

*People Power or  
Disempowered People?*

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*The Philippine EDSA Uprisings in  
Comparison*

Module: Political Transitions in Southeast Asia

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## **Introduction**

In light of devastating popularity polls and a deteriorating economic crisis, Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany decided to resign from office in February 2009 as he admitted to have become a political obstacle – a move that did not go unnoticed in the distant Republic of the Philippines. Here, the influential columnist Amando Doronila (2009) asked his readers: ‘Have we ever heard of any Filipino politician of consequence making this kind of mea culpa? Or stepping down?’ The negative answer led him to a radical conclusion: ‘This is why we need an EDSA to get rid of them – not elections. This is why EDSA keeps coming back.’

Indeed, EDSA – the synonym for various popular uprisings in Philippine history since the struggle against Ferdinand Marcos in the mid-1980s – kept coming back, at least into the discourse of everyday politics. Coincidentally, one day after Gyurcsany’s resignation, Philippine president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo verified her image as a leader who is less responsive to public dissatisfaction but rather prefers to prevent it from being displayed. Taking part in a ceremony to commemorate the 1986 EDSA uprising, she warned that the ‘world embraced EDSA I in 1986. The world tolerated EDSA II in 2001. The world will not forgive an EDSA III, but it will instead condemn the Philippines as a country whose political system is hopelessly unstable’ (Esguerra 2009). When Arroyo subsequently failed to show up at the culmination rites of the 23<sup>rd</sup> EDSA I anniversary – even triggering a rebuke from former president and long-time ally Fidel Ramos – commentators came to the rescue of EDSA whose image the president obviously tried to tarnish. They pointed out that Arroyo owed her own position to the EDSA II uprising that overthrew the populist presidency of Joseph Estrada and brought her to office, and that her comments were ‘graceless, tasteless, ungrateful’ (de Quiros 2009). One year before, Doronila (2008) had already noted that the attempts of Arroyo to downplay EDSA are merely meant ‘to assert the electoral legitimacy of her second term and to counter fresh challenges to it.’

As this episode of February 2009 illustrates, EDSA – or People Power – still haunts the public imagination as well as the political discourse in the Philippines. As a sword of Damocles hanging over the head of the incumbent president it has nevertheless failed to fundamentally alter the public responsiveness of those in power, as exemplified by Arroyo who has the lowest approval ratings of any post-Marcos president and ‘is the first to plunge into negative numbers in her “net satisfaction rating”’ (Hutchcroft 2008:151-52), yet successfully clings to office – a condition dubbed the ‘Arroyo Imbroglia’ by Paul Hutchcroft.

This particular puzzle points to a wider question which the paper at hand tries, if not to answer, then at least to discuss in order to better understand the merits and limits of People Power in the Philippines. Considering the persistent poverty and unequal distribution of wealth as well as the seemingly unchanged oligarchic dominance in the country, why are past and future EDSAs still celebrated domestically as a step forward in the Philippine transition to democracy? Did EDSA really empower Filipinos, or did it more to disempower them as the current state of democracy makes some observers believe?

A definition followed by a comparative historical overview of what EDSA, or People Power respectively, means in the Philippine context will precede a discussion of the different stances commentators have taken in the debate. Finally, the reasons for the nonappearance of an anti-Arroyo uprising will be briefly explored. Maybe unsatisfactorily, the conclusion will not give a definite answer – ‘yes’ or ‘no – to the question of (dis)empowerment through EDSA. Rather, it will follow Reid (2001:792) in his nuanced assessment of EDSA II, yet trying to avoid his uncritical normative preference for protest movements over more established democratic procedures:

Indeed, any fair appraisal needs to recognise that EDSA II was a contradictory movement. On the one hand, it remained ultimately an elite-controlled process. On the other hand, the model of popular mobilisation and empowerment demonstrates some of the potential of an alternative paradigm of radical democratic governance to emerge in the Philippines.

