

The People Power Project: Edsa and Beyond

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People Power



People must be persuaded that change is possible, is not to be feared, and that it can be done in our time.

Because the EDSA events of February 1986 have been prominently billed as revolutionary, observers expect the government that was formed in the aftermath of these events to be revolutionary too. In fact, it is not just observers who expect much from the Aquino government. Ordinary Filipinos, above all, expect bold initiatives to emanate from their People's Power government. Such initiatives were indeed undertaken in the first four months following the February revolution. After that, the entire project began to steadily lose the impulse that lent it its early coherence and singlemindedness.

The July 6th attempted coup at the Manila Hotel was a watershed. This event marked the beginning of excessive timidity, indecisiveness, and lack of confidence on the part of the new government. Its top leaders began to warn each other against rocking the boat too much for fear of a massive rightwing backlash. They allowed themselves to be heckled and intimidated by a vociferous Right, which was only too eager to magnify its strength. Each time any move was taken by the government towards dismantling the remaining ramparts of the authoritarian system, the Right charged the government with giving in too much to the communists. In the process, Cory's team allowed itself to be led disastrously into a corner from which it could not move by rightwing forces in and out of government.

This is why it has taken so long for the Aquino government to issue an executive order on agrarian reform. This is also the reason why the clean-up of the military, which is long overdue, has not been accomplished. And indeed, this is also the reason why the President's Committee on Human Rights under the late Jose W. Diokno could not function as effectively as it had aspired to, and why many repressive decrees of Marcos had remained unrepealed more than a year after the new government assumed power. The government's advisers

loved to say they were too busy surviving the successive coup attempts to think about reforms.

The Inertia of Old Structures

The first business of the new government was to survive. This it did quite effectively, but by the time it had normalized the situation, the revolutionary momentum with which it began was practically gone. Structural inertia had begun to overwhelm the new leaders. Compromises with the previous regime's power-wielders had been struck. Thus,

picked up the ball from there. Neither the government nor the people's organizations. This raises the theoretical question whether it is at all possible to create stable popular structures to defend the revolution, after the culmination of the struggle, or whether these structures must be formed in the course of the struggle itself.

It would be naive to think that the Aquino leadership had not anticipated the series of attempts to grab power by forces associated with the previous regime, including her own erstwhile partner at EDSA, Mr. Juan Ponce Enrile. The dilemma she faced, however, was whether to rely on an amorphous people's power that was still in the process of slowly organizing itself into more stable structures, or to count on a section of the armed forces identified with General Ramos, even if this meant postponing the much-needed top-to-bottom overhauling of this monstrous creation which had grown very fast and developed unprofessional habits under the Marcos dictatorship. The path of least resistance was to rely on Gen. Ramos, who sought and continues to assert his leadership over a fractious army ridden with so many virtually autonomous and thoroughly undisciplined but heavily armed elements.

This is the Aquino government's problem with the military - that it cannot claim full control over its ranks, and yet, its very action reflects on the State which is now under Aquino management. While it is nearly of common knowledge that the Aquino leadership is powerless to enforce its will throughout the entire military structure, the same leadership nevertheless likes to pretend that it is in fact in full control of it. Consequently, every time there is an attempted coup, the government finds itself in the ridiculous position of elaborately preempting it while eloquently denying its existence.

With its attention effectively dissipated by the troubles being created by fascist elements in the military and civilian community, the Aquino government failed to carry out the massive reorganization plan it had earlier contemplated. More tragically, it temporized pathetically on the agrarian reform question, until events overtook it. The massacre of unarmed peasant demonstrators at Mendiola (near the Malacañang Palace) in January 1987, after they had staged a week-long demonstration in front of the Ministry of Agrarian Reform, finally brought out the full urgency of this issue before the President. But the creation of the new Congress and the election of new legislators in the recent May elections have now made it a little more illogical for the President to exercise her legislative powers to formulate a comprehensive agrarian reform program. She had waited too long, and now the new legislators want the matter to be entrusted to them.

There is a lesson we can draw from this experience. Given an essentially *reactive* presidency, the initiative is bound to be seized by the more organized elements in the old order. These are the business interest groups, the conservative Church, the political clans that continue to dominate the remaining

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instead of radically scuttling the governmental framework that was carefully put together by the Marcos regime, the new government opted to take the path of least resistance, which was to take over existing structures and to gradually put them in the service of the new leadership.

There were very strong reasons for this, and this option could still have worked if the same people's power that gave birth to the new government had been better organized to take the initiative in rebuilding the social order. To be sure, President Aquino and her advisers knew this, though it is another matter whether they realized its urgency.

Sometime in March 1986, the President had urged the citizenry to form themselves into people's councils to safeguard the gains of the February revolution. But nobody

traditional political parties, and the professional power-brokers who precisely thrive within the niches created by governmental indecisiveness. Compared to the people's movements and organizations that were left over from the days of the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship, the organized conservative forces tend to be more effective because they precisely prey upon the tendency of the majority to lean towards the familiar.

