Pariah to President

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In February 1986, the world was gripped by the 'People Power' revolt in the Philippines – the peaceful uprising that ended the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Earlier this month, many watched in disbelief as his son and namesake, Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr., won the popular vote in the national elections, with the largest share since the end of his father's rule. Some commentators have explained this stunning result as the product of massive fraud or material advantage – that Marcos Jr. and his camp hacked the country's election system to rig the results or used their wealth – part of the estimated $10 billion stolen by the Marcos family – to fund a 'disinformation' campaign while buying off local politicians. The first allegation is certainly plausible, but so far it has not been supported by credible evidence. The second has been more extensively documented, but still leaves many questions unanswered. Why were millions receptive to Marcos Jr.'s narrative, and why did other candidates fail to counter it? By assessing the historical experience of the Filipino masses after the People Power revolt, perhaps we can shed some light on this political regression.

Marcos Jr. won because of two contiguous failures after 1986: that of liberals to force significant concessions from elites, and that of leftists to advance a compelling alternative to elite rule. Like their counterparts in other postcolonial countries, liberals in the Philippines have struggled to exert their influence on the ruling bloc. This problem persisted after 1986, when a big-tent coalition of centre-left and centre-right groupings led by President Cory

Aquino took the reins of the state, restoring what Benedict Anderson called 'cacique democracy': the pre-Marcos oligarchic-liberal order in which the masses were allowed to vote, but powerful landed families with extensive patronage networks dominated the political system. Despite heading a self-proclaimed 'revolutionary transition government', Aquino failed to compel the country's oligarchy to redistribute land, pay more taxes or raise workers' wages.

This trend accelerated during the global economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s, as Aquino and her anointed successor Fidel Ramos worked alongside a series of centre-right technocrats to institute increasingly regressive policies. They all but abandoned the project of establishing a developmental state, prioritizing the interests of investors over a domestic industrialization programme. In lieu of genuine land redistribution, post-1986 administrations promoted 'market-assisted land reform', enabling private developers and agribusiness corporations to accumulate more land and consolidate their holdings. Public infrastructure was privatized and fragmented; new consumption taxes targeted the poor; labour reforms drove down wages and conditions; while local producers were hit by an influx of cheap foreign goods. As a result, millions of working- and middle-class Filipinos suffered. Many became worse off than they were under the dictatorship, as land-grabbing dispossessed and displaced indigenous peoples, farmers and fishermen. Wages failed to keep up with inflation and jobs became more precarious, while the social 'safety net' was further weakened. Faced with these conditions, many became ambivalent about the post-Marcos era. Disappointment slowly morphed into indignation.

Had the Philippine left been stronger and more unified, this tide of frustration could have taken a progressive turn – allowing people to envision a society beyond both the dictatorship and its liberal-democratic replacement. But this was not the case. Once ascendant, progressives became increasingly disoriented and divided due to intensified state repression, sectarian violence and the dissolution of many workers' organisations following the collapse of key industries. Their ranks diminished, many on the left argued for eschewing electoral politics altogether. Others

supported limited participation: fielding candidates for lower offices or joining 'tactical alliances' with the traditional parties of the propertied classes.

Thus, in the decades that followed Marcos's ouster, no socialist ran for president – and those that ran for party-list representative or senator did so as part of larger coalitions dominated by the liberal centre. Though many organised in rural areas and industrial belts, a radical opposition to the post-Marcos settlement was largely absent from the mainstream, which left the marginalized and dispossessed with no distinctive framework to anchor their resentment, no vocabulary to articulate their indignation. As a correlative, the governing liberals had little reason to adapt their programme in response to left-wing challenge.

This stasis among both liberals and leftists allowed the Marcoses to plot their return to power. Slowly but surely, they prepared the ground for Bongbong's presidential campaign. Their homecoming from exile inaugurated a decades-long attempt to rehabilitate their legacy, by electing members of the family to local and national offices, forging civil society links, cultivating ties with the business sector and launching an extensive propaganda drive to whitewash the record of the dictatorship. In parallel, public opinion continued to turn against the Aquino-Ramos ascendancy. In one of the first outward signs of dissatisfaction with the post-1986 order, many from the lower classes spurned the liberals' candidate and voted for the populist former movie star Joseph Estrada in the 1998 presidential elections.

At first, the middle classes continued to defend the liberal centre. In 2001, they mobilised in large numbers to oust Estrada from office and replace him with another Aquino-Ramos endorsee, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. They then stood by her as the urban poor poured out into the streets in an unsuccessful attempt to return Estrada to office. In 2010, it was the same bourgeois stratum that guaranteed the success of the establishment's presidential candidate, Cory Aquino's son, Benigno 'Noynoy' Aquino III.

But their patience began to wither during Noynoy's tenure. His hardline neoliberal programme dented his popularity across all classes – as did his notorious failure to provide relief and expedite reconstruction in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan. Though the economy expanded, inequality deepened and poverty remained widespread, with much of the new wealth syphoned off by an emerging layer of billionaires. It was for this reason that, in 2016, many of the middle class finally turned their back on the establishment and embraced Rodrigo Duterte, the foul-mouthed, tough-talking right-populist candidate who mocked the moribund politics of the 'yellow' liberals.

This abandonment of the centre was not total. A significant section of the bourgeoisie still voted for the establishment's vice presidential candidate, Leni Robredo, giving her a narrow edge over Marcos Jr. However, while in office Duterte consolidated his popular support by condemning the 'oligarchy' (his preferred term) and cracking down on elite families that had fallen out of favour, while pursuing the same free-market programme promoted by the centre. He ridiculed liberal shibboleths like 'human rights' or 'checks and balances', waging a brutal war on drugs that left around 30,000 mostly poor people dead, as well as jailing an opposition senator, helping to oust a chief justice, punishing his media critics and escalating the military offensive against communist rebels. However, perhaps in recognition of continuing support for certain democratic institutions among the middle and lower classes, he refrained from abolishing congress and declaring martial law.

