

THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF PEOPLE'S POWER

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The thesis of this paper is simple. It was people's power, more than any other thing, which swept Marcos from his Malacañang throne and which installed in his place Corazon Aquino as the new president of the Philippines. It would also be people's power which could prevent a Marcos comeback, even without Marcos himself, or an emergence of a new dictatorship for that matter. But what exactly does the term people's power, the by-word of that unique popular uprising which sent Marcos and his cronies scampering out of the country, mean?

People's power would simply refer to the capacity of the people to chart social circumstances that are consonant with their own aspirations. Consequently, this entails the realization of the people themselves of their own power to make history. People's power is manifested either in spontaneous or organized forms of action. For instance, the bulk of those who participated in the so-called "February Revolution" were unorganized individuals who responded to the situation spontaneously.

It is argued here, however, that a more organized form of people's power is needed in the more delicate and complicated task of rebuilding a broken nation and restructuring an oppressive social dispensation. At the same time, people's power will continue to be a meaningful force in society only if the masses would actually constitute themselves into self-organized groups capable of voicing their own demands in the center stage of politics. In this sense, the presence of autonomous mass organization in the political system would not only serve to promote

pro-people policies in government but would also act as a countervailing mechanism to the possible abuse and corruption of state power. The institution of a new politics based on popular democracy would also deter the desires of the traditional politicians to swing the country back to the old politics based on intra-elite competition which existed prior to martial law.

The Social Basis of Elite Politics

Elite democracy held sway in the Philippines during the post-colonial period up to the imposition of martial law in 1972. It was characterized by the dominance of two major political parties, the Nationalista Party (NP) and the Liberal Party (LP), whose members only switched from one camp to the other. This had been made possible by the virtual identicalness of the platform of government of both parties. The NP and LP were in fact simply two factions of the same ruling class.

The present Filipino catchword "balimbing", used to refer to a political turncoat, is nothing new to Philippine politics.¹ As a matter of record, three previous Philippine presidents under the Republic each had to switch to the rival party in order to be the presidential candidate of his new party, and in the process went on to win the presidency.² Indeed, elite rivalry was waged on the level of personalities rather than principles.

Elite politics is founded along an elaborate system of patronage feature pork barrel allocations and the spoils system. Patronage politics among Filipinos is explained by Carl Lande as a function of the kinship system.³ According to Remigio Appalo, on the other hand, this is due to the Filipino cultural value of organic hierarchy.⁴ In effect, these arguments tell us that elite politics is here to stay because it is inherent among Filipinos.

A more critical approach to the situation would, however, reveal that the roots of elite patronage politics lie in the persistence of intense social inequality and mass poverty, characteristic of a dependent or neo-colonial capitalist system. An impoverished citizenry could be easily tempted into exchanging their votes for promises of rewards in the form of money and jobs from wealthy and glib-tongued politicians. It is not surprising, therefore, for politicians to train their sights on slum areas as targets for vote-buying sprees during elections.

The prominence of political warlords in the Philippine political scene manifests a social set-up where the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few could facilitate the commission of fraud and terrorism during electoral exercises. That's why Philippine elections have always been violent. In 1971, election-related killings reached the all-time high of 243. By early 1971, there were 80 political warlords around the country.⁵ With the imposition of martial law, Marcos destroyed only the political warlords antagonistic to him. It would be a real test for the leadership of Aquino if she could destroy the power base of Marcos's political warlords as well as prevent the reemergence of old ones and the appearance of new ones.

