

# The Philippines after 1986: Getting past Edsa

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**This week marks the 34<sup>th</sup> year of the historic 1986 Edsa People Power Revolution. It is also the fourth time President Duterte is, according to his spokesperson, staying home — consciously ignoring whatever significance the event may still hold for some Filipinos.**

Still, Edsa, by law, is a public holiday. Regardless of what the current regime may think of it, its observance as a milestone in the nation's life is an occasion for Filipinos to remember and reflect upon, and, possibly, to rededicate themselves to their civic duty as guardians of a fragile democracy.

But, time is a mystery. Its passage is a process of forgetting and remembering. To the writer Lewis Hyde, "Forgetting appears when the story has been so fully told as to wear itself out. Then time begins to flow again; then the future can unfold." ("A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past," 2019)

Accordingly, after a certain point, further retelling only evokes boredom and cynicism, and, in the worst of cases, even rejection. Could this be the fate of Edsa? If it is, then Mr. Duterte is clearly the fruit and beneficiary of that forgetfulness. We got tired of hearing about the people's heroism at Edsa, and of trying to look for its spirit in the acts of the leaders it thrust into power. We reached a point when it became difficult to tell the same story over and over without sounding weary and even embarrassed.

This exhaustion became manifest long before Mr. Duterte came into the scene. It showed in the dwindling crowds, and in the inability of the Edsa Commission to formulate new themes and exciting slogans to generate continuing public interest in the celebration of this historic moment. Something was failing, and not even another Aquino could revive it.

Mr. Duterte's appearance on the political scene just before the 2016 presidential election was unexpected. It came almost as a kind of joke, rather than as a redemption. He was seen not so much as a threat to democracy as a comic relief from the dreariness of the political landscape. Indeed, no one took him seriously enough to bother to question the validity of his certificate of candidacy, which was filed under the most bizarre circumstances.

The elites merely smirked, but the people who flocked to his rallies, and watched him on YouTube, were fired up by this funny and angry outsider as he mocked the Establishment. And now he is the government.

How the emergent right-wing populism that Mr. Duterte personifies is changing the face of politics everywhere is the subject of many recent books. But, only a few are as sharp and as perceptive as Turkish writer Ece Temelkuran's book "How to Lose a Country." In its depiction of how this "new zeitgeist" transforms a "ridiculous figure to a seriously terrifying autocrat, while corrupting his country's entire society to its bones," the author looks back at what was happening at the grassroots of her country, Turkey, in order to explain the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a dictator.

It is happening nearly everywhere, she writes, citing the rise of Donald Trump in the United States

and of Boris Johnson in Britain, countries previously thought of as sufficiently strong institutionally as to insulate them from the perils of populist authoritarianism. "This is a historic trend," she warns, "and it is turning the banality of evil into the evil of banality. For though it appears in a different guise in every country, it is time to recognize that what is occurring affects us all."

This book is a call for us to step back so that we could view what is happening to our country in relation to what is happening elsewhere in the world. It challenges us to retell the story of how democracy can deteriorate without anyone having to announce a coup, or invoke emergency powers, or declare a revolutionary government. Only if we can grasp the nature of this creeping authoritarianism and the populist resentment that fuels it, can we hope to rescue the story of Edsa from oblivion.

For this to happen, we need to get past our disillusionment over what happened in the three decades that followed after the initial euphoria had dissipated. The Marcos dictatorship left behind a mountain of problems from which the country could not easily recover. Not the least of these was the huge national debt that was incurred by the regime without accountability. Determined to follow the rule of law in the pursuit of stolen wealth, the administrations that came after Marcos got tied up in interminable legal processes that prevented the quick recovery of the plundered public funds.

The rebuilding of our democratic institutions from the ruins of the dictatorship proved to be a long, excruciating process. But even more tough was the achievement of social justice for the landless, the jobless, the homeless, and the excluded among our people.

Post-Edsa leaders made the mistake of believing that the primary function of government in the modern era was to promote development by making the country attractive to global capital. They thought that people would be able to take care of themselves as long as they were given equal opportunity to do so. They turned to private capital to provide essential public services, content to play the role of regulators. They trusted in the rationality of the market so much that they paid scarce attention to the needs of those the system precisely excluded because it had no use for them.

We could think of many other reasons. But, none of these would ever justify the belief that what the country needs are bold and willful strongmen to shepherd us and take charge of our problems. For, that would be tantamount to losing faith in ourselves as political subjects.

**Randy David**

@inquirerdotnet

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