

**People's Power Uprising in the Philippines:  
Lessons and Prospects  
By Sonny Melencio\***

**I**

I hate to disappoint my fellow Filipinos. The Philippines is not the first in Asia to launch a successful people's power uprising such as what happened in 1986 which led to the ouster of the dictator Marcos. Iran was the first, when millions of masses demonstrated on the streets and caused the downfall of the Shah in 1979.

But perhaps the Philippines is the first in launching three successive people's power uprisings – that got us nowhere. The first one was in February 1986 as I mentioned, which installed Cory Aquino into power. That was called Edsa 1. The second one was in January 2001 which led to the ouster of then President Joseph Estrada and the rise to power by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. This was called Edsa 2 because the uprising also happened at the Edsa avenue.

And perhaps our foreign friends do not know that there was another people's power uprising that came to be known as Edsa 3. That was when a largely urban poor crowd took over Edsa shrine for days on end in order to press for the ouster of Arroyo and the recall to power of Estrada.

Karl Marx said, following Hegel's statement that all important events occur twice in history – that the first time is tragedy, the second time is a farce. Now may I add, the third time is a failure.

I am referring to Edsa. Edsa 1 was a tragedy because while it led to the ouster of a dictator, it brought to power a Cory Aquino government that merely implemented the neoliberal policies of the dictator. Edsa 2 was a farce because it was not even about dismantling a dictatorship and broadening the democratic space for the broad masses and the left. There no iota of change that would characterize the Arroyo regime. And then Edsa 3 was a failure... although it gave us a foreboding of what to expect from the Arroyo regime. Edsa 3 highlighted the fascist character of Gloria.

The largely unarmed participants of Edsa 3 (if you consider stones and wooden truncheons which they grabbed from the riot police as arms) were massacred right in front of the Malacanang palace, right in front of TV cameras which showed how around 50,000 urban poor demonstrators tried to scale the gates of the palace in the early morning of May 1, or barely 4 months after Arroyo's assumption of office. The demonstrators were gunned down by the police leaving a number of people dead in the streets while hundreds more tried to hold their ground till late in the afternoon of May 1. It was the first time that Arroyo implemented a state of rebellion in Metro Manila. In February last year, it will be remembered that Arroyo declared a state of emergency which she was forced to remove weeks after due to popular pressures.

## II

Now, before I talk about the lessons and prospects of the people's power uprising in the Philippines, let me summarize first the similarities and differences of the three Edsa uprisings.

1. **On similarities**, all three Edsas were undoubtedly people's uprisings. They were characterized by direct action of the masses who mobilized for days on end, to press for the overthrow of an incumbent regime they perceived as oppressive and unjust. Edsa 1 and 2 succeeded in their aims of deposing the incumbent regimes and installing new ones.

Edsa 3 failed, but nonetheless it was a people's uprising – or more precisely, an urban poor uprising. It could not be dismissed as a mere fluke among a series of Edsa risings. It was as legitimate as the other two.

It had the face of Edsa uprising stamped all over it – a stream of angry urban poor people descending into the Edsa shrine and occupying it for five straight days. The scream of exasperation of the poor intermingling with the bombasts of the pro-Estrada politicians and trapos. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the overwhelming number of people at Edsa 3 tended to be more anti-Gloria than pro-Estrada. The uprising should be read as the signal of a gathering storm of people's disenchantment over the cold-hearted Arroyo regime rather than a mere demand for the reinstatement of president Estrada.

2. Another similar character of all these uprisings was that their leadership was taken over – hijacked was the proper term – by factions of the ruling

classes in the Philippines. The leadership in Edsa 1 uprising passed into the hands of the Cory Aquino faction. Edsa 2 was taken over by the Arroyo faction. Edsa 3 was led by the pro-Estrada faction of the elite.

In short, at the early period of all these risings, before they become widespread and become more class conscious in their character, factions of the ruling classes consciously take over and steer the course and directions of these events.

The fact that the leadership of the Edsa risings could easily be taken over by the factions of the elite means that the uprising was more a product of the wranglings of the different factions of the elite, rather than a product of a heightened class struggle between the elite and the masses. The Edsa scenario, however, always involved the masses as mere warm bodies for the aspiring elite faction.

That's why it was not surprising that in Edsa 1 and 2, right after the new leaders had been installed in power, their first act was to demobilize and disperse "people's power". For them, people's power had served its purpose (which is to put them in power) and that's all there is to it, folks. They tell the people, You can go home now and wait for new instructions.

That is why the reference to Edsa Revolution is a misnomer. None of the Edsa uprisings led to a genuine revolution in which the old ruling system and the old ruling class were overthrown by another class representing a new socioeconomic order. On the contrary, the Edsa uprisings were merely a changing of the guard in the main institutions of the capitalist state which remained intact. As they say, new dogs, old collars.

### III

Each of the three Edsa uprising therefore constitutes an unfinished revolution that could not be concluded due to a number of objective and subjective factors. What are these factors?

1. First, an objective limitation of all the Edsa uprisings was that their aims were limited to "regime change" or the overthrow of the individuals in power. They did not pose any comprehensive alternative to the rotten capitalist regime. They were all led by factions of the bourgeoisie who wanted to grab power through mobilizing large number of people who

would appeal (from that position of strength) to the various sections of the state – the bureaucracy and the military – to withdraw support from the incumbent faction.