Martial Law and the Politics of Repression

Martial law did not put an end to elite politics. It merely narrowed down its expression within the Marcos faction of the elite. Instead of intra-elite competition, there was state corporatism. While breaking the backs of all independent political institutions and organizations, Marcos sought to establish government-controlled or influenced ones under this command (i.e. *barangay*, *sangguniang bayan*, *Kabataang Barangay*, *TUCP*, etc.).⁶

With the closure of the Congress and the crackdown on political parties and the mass media, the traditional politicians were disenfranchised of their power bases. They were consequently knocked out of the political ring during the early days of martial law. The opportunism of these politicians could readily be seen when announcements came in 1978 that elections for the Interim Batasang Pambansa (National Assembly) would be held and that a new party – the Kilusang Bagong Lipunan (New Society Movement) – would be formed by the Marcos government. Former NP and LP members excitedly rushed into the arms of Marcos. With the reversal of the political pendulum, these same people are now rushing to embrace Aquino.

Some staunch opposition politicians, however, refused to join the bandwagon, but in the meantime dreamt of the day when their old political parties would be revived. On the other hand, some highly respected nationalist politicians of pre-martial law days like Lorenzo Tañada and Jose Diokno decided to cast their lot with the anti-fascist, anti-imperialist mass

movement, thus giving credence to the relevance of pressure politics at this specific historical moment.

Remember that these were times when it was not yet fashionable to wear yellow nor was it safe to identify one's self with the cause of the opposition. It was an inquisitorial period when the simple assertion of basic human rights could be interpreted as subversive and could therefore earn one a vacation in prison or a trip to heaven. However, it was precisely this repressive political atmosphere fostered by martial law which impelled many cause-oriented individuals to persevere in their commitment to politicize and organize people into mass organizations that would serve as channels of people's power in the struggle for justice and democracy during those dark days. If there is anything to be thankful about martial law, it is the fact that it taught people to fight for their rights and to assert their interests.

The Aquino Assassination and the "Confetti Revolutionaries"

The political aftermath of the assassination of former Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr. at the tarmac of the Manila International Airport on August 21, 1983 placed to a severe test the Marcos regime's capacity to rule in the old way. The brazen murder of such a prominent Marcos critic shocked the sensibilities of many people who previously did not care about the killing of workers in the picket lines or the massacre of peasants in the rural areas.



The urban middle class climbed out of their closets and demonstrated their opposition to the repressive regime by throwing yellow confettis from the safety of their tall office buildings in Ayala. After five o'clock they would blow their car horns in unison as a sign of protest. Even then, there was a distinctively cautious middle class flavor in these acts of protest. At the same time, the festive Filipino atmosphere which attended the first confetti rallies after the Aquino assassination would serve as a fitting prelude to the type of revolution that Filipinos would be making during those four days of February in 1986.

The entry of the "yellow" protestors into the political field swelled the ranks of the anti-dictatorship mass movement which was up to then under the leadership of the national democratic organizations. However, the potentials of these new political forces in successfully waging an urban struggle to depose Marcos was not appreciated by the national democrats who were peripheralized at the outbreak of the "February Revolution".

The Elections which the Dictator Miscalculated

On November 3, 1985, President Ferdinand Marcos announced over American television his desire for snap presidential elections on February 7, 1986. He stated that he was calling it in order to get a fresh mandate from the people. However, the real impetus for the snap polls was a combination of political strategy and American pressure. Marcos felt that an earlier local election, originally scheduled for May 1986, would divide his KBL power base and thereby hamper his own presidential chances if the presidential polls are set for 1987. At the same time, Marcos wanted to demonstrate to the United States government that he was still capable of maintaining stability in the country.

Of course, Marcos did not call the elections only to end up as the loser. The historical fact that a dictator never allows himself to lose in his own election became the starting point of debates among cause-oriented organizations as to the efficacy of participating in the snap polls.

The big coalition of national democratic organizations-Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN)-decided to boycott the polls although six of its national leaders, including their chairman, Tañada, filed leaves of absences from the organization to support Cory Aquino. According to BAYAN, as a matter of "principle", participation in the sham election would only legitimize the dictatorship. But for other progressive groups, the issue was not one of principle alone which was idealistic but one of "praxis" which combined theory and practice. The intellectual simply had to go down his ivory tower in order to find out that the masses were for using the elections to voice out their discontent. BANDILA (Bansang Nagkakaisa sa Diwa at Layunin), a coalition of social democratic and liberal democratic organizations, and the socialist group Independent Caucus carried the line of "critical participation" or "participation without illusions". While they agreed that it may not take an election to defeat the Marcos dictatorship, they also realized the significance of using the election as a venue for furthering the political education and organization of the people. After all, it is especially during election time that people are most receptive to political ideas and discussions.



