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A HISTORY OF THE PHILIPPINE POLITICAL PROTEST

2016 marks the 30th anniversary of the People Power Revolution. During those momentous four days of February 1986, millions of Filipinos, along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) in Metro Manila, and in cities all over the country, showed exemplary courage and stood against, and peacefully overthrew, the dictatorial regime of President Ferdinand E. Marcos. More than a defiant show of unity—markedly, against a totalitarian rule that had time and again proven that it would readily use brute force against any and all

dissenters—People Power was a reclaiming of liberties long denied. The millions that gathered for the 1986 People Power Revolution—the culmination of a series of public protests, often dispersed if at all given leave—was a nation wresting itself, as one, back from a dictator.

The four-day demonstration along EDSA was a manifestation of the discontent and furies that began with the parliament of the streets during Marcos' totalitarian rule, as Filipinos began, determinedly, to shake off the subjugation. But, the players of this revolution, at the start, knew only to gather; only in EDSA, at the height of the marches and within the multitude of citizens, did standing as one begin to coalesce as a campaign. From its beginnings as an immediate response to the rigged results of the snap elections, and then as a vigil to guard defecting top military men from Marcos' vengeful machinations, a show of support heartily encouraged by the Catholic Church; to streets gradually teeming with people to quietly face off with armored tanks, a confrontation of linked arms and prayers and flowers and songs—the four days of EDSA People Power in itself was an exemplar of the evolution of the Philippine protest.

On February 20, 1986, Marcos proclaimed himself victor of the snap elections, and was set to retain the presidency; on the same day, Corazon C. Aquino led a people's victory rally at Luneta and called for civil disobedience, which included the boycotting of known Marcos-crony institutions. Two million people took up the cause with her at that rally; stocks of singled-out companies fell the very next day. Marcos responded with the threat of reinstating Martial Law, should Cory Aquino lead a nationwide strike; he, too, orchestrated a mass demonstration of support—reports emerged that twelve million pesos had been earmarked to pay supporters to attend a proclamation rally in his honor at Luneta.

On February 22, Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile, who was once at the center of the declaration of Martial Law in 1972, discovered a plot to implicate him and officers involved in the Reform the Armed Forces Movement in a coup. Faced with only two options—dispersing or regrouping—Enrile chose the latter as the “more honorable” option. He announced his defection from Marcos, alongside Chief of Staff Fabian Ver's deemed successor, Lieutenant General Fidel V. Ramos, from within Camp Aguinaldo and Camp Crame. The Catholic Church announced their support of the two, and enjoined people via radio broadcast to provide aid and, for all purposes, a human cordon to guard them against anticipated counter-offensives. Soon enough, the base and its surroundings were teeming with citizens. Marcos denounced Enrile and Ramos, but speedily changed the venue of his inauguration to Malacañan Palace; there he would be sworn in as president yet again, but this time surrounded by nothing more than courtiers tied to his pursestrings. Back in EDSA, that first night: Close to a hundred thousand held vigil—a number that would only swell.



Citizens continue to march to EDSA as individuals or as organized groups with their own safety rope, provisions and banners. Photo by Nestor Barido, *People Power: The Philippine Revolution of 1986*

On February 23, Enrile and Ramos met along EDSA, surrounded and protected by a growing number of supporters eager for what already seemed then as a fomenting revolution. But Marcos and his remaining officials had mobilized forces still under his command: Columns of armored tanks formed barricades along EDSA, with heavily armed battalions as escort. Thus began the banded Filipinos' show of force—through song and slogans; through earnest extensions of friendship to hard-faced soldiers; through the flashing of the Laban sign—symbol of Cory Aquino's campaign and of the movement that carried her; through prayers and linked arms and rosaries, human barricades and flowers.

On February 25, Corazon C. Aquino was sworn in as the elected President, effectively reinstating democracy following decades of the totalitarian rule of the Marcoses. Democracy was swept in through the swell of a unified crowd—and it was this tide of the populace that would fully drive out the dictator from his Palace, stealing out of the country that wanted it no longer and that which could finally act on it.

Revolutions often do not erupt and resolve in a matter of days—but the events of February 1986 forever altered the course of our nation's history; it showcased to the world the singular strength of the Filipino people.

That pivotal national march along EDSA is only foremost among a long tradition of political demonstrations. For more than a century, Filipinos have been taking their grievances to the streets. One of the earliest recorded protests was in 1903, staged by the first workers' union in the country, calling for an

eight-hour working day and for the recognition of May 1 as a public holiday. In the decades that followed, in a Philippines under American rule, the streets were the stage to air grievances about unfulfilled promises of upward mobility from the benevolent colonizer.

In the 1920s and the 1930s, the protests were manifestations of racial tensions between Filipinos and Americans: When a Filipino lettuce picker in California died at the hands of Caucasian workers, 15,000 people flocked to Luneta for a memorial service that turned into a protest rally demanding independence from the United States; students of the Manila North High School instigated rallies for the dismissal of an American teacher who insulted her students. These rallies would serve as the foundation of unified and more centralized movements grounded on civil disobedience, calling for Philippine liberty.

On July 31, 1931, before the United States Congress passed the Hare-Hawes-Cutting Act of 1933 (<http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/the-commonwealth-of-the-philippines/>),—the law that would set in motion the decolonization of the Philippines—U.S. Senator Harry B. Hawes of Missouri traveled to Manila to gauge the people’s sentiment firsthand. What he found was a demonstration and testimonial calling for national independence held in front of the Legislative Building. In a few years, the Legislative Building (now the National Museum) would be itself witness to the inauguration of the Commonwealth of the Philippines (<http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/the-commonwealth-of-the-philippines/>), and the swearing in of the first elected Filipino President and Vice President. Two hundred and fifty thousand men, women, and children turned out to meet the new Commonwealth, either as marchers in the parade or as spectators on the sidelines.



