

On Martial Law at 50: Fact-Checking the Marcos Story, Countering the EDSA History

Analysis

To fact-check and counter the historical denialism of the Marcos family, there is need for a counterfactual history analysis of the failings of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution.



“FM Declares Martial Law”—the headline of the September 24, 1972 issue of the Sunday Express, which was the Sunday edition of Philippines Daily Express. The Daily Express was the only newspaper allowed to circulate upon the declaration of Martial Law. [licence infos](#)

Martial Law

On 23 September 1972, the late President Ferdinand Marcos went on television to announce Proclamation No. 1081, establishing a state of Martial Law in the Philippines. Constitutional authoritarianism, or the use of constitutional law to justify authoritarian governance, was imposed on the entire country to build a “New Society”. The government’s official rationale for the order was to protect the authority of the republic and guarantee security of its citizens against lawless elements, particularly communist insurgency and other rebellious tendencies. While ascertaining

the real intention of Marcos for imposing military rule is a subject of endless debate between opposing views, the result is obvious: the Martial Law regime prolonged and centralized the far-reaching presidential powers and privileges of Marcos for a total of 21 years (i.e., from his first term starting in 1965 and re-election in 1969 until his deposition through a peaceful social uprising in 1986).

Under conditions of Martial Law, Marcos had the monopoly to make decisions on government operations because there were hardly any democratic limits to his prerogatives. State power and resources were concentrated on Marcos as the *de facto* chief executive, chief legislator, chief justice, and chief commander of the armed forces all at the same time.



At 7:17 pm on September 23, 1972, President Ferdinand Marcos announced on television that he had placed the entirety of the Philippines under martial law.[1][2] This marked the beginning of a 14-year period of one-man rule that would effectively last until Marcos was exiled from the country on February 25, 1986. [licence](#)
[infos](#)

The political economy of the Martial Law regime had become known as a “conjugal dictatorship” of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos characterized by “crony capitalism” or a “kleptocracy” of the first family and their favored clique of oligarchs. [1] Data of the country’s [economic performance](#) from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s indicate that there had been significant decline in standard

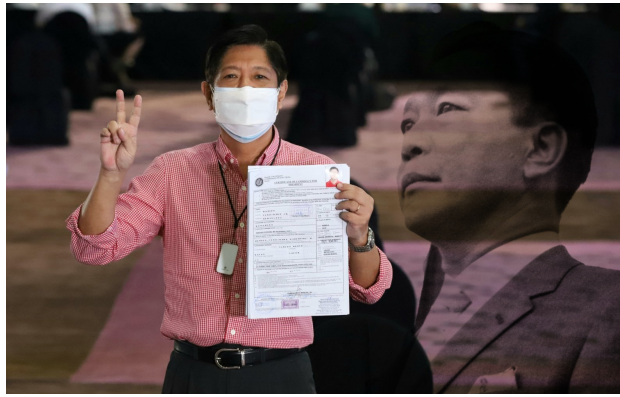
of living, including in the environmental aspect, as shown in: decreased real wages of workers and farmers; increased levels of poverty, inflation, unemployment, and external debt; and massive deforestation where forest cover in the whole archipelago got reduced into almost half. [2] In regional comparative terms, the economic structure of the Philippines under Marcos had remained largely feudalistic and had not caught up with the industrialization process being undertaken by state leaders in its neighbouring economies in East and Southeast Asia (notably Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia).

The international community has come to know the infamous Martial Law years as a brutal, corrupt, and extravagant period in Philippine history. The *Guinness World Records* has given the Marcos spouses a title for the “greatest robbery of a government,” where national loss from graft and corruption amounted to 5–10 billion US dollars. The *Amnesty International* has documented extensive extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances of at least 11,000 victims, and they also noted the interview of their organization’s delegation in 1975 with Marcos, who told them that the “over 50,000 people ... arrested and detained under martial law from 1972-1975 ... included church workers, human rights defenders, legal aid lawyers, labour leaders and journalists.”

