marcos.

Most protesters were at the National Shrine of Mary, Queen of Peace, or EDSA shrine, a major intersection in the heart of Metro Manila, where a chapel and bronze monument were erected after millions gathered in 1986 in a church- and military-led, non-bloody overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos.

Conference president Cardinal Pablo Virgilio David of Caloocan rallied the crowds from a stage by the shrine.

The cardinal wore white clerical attire, with a white baseball cap, and was leaning on his bishop's staff. He asked liturgists to forgive his use of the crozier (outside of Mass) to steady himself because of a weak knee.

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"This staff is what we use as a hook to rescue little sheep that have fallen off the edge of a ravine," said David. "We have many fellow citizens who have fallen into the ravine of corruption. They can still repent, and with this staff if they need the protection of the church, we will open our churches up as sanctuaries to those brave enough to tell the truth and nothing but the truth."

"It can also strike a blow at the wild dogs and crocodiles who've wasted the people's money," he added, to loud cheers and a steady chant of "Jail the corrupt (those plunderers) now!"

The cardinal was onstage with several Catholic leaders, other Christian churchmen and other clergy, including a Muslim leader.

"We seek true and deep renewal, but peacefully," he said. "This is not political, but a moral affirmation of our unified faith in the fight against the culture of corruption."

The conference's and other prominent Catholics' social media posts show crowds including seminarians and religious holding signs with slogans such as "Country first, suppress corruption" and "Thou shalt not steal - Exodus 20:15."

Days ahead of the rally, Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan, past president of the bishops' conference, released a strongly worded admonition to the faithful.

Reminding the public that they also have a part in the culture of corruption by continually voting for those who have been proven to be corrupt — and sometimes convicted for it — and by engaging in practices such as receiving money or groceries for their votes, Villegas wrote, "We need a revolt, a revolt not just against a corrupt system; but a revolt against the corrupt hearts and souls within us that enable the corrupt to prosper."

"We all have contributed to the system," he stated. "The system cannot change if we do not change from the soul. To get angry and to protest is good. This is still lacking. We must be angry at the corruption within us otherwise the rally will be 'That's enough, let us have a share!'"

Also, he said voting for honest politicians is still not enough. The public will have to keep close scrutiny of their actions to ensure they maintain honesty.

Dozens were arrested at a concurrent anti-corruption rally at a bayside park in Manila, after masked protesters set fire to tires of trucks in a security blockade surrounding the presidential palace.