A Filipino street demonstration calling for the United States to give the Philippines its independence. Circa early 1930s. Photo from Museo ni Manuel L. Quezon via indiohistorian.

The protest stands as a crucial part of Philippine political—of *democratic*, exercise. In their finer moments, the demonstrations were a populace banding together; else, they were stages upon which one fought for rights deemed maligned. Throughout the American Occupation, workers in the provinces would take to the streets to demand better treatment and to air outrage against the state. The protesters were inspired by the civil disobedience movement in India, choosing to boycott pro-American establishments and refusing to pay taxes to what they deemed as an impostor government. Some protests, however, degenerated into armed conflict. At one point, they faced off with the Philippine Constabulary in and around Manila in a violent uprising, which resulted in heavy casualties and the organic disbandment of workers' unions.

The Japanese Occupation did what it could to stifle demonstrations feebly coming to life. But this crackdown on unions often drove members who'd evaded arrest to join the larger Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon movement (HUKBALAHAP; The Nation's Army Against the Japanese).

With democracy reinstated after the war, the laborers' protests speedily gained strength: a 50,000-strong delegation marched to Malacañan Palace only a month after the Japanese surrendered, demanding better conditions for workers, the release of imprisoned union leaders, and a 60–40 profit sharing system in the provinces. President Sergio Osmeña met their demands.

The onset of the Marcos administration would witness a more dynamic philosophy to protests; these demonstrations would continue to evolve as the Marcos presidency transformed into a dictatorship. On April 28, 1969, the Filipino Agrarian Reform Movement (FARM)—composed of intellectuals, journalists, and professionals who were sympathetic to the workers' cause—launched a massive protest known as the Land Justice March in Tarlac, calling for land reform in Central Luzon. The protest march was supposed to end at Malacañang, but President Marcos flew to meet the protesters at Camp Aquino, Tarlac. After he agreed to most of their demands, the Land Justice March dissolved. During this time, FARM also staged a 93-day sit-in in front of Congress for better conditions in peasant communities.

Just two years later, in May 1967, Lapiang Malaya—a movement David Sturvenant describes as “a 40,000-member organization much given to ornate uniforms, patriotic posturing, and martial Rizal Day rallies”—called on Marcos to step down; they wanted to take his place. On May 20, more than 500 members were gathered at Lapiang Malaya's headquarters along Taft Avenue in Pasay City, supposedly to participate in a parade-demonstration. The Philippine Constabulary repeatedly attempted to break up the assembly, but eventually tensions rose to the point of violence. In what *The Manila Times* referred to as “Bloody Sunday,” 32 bolo-wielding members were slaughtered by Constabulary troops armed with rifles. 358 more were arrested and taken by the Constabulary to Camp Crame in Quezon City.



Thirty-two Lapiang Malaya members were killed, as against one PC soldier. Photo from the Philippines Free Press Magazine.

In an attempt to stave off the criticism that it had overreacted, the Constabulary came out with a series of dubious intelligence reports linking the sect to the communists. The Marcos administration's treatment of the Lapiang Malaya protest—turning it into a massacre of 32 farmers, with the Constabulary revealed to be virtually unchecked—was the first major item in the administration's track record against free assembly. Lewis E. Gleeck Jr. writes of Bloody Sunday: "The significant accomplishments of the administration were suddenly diminished by a grave failure in judgment on the part of the Philippine Constabulary [PC], which massacred 32 members of Lapiang Malaya, a bolo-armed group of uneducated fanatics who had carelessly been allowed to set up headquarters only a few kilometers distant from Malacañang. When the misguided group was called upon to sheath their bolos and disperse, they refused, and the PC charged them with rifles blazing, destroying not only the bolomen, but staining the reputation of the Constabulary and the Marcos government. This was an example of mistaken judgment that should have cost those who issued the order at least reduction in rank, but no visible disciplinary measures were taken. As [Rafael] Salas and later [Francisco] Tatad would lament, no Filipino official ever accepted responsibility for failure or errors, let alone resigned as a result of disasters suffered under his command."

It was the Lapiang Malaya massacre that impelled staunch Marcos critic Senator Benigno S. Aquino Jr. to describe the Philippines thusly: "A land consecrated to democracy but run by an entrenched plutocracy. Here, too, are a people whose ambitions run high, but whose fulfillment is low and mainly restricted to the self-perpetuating élite. Here is a land of privilege and rank—a republic dedicated to equality but mired in an archaic system of caste." Democracy had, observes Manuel L. Quezon III, "survived the Huk rebellion; and yet, even the beneficiaries of the relative stability of the mid-Fifties to mid-Sixties left an increasingly better-educated and cosmopolitan urban middle class in discontent."

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Students, who would eventually form a key cornerstone of the Philippine political protest, did not take to demonstrations until the late 1960s. For the most part, they were politically passive—a condition cultivated by the prevailing political culture then; the marked conservatism of the era, itself bolstered by Filipino values; as well as an education system that strongly promoted harmony between the citizenry and the government, especially considering that the latter signed on 15,000 new hires every year. Quirino Samonte writes:

“—what are the prospects of an activist *vis-à-vis* the *status quo*? For those who defy the law, the price can be high indeed as exemplified by those who chose to cast their lot with the ‘Huks’—a rebellious movement of peasants that had its roots in the social and economic injustices of agriculture’s tenancy system, but which has since become the feeding ground of Communist agitators.”

