

THE PHILIPPINES

Lessons of people power

EVELYN BALAIS SERRANO

THE ouster of Philippine President Estrada by the People Power made headlines not only in Asia but in the world as well. Unlike its precedent in Indonesia where people power was marked by violence, the Philippine case was a peaceful uprising, a silent revolution, characterized only by mass singing of nationalist songs, slogan chanting, street dance and other forms of creative expression of protest, Philippine style.

There are many significant lessons we can learn from the People Power experience in the Philippines. Let me share a few of them which I think are very relevant to other countries especially in Asia.

First, a peaceful resolution of any conflict and national transformation is indeed possible. When people organize, unite and fight for a common goal, it can be done. When I say this, I think of the Burmese people with their long and bloody fight for survival and democracy. I have strong hopes that given the opportunity to muster enough wisdom and courage, the Burmese can gain confidence in asserting their right to a democratically elected government. I also think of East Timor. When people are united enough, their strength is their unity and unity becomes their weapon against their enemy. No matter what the risks and consequences are, the unity of the will to survive, to prevail, becomes paramount.

One remarkable thing about People Power II in the Philippines was how various civil society groups and political factions, with known history of political splits and divisions, managed to forge unity even on a tactical basis, for a common goal. At EDSA, banners and streamers with shades of red, green, blue and other colors representing various ideological groupings ranging from extreme left to extreme right in the political spectrum were seen flying side by side.

This is a development from People Power I when a big faction of the national democratic forces refused to participate in the mobilization and which later led to the major split in the people's movement.

Another remarkable gain of People Power II was the sway of support ranging from pro-Estrada to the so-called neutrals and later to People Power by significant sectors like the religious groups, the business community, the media and the military. For many, it was not really a question of choosing between Estrada and Arroyo. If that was the case, the People Power would not turn out as it was. It was more of Estrada versus the people and that includes Arroyo, former President Corazon Aquino, Cardinal Sin, the civil society groups, business people and everybody who was part of the campaign to force him to resign.

Do we think it could have happened that fast if the business sector was not dead worried about the possible collapse of the economy as a result of the crisis? If media did not play its role? If the military did not withdraw its support from Estrada? If cardinal Sin did not order his flock to go to the streets? People Power happened because of the collective contribution of each significant sector, without which it would have not turned out the way it did. It was like a jigsaw puzzle where each piece should fit to complete the picture.

Role of Religious Institution-Crucial to Unity

What Indonesia lacks in its quest for good governance and which was a strong factor in the Philippines is a uniting figure or institution that could provide a high moral ground that could guide the people. If the case of Philippines, there was Cardinal Sin and the religious institution and the likes of Corazon Aquino and Chief Supreme Court Justice Davide. Indonesia's great ulamas and Muslim community have fallen to the trap of the political debate by aligning themselves, thus further polarizing society into the Gus Dur-Megwati divide. It needs Bishop Belo and Cardinal Sin from among its ranks of great ulamas to unite and lead the people to rise above partisan politics for the common good of the country.

Obviously for Burma, the 1988 uprising was not powerful enough to win over the military generals to the side of the people. But definitely, people power will happen from the outside. It has to start from the inside.

Role of Media and Technology-Key to Education and Action.

Some people call the People Power as the text revolution for the role the mobile phone played before, during and after the fateful day of January 19. Media and technology became the powerful instruments for massive education that moved people to action. Through media and technology almost every Filipino felt he/she was taking part in the making of history. Almost everyone was glued to their television sets and radio during the 'trial. Erap jokes filled the internet lines and print media had their heydays in covering the trial and people's actions.

This leads me to my second point. People Power does not only include those half a million people we saw marching along EDSA. Behind those huge mobilizations are the silent lobbying and negotiations done by those for some reasons could not go to the streets but with equal, if not more burning passion and commitment for change for the common good of the country. We can imagine the hundreds and thousands of faxed letters, texted messages, phone calls, postcards,

letters received by the Office of the President, the senators and congressmen and women from all the religious congregations, schools from elementary to higher education, community-based programs and other groups that joined the campaign to pressure Estrada to resign. The hundreds and thousands of churches and congregations all over the country and in many parts of the world praying day and night each day for peaceful solution to the problem must have driven away the evil spirits around the President that have finally convinced him to leave the Palace peacefully. So it is baseless to believe what some media and analysts say that the masses are solid in backing up Estrada who climbed to popularity via his mass-appeal for his movie roles as champion and defender of the poor.