Instead of its promised stability and prosperity, the imposition of Martial Law generated intense social conflicts and a worsening economic crisis. Growing civil discontent and political opposition combined with a restive military to resist the repressive Marcos regime. The United States of America had also withdrawn its support for the Marcoses. All these culminated in the momentous event now known as the “People Power Revolution”, which was a series of street protests that converged along EDSA (Epifanio De Los Santos Avenue), a major thoroughfare in Metro Manila, on 22–25 February 1986.

Practically, the four-day uprising led to the forced exile of Marcos, his family and their close allies to Hawaii, where he died in 1989. Politically, Corazon “Cory” Aquino became President. She was the widow of Marcos’ staunch critic and archrival, Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, who was assassinated on 21 August 1983 on the tarmac of the Manila International Airport. Ideologically, the People Power Revolution was supposed to be a turning point for the restoration of democracy as institutionalized by the adoption of the still-existing 1987 Constitution which, to a great extent, embodies liberal-democratic principles.

Fifty years after the declaration of Martial Law and 36 years after the Marcoses fled the Malacañang Palace, the son and namesake of the former dictator, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., has become the democratically elected President. The final and official tally for the 9 May 2022 election indicates that Marcos Jr. garnered 58.77% of the 56 million total votes cast, of which 27.94% went to his closest rival, former Vice President Leni Robredo. It was a historic mandate in recent election memory, and a dramatic comeback for the Marcoses, especially for Imelda, the dynasty’s matriarch. The so-called “Marcos Restoration” project, or the decades-long agenda and conscious drive of the Marcoses for their political rehabilitation, had been completed in Imelda’s lifetime. How and why did this political twist of fate happen?



In the Name of My
Father: Ferdinand
"Bongbong"
Romualdez Marcos
Jr. the 17th and
current president of
the
Philippines. [licence](#)
[infos](#)

Marcosian Storytelling

Much has been written and said in international news media about the role of the architecture of disinformation in the Marcos success story. The [New York Times](#) noted about “a flourishing ecosystem of political lies,” especially the utilization of live videos on TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to spread misinformation to boost the image of the Marcoses. Featured commentaries in the [Time](#) and [The Guardian](#) warned the world of the worrisome saga of the return to power of the former dictator’s family.

[Tsek.ph](#), a fact-checking initiative of professionals from the academe and media, has recorded and exerted tremendous efforts online to debunk “a heavy dose of conspiracy theory, denial of human rights violations during the Marcos dictatorship and casting of democracy icon President Corazon Aquino as villain” based on vetted information, official documents, as well as jurisprudence. Yet stories favorable to the Marcos family prove more compelling than verified facts, data and statistics.

The Marcoses know the art and power of storytelling to secure popular consent. Through the years, they have proven their flair for making folklore, mythology, legend as well as fables. One of Imelda’s memorable quotes is revealing of the family’s political philosophy: “Perception is real, the truth is not.”

To counter accusations about unexplained wealth of the Marcoses, their social media propagandists peddle hoax about the “Tallano Gold” – supposedly a reward and payment given to Marcos Sr. for excellent lawyering for the Tallanos, a pre-Spanish colonial era royal clan. At the same time, they promote the Marcos family’s denial of possessing the “Yamashita Treasure” – named after the World War II criminal, General Tomoyuki Yamashita, who allegedly hid in Philippine caves and underground a grand loot by the Japanese Imperial Army of Southeast Asian precious metals during its occupation of the region. [3]



The Marcoses gather at the tomb of Patriarch Ferdinand Marcos Sr. at Libingan ng mga Bayani (Heroes' Cemetery) on 18 September 2016. [licence infos](#)

Imelda boasts of their family owning gold bars and almost all large companies in the country. Ferdinand the father was fond of accolades and presented himself as a decorated war hero. Their children claimed to be highly educated and honor students in their youth. The Marcos couple projected themselves as protagonists of the story “Si Malakas at Si Maganda,” which is the Filipino version of Adam and Eve in the Bible’s Book of Genesis, where Ferdinand Sr. is *Malakas* (The Strong One) and Imelda is *Maganda* (The Beautiful One). Moreover, their children have disputed—if not falsified—claims about their bachelor’s and postgraduate degrees from top universities: Ferdinand Jr. from Oxford University and Wharton Business School, and Imee from the University of the Philippines College of Law and Princeton University. In their election campaigns, a fabled narrative was told about the invincible alliance of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (“The Tiger of the North”) with Sara Duterte (“The Eagle of the South”) as a “match made in heaven.”