As the 2022 elections approached, two rebranding projects kicked into gear. The Marcoses accelerated their disinformation drive, while the liberals inched to the left: displaying an openness to moderate pro-worker reforms, yet still rejecting calls for a higher national minimum wage, wealth taxes and decriminalised abortion. They again selected Robredo – a middle-class public-interest lawyer with centre-left sympathies – to be their presidential candidate, and swapped their trademark yellow campaign colour for pink.

At the same time, a split emerged in the left. Breaking with both the more dominant national-democratic and social-democratic blocs, which endorsed Robredo in the belief that a unity candidate was needed, a smaller coalition of activists presented the first openly socialist presidential ticket in Philippine history, headed by veteran labour leader Leody De Guzman and activist-academic Walden Bello. Convinced that the only way to appeal to lower-class Marcos supporters was to speak to their immediate material concerns, they championed the social policies that Robredo had dismissed. Their manifesto openly called for socialism – something previously unsayable in the public sphere.

Ultimately, though, both the liberals' reputation-laundering and the socialists' attempt to 'stage a presence' proved insufficient in the face of a well-orchestrated, decades-in-the-making shift to the right. Despite sparking some electrifying debates – which generated widespread curiosity about socialism – the De Guzman-Bello campaign failed to gain much traction beyond its core constituency. The absence of resources and supportive local officials constrained voter reach in an already uneven playing field. In the early days of the campaign they were largely ignored by corporate media, then later they were smeared as 'communist terrorists'. Many expressed support for their programme, yet viewed their organizational weakness as a liability.

The contrast with Robredo was stark. Unlike De Guzman, she gained the support of certain anti-Marcos political dynasties and received significant amounts of campaign contributions from big donors. But she nonetheless failed to narrow the huge gap between her and the frontrunner. Her 'inclusive politics' and good-governance agenda – which failed to distinguish her from the traditional 'yellows' – proved incapable of regaining the trust of disenchanted voters. Though she performed well in some of the country's poorest provinces, she won mostly elite enclaves, upper-middle-class districts and other upwardly mobile middle-class areas which constitute the liberals' base.

Ultimately, it was Bongbong who secured the decisive votes targeted by both the centre and the left: slums, working-class urban districts, and many of the downwardly mobile petit-

bourgeois neighbourhoods across the Philippines. His high-tech propaganda blitz certainly helped to seduce such voters, but Bongbong's success was mostly based on the recognition that rose-tinted accounts of the post-dictatorship years rang hollow. Political patronage networks likewise worked in Marcos Jr.'s favour; but local leaders would not have risked their own positions had they not sensed that the ground was already shifting beneath their feet and that Bongbong was on course for a landslide.

In the final analysis, what enabled Bongbong to win the presidency was not simply the machinations of his powerful family, but a strong current of resentment – directed at the liberals, unharnessed by the left – that the Marcoses could not have conjured on their own. Inside their trove of lies was a simple message which many believed to be true: that life did not improve after the People Power Revolution. Bongbong's self-portrayal as a victim of the liberal establishment was effective precisely because many ordinary people see themselves in a similar light. The candidate fostered a strange kinship between himself and the masses, animated by the promise that they would collectively rise again – that a 'beautiful morning' awaited them after a long period of darkness, as one of their campaign anthems put it. Insisting on the need for 'unity', Bongbong largely refrained from spelling out his policy direction and merely presented different iterations of a single vow: that he would follow Duterte by keeping the yellows out of power. In a society where antipathy to oligarchic liberalism runs so wide and deep, this was enough to carry him to victory.

What the president-elect will do next remains to be seen. His promise to continue Duterte's project suggests that he will further dismantle the country's liberal-democratic institutions and implement draconian measures to displace the centre and crush the left – though without abolishing popular suffrage or parliamentarism. He is also likely to further liberalize and deregulate the economy while doling out perks to investors and cronies. The burden of taxation will be further shifted onto the poor, though they will be compensated with minimally increased social provisions (a roadmap followed by Duterte and the

Aquinos before him). Bongbong has also announced that he will be re-appointing Aquino III's secretary for economic development and planning – a former World Bank economist and dyed-in-the-wool free-marketeer – to the same post in his cabinet.

Yet, confronted with a vast and still restive working-class majority, a mercurial middle class and an increasingly assertive upstart section of the oligarchy – all struggling for a larger share of a small pie in a turbulent world economy – Marcos Jr. may be emboldened to exceed the ambitions of both his father and Duterte. Capitalizing on the unprecedented support he has amassed, and taking advantage of the inertia of the opposition, he may finally accomplish what the Philippine right have long been clamouring for: overhauling the post-Marcos constitution to remove restrictions on foreign ownership of infrastructure and environmental resources, limits to executive power and other progressive provisions.

Marcos Jr.'s ability to consolidate authoritarian neoliberalism is by no means assured. Much depends on the outcome of struggles that will ensue within the centre and the left following their defeat. Will progressive liberals reclaim their party from the conservative forces who have largely dominated the political establishment for the past three decades? If so, will they pivot away from neoliberalism towards a more redistributive model? Will the left continue to tail the liberals, or will they come together and build their own autonomous power base? Just as Marcos Jr.'s victory was enabled by forces beyond the Philippine right, the fortunes of his political project will likewise be determined by the choices of his opponents.

Joshua Makalintal contributed to this article.

Read on: Benedict Anderson, 'Cacique Democracy and the Philippines', NLR I/169.