The Role of women A Mobilizing Force

I figure that more than half of those in the street demonstrations are women. I also take note with pride that most of the leaders of the opposition groups that orchestrated the campaign are women, Cardinal Sin's words would not command as much following without Cory Aquino by his side. And I know it would not be as exciting and victorious as it turned out if the challenger was not a woman. The reality of Estrada's super macho image and real life reputation of having many wives being taken over by a sweet, small and simple woman has added impact to the generally chauvinist Philippine society. It was a repetition of the Marcos-Aquino change of leadership where the latter was portrayed not only as a woman but a simple 'housewife that's only good at the kitchen.'not have the right to be elected as president. But politics seem more powerful than religion in this country. There is now a strong consensus even among the Muslim population that Megawati can indeed become a president.

People Power in the Context of History

Third, People Power II should be seen not as a separate event form similar experiences in the past but in the context of the rest of Philippine history. The Filipinos have long history of resistance dating back from the Spanish colonization, to the American and Japanese ear and not to mention our not so distant experience of 20 years under authoritarian rule, the incremental effect past rebellions, uprisings and the long and painful struggle against a repressive regime saw expression in People Power I in 1986 and now, in People Power II. We build courage. It does not happen overnight. Confidence comes through experience. And strong will usually develops as a result of hard and long

struggle.

People Power has no Borders

Lastly, the incremental effect of People Power has no borders. The sound of freedom after People Power I still echo to other parts of the world. East Timer's subsequent victory continue to send powerful message and provide inspirations to other struggling people like in Aceh, West Papua and Mindanao and, a in Burma and possibly, in Malaysia and Singapore.

While the tactical goal of People Power II was achieved with Estrada leaving his post and Arroyo taking over, the more strategic goal of effecting change especially in eradicating poverty and improving people's lives remains a big challenge and may still be far off from realization.

But People Power has opened a lot of possibilities and has given peoples in the Philippines, in the region and elsewhere what has been lost along way, HOPE and DREAM for a better future. If only for that People Power has clearly made its point.

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CHINA

Crackdown on the cult

ASM Nurunnabi

FALUN Gong is a fast-growing spiritual movement that blends elements of Buddhism, Taoism and traditional Chinese morality. The group claims to have 70 million members on the mainland and an additional 30 million followers in the rest of the world. Beijing describes the group as an "evil cult" with subversive intentions and has stepped up its violent crackdown. According to Falun Gong, Beijing has killed more than 100 followers over the last two years and thrown tens of thousands of members into prison camps and psychiatric hospitals.

According to a source in Hong Kong with knowledge of Chinese policy, hard-line Chinese now consider Falun Gong the country's number-one threat - more serious than independence activists in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. With neither side inclined to back down, the struggle is spreading to other parts of Asia. Under siege on the mainland, Falun Gong is taking its recruitment and public relations campaign to Taiwan, Macau, Singapore and especially Hong Kong, where followers recently held a massive gathering to publicise their plight. Beijing is countering by pressuring governments in the region - most of which have invested heavily in China-to avoid offering sanctuary to its enemy. The issue threatens to become an early flash point in relations between China and the Bush administration.

As the war escalates, some China watchers suggest that, as happened with student protesters in 1989, the communist leadership is beginning to split over how to deal with Falun Gong. According to a Hong Kong source, President Jiang Zemin is fearful of Falun Gong because the movement has gained hold within the Communist Party ranks. "So many members believe in Falun Gong that he wants to scare them," said the source. The director of the Human Rights Information Centre in Hong Kong has asserted some Communist Party officials are uncomfortable with Jiang's fierce crackdown. "Falun Gong is showing it's not afraid of death, not afraid of anything," said the director of the Human Rights Information Centre.

MALAYSIA

Scandal in a salad bowl

PETRONELLA WYATT

AN hour before arrival in Malaysia they hand you a visitors' card. It says in huge red letters: "Drugs trafficking or possession is punishable by the death penalty." This is a pretty stark welcome, as welcomes go, which immediately induces paranoia in the traveller, recalling those times at school when someone had scrawled graffiti on the common-room table but you were the one who blushed like Judas.

As the plane skidded onto the

DEMOCRACY

The Asian way

RICHARD SALUDO

It's a peaceful, unfettered and intense outpouring of the people's will. But is it democracy? That's been the refrain in stories by some Western publications about recent events in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Mass protests in Manila, ignited by corruption allegations and fueled by cellphone texting, oust an elected president, and the international media tut-tuts about mob rule and disregard for the law. A tycoon-turned-politician's landslide victory in Thailand's parliamentary elections leads one European magazine to wonder about a "Thai con," even as other coverage laments the impending retreat of reform in the country.

