

People's Power in Asia: Lessons and Prospects

The Philippine Experience¹

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People's power in the Philippine experience is not of recent past. The illustrated 1896-1902 Philippine Revolution, first against Spain's colonial rule and later against US occupation was preceded by over 200 local uprisings or revolts that were mostly led by the local elites or principalia. It was under direct US imperialist rule that mass actions and movements in the Philippines were marked by leadership of organized and conscious members of the working class and other laboring masses, even before the Communist Party of the Philippine Islands was established in 1930.

This brief presentation of the long historical background must at least be registered, but because of time constraint could not be discussed; the people's power of the recent past is our focus. But since we are students of history the circumstances leading to that event must be reviewed. The 1986 "Edsa people's power" was the culmination of the movement and struggles against Marcos dictatorship. For this I would make a round up of factors and developments that converged into what the Philippine ruling elite baptized as "people power" revolt. This was even given mention, but disrobed of any significance for the masses in the 1987 Constitution. The declaration of Martial Law and establishment of Marcos dictatorial rule in 1972 was a nodal point in the history of reactionary political rule in the Philippines. With US backing and on pretext of fighting growing communist insurgency, the Marcos clique monopolized power, suspended the 1935 constitution and rewrote the product of the 1971 Constitutional Convention.

The dictatorial regime closed both houses of congress, kept in check the Supreme Court, and unleashed the police and military forces against the people and factions and members of the ruling class who were rivals and enemies of Marcos. Mass activists and anti-Marcos politicians were arrested, tortured and detained. Some were summarily killed or abducted and never resurfaced since. Freedoms of assembly, association, speech, press, the right to redress grievances and practically all civil liberties were suppressed. Violations of human rights became rampant both in the urban and rural areas. The Marcos regime thus isolated itself from the people and from other factions of the elite.

It never took long for the people to get roused from fear. Thousands went underground others pursued the struggle through armed means and grew in number and experience in the process. By 1975 the workers movement was showing the way in breaking-off from Martial law terror and fear. The strike movement was the workers' assertion of the right to unionize and to strike forced the Marcos regime to steadily withdraw the ban on strikes and unions. But the regime also initiated the formation of a

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trade union center called the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines in order to temper and gain control of the workers movement. It also codified the labor laws in 1974. The youth and student movement that gained strength before 1972 re-asserted itself by 1977. The peasant movement that was mainly underground took legal and open form by 1981. The church sector, which has already seen action and participation in the mass movement before martial rule, became the lead force in the defense of human rights. Many church people went beyond the defense of human rights and embraced higher political consciousness. Several joined the underground, supported the armed struggle and the more advanced ones joined the people's army. Lawyers, the academe, doctors, artists and other professionals also formed their organizations. The anti-dictatorship movement strength also saw the participation and support of anti-Marcos members of the ruling class and other reactionary political parties who were disempowered by martial law. This movement was mainly under the leadership and influence of the CPP-NPA-NDF. The reactionary political opposition to Marcos remained fragmented until 1982 and was therefore losing initiative.

The US, which closely monitored the developments, pressured Marcos to give political concessions to the other factions of the ruling class. But in 1976, 2 years before the elections for the Interim National Assembly (Interim Batasang Pambansa- IBP) Marcos orchestrated the amendment of the 1973 Constitution through a referendum. Amendment number 6 gave Marcos legislative powers. Nevertheless, prominent anti-Marcos politicians, including then detained Benigno Aquino formed the Laban Party and participated in the 1978 elections. Laban was a coalition, it included three candidates identified or had ties with the NDF. Among the three was labor leader Alex Boncayao. As expected the April 1978 elections were fraudulent and this triggered the Metro Manila wide noise-barrage that was just short of a people's uprising.

The CPP which has gained strength and confidence was however embroiled in internal debate spawned by the action taken by the regional party leadership in Metro Manila that was contrary to the 1978 IBP election boycott policy of the central leadership. The debates that followed limited the drawing of lessons on such developments as well as on the unfolding of events that followed after. This proved to have taken the CPP by surprise such that it failed to free itself from the horns of dilemma until the decisive moments of the 1986 so-called People Power Seizure of power.