And yet, with changing political currents and shifting social mores, campuses would soon thrive as activist hubs. The 1960s saw a resurgence of nationalism among college students, who demonstrated against a spectrum of issues—from US imperialism, as seen in the deployment of Philippine troops to the Vietnam War, to the US military bases dotting the Philippines; to specific, sector-based issues that paralleled workers’ movements decades prior. The relatively insular but undoubtedly more sweeping issue at the heart of many a student outrage were individual school policies: School administrations would fail to respond to demands of lowered tuition fees, of granting independence to student organizations and publications, of improving facilities and the curriculum. Campus activism found campaigns in the widening gap between the rich and the poor, best exemplified by the divide between the working students of the proletariat and the collective elite of a handful of Manila schools, both public and private—hand in hand with this were the proliferation of “diploma mills” within the capital. Eva Lotta-Hedman and John Sidel observe:

“As the demand for formal qualifications and accreditation increased on the urban employment market, privately-run specialist colleges and technical institutes packed unprecedented numbers of fee-paying students into overcrowded and sometimes seriously dilapidated classrooms and even condemned buildings in downtown Manila. For example, the Philippine College of Commerce counted among its rapidly growing student population ‘mostly children of the lowest-income groups —laborers, janitors, carpenters, even laundrywomen.’”

Manila was overrun with the children of the laboring classes, outraged at institutions, at society, and at the state. All of this roundly grew into a pitch, the calls for reform and demonstrations of discontent galvanizing into solid movements. By the late 1960s, Lotta-Hedman and Sidel note, students would, as collectives, picket campuses, march in the streets of Manila, and demonstrate outside Congress:

“Whilst this wave of student activism focused but brief attention on ‘dialogue’ and ‘reform’ at the top of college administrations as well as national government, it also left behind a battle-scarred downtown area where buildings with broken and boarded-up windows remained a powerful testimony to the moment of struggle, thus recalling fragments of collective memory from the amnesia of history through lived experience itself.”

The culture of activism, with its reformists and its radicals, would only strengthen; there was power in the demonstration, of making one’s voice heard in a disruptive mass; one would not be ignored. Soon enough, campus activism would branch out, coalesce among classes, and reach out to integrate plights other than theirs: The provincial poor, the working class.

The power of the masses, led by a youth made aware of their ability to compel the state to stop and listen, would reach a bloody climax in 1970, with what would be recorded in our history books as the First Quarter Storm. Toward the end of 1969; Ferdinand E. Marcos won an unprecedented full second term as president in, Lewis Gleeck Jr. writes, “the most violent and fraudulent campaign the country had ever seen.” At this point, fervent calls for a revolution were not isolated to reformists and radicals, but involved conservative circles as well. Discontent was building solidarity: Sympathizers from all walks of life would link arms and protest an increasingly unpopular and thoroughly objectionable administration. The reelection of a president no one wanted any longer brought in a tide of outrage, one that lasted and lingered for three months, marked by often violent demonstrations: “The radical students, already disdainful of a political system dominated by elitist, ideologically indistinguishable parties, reacted to Marcos’ tainted reelection with a vengeance.”

The First Quarter Storm officially began on January 26, 1970, on the streets surrounding Congress, where Marcos delivered the first State of the Nation Address (SONA) of his second term. Student organizations, spearheaded by the National Union of Students of the Philippines and with the support of workers and members of the urban poor, crafted a manifesto in preparation for the SONA; a permit to rally was applied for, and some 20,000 people trooped to Congress. They were met, however, by a cadre of uniformed men in battle gear garlanding the streets, patrolling entry points. The rally went on peacefully beneath the blare of the sound system carrying Marcos’ SONA, which boasted of the country’s improved peace and order situation.



Student protesters camp outside the Old Legislative Building (now National Museum) while President Marcos delivers his address to the legislature in 1970. Photo from *Assembly of the Nation: A Centennial History of the House of the Representatives of the Philippines*.

But when Marcos and his wife Imelda exited the halls of Congress, demonstrators—spurred on by agitators and harassed by uniformed personnel—rushed at them, throwing bottles and placards and stones as they entered their limousine. The security force pushed back at the demonstrators. The mob was broken up by the police with batons; students were beaten with truncheons.

Two accounts give opposing views of the January 26 protest. Jose F. “Pete” Lacaba sympathizes with the student demonstrators in his classic, “The January 26 Confrontation: A Highly Personal Account.” Lacaba was outside with the students and described the violence in detail: students were chased by the police, hauled out of jeepneys, and beaten with rattan sticks. Lacaba himself took a blow to his waist from a policeman.

Kerima Polotan’s account, “The Long Week,” tells a different story. From inside Congress, she took fashion notes—a who’s who in barong, coat and tie, or terno—and offered snide remarks at the expense of members of the opposition, such as Senators Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr. and Gerardo “Gerry” Roxas. Her

account of the violence outside was taken from Manila Police District chief Colonel Gerardo Tamayo: one cop lost four teeth, another received ten stitches on his head, another sustained a nail in his knee.