Indonesia's test of wills poses the most unsettling of quandaries. Legislators have voted overwhelmingly to demand that President Abdurrahman Wahid respond to a parliamentary committee report alleging his involvement in two multimillion-dollar scandals the first step toward possible impeachment. Muslim groups for and against the leader clashed, unrest that raised the specter of military intervention. Whoever wins the struggle will be unsavory to many a democrat, whether it is the half-blind and erratic president; his opponents in Parliament, including the fiery Amien Rais and Suharto's old Golkar party; the sometimes violent

demonstrators; or the scheming, power-hungry military.

In judging East Asian democracy, a reality check is in order. First, it's 2001 - three years since three decades of dictatorship ended in Indonesia, nine since Thai student protests stopped a general's last grab for the premiership, and 15 since People Power drove the Marcoses from Manila. South Korea and Taiwan began dismantling autocracies in 1988 and 1987, respectively, but their opposition parties finally took power only in 1997 and 2000. Considering that after more than 200 years, Americans still have trouble electing their president, the most fundamental of democratic exercises, is it any wonder that Asia's democracies are fumbling after fewer than 20?

Crucially, a dominant middle class the hallmark of Western democratic states is still missing in Asia outside Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. Instead, rich, privileged elites and largely peasant masses call the shots. Joseph Estrada and Thaksin Shinawatra won landslides thanks to rural voters who believed their promises of a better life. The missing middle is most evident in Indonesia, where disgruntled folk are whipped up by top politicians and perhaps plotting generals. Even People Power 2 in Manila, despite its leaven of middle-class rallyists, would not have reached critical mass without, on the one hand, the

backing of big business, the Church and elements of the political elite, and on the other, the masses stirred by coverage of the Estrada impeachment trial. Of course, the decisive political act in Asian democratic uprisings is still the military's swing toward popular forces.

With the middle class still a lesser player in Asia, don't expect the political values it espouses - rule of law, informed choice, transparency and meritocracy - to hold sway. Rather, cronyism and feudalism, the values of the privileged and the poor, will continue to dominate. Many would say such democracies are fatally flawed, yet the simply reflect the interests of their dominant classes, as do other democratic systems.

Where the middle class is the majority, as in the West, it demands the rule of law and meritocracy to protect and advance its interests against elite abuse and underclass violence. But for the rich as well as the masses desperate for freebies and favors, cronyism and feudalism work better, at least in the short run. Yes, even for the poor. Would an uneducated peasant bat for a system that rewards high learning over one that could land his son a job if he talked to the right people? And what's in economic reform for him? Thaksin's promise of one million baht for the farmer's village may be a con, but he doesn't have to guess what it can do for him.

Of course, rule of law and meri-

tracy make for a more stable and progressive society in the long run. Meantime, where elites and mass movements can pressure national leaders, these are likely to be swayed by vested interests. Add to the mix the continuing fallout from the Asian economic crisis, which has drained state coffers and spread the poverty which makes voters prey to moneyed blandishments and radical appeals. Clearly, East Asia's young democracies will take many more years, probably generation, before they start working like mature ones in developed nations. People Power 2 may yet see more sequels across the region.

So what's a democracy-builder to do? Well, a few things work in his favour. First, there won't be any more coups, at least not the kind where generals plot to seize power in total disregard of the people's will. Those who point to the Manila uprising as a military takeover fail to see that the top brass took their cue from the masses in deserting Estrada. Second, economic growth and the explosion of media will pull more and more of the poor into the middle class, if not in income, at least in political awareness. Most important, there is now a broad, probably irreversible consensus in most of Asia that democracy is the best way to govern. For all its flaws and limitations, what Asians are building, from India to Japan, Taiwan to Indonesia, is democracy.

Courtesy: Asiaweek

entering a period of uncertainty. To the Communist Party, the group is a growing threat to China's social harmony, and so must be squashed. Falun Gong members insist they have been dragged into a nasty war they want no part of. The result sometimes is paranoia.

Falun Gong reportedly returns the strength for a non-violent guerrilla-style campaign. Followers protest on Tiananmen Square almost daily, stuff the mailboxes of Beijing Citizens with pamphlets denouncing the government and send out mass e-mails for support. Bound together by an ideal but not burdened by an orthodox structure. Falun Gong is eerily familiar for some communists with long memories, said one senior party official: "They are like the underground Communist Party before the revolution, that's why they are hard to control."

