

1970s-1980s (Philippines): The enduring trauma of martial law

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After he issued Proclamation No. 1081 placing the entire country under martial law, Ferdinand Marcos tried to explain that martial law did not mean military rule. He assured the nation that civilian leadership remained supreme over the military.

Technically, he was right. Marcos, who remained president, and Juan Ponce Enrile, who was designated martial law administrator, were both civilians. But the reality Filipinos experienced in their daily lives was one dominated by an overbearing military that could do just about anything. It was the soldiers they encountered in their communities, the streets, schools, and places of work. Not Marcos or Enrile, or the technocrats who formed his Cabinet.

These uniformed security personnel of the state, who were supposed to protect the country from foreign invaders, overnight became part of an enlarged police force explicitly assigned to weed out the nation's alleged internal enemies.

The latter included all supposed subversive elements that sought to overthrow the government—such as the communists and New People's Army guerillas, and their myriad allies and sympathizers supposedly embedded in different sectors and institutions of Philippine society. They were all supposed to be under the sway of an illegal party that espoused a foreign ideology.

The initial arrests under martial law in the early morning of Sept. 23, 1972 targeted known critics of the Marcos government: opposition politicians, journalists, writers, academics, student leaders, civic leaders, and labor activists. Though the arrest orders were couched as "invitations," they knew they had no recourse but to submit.

With the notable exception of senators Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. and Jose "Pepe" Diokno, the first detainees were generally treated well. A few did not have to spend more than a month in detention. The ones who were picked up much later, far from the nation's capital, were not as lucky. Some were brought to so-called "safe houses" run by the military. Many others were thrown into makeshift detention centers in various army camps. They were stripped of their rights, interrogated, routinely tortured, sometimes raped, and uniformly denied access to relatives and lawyers.

Those left behind, including many who managed to elude the first wave of arrests, lived under constant fear of surveillance, of being picked up, made to disappear, or "salvaged." After hearing that several of our colleagues in the University of the Philippines (UP) faculty had been detained, my wife Karina and I, who were both young instructors and had been active in the teachers' movement at that time, decided to make ourselves scarce.

Along with our two-year-old son, we moved from one relative's house to another until we could find a small apartment in an obscure commercial neighborhood. The few times we ventured out to buy food or run errands, we carried in our pockets little strips of paper we could slip into the hands of any

passerby, containing the names and telephone numbers of loved ones to contact in case anything happened to us.

These precautions were not driven by paranoia. Soldiers in uniform and operatives in plainclothes were everywhere. They roamed the UP campus openly when classes resumed after the brief disruption caused by the arrest of a number of the faculty and students.

Karina took a premature maternity leave, citing a difficult pregnancy with our second child, so she could be excused from teaching. Though I was on dissertation leave and was scheduled to do field research, I volunteered to take over the classes assigned to her. As I had just returned from graduate studies abroad, I assumed I was not under surveillance as my wife was.

That period from September 1972 to December 1973 was when activists who opposed martial law and the Marcos dictatorship felt they were in greatest danger. But as it turned out, the gravest atrocities of martial law happened much later, when the military felt more confident in what they were doing, and the public had learned to live with the restrictions of martial law. The “disappearances” and tortures continued unabated, but the sense of danger and woundedness from the initial blow had waned.

But psychiatrists would tell us that “a spectrum of woundedness” (a term used by the Hungarian-Canadian psychiatrist Dr. Gabor Maté in his book “The Myth of Normal”) can persist over time as a result of these disruptive events, manifesting itself as a lingering trauma in both our personal and collective lives. It’s worth pondering, for instance, how much of our distrust of politicians and aversion to men in uniform is due to the trauma of martial law, i.e., the psychological wound the Filipino nation sustained as a result of the large-scale betrayal of public trust by men in authority.

At a personal level, trauma may appear as a disease, a disconnectedness of mind and body that the Western concept of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) doesn’t adequately capture. Dr. Sotheara Chhim, a Cambodian psychiatrist and a 2022 awardee of the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, believes that the Cambodian concept of “baksbat” (which literally means “broken courage”) more completely encapsulates the trauma that his people experienced under the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge in the mid-’70s. At the heart of his therapeutic approach is “testimonial healing,” which allows the sufferer to have his story read by a monk before the community.

This is exactly what we have missed in the last 50 years — a full public reckoning and acknowledgment of the crimes committed under martial law.

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P.S.

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