Popular Support for Cory

Corazon Aquino, widow of the late Sen. Benigno Aquino Jr., became the united opposition presidential candidate through a campaign which showed a million people affixing their signatures in a draft for her to run. The message was simple. Cory Aquino was the only candidate acceptable to many political aggregations. For instance, Jovito Salonga, Eva Estrada-Kalaw, Aquilino Pimentel, among others, all threatened to run for president if Salvador Laurel was chosen official opposition candidate.

Without the luxury of an intensive media coverage afforded to Marcos, Aquino went on grassroots campaign sorties which brought her to the whole length of the archipelago while her rival campaigned on radio and television. Each time she arrived in a place, Mrs. Aquino would be met by an avalanche of enthusiastic people chanting her name. The opposition campaign scenes would be reminiscent of adulating movie fans shrieking as they see their favorite screen idols. One might refer to this situation in terms of a "fan club" mentality translated into politics.

Evidently, the people identified the opposition not with UNIDO (United Nationalist and Democratic Opposition), the political party under which Aquino then ran for president, but with Cory. Indeed, Cory Aquino became the new symbol of the opposition replacing her husband Ninoy who was the rallying symbol of the people after the tarmac incident. In the eyes of the people, Cory Aquino is the exact opposite of Marcos. She evokes sincerity because she is not a politician. We could even surmise that her politician husband, were he alive today, would not have gotten such tremendous response from the people.

In the past, ordinary people viewed politics as dirty; they perceived politics as equivalent to corrupt politicians. Hence, the clean image projected by Mrs. Aquino as a non-politician aroused hopes in people that she would not be the same corrupt official that Marcos was. It could be said therefore that the masses of people who supported Corazon Aquino were moved by both anti-Marcos and anti-politician sentiments.

