

# The end of People Power?

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"PEOPLE power" used to be synonymous with the Philippines. In February 1986 Filipinos captured the imagination of the world when they rushed out to the streets to support a military rising and ousted the strongman Ferdinand Marcos. Fifteen years later, in January 2001, they again surged to the streets to bring down President Joseph Estrada, who was widely believed to be the recipient of hundreds of millions of pesos from illegal gambling activities.

Today, however, they are largely absent while another president stands accused, this time of stealing elections.

Intercepted telephone conversations between President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and an electoral commissioner during the elections of May 2004 showed her attempting to influence the outcome of the polls. Unable to deny it was her voice in the taped intercepts, Arroyo publicly apologized for a "lapse in judgment." Instead of defusing the situation, the admission triggered widespread calls for her to resign.

In early September 2005, nearly three months after the scandal broke, Arroyo blocked a bid to impeach her, clinging to power despite a recent poll giving her the lowest overall performance rating among the country's five most recent presidents. Those numbers were not, however, translated into numbers in the streets. The biggest rally anti-Arroyo forces could muster numbered, at most, 40,000. In contrast, hundreds of thousands had clogged the main highway running through Manila, popularly known as "EDSA" for days on end in 1986 and 2001.

What happened, asked Manila's veteran street activists. Why were the people no longer protesting a clear-cut case of electoral fraud? By a president who was already vastly unpopular owing to ineptitude, uninspiring leadership and widely believed allegations of corruption even before the telephone intercepts surfaced?

The truth is that while people dislike Arroyo, they are also deeply disillusioned with the political system, which has come to be known as the "EDSA State." Conversations with middle- and lower-class citizens inevitably produce the same answer to why they're not out demonstrating: "Well, whoever replaces her will probably be as bad, if not worse."

Intrigued at the discovery that only a handful of students in my undergraduate class in political sociology at the University of the Philippines, the traditional hotbed of activism, had attended the rallies, I posed to them the question: Is this democracy worth saving? Two-thirds said no.

Rather than taking to the streets, people are fleeing in large numbers to Europe, the United States and the Middle East. Some 10 percent of the Filipino labor force now works overseas, and one out of every four Filipinos wants to emigrate. It is estimated that at least 30 percent of Filipino households now subsist on remittances sent by eight million expatriates.

Cynicism about democracy in the Philippines is understandable if one considers that it has served as a mechanism for frenzied competition for political office among elite factions while enabling them to maintain a united front against social and economic change. Some Filipinos point out bitterly that

while authoritarian Vietnam reduced the proportion of the population living in extreme poverty from 51 percent in 1990 to 10 percent in 2003, the Philippines could only bring it down from 20 percent to 14 percent in the same period. They decry the fact that at 0.46, the Philippines' Gini coefficient, the most reliable measure of inequality, is the worst in Southeast Asia.

These statistics come alive with a tour of metro Manila's vast shantytowns, where conditions of urban squalor are unparalleled in the region. During a recent visit to the sprawling Tatalon slum in Quezon City, a constant refrain from people I interviewed was that all recent administrations were the same in one respect: They had done absolutely nothing for poor people, though a few conceded that "Erap [Estrada] had a heart." Some analysts say that while "elite capture" of electoral processes contributed to the failure of the EDSA State, it has not been the only critical factor. It was also doomed from the start by external actors. In this view, one of the key reasons the United States, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund shifted their support in the mid-1980s from the discredited Marcos dictatorship was the regime's inability to impose policies needed to repay the 26 billion dollars in external debt to financial institutions. The new democracy, which had a legitimacy the dictatorship had lacked, became Washington's favored instrument for the imposition of a harsh "structural adjustment" program.