## **People Power, EDSA and the Philippine Transition**

The lack of discursive consensus regarding mass uprisings in the Philippines is already reflected in a contested terminology. In most of the literature the designations 'People Power' and 'EDSA' are used interchangeably to describe the uprisings of Filipinos against their presidents Marcos in February 1986, and Estrada in January 2001 – these events are then referred to as People Power I/EDSA I and People Power II/EDSA II, respectively. The labelling of the movement of urban poor protesters against the arrest of 'their' president Estrada in April and May 2001, on the other hand, is disputed. Its sympathizers rank it as EDSA III – or EDSA *Masa* (del Rosario 2004), or 'Poor People Power' (*in* Bautista 2001:30) – among the above mentioned movements of Filipinos for self-determination, whereas its opponents refuse to accept what they consider a paid mob rally as a legitimate addition to the Philippine inventory of democratic imagery – reflected in Arroyo's statement warning of a *future* EDSA III, thereby implying that the pro-Estrada movement of 2001 did not represent the EDSA-spirit.

Not everybody is content with the equation of EDSA and People Power, either. EDSA is the acronym for 'Epifanio de los Santos Avenue', a major north-south highway in Metro Manila, whose intersection with Ortigas Avenue became the center of demonstrations against Marcos in 1986 and, subsequently, the site of the commemorative EDSA shrine, a huge statue of the Virgin Mary. However, some observers point out that, contrary to 1986, the 2001 movement against Estrada lacked a single geographical centre and thus, EDSA II 'is a misnomer or to say the least, limited in explaining the breath [*sic*] of the people's rising which was truly national in scale' (Reyes 2001).

Acknowledging the legitimate objections to a careless use of terms, and trying to reflect the different trajectories and actors of and within the movements, this essay will hereafter use the established terms EDSA I for the events of 1986, People

Power II for the anti-Estrada uprising, and Poor People Power for the pro-Estrada demonstrations. Others have nevertheless tried to formulate a universal definition of People Power. Patricia Licuanan, following Cohen and Uphoff, describes it as the 'involvement of a significant number of persons in situations or actions which enhance well-being – for example, their income, security, or self-esteem' (*in* Macapagal/Nario-Galace 2003:220). For the purpose of this paper, an important alteration shall be made, i.e. that the enhancement of well-being is the *purported aim* of People Power. Whether all actors sincerely share this aim, and whether it has been achieved in the past, is precisely a matter of debate. Before turning to this debate, its historical background has to be outlined.

The first uprising was directed against dictator Ferdinand Marcos who had ruled as the country's president since 1965 – from 1972-1981 under martial law – with the declared aim to establish a New Society through a 'revolution from the center' (Noble 1986: 83) against a communist threat from the Left and the traditional rule of a landed oligarchy on the Right. After initial public support and successes mainly due to initiatives from technocrats (Noble 1986:88), the 'greed and violence of the regime became ever more evident, [and] much of this support dried up' (Anderson 1988:22). In the process, Marcos had estranged several strata of Philippine society which Mark Thompson (1995:7-9) has classified. He distinguishes between a violent opposition consisting of communists, military rebels, Muslim secessionists and the social democrats, and nonviolent opponents from within the Catholic Church, the business elite and the traditional oligarchy. Among and between these camps, changing coalitions were formed. However, the killing of oppositionist senator Benigno Aquino, Jr. – prominent member of the oligarchs –, and the subsequent political liberalization set off by a pressured Marcos, put the nonviolent groups at an advantage as they gained leverage as well as independence from the

growing communist campaign. By definition, the latter followed an extra-electoral revolutionary approach to popular mobilization – a revolution the oligarchs, bishops and businessmen were no longer willing to support when electoral channels opened. Hence, they capitalized on the moral outrage over the Marcos Regime and ‘resorted largely to moral appeals for democracy’ (Thompson 1995:11). These traditional groups then were the driving force behind the February 1986 uprising which brought together hundreds of thousands of people at EDSA in support of defected military generals Ponce Enrile and Fidel Ramos, opposition presidential candidate Corazon Aquino – widow of Benigno, Jr. – and against the rigging of elections earlier that month. Finally, due to US-mediation, Marcos left the Philippines for Hawaii and Aquino became president.

