Columnists — Public Lives

Philippines, 1972 - 2016: Marcos and Duterte

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This coming week, we recall Marcos' declaration of martial law 48 years ago, an event that significantly altered the course of Philippine politics. It may seem pointless to warn the younger generation of the virus of authoritarianism—since it is already upon us, albeit without a formal announcement of its arrival. But, it will always be useful to understand how it managed yet again to infect our political system despite the extra safeguards that were put in place in the 1987 Constitution.

I believe that, as in 1972, we were complacent in 2016. We thought our institutions were strong enough to weed out or withstand political adventurers. We did not pay much attention to what was going on in the public consciousness.

Back in the '70s, as Marcos was winding down his second term as president, the air was filled with rumors that he might declare martial law to prolong his stay in office. The political opposition scoffed at the idea that a sitting president would invoke the martial law provision in the Constitution for anything other than an actual invasion or a rebellion. They were confident that neither Congress nor the Supreme Court would support it. They naively thought that the United States would object to it.

People in academe, like myself, believed that the declaration of martial law at a point when Marcos' popularity was at an ebb would be foolish. It would polarize society, radicalize the opposition, and plunge the country in a civil war. Rather than fear it, the Left welcomed it as an opportunity to assert its leadership and the correctness of its vision for Philippine society.

The prevailing sentiment then was that any move by Marcos toward one-man rule would be met by a solid popular resistance. Knowing Marcos to be a methodical politician, political analysts expected him to use martial law as a threat but not to actually resort to it, given its costs.

Thus, when the crackdown began with the Sept. 23 dawn arrests of key figures in the opposition and the mass media, the event itself did not come entirely as a surprise. What did was the relative ease with which Marcos was able to carry it out. The expected massive popular resistance did not materialize — not in the weeks following the declaration, and not in those fateful years when more people were getting arrested, tortured, and killed for opposing the regime.

A new constitution tailor-made for Marcos was quickly crafted and promulgated in 1973, giving him the power to continue issuing decrees. Following a highly abnormal ratification process, the Supreme Court could do nothing to stop its enforcement and effectivity. The US government turned a blind eye on what was happening, having secured its forces' continuing hold on the country's largest military bases.

It would take more than a decade before the first cracks in the Marcos dictatorial armor began to appear. Battered by successive crises induced by developments in the world economy and a

ballooning foreign debt, a weakened Philippine economy was ill-prepared to counter the growing loss of confidence in the Marcos regime.

Marcos himself was rumored to be dying from a debilitating illness that often kept him out of the public view. As people began to talk of a post-Marcos future, Ninoy Aquino decided to come home from US exile. On Aug. 21, 1983, he was assassinated while being escorted by the regime's security forces upon his arrival at the Manila International Airport. The image of his blood-soaked body sprawled on the airport tarmac became the focal symbol of all the brutal killings that had taken place under Marcos.

Ninoy's funeral, attended by more than a million people, became the first manifestation of the people power phenomenon — a crucial moment when the vast masses, moved by grief and anger, conquered their fears. The next two-and-a-half years were marked by unending protests that sought only one thing: the ouster of the dictatorship.

Believing that he could easily win an election against a fragmented and leaderless opposition, Marcos offered to stake the presidency in a snap election in February 1986. To his surprise, the opposition came together to support a single candidate — Ninoy's widow, Cory Aquino. The choice of Cory was as emotional as it was a stroke of genius. It transformed the election into a moral battle between good and evil, and consolidated people power. The cheating that followed paved the way for the peaceful uprising at Edsa.

Rodrigo Duterte's road to power was very different from the one taken by Marcos in 1972. In 2016, Mr. Duterte was the underdog candidate for the presidency; Marcos was the incumbent head of a government wracked by corruption. He was fighting for political survival. Mr. Duterte sprang from nowhere as an alternative to a regime that had exhausted the goodwill it had enjoyed among Filipinos for 30 years. He was a reluctant candidate, projecting a refreshing indifference to the trappings of power.

The people cast their lot with him at the last minute, almost as a desperate act of defiance against a smug political elite. Unlike Marcos, however, Mr. Duterte came to power with no clear vision of what he wanted to accomplish. Goaded by the strong and steady public support he gets in every survey, he has been content to operate by instinct. He has used the powers of his office to settle personal scores rather than to attend to the pressing needs of the nation. The COVID-19 pandemic has merely exposed his incurable unfitness as a leader for times like these.

Today, even as the nation continues to debate the legacy of Marcos, that of Mr. Duterte seems destined to be no more than an insignificant footnote in the country's political history.

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P.S.

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