More worrying for the party, according to a report, Falun Gong has raided its profile in the military. An internal estimate says there are 4000-5000 Falun Gong sympathisers in the 200,000-strong air force.

The government has extended responsibility for controlling individual Falun Gong members outward to low-level party structures such as neighbourhood committees and work place party cells.

Spreading the burden of responsibility is not confined to the party. Provincial towns and cities with heavy concentrations of Falun Gong followers now have a rotating police presence in the capital. Their job is to intercept activists from home who came to Beijing to protest. Although their belief is impossible to verify, Falun Gong practitioners are convinced that certain leaders in the Politburo are sympathetic. The government campaign has upped the stakes in the battle against Falun Gong. Beijing looks set to emphasise the movement's overseas links. Domestically the crackdown is likely to intensify even more in the short term and may either force a dramatic Falun Gong response or oblige it to reduce its profile.

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runway, opalescent in the hot sun, the conviction that someone had planted drugs in my wash-bag had me by the vitals. The walk through customs and immigration was like a slow stroll through the Valley of Death. You know how it is with customs, anyway.

You look at them furtively to make sure they are not looking at you and then you catch their eye. They ask to go through your wash-bag. The bottle of aromatic oil has leaked and everything is covered in a thick slick of Otto Rose Bulgare Grade A, late of SW1.

Fortunately, the stench discourages the customs people slightly and the narcotics remain undetected. I slumped back in relief during the drive into Kuala Lumpur. The landscape resembled a massive salad bowl. There were palm trees covering every inch, in between which peaked soil the colour of the Duchess of York's hair.

Formerly British, Malaysia is made up of 55 per cent Malay Muslims, and about 30 per cent Chinese, who are economically dominant. The Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir, is Asia's longest-serving leader,

having been in power since 1981.

The country has seen a dramatic economic expansion, so that Kuala Lumpur looks like parts of Seattle imposed on old Brighton. The turrets of the colonial railway station and the magnificent 19th century mosque have become reconciled to Starbucks Coffee and Planet Hollywood. So well have people done that one property magnifico has had his office floor paved with jade.

It is still possible to feel like Alan Quartermain. The most amusement to be had is looking at precious stones.

Old women, whose eyes have a mineralised remoteness of their own, sit behind trays of gems like mythical guardians of childhood nightmares: aquamarines, diamonds, amethysts, topazes, emeralds and sapphires all in the raw, like fish on a market stall.

Once these stones have reached the West the mark-up for the tax and the setting is so great that in Malaysia a good amethyst can be had for £40 and a sapphire for £150.

Chinatown still has coffin-makers and laundresses, apothecaries, tailors and pawnbrokers. On the arcaded pavements men dip candles and teach caged birds to sing, sell charms, carve jade and play mah-jong. When the British ruled Malaysia they found it an unsettling place.

Malaya was the rubbish heap of empire. "Surbiton on the Equator," where lived the démodé, the failed and the uncool. There were more suicides in Kuala Lumpur than in all of British India. In England the "tragic wives of Malaya" became the stuff of scandal.

They went to pot, they drank

cocktails with breakfast, they made mischief and committed adultery. The awful soul-deadening, brain-destroying monotony of it all.

In 1911, one case transfixed Malaya. Ethel Proudlock, the young wife of a British rubber planter, was accused of shooting a neighbouring mine manager, William Steward. She claimed Steward had tried to rape her whereupon she fired at him.

The drawbacks to her defence were that her husband was out of town but she was wearing a low-cut evening gown and that she fired three shots into Steward's body while he was lying dead on the ground.

The jury sentenced Mrs Proudlock to be hanged by the neck until she was dead. This was the first time a white woman had received the death penalty. Against the wishes of British officials, however, she was pardoned by the Sultan of Selangor, and left the country.

When Somerset Maugham visited Malaya in 1921, Mrs Proudlock's lawyer told him about the case, even suggesting he write a story about it. He did: The Letter was later made into a high-camp movie with Bette Davis.

I walked down the street off Chinatown where the Proudlocks' sad little bungalow used to stand. Malaysia recently had another "trial of the century". Doctor Mahathir's former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, was put on trial for sodomy after being dismissed in 1998 for immoral behaviour.

He has now been in prison for six years and may be there for 20. Now, if only our Tony had thought of that.

Courtesy: The Spectator