Overall, EDSA I was an uprising under elite leadership and geographically confined to Metro Manila, excluding the Left and marked by a general nonparticipation of the urban poor who did not feel affected by a change in government, as analysed by Brillantes (1992:204) for the case of the residents of ‘Smokey Mountain’, a dumping site north of Manila. What some describe as a victory for the democrats (Thompson 1995:2), others see as the reassertion of class interests and hegemony by a dominant bloc (Hedman 2006:113). On a more positive note, Reid (2001:787) concluded that ‘the main legacy of the first EDSA uprising was actually the consolidation of deep-seated opposition to military and authoritarian rule’.

Although carried by only a limited social stratum, EDSA I became known as People Power. It kick started the Philippine transition – or return – to a democratic type of government and inspired similar uprisings beyond the region. It also provided the ideology, vocabulary and setting for People Power II.

The years after EDSA saw the rather mediocre presidency of Aquino (1986-92), labelled by Hutchcroft (2008:144) as an ‘*elite restorationist*’ who made possible the comeback of oligarchic supremacy over electoral politics (Anderson 1988:27-29),

followed by the more successful '*military reformer*' (Hutchcroft 2008:144), ex- general Fidel Ramos (1992-98), who presided over a gradual recovery of the Philippine economy, and, finally, Joseph 'Erap' Estrada (1998-2001), 'the *populist self-aggrandizer* who built a strong following among the masses and then redistributed wealth in favor of his family and friends' (2008:144). It was against the latter that Filipinos were to rise again.

Coming to power in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis and amidst attempts of Ramos to extend his constitutionally limited six-year term, former movie star Estrada capitalized on his fame and the plight of the poor – his slogan was *Erap para sa Mahirap* (Erap for the Poor) – to win the presidency with the biggest ever margin of almost 40 percent. Although comfortably backed by former Marcos cronies and landholders like Danding Cojuangco and Lucio Tan, Estrada was the first presidential candidate to also play the numbers game. According to statistics that take housing characteristics as a basis to classify the economic status of Philippine voters into categories from A to E – with A being the richest and E the poorest –, at the time of the 1998 elections only 10 percent belonged to the A, B and C classes. The E class made up 18 percent of the voters, while 72 percent came from D (Bautista 2001:2).

[E]xit polls in May 1998 revealed that almost half of the poorest E population and 40% of the D class across different regions nationwide elected him [Estrada] to office. Their votes, in turn, made up 25% and 63% of the total, respectively (2001: 4).

Although supported by an unprecedented electoral legitimacy, Estrada's administration was soon troubled by allegations of exceptional cronyism, corruption and economic mismanagement. His exclusionary style of decision making in backroom meetings estranged the political class, whereas his notorious private life outraged the Church, and the business sector mourned widespread corruption that damaged investor confidence. Media intimidation, the promotion of an infamous group

of military officers, a confrontational approach to leftist and Muslim insurgent forces, and Estrada's alleged connections to the underworld all contributed to his swift fall from grace among significant sectors of the people (Hedman 2006:168-171).

Whereas many poor stood by 'their' president, arguing that former governments were too plagued by corruption, de Dios (2001:55) argues that it was 'the unique feature of the Estrada administration that it failed to conform to the imperative of corruption-selectivity normally imposed on a non-dictatorial regime'. Estrada superimposed an additional layer of centralized Marcos-style political corruption on the pre-existing bureaucratic corruption commonly tolerated.

But not all underprivileged groups remained loyal. Estrada's failure to effectively implement land reform explains the participation of several farmer organizations in People Power II. Asking if Estrada benefited the poor, Balisacan (2001:107) concludes that 'practice lagged way behind rhetoric':

During . . . [the] "Ramos years", when the country's output grew by about 5% a year, poverty incidence declined at an average rate of 2.4 percentage points per year. In contrast, the Estrada years saw poverty incidence declining at an average of only 0.75 percentage point a year and output growth hovering around 3.0% a year . . . . (2001:101-102)

Balisacan argues that Ramos' strategy of raising the *overall* level of economic growth was superior to Estrada's initiative to counter poverty with the *targeted* implementation of schemes to support the poorest families in the provinces and cities. Interestingly, the same author notes only briefly that the economy during the Estrada years was troubled by the *El Niño* phenomenon in 1998 and the Asian Crisis which, he admits, 'hit hardest the poorest groups in society' (2001:105,107). The question looms if it is fair to judge Estrada's pro-poor policies on the basis of his very limited term of two and a half years.

