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## Exporting “People Power”? The Philippine Revolution 25 Years Later

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*Handog ng Pilipino sa mundo* [The Filipinos' gift to the world]  
*Mapayapang paraang pagbabago* [Is a peaceful way of change]  
*Katotohanan, kalayaan, katarungan* [Truth, freedom and justice]  
*Ay kayang makamit na walang dahas* [Are attainable without violence]  
*Basta't magkaisa tayong lahat* [If we come together as one]

An emblematic song exemplifying the triumphant spirit many Filipinos felt after the [1986 EDSA Revolution](#) (named after the highway where protesters gathered) resulting in the ouster of strongman Ferdinand Marcos is “[Handog ng Pilipino sa Mundo](#).” Its chorus is translated above. Probably unbeknownst at the time, this event would indeed spawn analogous events throughout the world of mass protest aiming for peaceful regime change from authoritarian rule.

To be sure, other near-bloodless regime changes have occurred prior to the one the Philippines experienced in 1986. Yet, the phrase “People Power” as commonly attributed to former Senator Butz Aquino—uncle of the incumbent President Noynoy Aquino—has captured the popular imagination. From seemingly never-ending street protests in Thailand, colour revolutions in Eastern Europe, and now to previously unfancied stirrings of revolution on the Arab street, the term has been bandied about with regularity.



An iconic photo of the EDSA Revolution showing hundreds of thousands of people filling up Epifanio delos Santos Avenue (EDSA)

Yet, as the Philippines recently celebrated the 25th anniversary of this event, several of its problems from quarter of a century ago remain unresolved, as do new ones which have emerged from giving mass demonstrations nearly equal billing to electoral processes. Then, as now, Western commentators tend to ascribe yearning for freedom and democracy as drivers of “People Power.” With jubilant scenes from Tunisia and Egypt now commanding airtime, returning to the country that started it all yields insights as well as caution:

### 1. “People Power” ...or mob rule?

Unlike in the West, the Philippines has had exceptionally high voter turnout rates around the 80% mark. Yet, this willingness to let one’s voice be heard at the polling place has been accompanied by the legitimization of mass protest as an alternative form of political expression. In early 2001, popularly elected President Joseph Estrada was ousted in the [EDSA II Revolution](#). The actor-turned-politician Estrada was popular among the masa or masses, but accusations of corruption dogged his short-lived administration. Contrary to the spirit of EDSA I, EDSA II showed stronger class divides as text-messaging bourgeoisie urged others to converge on the eponymous highway at the heart of Metro Manila. Ironically, it was not long before Estrada’s successor, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, was subject to similar pressure after Estrada was arrested in April of 2001—four months after his removal. While [EDSA III](#) again brought the eponymous highway to a standstill, a general lack of elite support did not seriously threaten the new incumbent.

Similar phenomena—with more overt class distinctions—have occurred in neighbouring Thailand. Ever since the September 2006 military coup which resulted in the flight of populist Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand has been beset by [street conflicts](#) between the royalist Yellow Shirts and the pro-Thaksin Red Shirts. In September 2008, the royalists led street protests and the closure of the airport in Phuket—a popular tourist destination—that helped [force the resignation](#) of the democratically elected Thaksinite PM Samak Sundaravej.

This chain of events eventually led to the Yellow Shirt-favoured incumbent, Oxford-educated Abhisit Vejjajiva, assuming office in December 2008. In turn, Abhisit’s term has been marked by near-constant protest by the Red Shirts who demand immediate elections to be held that favour the latter given their numerical superiority outside of Bangkok, the capital.

Aside from the questionable proposition of holding elections if they are subsequently voided by “People Power”-style events, that these mass movements have succeeded in the Philippines and Thailand largely when serving elite interests gives additional reason to pause.

By lending democratic legitimacy to mass protest, there is a danger of it supplanting electoral processes altogether which deserves serious consideration.