Misusing Popularity and Squandering a Historic Opportunity

It is not an accident that people's movements have been virtually marginalized in the present political situation. Their links to the palace have become increasingly tenuous, under-

Unfortunately, the popularity of the government has not been harnessed in favor of much-needed reforms. For such reforms could only have been undertaken by an executive wielding enormous legislative powers, while resting confidently on the enormous support displayed by the people. The rights of workers, which had been severely curtailed under Marcos, could have been radically restored under Mrs. Aquino. The awesome powers of the military, which had accumulated tremendously under the segis of the authoritarian regime, could have been effectively clipped.

The global popularity that the President enjoyed could have been effectively used as leverage to extricate the entire country from the debt-bondage into which the Marcos dictatorship had driven our people. The country's almost permanent subordinate role as junior partner in the American



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going quick rehabilitation only when there is a threatened coup. In the day-to-day affairs of government, their voice is not heard. Yet they find themselves constantly professing support for the government they had helped put in power for the simple reason that it is, by all accounts, still immensely superior to the Marcos regime.

The popular support for the Aquino government has been repeatedly affirmed by the triumph of the Yes votes in the February constitutional plebiscite, and more recently, by the impressive performance at the polls of Administration candidates, many of them virtual unknowns, who ran basically under the banner of "Cory's Choices". Their victory over somebody like Juan Ponce Enrile is a testimony not to their individual strength but to the unfading popularity of their principal endorser—Cory Aquino.

geo-strategic framework could have been altered dramatically, even if not entirely eliminated, had the popular president acted on this question.

On the contrary, this popularity has often been employed to back up economic policies that had been rejected by the people when it was Marcos who was paired with them. I refer specifically to IMF-imposed conditionalities that are now securely in place thanks to Mrs. Aquino's ministers. I also refer to the tragic pledge made by Mrs. Aquino in September 1986 before the American Congress to the effect that her government committed itself to honor all the external debt obligations inherited from the previous regime. No one knows exactly what prompted her to bind the entire nation to this suicidal promise. We only know that under the best financial rescue package possible, the country still effectively becomes



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a net exporter of capital.

In 1986, the country paid more than \$4 billion in debt service, which is approximately 80% of our total foreign exchange earnings from commodity exports the previous year. The lengthening of the repayment period hardly gives any relief to this ravaged country, for what we need is respite from debt service itself so that we can rebuild a devastated economy. But the present government has allowed the foreign debt to hang like an albatross around the neck of the entire Filipino nation. A number of "cause-oriented" organizations and individuals have recently formed a new coalition aptly called the "Freedom From Debt Coalition", which takes off from the information that as much as 39% of our national budget is used up annually just to service the national debt. But it has not been easy to mobilize massive support for this campaign. The popularity of our president has clearly interfered with the politicization of our people.

The Limits of Reform: Some Disturbing Questions

Even so, no amount of popularity can sustain a presidency that does not deliver. For one or two years, the people themselves will make excuses for the executive, simply because they adore her and they believe in her and her unquestionable sincerity. But as the crisis deepens, people begin to verbalize their incipient disenchantment, and their apprehension that perhaps the president is not well-advised. The country is fast approaching such a period. Next to agrarian reform, the debt question and the unreformed military, a number of uncomfortable questions have begun to be raised. The more crucial ones are the following:

1. Why has the government not moved fast in dismantling the private armies? Are the CHDF (Civilian Home Defense Forces) paramilitary units really being disbanded or are they simply being legalized under another label?
2. Why has the government not filed charges against the cronies in order to legitimize its confiscation of crony properties? Why has the retrieval of Marcos assets proceeded so slowly? Why has the government opted to strike compromise deals with cronies like Jose Yao Campos, the "banana king" Antonio Floirendo, and the "sugar king" Roberto Benedicto, instead of putting them behind bars or keeping them out of the country?
3. Why has the Cory government chosen to listen to and appease the business sector to the disadvantage of the labor sector? Why has it slighted organized labor?
4. Why has it not reorganized the bloated Marcos bureaucracy in such a way as to trim it down and make it more efficient?
5. Why did it not adequately empower the PCHR (Presidential Committee on Human Rights) so as to ferret out all the human rights violators under the Marcos regime?
6. Why has it not launched a serious public scrutiny



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of the operations of notorious government financial institutions like the PNB, the GSIS, the DBP, the NDC, and the Philguarantee, which were all known as the Marcoses' milking cows?

7. Why are sequestered and confiscated properties being re-privatized instead of operated on a cooperative ownership basis or as public stock corporations? This can be asked with respect to the San Miguel Corporation and the television stations that are reputed to belong to Mr. Marcos and his cronies, Eduardo Cojuangco and Roberto Benedicto respectively?