However, his critics soon lost patience. The last straw was his move to implement a national lottery scheme which threatened the illegal local *jueteng*

lotteries controlled by provincial politicians. The scheme would have led to the monopolization of the gambling business in the hands of Estrada crony Charlie 'Atong' Ang who 'obtained the authority to award franchises for "bingo 2-Ball", the legalized version of *jueteng*, at the same time that the police began to crack down on the older, unauthorized versions of the game' (de Dios 2001:53). Drawing parallels to Marcos' attack on the privileges of local elites and the latter's reaction, de Dios puts the counter attack of *jueteng* lord Chavit Singson in a familiar context. Singson, afraid of losing revenues from the game, exposed Estrada's involvement in a grand *jueteng*-related corruption scheme. To insiders, this revelation came as no surprise, as de Dios (2001:46) noted: 'The pyramid of *jueteng*-related bribe-takers . . . is one of the most established and customary sources of corruption and political financing'.

In any case, his opponents did not need another reason to get rid of Estrada and so the Philippine's first impeachment trial was opened. From 6<sup>th</sup> December 2000 to 16<sup>th</sup> January 2001, millions of Filipino's followed the political drama starring Estrada live on TV. The boiling point was reached when senators voted against the opening of an envelope which presumably contained deposit records that would have convicted Estrada of having opened a 3.2 billion peso (US\$80 million) bank account under the pseudonym 'Jose Velarde' (Landé 200:94).

Realizing that constitutional means were exhausted, Filipinos took to the streets for a display of People Power. Lorraine Salazar recalls (2001a) the events:

The vote took place at 10 pm. Within 30 minutes after that, text messages flew all over calling for full mobilization at the Edsa Shrine, for a 12 midnight mass by Cardinal Sin and to wear black to mourn the passing of democracy. People in public places all over the city started to gather, noise barrages and car pools going around neighbourhoods beeping to the tune of 'Erap Resign'.

This time, not just in Manila, but 'in every major urban center, prominently the cities of Cebu, Davao, Iloilo, Cagayan de Oro, General Santos, Naga, and Baguio, people flocked to the main parks to launch their own EDSAs' (Reyes 2001).

Although, as Hedman (2003:283) argues without further elaboration, People Power II ‘remained rather more limited – in terms of mobilizational scope and momentum – when compared to the tidal wave of opposition mounting against the Marcos regime’, Rivera (2001:252) noted that

the struggle against Estrada brought together an extraordinary political relationship among normally antagonistic groups, which saw left-wing and right wing parties, big business and labour unions, upper and middle classes and the urban poor, Christians and Muslims, Communists and anti-Communists, coming together to topple the administration. Unlike its marginal role . . . in 1986, the organized Left forces . . . played a leading role . . . in initiating broad alliances and participating in multi-sectoral political actions.

This is not to say that these groups were not internally split, but those mobilized were successful in ousting Estrada. When on 19<sup>th</sup> January the military top branch withdrew its support, and, on the next day, the Supreme Court declared vice-president Arroyo president, Estrada finally backed down.

Analysing the results of a nationwide survey, Bautista (2001:8-9) noted that ‘three out of four People Power 2 participants in Metro Manila would belong to the ABC classes’, but adds that ‘less than 5% . . . represented urban poor slum communities’. Generally, data and observations suggested that ‘People Power 2 participants consisted of the educated segment of the voting population in the ABCD classes and the *organized* [italics added] D and E groups’ (2001:9). Bautista (2001:13) thus concludes that the key to participation was ‘humanist education, attained formally through schools and universities or achieved in the practice of ideologically motivated social movements [e.g. labour unions and farmer associations] and religious organizations’.

However, Walden Bello (2001) countered:

[S]aying that unionized, class-conscious workers proved impermeable to Erap’s populist appeal doesn’t get one very far, since under conditions of globalization, irregular and marginal employment has become the dominant condition for the vast majority of workers, and it is these non-unionized strata that are most readily susceptible to Erap’s millenarian populism.

