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Remembering people power still matters

BRYAN DENNIS GABITO TIOJANCO

A liberal democracy whose citizens have little faith in the freedoms of democracy is a dictatorship-in-waiting. This is why Herman Müller in 1930 warned that "a democracy without democrats is an internal and external danger." He was then the chancellor of Germany's Weimar Republic, the democracy that made Adolf Hitler a dictator.

Our democracy is hardly an external danger, but it is often an internal one. Filipinos have historically been fainthearted liberals: quick to give dictatorial powers to elected presidents during real or imagined crises. Millions of our countrymen and women have unjustly suffered because of this.

The Philippines was Asia's first liberal (i.e., rights protecting) democracy. But it did not take long for President Emilio Aguinaldo to become a dictator at the urging of his chief adviser, Apolinario Mabini, who had little faith in the Malolos Congress. Our first president under the 1935 Constitution, Manuel Quezon, publicly declared that "individual liberties" and "opposition parties" were democratic "fetishes" protected by a "discredited theory" and may be discarded. The National Assembly quickly handed him dictatorial powers to address an economic crisis in 1940. He might have become dictator for life were it not for World War II. President Manuel Roxas, too, was cheered on as his administration tortured and murdered Huk guerrillas who—as Ramon Magsaysay's success later showed—were only fighting for fair elections and agrarian reforms.

Many now rightly condemn Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship. But his martial law was also widely popular at the start. Marcos' promises to stamp out government corruption, crush communism, and pursue radical reforms attracted technocrats, big business, the middle class, farmers, and the urban poor. Most politicians flocked to the regime instead of denouncing it. This broad consensus of support and acquiescence early on drowned out protests from democratic politicians, the press, university students, the progressive clergy, and a sizable chunk of the middle class.

Today, President Duterte has placed the whole of Mindanao under martial law. Our Constitution requires actual rebellion (and not merely an imminent danger of it) to justify martial law. And yet, although the (now defeated) actual rebellion was limited to Marawi City, the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Supreme Court have all given the move a

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thumbs-up. Surveys suggest that the people, too, support it.

All liberal democracies have some form of constitutional dictatorship like martial law as a last resort during a crisis, but it is generally allowed only when absolutely necessary to end the crisis and restore normal conditions. Our history, however, shows that we are all too willing to tolerate dictatorial powers in the name of reform or change. This shows how little faith our citizenry has in liberal democracy's ability to achieve these wanted changes.

This is why remembering people power still matters. The four days of courage—Feb. 22-25, 1986—that forced Marcos and his family into exile is the most celebrated, seminal, and inspiring assertion of democratic will in the Philippines. But even more important than People Power, the historical event, is people power, the revolutionary idea that culminated in those four days at Edsa. The term "people power" was coined more than a decade before 1986, and refers to a participatory kind of politics that challenged the fundamental assumptions and practices of traditional patronage politics. Community organizers had often used the term since the early 1970s as a catch-all label for whenever a sufficient number of individuals organize and act to improve their conditions. The widely celebrated success of the 1975 La Tondeña strike showed that a mobilized citizenry could achieve change peacefully—even during martial law. It bolstered our faith in democratic freedoms.

The spirit of people power is the democratic entry of new groups into a political stage historically dominated by elite patrons. The 1987 Constitution enshrines this spirit. We now have greater democratic space to directly participate in policymaking through initiative, referendum, and recall. It is now easier for us to affect policymaking indirectly through the decentralization of governmental powers in favor of local governments, autonomous regions, indigenous cultural communities, etc. The Constitution also politically empowers different kinds of citizens and their groups: workers, farmers, the urban and rural poor, people's organizations, NGOs, etc. In short, democratic rights enable more Filipinos to peacefully pursue democratic change.

Once we remember how powerfully effective the freedoms of democracy can be, perhaps we would try using the Constitution's People Power clauses first in our pursuit of needed changes, instead of once again flirting with dictatorship, or Charter change.