

Reclaiming Revolution

WALDEN BELLO, JENINA JOY CHAVEZ, JULIE ANN DELOS REYES, HERBERT DOCENA, MARY LOU MALIG, MARY ANN MANAHAN, JOSEPH PURUGGANAN and LOURDES TORRES

As the clamor for another president's ouster grows, one wonders why the one place where Filipino protesters have removed two sitting presidents before, the corner along Epifanio delos Santos Avenue (EDSA), stands empty.

The busy crossroads ushered in the "EDSA System", a combination of formal electoral democracy supplemented by an insurrectionary dimension exercised to legitimize non-electoral changes in political regimes.¹ The EDSA System brought in promise, new hopes, and ideals on which a nation could have been rebuilt. More equitable distribution of wealth and power through centerpiece programs on agrarian reform, anti-political dynasty and multi-party system, social and economic justice, human rights, accountability and transparency in public office, and participation – these and more were the approximations of ideals immediately after the "EDSA revolution" of 1986.

Yet, despite its built-in mechanism for self-legitimation, the EDSA System has been repeatedly undermined by factions of the ruling elite who have been its principal beneficiaries. They have betrayed the ideals of a people seeking social justice.

Catapulted to the presidency after the "People Power" uprising, Corazon C. Aquino, exempted her family's 6,453-hectare Hacienda Luisita from land reform and presided over the day-time massacre of protesting farmers. Instead of paying back the people by substantially spending on social programs, she instead chose to automatically skim off the biggest chunk of the annual budget to repay foreign creditors.

Fidel Ramos, for his part, systematically dismantled the capacity of the Philippine state to manage the market, opened up the country's resources to foreign investors, and sold off public assets to local and foreign elites. Joseph Estrada, despite his populist posture, carried on Ramos' neo-liberal agenda until his fall for corruption charges. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo sold off the country's mineral reserves to foreign prospectors by relaxing laws on their operations and concentrated on getting a windfall from the US' "war against terror."

That EDSA remains empty now is because we are choosing to move forward. What has been dismissed as "People Power fatigue" may simply be a refusal, borne by repeated betrayal, to become cannon fodder in the latest round of intra-elite wars. But it is not necessarily a refusal to once again take to the crossroads of history and take a different path.

THE FAILED PROMISES

Those who steered the EDSA System failed to address the one structural constant that accounts for the Philippines' less-than-stellar economic performance and persistent stagnation: a very narrow domestic market because purchasing power resides in a small fraction of the population. In the hope of holding on to their privileged positions in the system, the ruling elites recoiled from the required redistribution of power and wealth that could have expanded the domestic market and consequently spur sustained growth and development.

With their own power declared no-go zones, the ruling elites instead turned to foreign investors, dangling juicy perks and incentives to woo them. These investors, however, demanded various special favors in the form of neo-liberal laws and policies that effectively disempowered the state, removed support for local industries, workers, and consumers, and deprived it of a significant source of revenues. And yet, contrary to the promises, investments did not come in in droves. As experienced most acutely at the end of Ramos' term, many of them just dropped by for a quick buck but left as soon as the grass turned greener somewhere else.

Thus, close to twenty years after EDSA I, the Philippine state lies in tatters, captive to whichever faction happens to occupy the Palace, and more helpless than ever to control, discipline, and harness the private sector towards larger societal goals. This is a direct consequence of the ruling elites' strategy of surviving at all costs and fending off structural change by all means.

¹ Walden Bello Marissa de Guzman, Herbert Docena, and Marylou Malig, *The Anti-Development State: The Political Economy of Permanent Crisis in the Philippines*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Department of Sociology and Focus on the Global South, 2004.

Instead of redistribution, the past twenty years witnessed no dilution in the concentration of wealth and power. In 1985, the top ten percent of the population got 37% of the total income in the country; the lowest 20% only received 5%. In 2000, the highest ten percent got 36% while the lowest 20% got 5%.²

While poverty incidence has been reduced from 45% in 1988 to 30% in 2003,³ this may only have been partly because more and more Filipinos have found work abroad. The number of overseas Filipino workers almost trebled from 380,000 in 1986 to 1,000,000 in 2004. Locally, unemployment remains virtually unchanged, from 12% in 1986 to 14% in 2004.⁴ The Social Weather Stations' own unemployment figure even puts it higher at 20%.⁵ Despite the officially registered reduction in poverty, 57% of Filipinos still consider themselves poor, higher than 55% in 1983, when the economy was in crisis during the twilight of the Marcos dictatorship.⁶

Not only have the richest Filipinos held on to their share of the country's wealth, they have even entrenched their domination of the government: In 1962, 27% of the representatives in Congress were classified as upper class. That has jumped to almost 50% by 2004. In 2001, the average net worth of a Representative in the lower house was 22 million pesos. For a Senator, it was 59 million. That of the average Filipino: 150,000 pesos.⁷

Unsurprisingly, as of 2003, only 48% of the original total of land targeted for land reform has been distributed and most of them were public or non-privately owned lands in the first place; landlords had successfully exempted their holdings from being redistributed.⁸

THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

Ultimately, what the Philippines urgently needs now is a radical redistribution of wealth and power through measures such as genuine land

reform, progressive taxation and transfer programs, diversion of external debt payments towards social spending in education, housing, and health, and greater public role in providing services to the people, among others. Such a redistributive program is a precondition for expanding the country's domestic internal market by increasing people's purchasing power, which in turn, is a requirement for sustained economic growth and development.