8. Why are the old political clans back in power? The Lazatins and Lingads of Pampanga. The Dupayas of Cagayan.

And indeed, the Aquinos and the Cojuangcos. Why has the Aquino government chosen to deal with them instead of the cause-oriented groups, both for the elections and the appointment of OICs and high officials in government?

9. Why did the Cory administration decide to court US support immediately instead of using her world-wide popularity to enlarge her support especially in Europe, Africa and Latin America?

10. Why did the Aquino administration decide to soften its stance on the matter of US military bases in the Philippines?

11. Why did the Aquino government decide to go for foreign investment-led economic recovery, instead of pioneer-



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ing a people's power nationwide livelihood program led by community cooperatives? The security of the familiar?

12. Why did the government choose to protect the property rights of the sugar landlords, even if this meant allowing them to keep a large part of their lands idle, instead of utilizing it to produce food?

These questions all seek to explore the limits of reform within the framework of a political balance such as now existing in the Philippines. Any attempt to answer them would be inadequate unless some attention were also paid to the constellation of ideologies at play from the time of the Aquino assassination to the downfall of the Marcos regime.

Depicting the Struggle: The Terrain of Ideology

It may be said that there were, at the time, essentially three dominant perspectives in the struggle.

The *first* was the perspective which simply saw Marcos as being at the root of the country's problems.

The *second* was the view that the problem lay in the authoritarian political system.

And the *last* was the belief that the problem was more structural than personal, more encompassing than authoritarianism, because of the involvement of the United States as guardian of a neo-colonial social order.

The first perspective was essentially a moralistic one which focused its criticism on the corruption of the regime, the wastefulness of the ruling family, and the thievery of those in high places of government. The February 7th snap presidential election provided the perfect setting for the emergence and popularization of this standpoint. That election was represented as nothing less than a contest between good and evil.

The second perspective, on the other hand, denounced cronyism as an offshoot of the centralization of political power in the hands of one man. The adherents of this view found common cause with those who denounced the regime for its violation of civil and political rights as a consequence of its use of military power as a prime instrument of enforcing its will.

The third perspective was the most comprehensive of all. Marcos was seen as nothing more than the historical enforcer of the logic of national and social oppression. This was an anti-imperialist and democratic view, which located the roots of oppression in the structures of dependence and of class rule. Adherents of this perspective saw the long-term resolution of the contradictions of Philippine society as lying beyond the simple replacement of the Marcoses. What they demanded was the overthrow of imperialist control and the liberation of popular democratic initiative through the empowerment of grassroots forces.

The EDSA revolution clearly marked the triumph not even of the second perspective, but basically of the first moral-

istic perspective. It also marked the marginalization of the structuralist standpoint which was clearly oriented to radical change. This is the reason why the EDSA revolution is perhaps one of the few Third World revolutions in the modern period that was not anti-imperialist. That revolution was basically anti-Marcos, and at best anti-authoritarian. The forces that gathered at EDSA were more unified in what they rejected than in what they accepted. This is why the mandate of the revolutionary government that emerged from it remains unclarified to this day. This is the reason for the characteristic vacillation of the Aquino government on many basic issues.

Concluding Points: The Revolution Continues

The picture being drawn here of the political situation in the Philippines, a year after the downfall of Marcos, would however not be complete without the following additional and concluding observations:

1. The People's Power revolution in February 1986 may not have led to meaningful changes in the Philippine social structure, but it definitely gave many Filipinos enough reason and courage to question the existing system of privilege, of power, and even of property. This is the wellspring of a sustained campaign for an authentic agrarian reform, and of the quest for a far-reaching democratization of Philippine political life.

2. This partial liberation of consciousness from a variety of myths, which were perpetuated by the governing class especially during Marcos's time, is what makes the entire present political process still an open-ended one. In short, the revolution continues; it is unfinished.

3. The traditional social institutions which are largely based on the collective myths of the past are losing their legitimacy. There is, for instance, a crisis of those social arrangements by which access to natural resources, like the forests and the lakes and all other sources of public wealth, are allocated. The dominant classes who profited from prevailing institutions and arrangements are however attempting to consolidate their hold on power in the face of a potentially restive subjugated class. The recent national elections and the coming local elections constitute the vehicle for this ongoing political restoration.

4. We are living in a transitional period — a time for questioning, for trying out new approaches, for a radical reorientation of perspectives — in politics, in government, in the economy, in education, in foreign relations, etc.

5. The old is being massively challenged — especially from the standpoint of social justice — but new alternative arrangements have not fully taken shape.

6. It is now necessary to formulate coherent alternative arrangements so that they can serve as the people's basis for persuading others that change is possible, is not to be feared, and that it can be done in our time. **K**