How Marcos Politicized the People

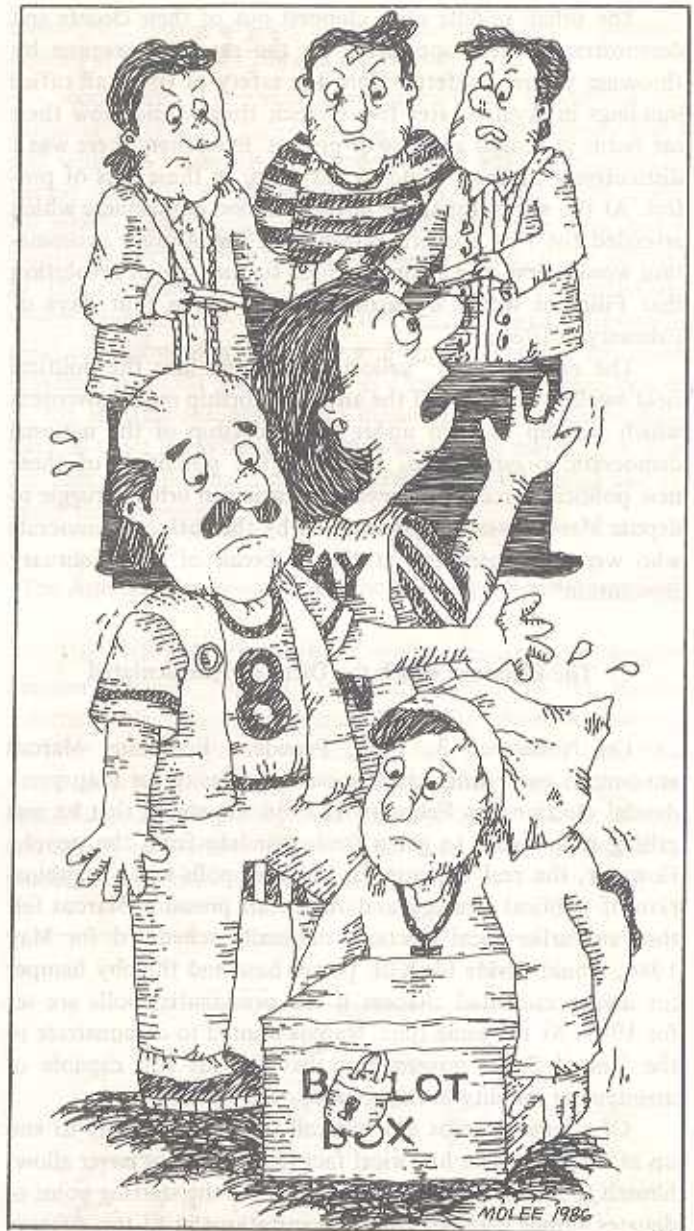
NAMFREL (National Citizens Movement for Free Elections), accredited as the citizens arm of the Commission on Election (COMELEC), proved to be a pain in the neck for Marcos. With the words "bantay ng bayan" (people's vigilantes) emblazoned on their white t-shirts and jackets, the NAMFREL volunteers doggedly watched over the electoral proceedings in the different polling places, going to the extent of guarding the ballots with their own lives. In the process they were subjected to all forms of harassments and terrorism. The example of NAMFREL was replicated in the vigilance of unorganized people who swarmed to watch over Camps Crame and Aguinaldo who, precisely because they were unorganized, got their instructions on what to do from the Church-run radio station Radio Veritas which definitely played a very critical role in the whole process of defeating Marcos.

This demonstration of people's vigilance is different from the kind of participation shown by people in pre-martial law elections. Previously, people saw their duty as done with the casting of their ballots. Under the authoritarian regime, however, the people realized that the desire for clean elections involved a political struggle that is both radical and dangerous, as it is continuing.

Playing crucial roles in countering the hegemony of government propaganda, intended to prepare the minds of the people for a Marcos victory, would be the alternative mass media which courageously reported and broadcast the anomalies perpetrated in the February polls. Even before the official Batasan count of the elections came out, it was clear in the minds of the people that the real winner in the election was Corazon Aquino.

With the massive exposure of cheating and outright terrorism the official result of the election was no longer of consequence. With the utter failure of the electoral process, the political struggle was now transferred to the terrain of mass pressure politics.

The election therefore produced two candidates for the same post both claiming victory. On the one hand, we had Marcos claiming a legal victory because he had the support of the Batasan. On the other hand, we had Aquino claiming a popular victory because she had the support of the people. As



succeeding events would show, people's power would make the final pronouncement on who actually won.

The Civil Disobedience Movement

Marcos thought that the popular indignation about the electoral result would die a natural death in the same manner that the post-Aquino assassination protest campaign collapsed. He adopted a wait-and-see strategy in this regard. Once again, he was clearly on the defensive in terms of propaganda. He was only waiting, however, for the proper opportunity to crack down on his enemies.

On the other hand, the Marcos regime's attempt to reassert its ideological hold upon the people received a crucial blow from an unlikely source - the official Catholic Church which was well known for its conservative and "critical collaboration" stance vis-a-vis the Marcos regime. The official Church hierarchy, through the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), issued a strongly-worded statement on February 14, 1986 describing the snap polls as "unparalleled in the fraudulence of their conduct". The 66 bishops emphasized that "the government that retains power through fraudulent means has



no moral basis". In a country where the overwhelming majority are Catholics, the call of the bishops for a "non-violent struggle for justice" definitely tilted the balance of the ideological scale in favor of the opposition forces.⁷ With the blessing of the bishops, the opposition braced itself for a long civil disobedience campaign to force the Marcos regime to respect the will of the people.