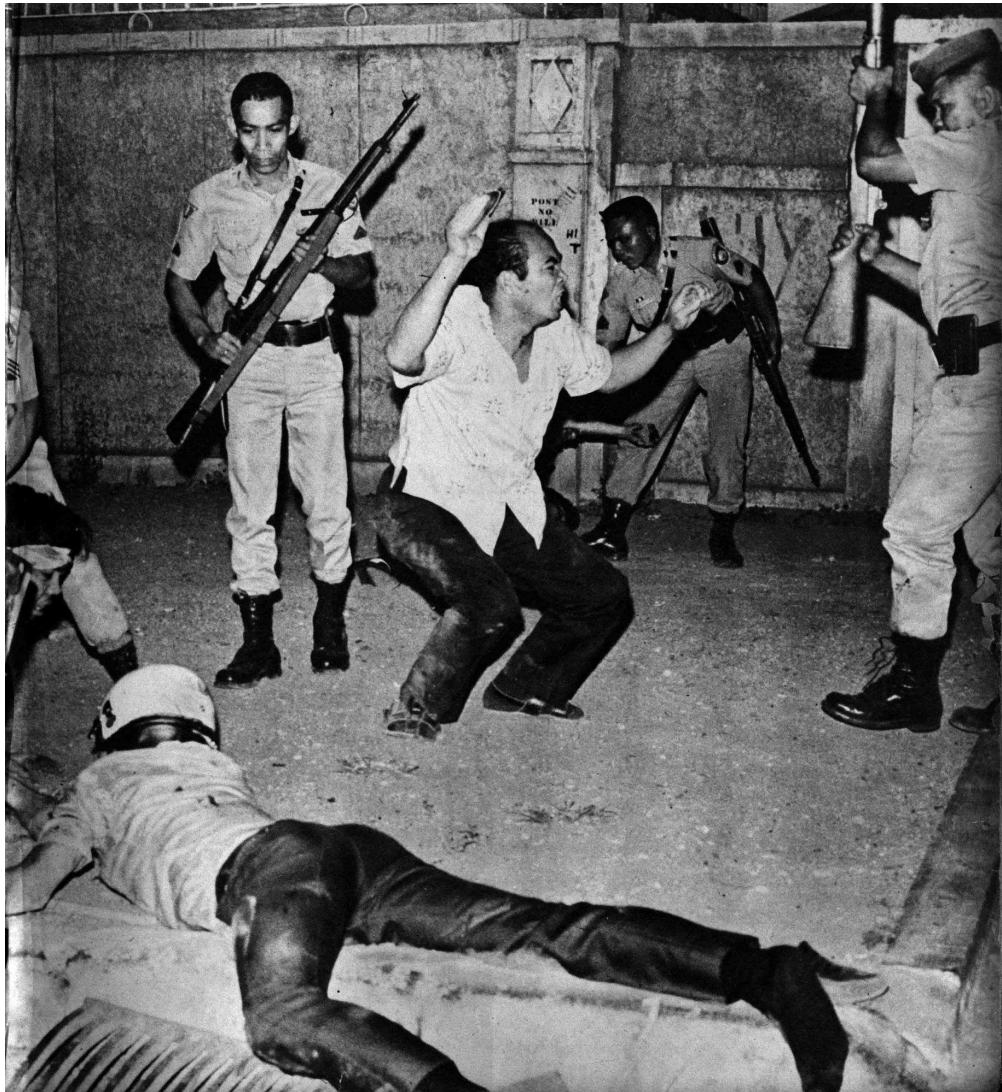
Presidential security agents body shielding President Marcos as he enters his car while a rain of placard handles fly all around. Photo from the Manila Bulletin.

On January 30, to protest the violent dispersal of the January 26 student-led rally, another demonstration was held in front of Malacañan Palace—candles burned beside an effigy of a coffin, to symbolize the death of democracy. In the streets that radiated from the Palace, more and more protesters were gathering, marching toward the breach in the gates; as security tried to break up the mobs, doors would open to the rallyists, second-floor windows opened revealing strangers serving as frantic look-outs. The “clean-up” of the street protests took some seven hours, with shows of solidarity in an increasingly bloody evening punished by a police force that did not distinguish between protesters and sympathizers. (In the meantime, Nick Joaquin, notes: “That night, an exodus of privilege made ghost towns of the exclusive villages in the suburbs; the chi-chi crowd, fear in their guts and guilt in their hearts, holed up with their hysteria in the big hotels, driven there by the certainty that Forbes Park and Bel-Air and Dasmariñas and Magallanes would be set afire by an avenging people.”)

Rallyists retaliated with force. They started fires and destroyed property; a fire truck was rammed into the Palace gates. At Mendiola, students armed with bamboo sticks faced off against a battalion wielding heavy artillery.

Demonstrators were killed—one 23-year-old student, performing in a mock trial of a Marcos effigy, was shot in the head—several others wounded in clashes that ran late into the night. Marcos, in his diaries, wrote about the siege of his Palace:

“...demonstrators numbering about 10,000 students and laborers stormed Malacañan Palace, burning part of the medical building, crashing through Gate 4 with a fire truck that had been forcibly commandeered by some laborers and students amidst shouts of ‘Mabuhay Dante!’ and slogans from Mao-Tse-Tung, the new Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People’s Army. The rioters sought to enter Malacañang but the Metropolitan Command (METROCOM) of the Philippine Constabulary and the Presidential Guards repulsed them towards Mendiola Bridge, where in an exchange of gunfire, hours later, four persons were killed and scores from both sides injured. The crowd was finally dispersed by tear gas grenades.”



Though the protracted battle between authorities and students who stormed the Palace would conclude by dawn, the First Quarter Storm would only escalate, sustained by a citizenry disillusioned and outraged by the state's intolerant and violent responses to expressions of democracy.

A year after the First Quarter Storm, in the lead-up to the 1971 midterm elections, UP students, supported by faculty members and non-academic personnel, staged a sympathy strike in support of *Pasang Masda*, an organization of jeepney drivers that protested gas price hikes. The students occupied the Diliman campus and blockaded its main roads through the use of a new weapon of protest: the human barricade. This nine-day uprising was known as the "Diliman Commune." Some residents in the area banded together and hunted down the radical students in the defense of order and their property rights. President Marcos ordered the Philippine Constabulary Metropolitan Command to retake the campus. The Philippine Constabulary went to UP and dismantled the barricades; three students died in the violence that ensued. The demonstrations in UP Diliman ended only after the school administration accepted some of the demands of the students. The military siege was put to a halt following a recommendation made by university president Salvador Lopez to President Marcos.