## 2. Does "People Power" produce lasting peace and order?

Critics of the United States' occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq point out that establishing democracy is not simply a matter of transplanting Western institutions. Yet, in the Philippines, an almost entirely homegrown revolution has failed to deliver the blessings of security. In the [2010 Global Peace Index](#), the Philippines ranked 130th, worse than its ostensibly less open neighbours Malaysia (22nd), Singapore (30th), Laos (34th), Vietnam (38th), Indonesia (67th) and even Cambodia (111th). Together with Thailand which ranks 124th, years of seemingly intractable squabbles have taken their toll. While momentary alliances of those disgruntled with authoritarian rule do occur and give rise to popular uprisings (EDSA I), incompatible interests left unresolved may only result in additional strife (EDSA II & III).

While the shadow of Thaksin looms large on Thai politics despite his exile, so do other erstwhile relatives of Ferdinand Marcos exert influence in the Philippines. Congresswoman Imelda Marcos represents the second district of her home province of Leyte, while her son Bongbong and daughter Aimee are, respectively, a senator of the republic and a governor of the late president's home province of Ilocos Norte. Instead of the triumphalism prominent in the wake of "People Power" events, the (re-)introduction of democracy may instead serve to preserve and accentuate divisions that often prove more durable than autocrats who have worn out their welcome alike Ferdinand Marcos.

## 3. Is democracy a necessary or sufficient condition for economic growth and equality?

One of the most remarked upon findings in the social sciences is that there is [no direct relationship](#) between democracy and economic growth. While authoritarian rule may not necessarily produce economic development, nor does democracy. In the last few years of Marcos rule, Filipinos became increasingly aware of how far their nation had fallen relative to regional peers. In the 1950s, the Philippines had the second highest per capita income in the Asia-Pacific after Japan, but gradually slipped back due to others overtaking it. In the wake of the 1986 revolution, euphoria attended hopes that the country would regain its economic footing. Yet today, it lags behind all other original ASEAN founding members in GDP per capita terms.

To be sure, many of the grievances being voiced in Middle East and North African (MENA) states concern a lack of economic opportunities, which tend to reinforce pre-existing inequalities. It is likely no coincidence that Tunisia (30.3%) and Egypt (25.4%) have the [two highest youth unemployment rates](#) for oil importers in MENA. Moreover, these two regions have the world's worst youth unemployment-to-population ratios. Despite both Tunisia and Egypt having reasonably high rates of growth in recent years, their youth has largely been left out. Post-revolution Philippines provides little comfort for those wishing for greater equality: on the eve of their respective revolutions, Tunisia and Egypt both had *lower* Gini inequality coefficients than the Philippines.

## 4. Does "People Power" establish momentum for lasting social change?

The ultimate goal of these events is likely one of nurturing new social contracts with the state that overturn old conventions that proved detrimental to widespread advancement. Yet many vestiges of the past remain resilient in the Philippines. For instance, incumbent President Noyon Aquino's reformist credentials will remain suspect for as long as the Cojuangco side of his family retains ownership of [Hacienda Luisita](#), a six-and-a-half thousand hectare sugar plantation that is a remnant of the Spanish colonial era. Certainly, vociferous debates in Thailand in the run-up to its [midyear 2011 elections](#) remain as divisive as when Thaksin was overthrown.

## Conclusion

Overall, the Philippine example poses questions to those who have lauded similar events that have taken place in its wake. First, is there any reason to believe that "People Power" will not devolve into ochlocracy (mob rule)? If that happens, why bother to hold elections if a nation's political fate will repeatedly be decided in street protests instead? Second, does democracy encourage peace and order? Countries may find that longstanding clan, faction, and/or geographic divisions instead of cross-cutting policy appeals predominate in the aftermath. Third, why should we believe that economic growth and equality will be bolstered by such events? The Philippine example and rising levels of inequality in post-Soviet Eastern Europe give reasons to pause. Fourth, why should we expect that the rules of the game in affected nations will change instead of just reshuffling competing elite players?

The Philippine example inspires caution with respect to responses to all four questions. Indeed, overthrowing widely disliked authoritarian regimes may come to be regarded as the easy part on the road to political-economic betterment—as it has in the Southeast Asian nation that spawned "People Power."

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