The post-election protest campaign by the opposition kicked off with the "Tagumpay ng Bayan" (Victory of the People) rally at Luneta on February 18, 1986, the day after the Batasan proclamation of the Marcos-Tolentino tandem. In this rally, Cory Aquino outlined a protest program featuring the boycott of well-known crony corporations (e.g., Rustans, San Miguel Corporation, Security Bank, etc.). She also asked the people to stop watching Channel 4 and to stop buying establishment newspapers, as well as to hold back payments of water and electric bills.⁸

The rationale behind the protest campaign, which threatened to escalate into a full-blown civil disobedience movement, was the idea that a government that had lost its legitimacy did not deserve the obedience and compliance of its people.

The schools became the important centers of protest. It should be noted that classes were suddenly suspended by the Ministry of Education with still two weeks to go prior to the election. The suspension virtually derailed the holding of mock elections and opposition sorties in the campuses. After all, majority of the voters were below the 25-year old bracket. At the University of the Philippines and Ateneo University, alternative classes were held. The faculty and students there found it abnormal to continue holding normal classes in an abnormal situation. At De La Salle University, an "operation work stoppage" was undertaken to convince people within the 4th district of Manila to support Cory Aquino's call for a work stoppage on February 26, 1986, a day after Marcos's expected inauguration into office.

The big labor unions together with other mass organizations had also expressed their support for Cory's plan of civil disobedience. In effect, the scenario was set for a broad front to unseat the Marcos regime from power through mass protest.

The American government, on the other hand, appeared to be uncomfortable with this type of politics. It feared that such mass initiatives could develop into a deep anti-American sentiment which manifested its initial signs when US President Ronald Reagan stated that both the Marcos and Aquino camps were equally responsible for committing fraud and violence in the February polls, and above all, that his main concern is the safety of the American bases in the Philippines. Hence, up to the eve of the February rebellion, special US envoy Philip Habib was in Manila negotiating for a governmental set-up where there would be power sharing between Marcos and Aquino, which the latter firmly refused.⁹

The "February Revolution"

The defections of the Enrile and Ramos factions of the military the night of February 22, 1986 signalled the start of the so-called "four days in February" which toppled the Marcos regime. It also brought into the open the deep divisions in the military especially those existing between the regular officers who come from the Philippine Military Academy and the integree officers.¹⁰

The dramatic support thrown in by the people to the military rebels who were mostly members of the RAM (Reform AFP Movement) served as the fulcrum by which the indecisive generals resolved to support the rebel soldiers. On the other hand, the inability of Marcos to control the revolt during its early hours considerably weakened his options as the days passed. With so many civilians surrounding the two camps—Camp Crame and Camp Aguinaldo—where the reformist soldiers were holed in, it was obvious that a direct military confrontation could only be done at the cost of the lives of so many people. Such a catastrophe would invite international revulsion against Marcos's regime and could perhaps close all exit doors for him once he decides to leave the country.

In the meantime, the political contest was fought more in the mass media rather than in actual military combat. If anything could be said of the February rebellion, it is the fact that the political struggle was fought largely on the level of propaganda rather than of military might. Radio Veritas played a vital role as the coordinating arm of the popular uprising. It should be noted that the mass base of the Camp Crame uprising were unorganized people who sought instructions through the radio.



The short duration of the revolt was characteristic of its urban setting. Having been fought in the center of power itself, changes in the constellation of forces occurred very decisively. Control of vital media facilities, for instance, swept the tide in favor of the rebellion. The takeover of the government television, Channel 4, cut off Marcos's contact and influence with the people from inside his Malacañang garrison.

Many people believe that the mass movement which hoisted Corazon Aquino to power composed a minority of the Filipino population. This is true but only from a narrow empiricistic point of view. Certainly, this is the specificity of an urban rebellion: you strike from the cities to the countryside.