One contemporary observer noted that after the Diliman commune, "protest classes, boycotts, demonstrations became almost a daily spectacle that would beset the University until the declaration of martial law."

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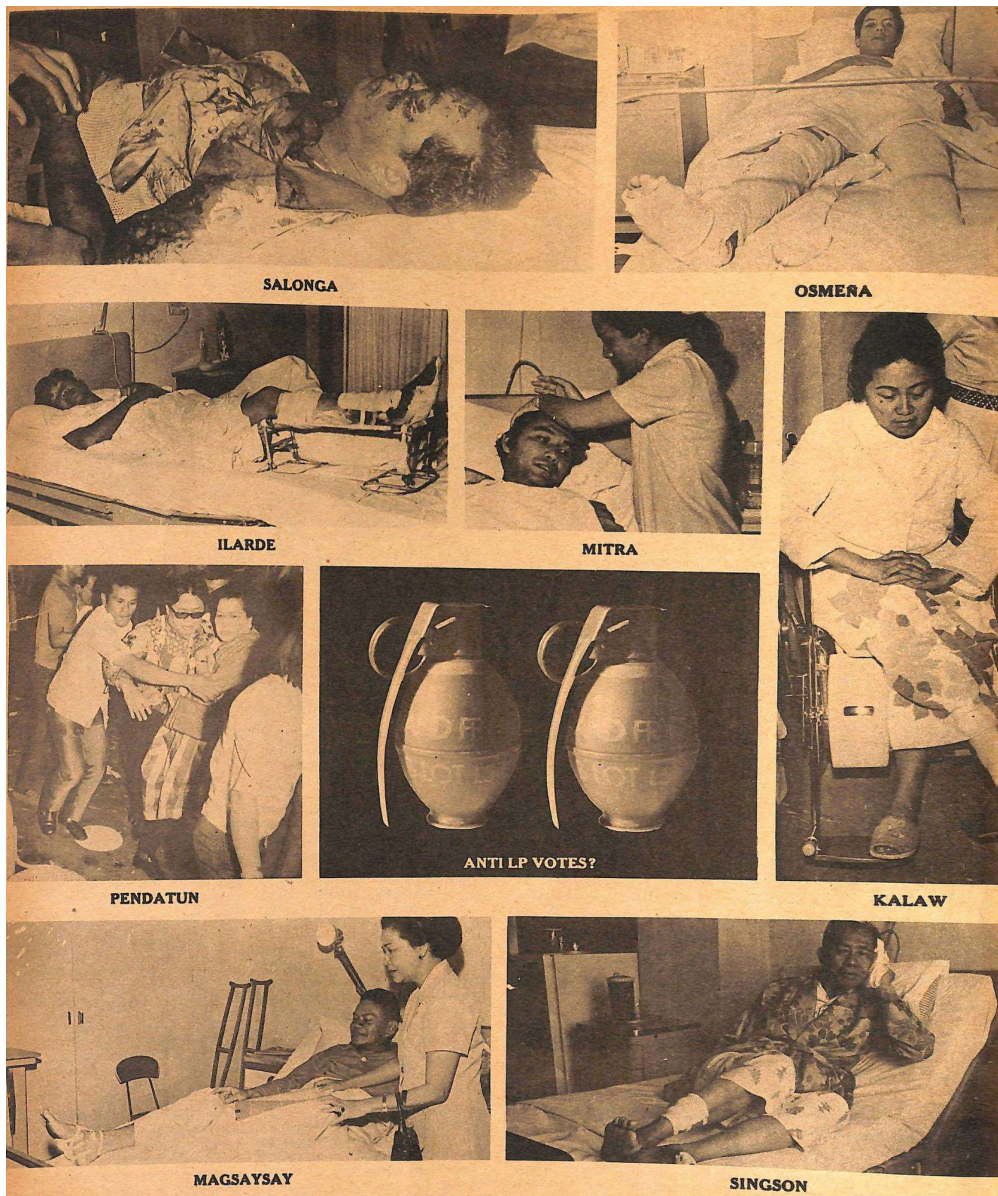
Lotta-Hedman and Sidel note that, given "the mounting political activism that swept Manila campuses during this decade, students increasingly left their classrooms throughout the University belt not only to shop for food or school supplies, or watch movies, but to join in the mass demonstrations that filed through or converged upon downtown. As students, faculty members, workers, and peasants alike—and sometimes, together—launched new radical organisations and engaged in concerted collective campaigns during the course of the decade. Plaza Miranda—'the crossroads of the nation'—became a familiar destination not just for Nazareno devotees, downmarket clients, and during election years, political candidates, but also for mass activists—as well as the Metropolitan Anti-Riot squads organised for the occasion."

Located no more than a kilometer from Malacañan Palace, Plaza Miranda was the largest venue from which rallyists could be physically close to the residence of the country's chief executive, whether in loyal support or oppositionist denunciation. In the era of grand demonstrations and mass mobilizations,

National Artist for Literature Nick Joaquin, in his *Almanac for Manileños*, described Plaza Miranda as “the crossroads of the nation, the forum of the land.” President Ramon Magsaysay, arguably the most popular of our postwar chief executives, famously recognized the square as a gauge of public opinion when he asked a proponent of a policy or project: “Can we defend this at Plaza Miranda?”

(<http://malacanang.gov.ph/75022-defend-it-at-plaza-miranda-a-history-of-the-countrys-foremost-public-square/>). Far removed from the closed, air-conditioned rooms of Congress or cushioned seats in public buildings, bringing an issue to Plaza Miranda was the ultimate act of transparency and accountability, where the people, any Juan or Juana de la Cruz, could question their government.

