

# Philippines: My lessons from martial law

Tuesday 8 October 2024, by [DALISAY Jr. Jose "Butch"](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2024).

**I was recently invited by a student organization at the University of the Philippines to speak to them about my martial-law experience, given that I had been a student activist in UP during what we called the First Quarter Storm, had been imprisoned and had, against all odds, survived into a reasonably comfortable old age. It occurred to me, as I entered the SOLAIR building in Diliman where the event was going to be held, that I had last stepped into that place as a 17-year-old activist back in 1971. What had I learned since then? Here are some points I raised with my young audience.**

1. We were always in the minority. Even at the height of student activism in UP and in other universities, those of us whom you might call truly militant or at least progressive were far smaller in numbers than the majority who dutifully went on with their studies and their lives and saw us as little more than a rowdy, noisy bunch of troublemakers. And the fact is, we were still in the minority in 2022, which is why Leni lost (yes, even in Barangay UP Campus). This bears emphasizing and thinking about, because sometimes we fall into the **trap of believing that since we think we're so right, surely others must think the same way**. Which brings us to my next point.

2. We have to learn to **communicate with other people with different views**. The phrase "echo chamber" often came up in the last election, and with 2025 looming, it's even more vital that we master modern propaganda as well as the other side does. This means sharper and more effective messaging. Enough of those two-page, single-spaced manifestoes written in the Marxist jargon of the 1970s and 1980s and ending with a string of slogans. Learn how to fight the meme war, how to navigate and employ TikTok, Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and all the arenas now open in digital space.

3. When talking about martial law, don't just dwell on it as the horror movie that it was for some of us. True, many thousands of people were killed, tortured, raped, imprisoned and harassed. True, the trauma of that experience has lasted a lifetime for those involved. But most Filipinos never went through that experience, adjusting quickly to the new authoritarianism; many even look back to that period with nostalgic longing. That's proof of martial law's more widespread and insidious damage – the capture of the passive mind and its acceptance or denial of the massive scale of theft and State terror taking place behind the scenes. **Martial law imprisoned our minds.**

3. People change; you could, too. One pointed question I was asked at the forum was, "Why is it that some very prominent student activists turned their backs on the movement and went over to the dark side?" It's true – many of the shrillest Red-taggers we've seen these past few years were reportedly once high-ranking Reds themselves. So why the 180-degree turn? Well, it's perfectly human, I said, trying to be as kind as I could, despite being at the receiving end of some of that calumny. People can hardly be expected to stay the same after 20 or 40 years. Even if many, if not most, of my generation of activists have remained steadfast in our quest of the truth, freedom and justice, **one's definition of exactly what is true, free and just can change**. Some people change their stripes out of conviction; some others do it for the oldest of reasons – money and power, or sheer survival. I'm saddened but no longer surprised by brazen betrayal. I learned from martial-law

prison that people have breaking points, and some thresholds are much lower than others.

4. We have to admit **we were wrong about some things**. This will vary from person to person, and there's a line that could even constitute the "betrayal" I mentioned above. Some fellow activists will probably disagree with me on one of these key points: **armed struggle didn't work, and it won't, not in the Philippines nor anytime soon**. However we feel about the subject, the fact is, one armed Filipino revolutionary force or other has been at it for more than 80 years now - "the world's longest running insurgency" as it's often been referred to - with little gain to show for it. I don't mean to denigrate the noble and heroic sacrifice of the thousands who gave up their lives fighting what they believed was a brutal dictatorship - many were personal friends - but how many more lives will it take to prove the efficacy of revolutionary violence, one way or another?

5. That leads me to the last point I made to my young listeners: **live, don't die, for your country**. We can and will die for it if we absolutely have to (especially us seniors who have little more to lose), but today's youth have options we never did. In the 1970s, if you were young, idealistic, politically aware and daring if not brave, you could not but conclude that something was terribly wrong with Philippine society, and that change was badly and urgently needed. You chose between reform and revolution - and it was only a matter of time before you became convinced that the latter was the only way forward.

Agreed, the basic problems of Philippine society may not have changed much - but one's ways and means of addressing them have. The growth of civil society - the proliferation of NGOs covering a broad range of causes and concerns - offers practical, focused, peaceful and professional alternatives to young people seeking social and economic change. One need not embrace the burdens of the entire nation, only to feel inadequate or ineffectual; one can do much if not enough by improving the lives of families and communities. Beyond feeling sorry or guilty for those who fought and died as martyrs, do what you can as a living, intelligent and capable citizen to create a better Filipino future to the best of your ability.

If this sounds like the voice of a tired old man, it is. I'm tired of death and despair; I choose to fight for life and hope.

**Jose Dalisay**

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<https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2024/09/30/2388915/my-lessons-martial-law>