At the same time, it should be pointed out that people responded so enthusiastically to the military revolt because they saw it as simply a continuation of the civil disobedience movement to oust Marcos from power. From the context of political dynamics, it was a continuation of the political process where people's power was expressed in support of Cory Aquino all over the country, beginning from the electoral campaign which proceeded to the civil disobedience campaign and culminated in a mass rebellion which drove Marcos into exile.

An Ode to People's Power

Many people are still at a loss as to whether the "four days in February" could rightfully be called a "revolution". It is a revolution alright but only in terms of overturning our political culture from one of passivity to one of active involve-

ment. It is a revolution in terms of people realizing their own collective power to make history. It is a revolution in terms of people wanting to actively participate in the shaping of their own future instead of entrusting it in the hands of a few politicians. In short, it is a political revolution but one that remains unfinished because the political structures of dictatorship have not been completely transformed. At the same time, the concrete political structures of a truly popular democracy has yet to be fully delivered from the womb of the old political order.

On the other hand, the "February Revolution" is certainly not a revolution in terms of overhauling the oppressive structures of Philippine society. It is not a social revolution so to speak. It does not prevent the people, however, from transforming it into one. People's power, after all, did not end with the exit of the Marcos regime from the Philippine political scene.

President Aquino herself recognized this fact. In the "Misa ng Bayan" (Mass of the People) held at Luneta on March 2, 1986, she urged the people to set up people's organizations at the grassroots and community levels to transform people's power into permanent structures that would safeguard the gains of the people's revolution.¹¹

An organized citizenry is definitely a more effective agent of social change than a mass of individuals groping for direction. The consolidation of people into mass organizations and self-management institutions would go a long way in facilitating the process of popular participation in every aspect of our society.

Notes:

¹"Balimbing" is a green and juicy fruit with many sides to it. It has five longitudinal sharp angular lobes. In recent times, the word was used by Filipinos to refer to a person who campaigned for the deposed tyrant Marcos in the snap elections of February 7, 1986 but who quickly trooped to the Aquino camp when the going went rough for Marcos.

²Manuel Roxas bolted out of the NP to form the LP in 1945 to challenge then President Sergio Osmeña Sr. for the 1946 presidential elections. Ramon Magsaysay was the Defense Secretary of President Elpidio Quirino (LP) when he transferred to the NP to challenge Quirino for the post in 1953. Ferdinand Marcos was even the LP president when he switched to the NP to oppose Diosdado Macapagal for the position in 1965.

³Carí Lande, "Brief History of Political Parties", Jose Abueva and Raul de Guzman (eds.), *Foundations and Dynamics of Filipino Government and Politics*, (Manila: Bookmark, 1969) pp. 151-157.

⁴Remigio Agpalo, "The Philippines: From Communal to Societal Pangulo Regime", *Philippine Law Journal*, Vol. 56, March 1981, 1st qtr., pp. 56-98.

⁵Stephen Shalom, *The United States and the Philippines: A Study of Neo-Colonialism*, (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues 1981), p. 162.

⁶Robert Stauffer, "Philippine Corporatism: A Note on the New Society", *Asian Survey*, April 1977, p. 395.

⁷Ceres Doyo and Glenda Gloria, "Bishops' Call: Struggle for Justice", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, February 15, 1986, pp. 1,2.

⁸Marlen Ronquillo, "Cory: Boycott Crony Firms", *The Manila Times*, February 17, 1986, pp. 1, 10.

⁹Amando Doronila, "Shared Power is Ruled Out", *The Manila Times*, February 22, 1986, pp. 1, 10.

¹⁰Francisco Nemenzo Jr., "The Current Philippine Crisis", Paper delivered at a joint seminar of the Department of Political and Social Change and the Department of International Relations, Australian National University, Oct. 20, 1983.

¹¹Rey Arquiza, "Magtutungan Tayo- Cory", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 3, 1986, pp. 1, 2.