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Politics of the extraordinary

Philippines February 1986, Egypt January 2011 – both are examples of contemporary political upheavals that social scientists now call “extraordinary” moments in politics. They signal a departure from “normal” politics -- from statist politics, from institutional procedures and rituals of representation, from government by political elites and professional bureaucrats. Such moments point to the promise of a new beginning, of a “founding” event that restores to the people their sovereign right to self-determination.

The analysis of extraordinary events like these has spawned a growing interest in the future of popular democracy in the modern world, and the many forms it can take. Regardless of what happened to the governments they instituted, the “people power” uprisings in the Philippines form a vital case of this intriguing global phenomenon. We Filipinos are fortunate to be marking the 25th anniversary of EDSA 1, an extraordinary moment in our political history, at a time when the world is rejoicing over the Egyptian people’s own recent success in overthrowing a military dictatorship. This happy coincidence allows us to revisit our own experience through the prism of the Egyptian people’s current expectations. And vice-versa: Egypt has much to learn from what happened in the Philippines after 1986.

The politics of the extraordinary is not to be confused with the politics of the exception. The latter refers to emergencies, when the State takes exceptional measures to deal with a crisis. The declaration of Martial Law by Ferdinand Marcos in September 1972 is an example of this. Marcos regarded the proclamation of emergency as a defensive response aimed at meeting the “rightist-leftist” threats against the State. The crisis, as we now know, was nothing but a pretext for instituting a dictatorship that lasted for 14 years.

Marcos, of course, saw Martial Law in an entirely different light. He projected it as a new beginning. He called his regime the “New Society.” But there was little that was new about it. Although he went after some landed oligarchs who had politically opposed him, his dictatorship remained a government of the elite. He mobilized the masses to lend their support to his ambitious experiment, but did not tolerate their self-organization outside State sponsorship. He filled the jails with political critics and dissidents. He took control of the mass media, and dismantled the checks and balances of constitutional government. He engineered the passage of a new constitution that gave him concurrent legislative powers.

Marcos wielded political power but political legitimacy eluded him. He took power using the military, while the people stood in fear and silence at the margins. Much as he tried, he could not project himself as the founding father of his nation, or as the inheritor of a legacy of heroism. Even his war medals were later exposed to be fake.

In contrast, the government that replaced the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 was ushered in by both the people and the military. Extraordinary circumstances thrust Cory Aquino into the role of a charismatic leader. Her rise to the presidency was made possible by self-organized popular movements coming from various sectors and classes of Philippine society. Following the failure of the snap presidential election in which Cory opposed Marcos, the popular uprising at EDSA gave her the mandate to start a new political order. She forthwith junked the Marcos constitution, reorganized the Supreme Court, dismissed the legislature, replaced local government officials, reorganized government, issued her own laws, and ordered the writing of a new constitution.

But, having come from the same traditional political class that had ruled the country since independence, Cory fell back on the support of close associates of her martyred husband, who were mostly opposition politicians from pre-martial law days. She sought to bring representatives of the

popular movements into her government, but resolutely refused to share political authority with the military figures that had turned against Marcos. She paid dearly for the decision not to share power with the army. Seven military coups tested the tenacity of her presidency. She survived them all because of the people's abiding support.

Edsa 1986 was an authentic founding moment in a way that Edsa 2001 was not. The first Edsa had all the ingredients that made a radical break from the past possible. Andreas Kalyvas, who wrote a book on the politics of the extraordinary, notes that "the democratic politics of the extraordinary refers to those infrequent and unusual moments when the citizenry, overflowing the formal borders of institutionalized politics, reflectively aims at the modification of the central political, symbolic, and institutional principles and at the redefinition of the content and ends of a community."

The Philippines was ripe for this "originary, instituting moment of society" in 1986. Edsa was a source of new political identities, and changed the means and scope of political action. Having prevailed over the dictatorship, the people were ready to be the authors of their destiny, to make their own rules, and to govern themselves. But, what they lacked was a new model of government that would narrow the gap between rulers and ruled, and that could quickly be put in place. That lacuna was instantly filled by the old political class which wasted no time in restoring the old paradigm of elite-led government. Thus was the extraordinary legacy of Edsa normalized.

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