

# Philippines 1986: How a revolution turns into a restoration

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Academics like myself who have studied revolutions in other countries initially approached the unfolding event at Edsa in February 1986 with great skepticism. Revolution was certainly on no one's lips at that point. That this could be a turning point in any meaningful sense was farthest from our minds.

First, because the main characters behind the Camp Aguinaldo standoff — then Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and then Constabulary chief Fidel V. Ramos — were the same people who headed the security sector under the Marcos dictatorship. They had ambition, no doubt, but they had not been known to be sources of an alternative vision for Philippine society.

Second, while this was happening in a military camp, it was not clear who was in control of the troops. Holed up in one of the rooms in Camp Aguinaldo, Enrile and Ramos had called in the media to make an announcement. Their message was that they had lost trust in President Ferdinand Marcos, and were calling upon the rest of the Armed Forces to join them in withdrawing their allegiance from the Marcos regime. They also appealed to the Filipino people for support as they faced possible reprisal from Marcos' loyal forces.

It was logical to suspect a coup d'état in the making. Rumors about an impending coup by reformist officers had been swirling for quite some time. The country had just gone through a controversial snap election marked by violence, ballot box snatching, and blatant cheating. Cory Aquino, the candidate of the unified opposition, protested the conduct and outcome of the election, and was calling for a series of mass actions. With Marcos appearing to be losing control of the situation, it seemed the perfect moment for the military to intervene.

While Enrile and Ramos and the handful of soldiers around them looked ready to die, there was no sign that they had a significant segment of the military on their side. Marcos calmly spoke to them by phone, urging them to end their foolish adventure for the country's sake, and to come to Malacañang to talk like responsible adults. He assured them that, contrary to what they were saying, there was no order for their arrest.

Marcos claimed that, in fact, there had been a security breach in the Palace and that an attempt against the first family had been uncovered and averted. But, the climate of public opinion was swiftly turning against him. Far from shoring up his legitimacy, the snap election had further eroded what remained of it.

The mutineers at Aguinaldo correctly sensed this. They used the standoff, which had turned into a protracted press conference, as an opportunity to gain the sympathy of the public. The timely appeal of Jaime Cardinal Sin, the popular archbishop of Manila, to the Catholic faithful and all peace-loving Filipinos to manifest their support for the beleaguered Enrile and Ramos group decisively turned the tide against Marcos.

But, in an interesting way, as soon as civilians took center stage at Edsa, providing protection to the grossly outnumbered military rebels, the tide also turned against the idea of a military seizure of power. Cory showed up only once at Edsa during those four historic days, but her stature as the people's iconic leader was unrivaled.

And so it came to pass that, while a failed military coup served as the catalyst for the Edsa upheaval, it was the action of the unarmed civilians who surrounded the camps that shaped the narrative that gave meaning to the subsequent events. The people who poured into Edsa brought with them their hopes for a country free from tyranny and corruption, and from degrading poverty and glaring social inequality. Though they were not sure how Cory would fare as a leader, their faith in the future was unshakeable.

Because the unforeseen events at Edsa portended a new beginning, we all felt confident to call it a revolution. It was not the kind of revolution many of us had in mind —i.e., one that entailed the fundamental restructuring of the property system, which lay at the base of unequal social power. But, it promised something different, something open-ended.

I doubt if a socialist agenda would have received public support at that point. The new leaders were at best liberal in their thinking; a number were incurably feudalistic in mindset. They were the ones who dominated the transitional government that Cory cobbled together from the ranks of the traditional political opposition, the anti-Marcos business elite, and the civil libertarians who stood by her husband when he was in prison.

Still, there were enough voices in the new government who could be relied upon to articulate and champion social democratic reforms. Many of them found their way into the group of academics, lawyers, civic leaders, and activists personally handpicked by President Cory in early 1986 to form the Constitutional Commission. Their mandate was to draft a new constitution that would embody the highest ideals and aspirations of the Edsa revolution. Their job was far from easy; many times they felt compelled to leave vital reforms hanging, by inserting the fatal phrase "as may be provided by law."

Threatened by repeated coup attempts, Cory turned more and more to the United States and to the business and political elites for the support she needed. The popular, if largely unorganized, sectors that campaigned for her in the snap election and bravely faced the tanks at Edsa gradually fell to the side. The revolution that began with so much promise quickly turned into a restoration, giving birth to a political system grossly out of sync with the progressive intentions of the nation's own Constitution.

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<http://opinion.inquirer.net/111302/revolution-turns-restoration#ixzz5LBrjIkGq>

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