The validity of this objection was proven by the return of protests in the incarnation of Poor People Power. The latter was fuelled not only by the poor's disadvantageous position within a global capitalist order, but by their frustration with systemic injustices of an exclusive political system, exemplified by what was perceived as *Siegerjustiz* – the detention of Estrada, still the hero of many deprived, on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2001. Arrested by a police force numbering two thousand at his residence in Greenhills, San Juan, and in the presence of his supporters who had camped there, Estrada's second fall was 'more than just personally injurious to an ex-president', as del Rosario (2004:44) notes. He argues that Poor People Power was the breakthrough of a hitherto 'hidden transcript', i.e. an underground discourse whose central themes are those of 'persecution, execution, and retribution' (2004:43). A narrative familiar from telenovelas, Estrada movies, and – most importantly – the Passion, directly spoke to the poor: *Jueteng* lord Singson betrayed Estrada just like Judas had betrayed Christ. The impeachment trial was filled with Pharisees who fabricated charges. Estrada's arrest 'was reminiscent of the manner in which Jesus Christ was arrested on the eve of his crucifixion' (2004:45). On 25<sup>th</sup> April, Gethsemane was in Greenhills.

What followed was an uprising of the urban poor at the EDSA shrine – an action that the more privileged took as an 'occupation, in Cardinal Sin's words, a "desecration"' of this symbolically laden space (Garrido 2008:445). In return, 'Arroyo, Cardinal Jaime Sin, former presidents Fidel Ramos and Corazon Aquino, the Makati Business Club, and the two giant TV networks were all portrayed as pillars of elite domination' (2008: 445) by the demonstrators. Although, as Salazar (2001a) observed, the crowd 'was massive, surpassing the number of the Edsa 2', there was a major news blackout. Instead, mocking text messages circulated in Manila, for

example 'Edsa 1: free the nation from a dictator; Edsa 2: free the nation from a thief; Edsa 3: free breakfast, snacks lunch, and dinner... so let's go!' (Salazar 2001a). Indeed, it soon became apparent that Estrada cronies were trying to buy the crowds:

The hidden character of the Edsa Masa transcripts, once out into the public domain, became vulnerable to "hijacking" by those who would take the rawness and purity of this mass sentiment, and stir it in a direction that suited their narrow interests and purposes (del Rosario 2004:70).

On the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> May, pro-Estrada politicians successfully incited the protesters to storm the presidential palace – a move that culminated in the violent dispersal of the crowd. Poor People Power had ended.

This account of the three popular uprisings in the Philippines has already illustrated some differences between them. What follows is a comparative summary:

- 1) EDSA I ousted a dictator from office, whereas People Power II overthrew an elected president. From a democratic *procedural perspective*, the latter thus leaves ambivalent sentiments, to say the least.
- 2) 'There were no giants at EDSA [2]' (Reyes 2001). In contrast to EDSA I and Poor People Power, People Power II was *non-personalistic*, i.e. no single leader served as an icon of change, unlike Aquino in 1986 and Estrada in April 2001.
- 3) The *mobilization* of participants for People Power II differed markedly from EDSA I. As Hedman (2003:299) noted: 'In contrast with February 1986 ... [it] featured an exclusively civilian leadership, a more decentralized mobilizational process, and a wider social composition of individual participants and coalition blocks alike'. The leadership of Poor People Power was civilian as well, but the movement's social composition was limited and its mobilization 'hijacked' by Estrada cronies. Yet, it introduced a new social class to EDSA: The urban poor.
- 4) Unlike in EDSA I when *military defections* first triggered the massive gathering of

civilian supporters at EDSA, in People Power II 'military defections fell far short of the military involvement at EDSA in 1986' (Hedman 2003:299). Hernandez (2001:66) argues: '[T]he withdrawal of [military] support [for Estrada] was driven by the apparent impending success of People Power 2'.