A substantial number of Filipinos instantly believe these stories, despite thorough fact-checking made by critics to prove many of them as falsehoods. No amount of logical reasoning, valid exposé, or polemical counterargument about Marcos mythomania and pathological lying could have significantly prevented the process of turning a pro-Marcos voter into a loyalist.

The Marcoses and their PR strategists can be accused of distorting historical facts. Guided by big data and research, they have figured out well how history is produced and consumed through storytelling targeted at general pattern of behavior of the population. Nevertheless, any attempt at historical revisionism or denialism of the Marcos family engenders continuing conflicts. Without common historical ideas, Marcos Jr.’s repetitive campaign message for nation-building—let alone his appeal to unity—is mere populist talk and pure, empty rhetoric.

There is no doubt that the Marcoses have resorted to disinformation and negative campaigning long before the 2022 election. Yet the drawing power of their propaganda does not simply come from people's mental and emotional reception to deception; but more so from the legitimate arguments and sentiments against the wretched social condition and lived experiences of the Filipino majority.



Martial Law
Commemoration
Rally [licence](#)
[infos](#)

EDSA: a counterfactual reflection

As Filipinos commemorate the 50th anniversary of Martial Law declaration, the typical liberal response of fact-checking the stories from the Marcoses is not enough. Rather, it has become even more necessary to do a counterfactual reflection on the legacy and shortcomings of the EDSA People Power Revolution's particular progressive promises for political liberalism, social justice, and national economic development. What if the supposed liberal-democratic order had been true to form? What could have been if the democratization process in the post-Marcos era had advanced substantively?

Indeed, in order to more effectively fact-check and counter the historical denialism of the Marcos family, there is need for a counterfactual history analysis of the failings of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. This counterfactual reflection implies the contingency rather than inevitability of the Marcos Return phenomenon and the process of socio-political change. Some key propositions and presuppositions are put forward in the following discussions.

Social Justice

First, if EDSA's spirit for social justice and democracy had come to life, then "never again" would there be a Marcos and the like elected to public office. There is no democratic transition without transitional justice. The process of regime change from ending autocracy to deepening democracy must begin with the establishment of a fair institution for truth-seeking to hold the autocrats and their accomplices accountable for their crimes against human and social dignity. Apparently, already during Cory Aquino's tenure, the Marcos family and their political allies, together with the landed oligarchy, speedily recovered from initial punitive measures and handily returned to the sphere of influence.

It is true that the Marcos family has been largely marginalized by the liberal media, progressive intelligentsia, and critical universities especially in urban cities. But it is also the reality that they have always been influential on politicians at the local and national levels, elite circles in arts and

culture, sections of conservative blocs and religious groups, the institutions of the police and military, and top law firms and the whole court system.

The self-serving narratives of the Marcoses about the country's past and their family's credential are not new. But why has the Marcos story gained traction now than it did in the past 36 years? Aside from effective rebranding and beautification through strategic public relations and communication strategies – including the hiring of the consulting services of the controversial firm Cambridge Analytica – the renewed sources of legitimacy of the Marcoses should be understood.

In a plutocratic and highly unequal society, money is a renewable resource of energy for the elite political class. Because they have remained wealthy, the Marcos family never lost power and influence in the society. With their wealth intact, given the right timing and strategizing, the money of the Marcoses has easily regenerated into political power.

