

# **Philippines: Thirty-one years after the overthrow of the dictatorship, the people's struggle continues**

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## **EDSA 2017: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PEOPLE'S FREEDOM FROM DEBT, POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND STATE REPRESSION CONTINUES**

Thirty-one years ago, on February 25, 1986--- our people stood their ground at the now historic Epifanio delos Santos Avenue (EDSA) to overthrow a dictator and its 14 -year fascist reign in the hope that their revolt would bring about genuine change from intense repression, corruption, poverty, inequality and underdevelopment.

That we succeeded in the former and failed in the latter is a tragedy that has soured the memory of that history-making event. It is also the reason why we find ourselves once again to returning to where it began.

In order for us to constantly remember, and not once forget, that only a united and determined people could brave the guns of the most tyrannical regime and unseat it from power. And that the betrayed legacy and promises of People's Power Uprising in EDSA still need to be continuously fought for and won.

Many people who supported the EDSA uprising believed it would usher in genuine democracy that would embody the demands and genuine aspirations of our long-suffering people and assert their sovereign will. Instead, it led to a return of the old oligarchs who had been disenfranchised under the Marcos regime and who moved swiftly to recover their bases of wealth and power at the expense of the struggling majority. Rather than bring about thoroughgoing change it merely led to the restoration of the old ruling order, complete with its facade of democracy with institutions and periodic elections where opposing factions of the few ruling elite battled for their turns to plunder the nation's coffers and entrench their rule and power.

But it was on the economy that the disappointment with EDSA was most profound. After the ruin wrought on the country by years and years of plunder by Marcos and his cronies, the people were expecting an era of more equitable distribution of wealth, economic justice and a radical departure from flawed and failed economic development model and its attendant policies. That hope was quickly dashed as President Corazon Aquino made debt payments a priority over funding social services and the country remained one of the laboratories for neo-liberal economic policies under the structural adjustment program imposed by the World Bank and the international financial institutions (IFIs). To make things worse, debt servicing over the next three decades was allocated 20 to 45% of the annual government budget—a decision that undercut the government's capacity to invest and stimulate economic growth and provide basic social services.

Under the post-EDSA system, neo-liberal policy-making resulted in the transfer of essential public services such as mass transportation, power and water to private sector leaving the poor at the mercy of rapacious corporations. It also caused the disastrous dismantling of economic

protectionism via the swift lowering and removal of tariffs even as our neighbors retained theirs, which practically wiped out entire sub-sectors in industry and agriculture.

The early institutionalization of prioritizing of debt servicing at the expense of social programs and the adoption of neo-liberal policies continued throughout the succession of post-EDSA governments. This, coupled with a resurgent elite blocking laws aimed at redistributing wealth such as the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) meant that little headway was made in the struggle against poverty and inequality. Rather, the opposite happened. Particularly telling is the fact that, the 50 richest Filipinos' net worth of US\$74 billion in 2014 was a staggering 26 percent of the country's GDP. Even more staggering, three families alone, Sy, Ayala, and Aboitiz, share a combined wealth equivalent to 12 percent of the Philippine economy.

It is therefore no surprise that in the three decades since EDSA, poverty and unemployment remained high and inequality continued to grow even during the years of exceptional growth. Even when economic growth as measured by the GDP surged at an average 6.2% under the younger Aquino, it paled in comparison to continuing high poverty levels, joblessness and rising income inequality, the P6.4-trillion public debt to be inherited by the next administration and the billions of pesos wasted in payments for fraudulent, wasteful and questionable loans.

The failure of government after government to bring about the transformation that the people expected after EDSA has understandably resulted in a growing disillusionment with the post-EDSA system of elite democracy. Unfortunately, it is also this disillusionment that has provided the opening for leaders who want to revise the 14-year history of suffering and struggle that culminated in February 1986.

Until the EDSA dream of a genuinely democratic and equitable society is realized, the danger of a return to authoritarianism and all the horrors that it come with it will never go away.

This we must not allow. This should spur us to forge ahead and continue our historical fight as a people until genuine freedom and justice, democracy and durable peace are finally won.

**Freedom from Debt Coalition-FDC**

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