It is also a precondition for moving beyond the Edsa System – or what other writers call “polyarchy” or “low-intensity” democracy – in which “people power” has been confined to choosing between rival ruling elite factions during periodic elections structurally designed to entrench the ruling elites' rule as a class.⁹ It is a necessary step to achieving substantive democracy, a necessary element for fundamental electoral reforms needed to attain deeper popular participation in the political system.

Real popular legitimacy, in turn, is a prerequisite for a strong democratic state insulated from factional elite politics and capable of implementing a strategic social and economic policy that is concerned not only with growth and industrialization but also with social and gender justice, equity, and ecological sustainability. The emergence of this state is, consequently, a requirement for the Philippines to survive the perilous waters of the global economic and political system.

Unfortunately, the ruling elite cannot see beyond their own vested interests as factions or as a class. What the Philippines needs are exactly what they will continue to deprive it of. Arroyo's resignation – both for violating the rules of limited democracy and for impeding substantive democracy – is a necessary condition for a more responsive system of governance. But resignation will not be enough if her faction will only be replaced by other factions now at the gates.

THE ALTERNATIVES

What will emerge from the present standoff depends on the balance of forces in the coming conjuncture. First, the ruling elites may yet succeed in convening a constitutional convention or a shift to a parliamentary system but sans a fundamental redistribution of power. Both will be tantamount to a minor tweaking of the rules of the game. Second, Young Turks in the military may decide to wrest power for themselves but they will not last long because of Filipinos' ingrained aversion to military rule. Or an

² National Statistics Office, “Total Family Income and Expenditure and Percent Distribution by Income Decile: Reference Year, Family Income and Expenditure Survey,” www.census.gov.ph. Also see World Bank, *World Development Report*, 1988 and 2005.

³ National Statistics Office, “Poverty Incidence of Families,” reference year. See also United Nations Development Program, “Second Philippine Progress Report on the Millennium Development Goals,” June 2005.

⁴ National Statistics Office, Labor Force Survey, www.census.gov.ph.

⁵ Social Weather Stations, “Second Quarter 2005 Social Weather Survey,” www.sws.org.ph

⁶ Social Weather Stations, “Self-rated Poverty: Households who are ‘Mahirap?’”, April 1983 to December 2004, www.sws.org.ph.

⁷ Sheila Coronel, “How Representative is Congress?”, Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, March 22-24, 2004.

⁸ Saturnino Borras, Jr., “Questioning the Official CARP Land Redistribution Accomplishment Report and Working Scope,” Presentation to the International Council of Churches Organization (ICCO) Partners' Research on CARP Scope Validation at the UP College of Social Work and Community Development, March 2005.

⁹ See among others, William Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

impeachment process may progress and give way to a constitutional succession, again with no assurance of substantive change and with remaining threat of political instability.

Truth is, the current political crisis may very well resolve itself in whatever way using whatever means without a real resolution of the fundamental crisis the country faces. The skepticism over staging another People Power is there not just because the people offered to sit as the next president do not appeal to a broad segment of the population. It is for the most part due to a sad realization that no matter who sits in Malacañang, things will remain the same.

There is need to build yet a different alternative or alternatives that go beyond a change of people in government. They are alternatives that articulate the basic ideals of EDSA that remain unfulfilled and the new aspirations people acquired while bearing witness to the vagaries of elites entrenched in our sorry political system. Such alternatives need to be built by broad affirmation and action, not prepared and packaged for us by those who purport to know better. In order to prove our respect for the people and our faith in genuine democracy, we should not seek to impose our will nor foist our choices on the people. There is need to build consensus on, action and movement around the specifics of reforms and radical changes we want to see in government and in the country.

These alternatives to be credible must not fall into the games of the elites. In order to be seen as credible alternatives, they should strive to distance themselves from discredited elite factions who may be the kiss of death for a progressive movement. Energies should continue to be directed at building strong social movements and citizens action that would be the foundation for genuine democracy and lasting reforms. Taking short-cuts, such as getting seats in a “transitional council” still dominated by elite factions can not substitute for – and may in fact undermine our efforts in building the movement for fundamental change.

The elites may have repeatedly successfully subverted or deflected the insurrectionary tradition that had fired up various “People Power” uprisings through the decades, but it lives on. It is the one remaining legacy of the EDSA System that we should take pride in and reclaim. ■

The authors are with Focus on the Global South, a policy research and advocacy institute. Together with the University of the Philippines Department of Sociology, Focus on the Global South published the book, *The Anti-Developmental State: The Political Economy of Permanent Crisis in the Philippines*.

Focus on the Philippines (FOP) is an electronic newsletter on Philippine news and issues put out by Focus on the Global South-Philippine Programme. FOP has currently over 600 subscribers. The newsletter tackles broad development issues like trade and finance, militarization, environment, global governance, multilateral institutions, and US hegemony among others. FOP is a venue for sharing perspectives and commentaries on the issues that shape our country and inform our respective advocacy work. We welcome articles, policy papers, commentaries on Philippine development issues. We also welcome new subscribers. Please send contributions (in word format) and request for subscription to josephp@focusphilippines.org or josephp@focusweb.org.