

Philippines, thirty-one years after the overthrow of the dictatorship: Requiem for the EDSA Republic

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President Benigno Aquino III looks at the portrait of his late mother, former President Corazon Aquino, on display at Japan's National Press Club, in this June 2015 Malacanang Photo Bureau file. Prof. Bello notes the irony that the son (Mr. Aquino) presides at the fall of the "30-year-old liberal democratic state that came to existence with the February 1986 EDSA Uprising," a regime that "the mother (Cory) was instrumental in bringing to life."

The Aquino administration is down to its last nine days.

One can make the case that we are also seeing the curtain fall on the 30-year-old liberal democratic state that came to existence with the February 1986 EDSA Uprising. With its penchant for irony—or black humor—history appears to have ordained that the son would preside over the interment of the regime that the mother was instrumental in bringing to life.

Repudiating Liberal Democracy

While the demarcation line between the EDSA Republic and its successor may not be as dramatic as that separating the martial law regime from EDSA, it is nevertheless clear: an electoral insurgency that propelled to the presidency a figure whose campaign was marked by a provocative repudiation of the substance and discourse of liberal democracy that have served as the ideological scaffolding of the EDSA system. Central to this ideology have been the liberal values of human rights and due process that were institutionalized in the 1987 Constitution, which crystallized the ideals of the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship.

Duterte's appeal to large numbers of voters lay precisely in his sneering dismissal of these values.

The turn to illiberalism was undoubtedly promoted partly by the fear of many citizens that the liberal democratic state could no longer protect their lives and limbs from criminals, drug pushers, and the police. It stemmed likewise from a widespread perception that due process, far from ensuring justice, had turned into a system of protection for the wayward, the corrupt, and the powerful.

But one must also count as a central explanation for Duterte's success the popular disillusionment with the kind of democracy that the EDSA Regime delivered. The EDSA Uprising and its aftermath had promised a representative democracy more responsive to the masses, with the 1987 Constitution even institutionalising a party-list system aimed at ensuring representation of the marginalised sectors. True, the EDSA Republic did bring back electoral competition, but it was principally among elite dynasties that could afford the enormous costs of political advertising and massive vote-buying. Duterte's electoral victory was, in fact, a defiant repudiation of the EDSA regime's corrupt electoral circus, relying as it did mainly on a mass electoral revolt, in contrast to the Big Money-backed traditional candidacies of Mar Roxas, Grace Poe, and Jejomar Binay.

How Neoliberalism subverted EDSA's promise

Despite its political shortcomings, the EDSA regime would probably have retained a significant amount of support had it delivered on the economic front.

After the disastrous kleptocracy that was the Marcos dictatorship, the 1987 Constitution promised "a more equitable distribution of opportunities, income, and wealth; a sustained increase in the amount of goods and services produced by the nation for the benefit of the people; and an expanding productivity as the key to raising the quality of life for all, especially the underprivileged." It would be an understatement to say that the EDSA system failed to translate this promise into reality. And for the lower classes that rallied around him, Duterte's main appeal was his populist pledge to shake up an economic system whose rules and practices had condemned them to permanent marginalization.

Perhaps the key tragedy of the EDSA Republic was that it came into being right at the time that neoliberalism was on the ascendant globally as an ideology. Even before the February 1986 uprising, the Philippines had become one of four guinea pigs of the new structural adjustment program unveiled by the World Bank, which aimed to bring down tariffs, deregulate the economy, and privatise government enterprises. Under the administration of Corazon Aquino, pressure from the International Monetary Fund and US banks made repayment of the massive foreign debt of \$26 billion left by Marcos the top national economic priority, and over the next three decades, debt servicing would take up from 20 to 45 per cent of the annual government budget, crippling the government's capacity to invest and stimulate economic growth and provide essential social services.

With Fidel Ramos, neoliberalism reached its apogee: tariffs were radically reduced to zero-to-five percent, deregulation and privatization were speeded up, and the Philippines joined the World Trade Organization—to "benefit," it was said, from the tide of corporate-driven globalization. Under Ramos and later, under the Estrada, Arroyo, and Aquino III administrations, the contours of the EDSA political economy were consolidated: pro-market policies, relentless privatization, export-oriented development, export of labor, low wages to attract foreign investors, and conservative monetary and fiscal management.

