

The enthusiasm of despair and the rise of Ferdinand Marcos Jr in the Philippines

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Thirty-six years ago today, after a decade and half of dictatorial rule over the Philippines, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos and their children were ousted from power by the combined force of a democratic mass movement, known as People Power, and a coup attempt by a breakaway faction of the military.

The anniversary is distinguished above all by the fact that Ferdinand Marcos Jr is the front-runner in the country's presidential elections, which will be held in May, and is currently polling to win with nearly 60 percent of the vote.

Known as Bongbong, Ferdinand Jr rides upon a wave of mass disillusionment provoked by the failure of the post-People Power administrations over the course of three decades. This wave has been unleashed by social crisis—the pandemic, mass inequality and poverty—that is driving the re-emergence of authoritarian forms of rule around the globe.

Ferdinand Jr's campaign for the presidency is, to its core, based on the rehabilitation of the martial law era as a “golden age” in Philippine history. As his campaign song, he has adopted the anthem of the dictatorship, “Bagong Lipunan” (New Society). One has a feeling of intense horror watching thousands dance at his rallies to the song that, to those who remember, was a paean to regimented thought and repression.

The Marcos dictatorship, imposed in 1972, was based on systematic repression of the population. Seventy thousand people were arrested on political grounds and nearly 4,000 killed by the regime. A new verb entered Philippine English, *salvage*, which described the brutal torture and murder of political dissidents by military and paramilitary forces.

The suppression of social unrest by military means during the explosive decade of the 1970s was the fundamental function of the martial law regime. The overwhelming majority of the country's elite, including the political opponents of Marcos, acquiesced to the dictatorship—even supported it. While disgruntled at the personal excesses of Ferdinand and Imelda, martial law played a necessary social role in defense of their class interests.

Critical to the regime was the financial, military, and political support provided to the Marcoses by Washington. Each successive US administration—Republican and Democrat alike—“backed Marcos to the hilt.” The words are Richard Nixon's, taken from a secret memorandum endorsing Marcos' proposal to declare martial law.

Ferdinand Jr was no political innocent during the regime of his parents. He was an adult and was instrumental in the apparatus of dictatorship, serving as governor of the province of Ilocos Norte in the early 1980s.

Corazon Aquino took office—as the Marcoses took up exile in

Hawaii—in February 1986, the recipient of unprecedented levels of mass hope. After a decade and half of repression, everything would be different now. Little changed.

The people power government of Aquino, which spoke incessantly of “democracy,” proved to be the rule of a rival set of oligarchs.

Looking to stabilize her hold over the military, she incorporated leading figures of the Marcos regime into her cabinet and responded to a series of military coup attempts by adapting to these layers. In 1987, police forces outside the presidential palace opened fire on a peaceful march of farmers asking for land reform, killing over a dozen.

It was this political climate, in which everything changed but nothing was different, that shaped education about the martial law regime. To detail the crimes of the dictatorship would have exposed many of the allies and policies of the Aquino government. Textbooks spoke of the corruption and personal excesses of Ferdinand Sr and Imelda, reaching almost mythical levels of theft, but not of the repressive apparatus of military rule. Imelda was remembered not for her brutality but for her thousands of shoes.

The injunction “Never Again” was widely repeated, but the predicate to which it was attached became hazy and ill-remembered.

The cronies of the Marcoses were rehabilitated and then the Marcoses themselves. They played a useful role in elite politics, able to mobilize a significant geographic and linguistic constituency.

Her husband now dead, Imelda Marcos returned from exile with her family. She ran for president in 1992 with the promise that she would “Make the Philippines Great Again.” Ferdinand Sr returned as well, his waxy, embalmed corpse on display in an Ilocos Norte mausoleum awaiting the day he could be given burial with national honors.

Political rot spread beneath the paraffin of post-Marcos illusions. Each successive administration inherited diminishing popular hopes that the hard-won forms of democracy would produce meaningful reforms.

The conditions of living for the majority of the population worsened. The working people of the country became dependent on a vast labor diaspora to sustain their families. Fully 10 percent of the country's population sought work overseas. Families were riven—mothers, fathers, sons and sisters abroad, domestic workers, construction workers, healthcare workers, home for two weeks every two years.

It is the longing of this diaspora to remain connected that fuels social media use in the Philippines at one of the highest rates in the world. The propaganda of a Marcosian ‘golden age’ has found wide circulation through social media. It is through these networks that Ferdinand Jr mounts a campaign of anti-intellectualism and conspiracy theories.

No political force has been as instrumental in producing the noxious political atmosphere that hangs over the Philippines today than the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The party, and the various national democratic organizations that follow its political line, cultivated and sustained the illusions of the working population that one or another section of the elite would at long last use the forms of democracy to carry out substantive reforms.

In each election cycle the party mustered the support of the oppressed masses behind yet another faction of the elite. The last 30 years are a cemetery of political illusions, littered with headstones bearing the names of those the party endorsed as progressive representatives of the capitalist class: Arroyo, Estrada, Villar, Duterte. Preaching that reactionary, and even racist, nationalism was the solution to the poverty and oppression of the Filipino masses, the CPP repeatedly squandered the moral energy and independent initiative of the working class, disorienting and misleading them.