The structure of plutocracy cultivates impunity where the rich and powerful can conveniently get away with their crimes and wrongdoings. This has greatly shaped the formation of an elite-oriented popular consciousness in the Philippines. Among other things, the result of the May 2022 election suggests that majority of the voters—particularly the poor and middle classes—identify themselves with the very rich Marcos family than another presidential candidate whose humble beginnings, class background, or social status is more like theirs.

Ending the culture of impunity would have required the state's proactive approach to asset sequestration, forfeiture, or seizure of all proven ill-gotten wealth in favor of the citizenry. A basic idea that underpins the principle of “social justice” as articulated in the 1987 Constitution is to prevent the superrich from using their excessive money to unfairly influence political affairs. In this sense, the controversy over the [Marcos' estate tax](#) liability, which allegedly ballooned to PHP 203 billion (USD 3.5 billion) from its original assessment of PHP 23 billion (USD 393 million) is not simply a fiscal matter for the government treasury; it is an essentially social justice issue. Wealth taxation or estate taxes are exclusive state instruments to reduce socio-economic inequalities and equitably diffuse political power for the common good.

Education

Secondly, if EDSA's aspiration for genuine social change were to be realized, the state would have established social institutions conducive to nurturing active citizenship. Meaningful social change will not come from any messianic politician but from enlightened citizens.

The education system is a cornerstone of active citizenship. But it is evident that the Philippines suffers from a serious [learning crisis](#) – not least the alarming level of reading comprehension among the youth and adult population. Since time immemorial, the overarching pedagogy for learners in the country's schools and colleges has been the now discredited “rote memorization” technique rather than the enhancement of “critical thinking” skills. Active citizens in a democratic society are critical thinkers who are unafraid to speak truth to power and affirm their rights, including the right to dissent.

Liberalism

Thirdly, if EDSA's important tenets of liberalism had progressed into the values system of Filipino citizens, then backward features of political conservatism would have been minimized. One of the principal aims of democratization for the Philippine society should be the liberation—especially of ordinary citizens—from the scourge of patronage politics and thus break away from patron-client relationship that has entrenched elite dominance in social relations. On the contrary, the

overwhelming vote to return the Marcoses to power signifies the resurgence of patrimonialism that the Marcos patriarch represents.

It is somehow puzzling why Marcos Jr. had landslide victory in overseas voting even among long-time Filipino emigrants, for example in Nordic and European countries, which are generally considered progressive, liberal, trust-based, and least corrupt – values that are antithetical to the Marcos regime’s record of abuses. This is telling of Filipinos’ conservative political culture if it is indeed the case that people vote for their identity, values, and who they identify with. How ironic it is when Filipino diaspora communities residing in the developed world enjoy the institutional and policy guarantees for civil liberties and human rights in their host countries, but they cannot imagine the same environment of freedom for fellow Filipinos back home. It has also been observed that apologists for Martial Law and authoritarianism among them would often assert the majority mandate of Marcos Jr. to silence the voice of the minority, forgetting that they themselves are minorities and it is the ideal of democracy that protects their rights to be recognized, heard, and valued as immigrants.



Martial Law victims monument in Mehan Garden, Manila. [licence](#) [infos](#)

Moral Compass

Fourth, if the EDSA’s promise to establish a “democracy under the rule of law and a regime of truth, justice, freedom, love, equality, and peace” had been fulfilled, as promulgated in the Preamble of the 1987 Constitution, then citizens would not have a confused ethical and moral compass. The melodramatic vlogs and spliced TikTok videos of the Marcoses should have not distracted the public from real issues and facts such as Marcos Jr.’s conviction of tax crimes, dubious Oxford degree, and inheritance from questionable wealth. Recall the classic style of the Marcos family for bread and circuses.

In several instances as people debate on issues of the day, the problem really is not anymore historical distortion, untruths, or fake news but the distorted sense of morality, truth, and fairness. Oftentimes in online exchanges, pro-Marcos netizens resort to majoritarianism – and thus regard

Marcos Jr.'s policy choices and statements as the embodiment of what is moral, true, and fair. This moral crisis is likewise exemplified in the differing value judgment and appreciation of the 2019 documentary film *The Kingmaker*, which prominently features the seeming insensitivity, callousness, or foolishness of Imelda Marcos. However, instead of eliciting contempt, Marcos' loyalists and newfound fans find the authenticity of Imelda as regal in compassion, honesty, and intelligence. They unashamedly flaunt and celebrate Imelda's opulence and vanity, notwithstanding her convicted of seven counts of graft and multiple pending cases.