A year following the First Quarter Storm, the political situation in Manila and throughout the country was at a fever pitch. Growing disenchantment with Marcos put his political future at stake with the 1971 midterm Senatorial elections—the traditional dividing line between a president’s continued political relevance or reduction to lame duck. The sons of Presidents Osmeña and Roxas, united under the Liberal Party, led the opposition to President Ferdinand Marcos. Senators Sergio Osmeña Jr. and Gerardo Roxas were both victims in the Plaza Miranda bombing, which would indelibly link the Liberal Party of the Philippines to the public square’s identity as the forum of Philippine democracy.



Liberal Senators after the Plaza Miranda bombing. Photo from the Philippines Free Press.

On August 21, 1971, at the miting de avance of the Liberal Party in Plaza Miranda, the square became the scene of two simultaneous grenade attacks that nearly liquidated the party's leadership, just as Senator Roxas, Liberal Party President, was proclaiming his party's candidates for the City of Manila. Among those who sustained serious injury were: Roxas, Osmeña, Senators Jovito Salonga, Genaro Magsaysay, Eva Estrada-Kalaw (a Nacionalista guest candidate of the LP), and senatorial bets John Henry Osmeña and Ramon Mitra Jr. Roxas would hold President Marcos responsible for the attack:

“The Plaza Miranda incident has illustrated beyond doubt that there is not a safe place in the country where people may express their views without having to face the perils of assassination. I have only one message to leaders, followers and the electorate: Nothing will deter the LP nor dampen its determination to win the mandate of the people this election. We shall continue to fight for the right of our citizenry. I am grateful to the Almighty for those of us who were fortunate to have been spared.”

Widely considered the most blatant assault on free speech and guaranteed democratic rights at the time, many quarters believed it to be masterminded by Marcos himself, which led to increased opposition to his administration. Three months later, the polls resulted in a Senate sweep by the Liberals, with only two Marcos allies making it into the winner’s circle. The President’s alter egos—Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and Secretary of Labor Blas Ople—were among the losers.

The Marcos years, characterized by the Machiavellian exercise of power preservation, fomented political unrest: Alleged graft and corruption by the administration and her cronies would worsen the disparity of wealth and grow the gap between the extremely wealthy and the very poor. Civilians took to rioting, which fed the administration’s hunger to be on the defensive and thus respond with aggression.



A mass rally organized by the Movement of Concerned Citizens for Civil Liberties (MCCCL) was held at Plaza Miranda in Quiapo. Speakers at the program denounced the reported plan of Marcos to declare martial law via Oplan Sagittarius. Photo from the Philippines Free Press Magazine.

This heightened sense of control meant the suppression of civil liberties and before long, President Ferdinand Marcos found himself addressing the public, justifying the need for power to be vested solely in his hands.

On the afternoon of September 21, 1972 (<http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/featured/declaration-of-martial-law/>), the last protest before the declaration of Martial Law was held in Plaza Miranda. Sponsored by Concerned Christians for Civil Liberties, the demonstration was attended by a crowd of 30,000 people from different sectors—civic, religious, labor, student, and activist.

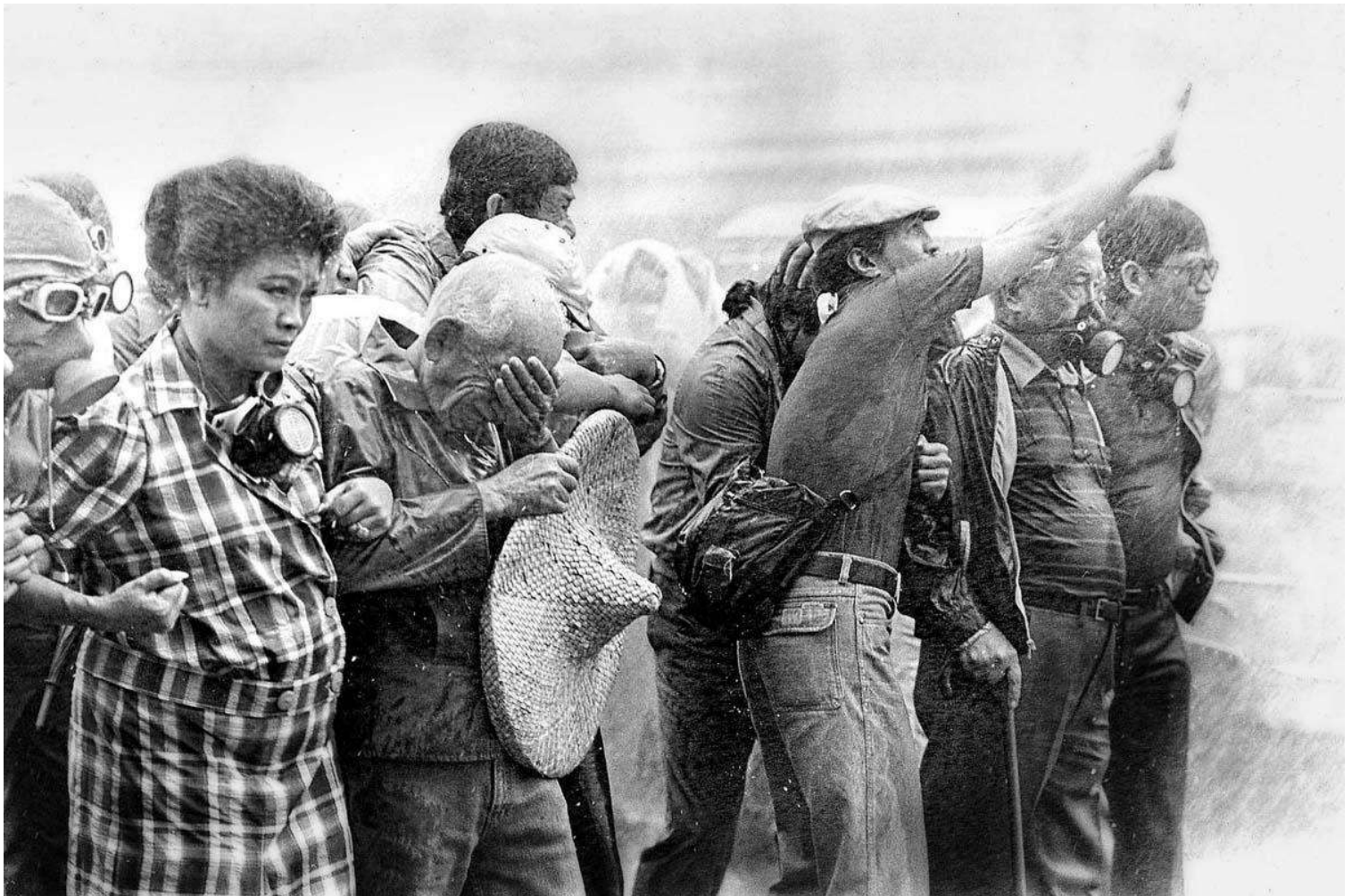
The September 23, 1972 declaration of Martial Law