- 5) Whereas EDSA I and People Power II were led or supported by the church, the business sector and the middle class, Poor People Power was widely met with anger and mockery on the part of these *strategic groups*.
- 6) Del Rosario (2004:70) argues: 'The *discursive difference* [italics added] among the three uprisings is that the third uprising is a portrayal of "raw" anger, while the first two is that of "cooked" indignation.'

Finally, one of the more original comparisons should be cited. De Dios (2001:58) managed to discover similarities between the seemingly irreconcilable People Power II and Poor People Power:

At bottom, EDSA 2 expressed a hope that Estrada's indictment and fall would herald a more thoroughgoing clean-up of other ailing social institutions. On the other hand, if anything was valid about what became known as EDSA 3, it was a cynical one – that Erap could not be judged alone because he could not have acted alone ... Despite their frequent juxtaposition, therefore, the two EDSAs ironically proceeded from the same message, although one was grounded in hope, the other in cynicism.

### **People Power or Disempowered People?**

De Dios seems to find only one valid aspect in Poor People Power: The poor's cynicism about corruption, a tenor representative of the often-cited publication his essay was published in. Salazar (2001b) has summarized this kind of writing:

A year after the event, well respected Filipino academics and intellectuals have written several books, explaining how Edsa 2 came about and providing a rationale for the event, and calling it an example of 'direct democracy' in action. Most of these analyses mention Edsa 3, but only to strengthen the moral and rational authority behind Edsa 2, as Edsa 3 was depicted as the negative other, the dark cousin of People Power 1 and 2.

As if to convince themselves of their righteousness, these scholars – of whom many personally participated in People Power II – present the middle class as the vanguard of democracy while repeatedly mourning from a moral high ground the cynicism of the poor – without taking the necessary second step to explore in what kind of socio-political misery that cynicism is grounded, and without asking whom a mere change in political leadership really serves. Instead, they proclaim:

The sense of hope and future-oriented ethos of People Power 2 is rooted in the composition of its participants. The middle classes, in particular, have the means to imagine and create the possibilities of a better future for themselves and their progeny (Bautista 2001:14).

It is true that the middle classes enjoy the benefits of higher education, are familiar with the normative values of democracy and command technical and organizational skills that enable them to take the lead in civil society organizations. From that perspective, uprisings spearheaded by the middle classes must be seen as genuinely liberating whereas those initiated by elites or the uneducated poor are to be dismissed as undemocratic. This ‘symbolic distinction between civil and uncivil society informed representations of EDSA 2 as an organized, morally legitimate citizens movement and EDSA 3 as disorganized, morally illegitimate, and resulting from elite manipulation; (Garrido 2008:444). But does the *potential* ability to think beyond the individual self-interest automatically imply that the middle classes *in actuality* are free of petty class interests? In fact, they have at times proven to be quite opportunistic, as Rivera (2001:239) notes:

As a source of political leadership, the middle classes, especially its most educated segment, have indeed responded to all kinds of political projects whether as technocrats of the Marcos dictatorship, cadres of revolutionary parties, or army coup leaders. But it is this same flexibility and contradictoriness which stresses the limitations of the middle class as a constituency for political action.

Whereas all these endeavours might have partly been inspired by visions of national improvement, it is ironically this fixation on normative ideals – and the lack of patience to achieve them constitutionally – prevalent among large sections of the middle classes that often stands in the way of a more pragmatic and gradual approach to democratic development. Gutierrez (2001) cites Dela Torre asking: ‘Why didn’t “civil society” engage Joseph Estrada in the way they engaged Fidel Ramos?’ It was because he was not sufficiently ‘respectable, polished, refined, elegant, cultured and sophisticated’ (Gutierrez 2001) – in short, middle-class. Franco (2004:119) likewise questioned civil society’s unwillingness to cooperate with Horacio Morales, head of the Department for Agrarian Reform (DAR) under Estrada:

Although its reduced output was much maligned by many anti-Estrada groups who had already opted to disengage from the Morales DAR, these groups would help put into power an [Arroyo] administration that would fail to match even the land redistribution of the Morales DAR.