Human Rights

Fifth, if EDSA's democratic institutions for a just and humane society had matured, there would not be an illiberal politician like former President Rodrigo Duterte who could sustain a huge following among the electorate despite—or because of—wanton disregard for due process and human rights. [4] A functioning justice system would not have allowed Duterte's political career to prosper since his violence-ridden leadership as Mayor of Davao City in the early 1990s.

The popular Duterte administration facilitated the rehabilitation of the Marcoses and stimulated a certain public nostalgia for Marcosian authoritarianism. Arguably, the most strategic political positioning of the Marcos family was to exploit and ride the phenomenal popularity of Duterte – as such, the cleverest electoral maneuver of Marcos Jr. was to woo the Duterte daughter, Sara, to be his vice-presidential candidate. Sara Duterte was the consistent frontrunner for the presidency in early pre-election polls, and Rodrigo Duterte registered an impressive +81 net satisfaction rating in the last survey of his six-year term.

Democratization

Sixth, if EDSA's democratization process had consolidated and deepened, there would not have been political dynasties thriving on violence, patronage and money politics. The competitive presidential election of May 2022 was a battle to win the electorate's heart, mind, and stomach. It brought together the most veteran and wealthiest Filipino political families (the Arroyos, Estradas, Enriles, Revillas, Villars, and Dutertes), their rich benefactors from the business sector, and their local political elite clienteles – all in support of reinstalling the Marcoses, the old political royalty of the Philippines.

Contrary to the positive evaluation of the Commission on Elections, the final report of the International Observer Mission (IOM) of the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines noted that there were reported glitches in vote counting machines, rampant vote-buying and violence. The IOM concluded that the election exercise “failed to meet the international standard of a free, honest and fair election.”

Economic Development

Lastly, if EDSA's economic vision for national industrialization and its requisite land reform had materialized, social-media mythmaking and whitewashing about the “golden age” of Martial Law and the edifice complex of the Marcoses would be an extremely hard sell, if at all plausible. The strengthening of the country's manufacturing base with the goal of full employment, alongside agricultural innovation and the provision of social services, was envisioned to increase living standards and hence secure people's wellbeing.

As has been manifested in the current political moment, the economically insecure and vulnerable population can be swayed easily by satirical videos and memes in social media. Ridiculing the

anti-Marcos groups online about the blunders and failures of the EDSA republic is both affective and mind conditioning to many. This is because such mockery has a touch of truth.

—

Bonn Juego is a political economist and development researcher. Currently, he teaches issues on sustainability transitions and strategies at the Corporate Environmental Management unit of the Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics, Finland.

The views expressed by the author are not necessarily those of Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

References

[1] Mijares, P. (2017). *The Conjugal Dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos*. Revised and Annotated Edition. Ateneo de Manila University Press.

[2] De Dios, E.S., Gochoco-Bautista, M.S., & Punongbayan, J.C. (2021). Martial law and the Philippine economy. Discussion Paper No. 2021-07. University of the Philippines School of Economics.

[3] Daugherty, Greg. (2019, April 29). How a locksmith, a dictator and a WWII General are connected to \$22 billion in lost treasure. *History.com*. <https://www.history.com/news/wwii-yamashita-treasure-roxas-marcos-gold-buddha>

[4] Juego, B. (2018). The Philippines 2017: Duterte-led authoritarian populism and its liberal-democratic roots. *Asia Maior*, 28, 129–164.

23 September 2022

by Bonn Juego

© **Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V.**

Schumannstraße 8

10117 Berlin

T +49 (30) 285 34-0

F +49 (30) 285 34-109

www.boell.de

info@boell.de