(<http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/featured/infographic-day-marcos-declared-martial-law-september-23-1972/>), planted the seeds of discontent that would make dissent and revolution necessary—even vital—to the restoration of democracy.

Urban protest did not vanish entirely, even under Martial Law. On the day before the Interim Batasang Pambansa elections, for example, residents of Metro Manila organized a show of support for the incarcerated ex-Senator Ninoy Aquino, who was the leader of the opposition candidates: the noise barrage held on April 6, 1978, would become one of the most famous protests of the era. At 8:00 p.m., people went out into the streets, making whatever noise they could “to let Ninoy Aquino in his prison cell know that the people had heard his message.” They banged on pots and pans, honked their car horns, and shouted their throats sore in support of Ninoy and his party, Lakas ng Bayan (LABAN; the People’s Power).

A period of relative quiet followed; but in 1983, the assassination of the foremost critic of the Marcos dictatorship—the man who was among those first arrested in the declaration of Martial Law—revived the nation out of inaction. Fifteen minutes after Ninoy Aquino returned to the country after three years of exile in the United States, he was dead on the tarmac of the Manila International Airport. Chairman of the National Historical Commission of the Philippines, Maria Serena I. Diokno, writes, “It was the Aquino assassination, more than any other event in the Marcos regime’s long history of repression and violence, which moved countless Filipinos, especially the once-timid middle class, to awaken and jointly fight the reality of dictatorship. For many it was, in the words of a Makati businessman ‘. . . the spark that gave us the courage to speak up.’ Indeed, from that shocking moment on the tarmac in August 1983 until the EDSA Revolution in February 1986, numerous organizations emerged to protest the iron strength of the Marcos dictatorship.”

Until then, the country's demonstrators had been stilled under Martial Law, with the regime unrelenting in its campaign to stifle free speech, much less audacious displays of opposition. But with Aquino's assassination, Filipinos took to the streets to honor the dead, to cast their lot with the fallen hero. It was in the streets of Manila, with Ninoy Aquino's funeral cortege escorted by millions, that the Filipino people themselves undertook what the dictatorship denied: The flag in front of the Rizal Monument (<http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/rizal-monument/>), was lowered to half-mast, in symbolic tribute from the Republic's protomartyr to its new martyr of democracy. Diokno writes of the sea-change regarding popular outrage that gained strength on August 31, 1983: "On that day, about two million Filipinos turned out to be counted; they joined the procession, lined the streets, displayed banners and ribbons, and chanted all throughout an eleven-hour journey. The unprecedented funeral set the tone for the protest movement that was to evolve. It was a movement that in the next two years increasingly challenged the Marcos regime's stockpile of teargas, bullets, and repressive presidential decrees. In subsequent rallies and varied mass actions, demonstrators, linking arms and bearing no weapons, bravely faced the U.S.-supplied arms of the state."



Chino Roces, Lorenzo Tañada Sr., and Butz Aquino facing the water cannons at Mendiola. Photo courtesy of Jacinto Tee.



The funeral procession of Ninoy Aquino. Note that the flag had been defiantly lowered by the crowd as the truck carrying the bier passed. Photo taken from *Ninoy: The Willing Martyr*.

The indignation and the grief, fuelling the resurgence of democratic expression, spread across all sectors—the country had once again found a single banner from which it could unite and struggle, against the innumerable abuses of the Marcos regime. When before efforts to mobilize the masses would come to naught or prove at best to be ephemeral, the anti-government protests following Ninoy’s death would last months, and once again bring to the fore movements that would usher in more definitive campaigns for the restoration of democracy in the Philippines. Mark Thompson shares government estimates of the upswell of protest inspired by Ninoy’s murder: “165 rallies, marches, and other demonstrations took place between August 21 and September 30, 1983. The largest was Aquino’s funeral procession in Manila, which took eleven hours and was attended by an estimated 2 million people. Protest demonstrations continued into the following year, with more than 100 held between October 1983 and February 1984. The biggest of these was the 120-kilometer ‘Tarlac to Tarmac’ run (from Aquino’s home province to the international airport where he was murdered), attended by an estimated five hundred thousand people.” The protest movement swept across socioeconomic strata—even, notably, among the country’s middle-class and sympathetic elite. In Ayala Avenue, the country’s foremost financial and business district,

meetings, public demonstrations, and protest marches would be held weekly following the Aquino assassination to the beat of ati-atihan drums, and often under a blanket of yellow confetti drifting from the buildings.