Debt repayment became the national economic priority of the fledgling government of former president Corazon Aquino, which legislated "automatic appropriation" of the full amount needed yearly for servicing the foreign debt. With up to 50 percent of the budget allocated to debt service in some years and the remainder eaten up by operational expenses and salaries, hardly anything was left over for capital expenditures, dooming the country to stagnation. Not surprisingly, by mid-2005 the foreign debt stood at more than 56 billion dollars, with as much as 88 percent of government revenues going to service the total public debt. Committed to Aquino's "model debtor strategy," successive administrations dug a deeper and deeper fiscal hole. It is ironic that today Aquino marches against Arroyo, when she herself helped forge the policy that helped doom Arroyo.

Thus, between elite capture of electoral processes and externally imposed economic policies, the EDSA State stood little chance of success.

The Philippine situation is not unique. Indeed, it illustrates the trajectory of what Samuel Huntington christened the "third wave" of democratic expansion, when repressive regimes were swept away, beginning in the mid-1970s, from Southeast Asia to Latin America. Great hopes at the end of the era of dictatorships had turned to bitter disappointment by the beginning of the millennium. A 2004 poll conducted by the United Nations Development Program showed that 55 percent of Latin Americans surveyed said they would support authoritarian regimes over democratic ones if the shift would solve their economic woes. A reversal of the third wave, say some analysts, has in fact already begun with the destruction of Pakistani democracy by Gen. Pervez Musharraf in 1999, an act that enjoyed substantial support among the middle and poorer classes alienated by corrupt and ineffective democratic government under competitors Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

With the distant Marcos era now viewed through rose-tinted glasses by many in a younger generation of Filipinos who did not experience the depredations of dictatorial rule, there is a

danger that, as in Pakistan, a return of authoritarianism lies in the country's future. Unlike in Pakistan, however, it may not be through the agency of the country's small and fragmented military, though scores of young officers are said to be seething with discontent. Indeed, many do not rule out a self-initiated "executive coup" à la Marcos on the part of President Arroyo — a move that they see in a recent executive order greatly restricting street protests.

A great cause of concern on the part of die-hard EDSA democrats is that the political forces that

would bar such a return are in very bad shape.

The “elite ins” and “elite outs” are locked in a bitter war of attrition, with the middle ground fast disappearing. The Left is dominated by an aging, authoritarian Communist Party that has oscillated opportunistically between allying with one faction of the elite or another in classic 1930s “united front” fashion, with each swing, paradoxically, seeming to move it farther from power, though there are reports that its armed wing, the New People’s Army, is attracting fresh recruits in some areas as poverty and corruption make people more desperate.

Philippine civil society was once one of the most dynamic in the region, and there were hopes that it would act as the counterweight to the state in the new democratic dispensation. But successive waves of civil society actors have joined elite-dominated governments that used their rhetoric of “people’s empowerment” and “sustainable development” while co-opting them — indeed, in some cases turning them into hard-line apologists. Some of both Estrada’s and Arroyo’s leading partisans were once prominent human rights and social justice activists. “Civil society” is no longer the resonant term it once was, connoting partisanship for justice, equity and clean politics. Indeed, it is now cynically regarded by some as a steppingstone to political power.

So, as it enters its twentieth year, the EDSA State limps along, devoid of vision and inspiration, increasingly shorn of defenders, awaiting the coup de grace that nature, which always abhors a vacuum, seems poised to inflict. The pessimism is palpable, yet there are those who will not fatalistically accept either democratic entropy or a return to authoritarianism. The hope, they say, lies in the fledgling pluralist “New Left” that is fighting to liberate democracy from its imprisonment in the EDSA system. Represented by such formations as the coalition Laban ng Masa, or “Struggle of the Masses,” and the Citizens’ Action Party, better known as Akbayan, this movement has called for the president to resign while keeping its distance from the current working alliance between elite politicians and the old left. It advocates the immediate establishment of a “transitional revolutionary government” and promotes a program of democratic renewal that links participatory governance with radical social reform. These new progressives are fresh and committed, but they concede that they are in a race against time.

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