The immediate events that preceded the 1986 Edsa people power revolt were not similar to those before 1978. The assassination of Ninoy Aquino in 1983 further exacerbated the political crisis that was also greatly conditioned by the financial crisis that wrecked the Philippines from 1981. The "presidential elections" of 1981 wherein Marcos won "fresh mandate" from the people failed to draw in prominent anti-Marcos reactionaries. That election was widely boycotted by the people. Even the arrival of then US vice president George Bush, Sr. at the re-inauguration of Marcos presidency failed to temper the opposition. It was the assassination of Ninoy that forged the unity of the reactionary political opposition with his widow Corazon Cojuangco- Aquino as the symbol. The anti-dictatorship movement from 1983 had another center the CPP had to reckon with.

The rumblings inside the AFP were also another development that was beyond the influence of the CPP. The disgruntled officers who were long overdue in their promotions were also roused by the further isolation of the Marcos regime. The Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) took shape in 1985 and since then became part of the political scene.

The Reagan government of U.S. saw Marcos as part of the problem and part of the solution pressured him to call for snap presidential elections. That was November 1985; the National Assembly was in recess. Marcos, with his law-making powers, set the elections on February 6, 1986. The CPP set as policy for the movement a boycott position, with the one-sided view that the U.S. would support Marcos and the latter would resort to massive cheating. Sadly, the policy lacked depth and was devoid of any creativity and audacity.

The massive outpouring of support for Aquino proved the party wrong. Worse, the people's army was not even issued timely marching orders so as to grab opportunities then being offered by the unfolding events. While the movement tried to catch up, the situation has turned more complicated beyond the imagination, grasp and understanding of the party.

The perceived massive cheating and sporadic violence in the 1986 snap elections fueled and heightened the people's ire and resistance. The anti-Marcos faction of the elite seized leadership at this juncture. Cory Aquino called for civil disobedience. Cardinal Sin at the Church's lead openly supported. The RAM launched but failed in its coup attempt and withdrew to Camp Aquinaldo with then estranged defense minister Juan Ponce Enrile. Around 200 RAM members were holed-in at Camp Aquinaldo. The media both foreign and local came to the press conference called by Enrile who declared his falling out from Marcos and called for the support of the people and other sections of the AFP. Then vice chief of staff Gen. Fidel Ramos was at Camp Crame where he awaited developments before deciding to join Enrile when the masses from diverse classes who have heeded Cardinal Sin's call to "support and defend the patriots" were already in hundreds of thousands at Edsa between the 2 camps. The days of Marcos were numbered. US President Ronald Reagan phoned Marcos to "cut and cut clean". It was the end for Marcos. The middle and elite classes were euphoric. The left was left out. Thus was the elite-led people power revolt of 1986. The rest is history but lessons remained unlearned by the CPP, which would be wrecked later into several groupings.

The Philippine ruling elite and the US having learned their own lessons, appropriated to themselves the so called "bloodless people power revolt". Peoples around the world followed the events, which were captured by broadcast and print media as they unfolded. Apparently, the 1986 Philippine experience became model for the wave of "revolutions" that was also called the "autumn of nations" that swept across Eastern Europe in 1989.

Lessons and prospects

The Edsa model of people power was repeated in 2001 to topple the Estrada regime. This time the fragmented “left” participated and, in the process that was orchestrated from the start by the US and the anti-Estrada faction of the elite and Cardinal Sin-led Church’s hierarchy, was marginalized. Except for the traditional mainstream “left” belonging to the Bayan and KMU circles, which openly aligned with Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo at the expense of the people. This so called Edsa people power 2 was not similar to the original though the elements were there, the major pillars of elite rule in the Philippines—big business, the AFP command and the local Church’s hierarchy. The mass of people who were in Edsa 2 were mostly organized and instructed. The crowd was far less in number and lacked the spontaneity of Edsa.

Karl Marx once warned, paraphrasing Santayana, “History repeats itself only twice. The first is a farce and the second time is tragedy”. Perhaps Marx may have forgotten to add that, “the third time is a comedy”. And if I may add, the fourth time would be stupidity.

KPD views Edsa 2 as the stamp that sealed this extra-electoral process and method of changing regimes for the elite. But should the organized “left” and the masses adopt people’s power and raise it to the level of strategy or include it in the arsenal of tactics and weapons of people’s struggles in conditions wherein sections of the elite and the military are actively taking part in struggle, they must ensure independence in initiative and action based on a clear program and direction and the creativity and flexibility in calls and actions that would mobilize and heighten the resolve the masses at large. This means for the organized “left” plenty of painstaking propaganda-agitation, education and organizing work among the masses and correct and timely calls and actions that would link the organized with the unorganized and spontaneous masses. #

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