ATOM (August 21 Movement) members at the "Tarlac to Tarmac" run. Photo courtesy of Mr. Gary Majam.

The murder of Ninoy Aquino during the Marcos regime would set in motion the beginning of the revolution that would reclaim the country from the dictatorship. Marcos would struggle to maintain his control over the people, even instigating charades of democracy: On February 7, 1986, nationwide snap elections were held for the presidency and the newly restored position of vice president. The contenders were the tandem of Marcos and Arturo M. Tolentino, versus Cory Aquino, widowed spouse of assassinated Ninoy, and Salvador H. Laurel. Aquino had proven her charismatic and emblematic sway over the people just months prior; the Cory Aquino for President Movement had ensured for her 1.2 million signatures calling for her candidacy alone—a feat rendered more remarkable given the suppressions of the times. However, as the votes were tallied, the Commission on Elections (Comelec) numbers showed Marcos and Tolentino the winners, a result made official by the Batasang Pambansa. As government tried to rubberstamp its way to victory, a series of astounding events began to grip the world's attention: computer operators tabulating Comelec votes walked out; the bishops of the Catholic Church issued a pastoral letter saying a

government that cheated was devoid of legitimacy; Cory Aquino called for a civil disobedience campaign and a boycott of crony-owned corporations until the opposition victory was recognized. Within two weeks of the snap elections, multitudes of demonstrators would fill the vast expanse of EDSA calling for—and achieving—the peaceful ouster of a dictator.

The Revolution of 1986 sparked a selfless sense of community in multitudes, rarely seen in such demonstrations. Edwin Lacierda, presidential spokesperson of Cory's son, Benigno S. Aquino III, was there to witness: "More than a rally," he recalls, "all of us came to EDSA to break bread and fellowship with all who were willing to stand in the line of fire and take the bullet, as it were, for freedom and change of government."

When Jaime Cardinal Sin broadcasted his famous message to gather at EDSA over Radio Veritas, hundreds of thousands heeded the call. Food was never a problem, thanks to volunteer "food brigades"; there was always a pot of rice, a pan of pancit, tins of crackers to be passed around. When rumors spread of a potential teargas attack, residents near camps Crame and Aguinaldo scrambled to provide protesters with wet handkerchiefs and towels. People did not hesitate to sacrifice their cars to barricade the advance of the tanks; one owner simply shrugged off the threat of losing his automobile and said, "Some things are worth more."



People gathered at Quirino Grandstand for Tagumpay ng Bayan (Victory of the People) rally where Cory Aquino calls for a campaign of civil disobedience. Photo from LIFE Photo Collection.

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When the Malolos Congress—which ushered in the birth of the First Philippine Republic—was ratified, among the witnesses was a delegation of Filipino soldiers who had marched away from a Manila that they had won but which was barred to them: Spain refused to hand over the capital and stronghold to the Filipinos who had survived revolutions to overthrow 300 years of rule and had since forged uneasy alliances with Americans to secure victory. There, witnessing the foundation of a true modern state for Filipinos, was an army that had won back the country, to no recognition of two warring conquerors.

The old trope of paths not taken is one examined by Nick Joaquin in his play *El Camino Real*: One Emilio Aguinaldo reflects upon his missed chance of taking back Manila from the Spaniards sans the aid of Americans by marching down El Camino Real, the royal road—now the Coastal Road that connects Manila’s south to Cavite. There had lain before Aguinaldo the path of true conquest—a path that reclaimed what was rightfully the Filipinos’, a path that could have been forged by Filipinos alone—and Aguinaldo had not taken it. Joaquin, through an imagining of Aguinaldo’s inner life, opines on a Philippines that could have been wrought had one man, leading a host of others, marched down the path of kings.

But we Filipinos have known to take confidently to the streets our devotions and our yearnings, our furies. On streets we gather to be heard, to be seen, by the powers that be. We gather in thoroughfares to welcome home triumphant athletes and venerated celebrities; we sanctify the celebrity, trailing after roving stages. When the sitting Pope visits with the country's Catholic faithful, the roads are lined with often rain-drenched thousands hopeful for a glimpse of, a wave from, a benediction. We honor the dead, close down arteries of the city to march after a coffin inching to its final resting place. We topple a dictator, even at the cost of our lives; we rise up when the state threatens to turn its back on its citizens.



An aerial photo shows six million devotees attending the concluding mass of Pope Francis at the Quirino Grandstand in Manila. Photo from AFP/Philippine Air Force Public Information Office.

We rouse, we march, we *rally*. The same streets that we cross to go to our schools and offices and malls are the streets that hold us when we craft papier mâché facsimiles of public figures, unfurl canvas sheets emblazoned with slogans, and chant battle cries; it is these streets that hold us as we stand vigil. We stand upon the very streets we lament on the day-to-day—via debates, consciously made or otherwise, pitting inconvenience against development—when we need the Republic to listen; the volume of people we scorn in our daily tribulations become brothers- and sisters-in-arms when a goal must be won for the citizenry. The commonplace, the purely pragmatic—at its most fundamental: A line, be it straight or weaving, that conveys us from one point to another—becomes a stage upon which revolutions spark. For

on and along roads—first cleared paths through foliage and terra, and then lined dirt and then gravel, and then asphalt and steel and concrete—shooting through our archipelago, Filipinos gather—collective movements within all these centuries creating a true cartography of Philippine democracy.

[READ: The Appendix and the Bibliography of *A History of the Philippine Political Protest*

(<http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/edsa/the-ph-protest-appendix/>)]



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