Under conditions of global capitalist crisis, the bourgeoisie moved further to the right and their supporters in the CPP followed suit. When the national democratic organizations backed real-estate billionaire Manny Villar for president in 2010, they campaigned on a shared platform with Bongbong Marcos, who launched his national political career by running for Senate on Villar's slate. Satur Ocampo, who as a leading member of the CPP was a victim of martial law torture, ran for Senate alongside Ferdinand Jr and posed for photos with him.

The foundations of post-Marcos democracy shook with the election of Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. A vulgar, authoritarian populist, he oversaw mass murder by the police and paramilitary death squads in the name of a "war on drugs" that killed tens of thousands of impoverished Filipinos. The CPP, which had longstanding ties to Duterte, declared that he would be the country's first "socialist" president. They appointed representatives to his cabinet and announced their support for his drug war. Among Duterte's first presidential acts was to arrange the burial of Ferdinand Sr, with state honors, in the National Heroes Cemetery. Within a year, Duterte had an acrimonious falling out with the party.

The Corazon Aquino government and several subsequent administrations cultivated in popular consciousness a dichotomy: Marcos, corrupt and rapacious, responsible for the country's economic destitution; and Liberal Democracy, the solution to the country's ills. The passage of time weakened the content but the formal dichotomy remained, waiting for the day its polarity was reversed.

This is the thrust of Ferdinand Jr's campaign: martial law was a golden age, all that came after was a fall from grace. He is standing the People Power dichotomy on its head.

His leading rival, Leni Robredo, is chair of the Liberal Party, long associated with the Aquino family. Her decision to run as an independent, to bury her ties with the Liberal Party like incriminating evidence, expresses just how much the political landscape has changed over the past three decades. It was the Liberal Party that restored the Marcoses to the Philippines and it was as a member of the Liberal Party that Duterte rose to national prominence three years before becoming president.

Robredo is running a right-wing campaign, looking to secure the support of conservative layers and the military. She has announced her support for the continuation of the war on drugs and the McCarthyite anti-communist witchhunting organization, the NTF-ELCAC. Despite this, the national democratic organizations have thrown themselves

into an all-out campaign for Robredo.

Marcos has the backing of substantial layers of the elite who see in his campaign two key reasons for support. First, Marcos represents the promise of using dictatorial forms of rule as a means of dealing with the country's intensifying social unrest. Second, Marcos has declared his intention of continuing Duterte's friendly policies toward China and the elites backing Marcos hope that Chinese investment, particularly in infrastructure, will boost economic growth outside the national capital region.

There is an enthusiasm of despair, and it is this that fuels popular support for the Bongbong Marcos campaign. The thousands dancing to the anthem of martial law move with the frenzied desperation of imperiled members of the lower middle class and remittance-dependent poor. It is the pageantry of nihilism.

It remains plausible that Marcos' poll numbers will fall. He is an unimpressive man, unlike his father, whose long historic coattails he rides. He is possessed, at best, of an artful stupidity.

Senior was articulate, even brilliant. A lawyer who rose to power by dint of labor, calculation, and lies, he prided himself on his ability to deliver entire speeches from memory. Junior, the child of unfathomable privilege, cannot complete a coherent sentence, and avoids public debates to cover this up. If he is compelled to articulate himself in an objective forum before the nation, it is possible the outcome will be devastating.

Ferdinand Jr.'s prominence expresses the advanced preparations in the ruling class to impose dictatorship. They are gripped with fear that a mass movement of the working class will emerge in opposition to grinding conditions of exploitation and inequality. Despite all of the betrayals of Stalinism, the Filipino working class has a long and heroic tradition of struggle, one that goes all the way back to the revolutionary overthrow of Spanish colonialism and protracted fight against American empire at the turn of the 20th century.

The Filipino elite is highly attuned, with a sensitivity honed over a century, to the tremors of working class unrest. Their sprawling mansions are but kilometers from vast shantytowns and the proximity invests their politics with a nervous and jealous energy.

Marcos Jr rises on an objective social basis: historically cultivated mass despair at the possibility of a democratic solution to the country's immense social ills. None of the basic problems confronting Philippine society have been resolved. Peasant farmers labor bent double beneath loads of cane on vast sugar estates. Millions live in shantytowns that crowd the interstices of Metro Manila. Poverty wages and inhuman conditions confront the working class. Families are torn apart by the global diaspora of labor.

Democracy can only be defended by a movement that is dedicated to curing these social cancers. That which is now constrained in despair, can turn to hope if it is given revolutionary orientation. Talk of clean government, of national unity, of ending corruption—this is the political hot air of the ruling elite. Preventing the re-emergence of open dictatorship in the Philippines requires a political program that articulates the independent interests of the working masses. The fight for democracy must become the fight for socialism.



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