2. Second, this limitation also emanates or is related to the low level of political or class-consciousness of the masses who participated in these uprisings. It cannot be denied that in all the Edsa uprisings, the masses were cheering as heroes many representatives of the ruling class and *trapos*.

In Edsa 1, for instance, the people cheered the likes of Cory Aquino, Juan Ponce Enrile, and Fidel Ramos. In Edsa 2, the loudest cheers were reserved for confessed gambling lord Chavit Singson and the anti-Estrada senators. In Edsa 3, the mostly urban poor crowd applauded as their leaders and heroes a number of pro-Erap cronies and *trapos*—belying the claim that the participants were more "class conscious" because of their "poor power" slogan.

3. Another objective factor—which is also related to the low political consciousness of the Edsa masses—is the low level of working-class struggle in the country. While the broad working class (the industrial workers, the urban poor, the rural workers and the rural poor) participated in the Edsa uprisings, the dominant and overwhelming force came from the so-called urban middle classes (except of course at Edsa 3). Their dominating presence, coupled with a leadership coming from factions of the ruling elite or the big bourgeoisie, swayed the direction of the uprising towards a compromising middle ground. The prayer-rally style of the mobilization for instance was a compromise with the church hierarchy and the calculating *trapos*.

Organised working-class participation was always lacking, such as a general strike or a paralyzing action in conjunction with mass mobilization and rallies. During Edsa 1 and 2, the workers' unions threatened to go on a general strike to effect the downfall of the incumbent regimes, but it did not materialize for a number of reasons, foremost of which was the unpreparedness of the workers' organisations.

The Edsa uprisings, which were urban-based eruptions, failed to kindle even a small-scale urban poor revolt in any part of Metro Manila (which in the past, has already taken the form of street barricades and massive mass mobilization during calls for people's strike or "welgang bayan"). The attack

on the Edsa 3 marchers by the military forces did lead to rioting in the Mendiola and Recto area that lasted till late afternoon of May 1.

It was reminiscent of the Battle of Mendiola during the First Quarter Storm, when tens of thousands of students, armed only with molotovs, pillboxes and stones, battled it out with the police in a seige at Malacanang palace during the 1970s. While that FQS battle led to widespread rallies and skirmishes in the urban areas that inaugurated the development of a strong revolutionary movement in the 1970s, Edsa 3 collapsed and puffed out of existence in an instant.

4. Fourth, the central and crucial subjective factor that was missing during the successive Edsa risings—was the absence of a revolutionary leadership.

In 1986, the biggest left party—the Communist Party of the Philippines with its mass organizations—was completely marginalized in the people's power uprising due to its dogmatic schema of Maoist protracted people's war and its sectarian approach towards the anti-dictatorship struggle.

From this ultra-left stance in Edsa 1, they swung to an opportunist line during Edsa 2 when they uncritically endorsed Arroyo as the replacement to the Estrada rule. That time, the Laban ng Masa forces gathered here took the principled approach of calling for a “neither GMA nor Erap line”, or in the case of the Sanlakas’ group, the call around “Resign All”. This is a line that puts forward the independent positioning of the progressive and revolutionary forces.

In Edsa 3, however, the socialist and progressive blocs were nowhere to be found.

All these major limitations and weaknesses account for the defects of all the Edsa risings. Until we are able to solve these, people's power uprisings will remain confined to a mere changing of guard rather than changing the whole unjust and repressive system.

#### IV

Today, Laban ng Masa continues its critique of the Edsa-type uprising. This is a strategy that has been developed, almost to perfection, by factions of the ruling class out to overthrow another faction in power. This is the type that

mobilizes the masses as mere warm bodies for the aspirant elite faction. This is the type that confines the mass mobilization in a limited corner of the metropolis where people could stay on for days to appeal to various sections of the bureaucracy and the military to withdraw their support from the incumbent.

But the Edsa-type uprising as I have mentioned is now failing. So are the Edsa governments or Edsa regimes that have been put in place after each uprising. What is needed is a deepening and broadening of the Edsa uprising, a qualitative change in the direction, substance and form of the uprising. An uprising that could not anymore be called another Edsa uprising because it has gone beyond the framework set by the factions of the ruling class in their own games of capturing power.

An Edsa-type uprising will not suffice to carry forward the social revolution that is on the agenda in the Philippines today. Edsa has caricatured people's power. We have to appropriate the term by ensuring that people's leadership in the mobilization and struggles is assured. And that the outcome of these direct people's actions will be a system change and not a mere transfer of power from one trapo to another.

If the uprising becomes a class-conscious act of the masses, it could not be confined to the Edsa shrine or to a few select places. It would be widespread in its character, as it would be total in its objectives. It would be a direct action of the masses that would require the formation of alternative democratic institutions, such as people's councils or communal councils (as in the case of Venezuela) or people's assemblies (as in the case of Argentina and Latin America).

The experiences of other countries in advanced stage of working class struggles show us the way. We welcome these exchanges and we join you in the forward march to socialism. Thank you very much. Maraming salamat.

*\*Sonny Melencio is the executive director of Transform Asia, a member of the Coordinating Council of Laban ng Masa, and a member of the executive committee of Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino.*