

Commentary

People's power fades into history

Filipino politicians gain popularity by advocating environmental causes, but unfortunately mere talk does not resolve environmental problems in the country known for being visited by the most number of typhoons in a year (around 20 on the average).

Many experts believe that the increasing occurrence of strong typhoons in the Pacific and the so-called El Nino dry spell in recent years is caused by climatic change brought about by global warming. Aware of the global debate on climate change, the Philippines joins the rest of the world in celebrating Earth Day every April (April 22). Unfortunately, in the Philippines, this event has become ceremonial in nature, with the government, businesses, activists and the public in general falling short of taking any concrete step to slow greenhouse gas emission. With the pace of change quickening, the Philippines will likely be caught unprepared unless it actually takes the lead.

January 20th marked the 7th anniversary of EDSA II—the second “people’s power” uprising that led to the ouster of President Estrada and the installation of (then) Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to the highest office in the land. For the Philippines it was the defining moment of the first decade of the new millennium. On that day, the Philippines said farewell to a president that had won the largest mandate in Philippines history and ushered in a presidency that has had as its own defining hallmark ongoing controversy surrounding whether President Arroyo has a mandate at all. It is a pity because it detracts from the much good that she has done the country.



“An abusive and corrupt regime was replaced by one that was even worse. Did the country make a mistake?” That was the rhetorical question asked in one newspaper editorial. The answer is not so easy to give. President Arroyo quickly proved to the country that she was no reformer—at least not insofar as the political system is concerned. Sadly, lacking a popular mandate, she has chosen as her constituency, the military, the Catholic Church and the dynastic political families who have always made sure they stay on top whatever happens. As a result, on the political front, her presidency has been “conservative” to put it in the kindest possible terms.

She probably doesn’t care. As we say in another commentary piece this week, she and her team outshine the Blues Brothers in their “mission from God.” Her particular mission was to put the country’s economic house in order but to do so in a manner that did not upset either the elite or her church. Sadly for much of the decade we have been witness to a zero sum game. Progress on the economic front has been countered by backsliding on basic democratic norms.

She has succeeded where many thought she would fail because there has been simply no alternative path for the country to take. Her success has shown the limits of the people power phenomenon. Again quoting one newspaper columnist “the romanticism of EDSA 1 has been destroyed in the

wash-up of EDSA 2.” And more: “EDSA 2 was a revolution devoured at the table of history by the greed of its own beneficiaries.”

Those are strong words and we do not necessarily embrace them but they do illustrate the passions stirred up in the minds of many by the failure of the Administration to match economic progress with political progress.

But we have to ask: “hasn’t it been always thus?” Leaving Hong Kong aside as a special case, Singapore, Taiwan and Korea have all grown to economic prosperity on the back of strong government that brooked no opposition. In the case of Taiwan and Korea, the foundations of that prosperity were laid under martial law. And those of us old enough to remember, might recall what happened to the Shah of Persia when he tried to introduce democratic reforms ahead of economic reform.

Such an attitude is not to condone the continued poverty of the countryside but rather to put it in context. And it does appear that President Arroyo and her team are aware of the need to break the cycle of poverty. In a country beset by needs on all fronts it is a matter of setting priorities and sticking to them and in this regard, she seems to be doing just that.

No wonder then the President chose not to celebrate the anniversary of her original rise to power; the more so in light of the pardon granted to Estrada. Neither of them wanted to remember the event but for markedly different reasons.

And it may well be the right approach. People’s power the first time around was a seminal event that addressed a singular problem. As a means of implementing reform, its limits are now well known. Stability is a precursor to progress.

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