

# Memorandum to Popular Democrats

February's successful insurrection allowed a dramatic leap from dictatorship to a relatively democratic political order.

The essential element distinguishing the new political order from the old is a dramatically expanded democratic space: a new condition of freedom brought forth by a combination of the formal withdrawal of repressive state policies and the objectively enhanced capacity of the masses for democratic assertion.

Conditions are now quite hospitable to rapidly advancing the process of popular empowerment. The particular dynamism of the prevailing situation must not, however, be overlooked.

The opening of the democratic space does not per se imply popular empowerment. Unless conscious popular organizing proceeds rapidly, there is danger that the wide democratic space opened up by insurrection shall transform into a political vacuum, a formal democracy without democratic substance.

The emergence of a democratic vacuum presents dangerous possibilities. History is replete with instances of sophisticated democratic apparatuses developing in place even as democratic popular engagement remained undeveloped. In a majority of cases, the low capability for democratic mass mobilization in the face of open channels for popular intervention invited tragedy.

Such was the case in Europe during the Thirties. The failure of progressive popular forces to effectively articulate even in the most hospitable of conditions allowed regressive and repressive tendencies to seize open political channels and turn the formal democratic order against itself. Fascism is the most destructive outcome of such hapless situations.

In a sense, the crisis of a democratic vacuum occurred once before in our political history.

American colonialism bequeathed to us a fully developed liberal democratic state apparatus. Modelled after the American mode of governance to the detail, the liberal democratic state apparatus was made to work in a political

context characterized by the systematic suppression of popular organizations. The independently emerging mass movements during the period of formal colonial occupation understandably took a sharp anti-colonial focus. The colonial power understandably reacted with suppression, even as it went about laying the institutional groundwork for democratic procedures.

American colonialism, therefore, left behind a legacy of political ambivalence. On the one hand, it insisted on forcing into existence a formal democracy complete with extensive juridical and educational establishments. On the other hand, it scuttled autonomous popular organizations and equipped the post-colonial occupation understandably took developed repressive apparatuses. A powerful executive branch and a strong constabulary are but two indications of this.

With autonomous popular organizations — and thus popular political initiative — habitually suppressed by an organically repressive post-colonial state, democratic political articulation failed to substantiate the theoretically existent democratic form.

With the masses prevented from filling the democratic space through authentic popular organizations, the liberal democracy continued through the life of the post-war Philippine Republic. The process reflected in the ideological dehydration of political contestation and the delimitation of popular political involvement to the routinary sphere of electoral participation.

The systematic exclusion of meaningful popular political involvement was compounded by the maturation of bureaucrat capitalism and increasingly severe imbalance in the distribution of wealth. The former converted the political party system into a patronage network and the latter made the masses dependent on patronage.

The inability of the masses to effectively intervene through the formally constituted democratic channels told on the political fiber of the Republic. The

irony of formal democracy and the politics of popular exclusion weakened the democratic structures, making them susceptible to easy appropriation by authoritarianism.

The imposition of martial rule in 1972 finally resolved the riddle of post-colonial Philippine politics. By dissolving all semblances of democracy, dictatorship exposed the objective powerlessness of the masses.

The unmasking of the impotence of merely formal democracy provided the backdrop for more conscious popular organizing during the period of struggle against dictatorship.

With the expulsion of the dictatorship through popular insurrection, the masses grasped all the more clearly the value of organized mass intervention into the formation of state policy. Such clearer understanding should encourage the further expansion of popular organizations.

But it is not enough that more extensive popular organizing takes place. Without a comprehensive strategic perspective of social reconstruction, there shall always be the danger of popular organizations dispersing into single-issue politics and parochial crusades.

The dispersion and parochialization of organized popular politics negate the potential of such politics for overdetermining social conditions in a manner favorable to the masses. Mass political involvement shall be susceptible to cooptation and absorption by structurally entrenched ruling class interests.

Masses shall remain powerless for as long as the structural sources of social power remain intact and veiled by ruling class ideologies, for as long as the mystifying formulations of bourgeois liberalism remain hegemonic.

A clear strategy of popular empowerment should guide present efforts at consolidating the organized basis of popular democracy.

That strategy shall distinguish a *conscious* popular democratic movement from random and, thus, transient grassroots organizing.