While our neighbors retained their high levels of protection and activist government management, neoliberal disarmament resulted in the Philippines' having the second lowest average growth rate per annum in Southeast Asia from 1990 to 2010, with even the second-tier ASEAN economies of

Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma outstripping it. And although the economy registered 6 to 7 per cent growth rates in 2012 to 2015, there was no “trickle down” to counter the legacy of stagnation bequeathed by neoliberal policies. At nearly 25 per cent of the population, the percentage living in poverty in 2015 was practically the same as in 2003, and the Philippines remained the second most unequal society in ASEAN, after Malaysia, registering 43 on the gini coefficient, a measure of inequality. For many visitors, comparative statistics were superfluous. Extreme poverty was so wretchedly visible, in a way it was not in other Southeast Asian societies.

The neoliberal paradigm was not, however, the only cause of the EDSA regime’s failure to address the deepening social crisis. Corruption was a problem, as it was in all of the Philippines’ neighbors. But even more consequential than corruption was class. Just as they had forced Marcos to halt his land reform program in the seventies, the landed class successfully resisted the implementation of Republic Act 6657, Cory Aquino’s already watered-down land reform program. A civil society push to reenergize the program, RA 9700, or Carper, which was passed in 2009, bogged down under the Aquino III administration owing to lack of political will and presidential indifference. By the end of the program on June 30, 2014, some 700,000 hectares of the best private land in the country remained in the hands of landlords, violence against land reform beneficiaries was common, and rural poverty remained stubbornly high.

Unaccompanied by structural reforms, the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program of the Aquino III administration, though it eventually covered over 4.4 million families, or nearly one-fifth of the population, could barely make a dent on poverty and inequality.

Breaking with the political economy of EDSA

The incoming president’s comprehensive understanding of the sources of the country’s economic and social malaise still has to be fully demonstrated, but in his victory speech in Davao on June 2, he zeroed in on one of its major causes, the “onslaught of the World Trade Organization,” which, he claimed, had destroyed the country’s food security and made it dependent on food imports from Vietnam and Thailand. He has also identified as key problems workers’ lack of security of tenure, conservative government spending policies, and a horribly abusive mining industry. In his appointment of two people closely identified with the leftist Makabayan Bloc, Rafael Mariano and Judy Taguiwalo, as heads of the Department of Agrarian Reform and Department of Social Welfare and Development respectively, Duterte has acknowledged the need for drastic social reform.

The question is, will his evolving approach breach or remain within the neoliberal paradigm that has served as a straightjacket on the economy? To satisfy those who have voted for him, Duterte probably realizes that he needs to make a thorough macroeconomic overhaul, and this will mean a break with the neoliberal political economy of the EDSA regime.

If it does break with neoliberalism, then what may emerge as a paradox at the heart of the new regime is that while it is likely to undertake policies, like extra-judicial execution of criminals and other people, that are hostile to fundamental human rights and due process, it may also promote policies that advance citizens’ social and economic rights. Socialized into seeing human rights as indivisible, liberals and progressives will find it challenging, to say the least, to relate to the new regime, though in the view of many, it will be hard to avoid a stance of strategic opposition.

EDSA's ambiguous legacy

A new dispensation is at hand, and its character and thrusts will probably be expressed in a new constitution or a 1987 Constitution that is significantly amended and altered. Given its failure to break the system of traditional elite politics and produce a new social and economic deal for the country's deeply discontented majority, the EDSA regime will not be missed by most. Indeed, some say that EDSA is already an orphan, with the disintegration of the Liberal Party-led "Yellow Movement" that had once loudly proclaimed a monopoly to its legacy and the shameless rush of its partisans to the bandwagon of the man they had pilloried during the campaign as a "dictator," forgetting that the best antidote to dictatorship is a vigorous opposition.

Yet this liberal regime, it must be acknowledged, has not been without its positive contributions to the country's political development. One can only hope that whatever the structure of the political regime that follows, whether unitary or federal, parliamentary or presidential, it will not throw overboard two key principles of the 1987 Constitution that represented the hard-won gains of the 14-year struggle against the Marcos dictatorship: Article II, Section 11, which reads, "The State values the dignity of every human person and guarantees full respect for human rights"; and Article III, Section 1, which says that "No person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, nor shall any person be denied the equal protection of the laws."

With its now largely pejorative association with the color yellow, it is questionable if the February 1986 Uprising will be celebrated next year. But whatever the fate of the EDSA Republic and however much its record might have deviated from its aspirations, let us make sure that we retain those universal principles of democratic governance enshrined in its Constitution, in the absence of which polities quickly descend into arbitrary rule, dictatorship, or fascism.

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P.S.

* June 21, 2016 1:21 AM. InterAksyon.com. The online news portal of TV5:
<http://interaksyon.com/article/129284/op-ed--requiem-for-the-edsa-republic>

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