Arguably, it was as much Estrada’s inability to formulate a proper English sentence as it was his corruption that alienated the middle classes and led them not just to demonstrate for a change in political style and policy direction, or to exert pressure while waiting for the end of his single-term in office, but to call for his immediate ouster. This uncompromising insistence on Estrada’s resignation and the refusal to acknowledge his unprecedented electoral victory – or at least to explore its deeper meanings –, suggests that People Power II disempowered vast sections of the Philippine electorate.

In fact, Hedman argues in a seminal work that all past campaigns for free elections and clean politics in the Philippines were not about the power of the people, but of a dominant bloc that encountered a crisis of hegemony and thus mobilized people ‘In the Name of Civil Society’ (Hedman 2006). Against a celebratory Toquevillean understanding of civil society as one safeguarding citizens against

undue encroachments on civil liberties by the state, Hedman (2006:6) posits Gramsci's writings 'on the significance and role of a "dense" civil society in complementing and reinforcing the coercive state under capitalism'. Here, a dominant bloc – identified for the Philippines as the Catholic Church, the capitalist class, and the U.S. government – works through civil society in order to maintain or reassert hegemony in times of 'crises of hegemony' through a process of transformism "whereby radical pressures are gradually absorbed and inverted by conservative forces, until they serve the opposite of their original ends" (2006:16-17). In calling on Filipinos to identify themselves as individual voters and to protest for clean elections and politics, alternative identities – for example as members of an exploited class fighting an extra-electoral revolutionary battle against the oligarchy – are suppressed (2006:143). This suppression became necessary since, in times of crises, hegemony was always threatened not only from above – i.e. by power-hungry presidents who jeopardized the interests of the dominant bloc – but also from below, i.e. by communist movements in the 1980s, and the politically assertive poor under Estrada.

[T]he hegemony of the transnational bloc, led by the U.S. government, the Catholic Church, and the capitalist class in the Philippines has found institutional and ideological support in the very form of the liberal democratic state ... . In a country deeply divided by class relations and conflicts, the liberal democratic state . . . "represents the totality of the population, *abstracted* from its division into social classes, as individual and equal citizens . . ." (Hedman 2006:42).

Elsewhere, Hedman (2003) describes how People Power II was turned from an uprising reflective of class differences into one suggesting a classless movement of concerned citizens. Interestingly, anti-Estrada protests in the months preceding the events in January were not centered at EDSA but at Mendiola Street in Manila and Ayala Avenue in the business district of Makati. Both places 'provide distinct milieus for the mobilization of some (but not any) kind of collective memory' (2003:289). Whereas Mendiola – the former site of radical student protests – was crowded with

students, veteran leftists and NGO activists, posh Ayala brought together the clergy, high-profile Estrada critics, office workers as well as business- and labour- organizations. Hedman (2003:295) notes that:

despite claims to past political struggles and victories against a corrupt dictatorship, the powerful sense of classness defining . . . both Makati and Manila . . . served to complicate and undermine the efforts of opposition organizers to mobilize a broad-based, cross-class 'People Power' movement against the Estrada presidency. . . . Thus, a successful opposition movement seemed to require the sublimation of the kind of classness . . . inevitably associated with the Ayala and Mendiola rallies into a more inclusive sense of belonging . . . . EDSA provided this much-needed third space . . . .

In the end, classness as reflected in 'urban space' was again subdued under the dull call for clean politics under the co-leadership of the 'dominant bloc'. Similarly, the puzzling phenomenon of the participation of the Left, in contrast to 1986, has been explained by Hedman (2006: 174) with 'the deepening of the dominant bloc's capacity for leading mobilization in the name of civil society in the Philippines since the 1980s'. However, the Left's anti-capitalist chants and their radical slogans like 'Resign all!' (including Arroyo) on the stage at EDSA 'weren't picked up by the crowd – simply because that wasn't part of the consensus' (Salazar 2001a).

It is tempting to use Hedman's framework to explain all acts of popular uprisings in terms of 'crises of hegemony' and 'dominant blocs', but such an approach can easily lead to paranoia typical of much postmodern scholarship. Thinking in blocs means overlooking their internal diversity – after all, the founding chairman of the communist party, Jose Maria Sison, came from a landed clan (Rivera 2001:234). In his review of Hedman's book, Guillermo (2008:156) argues that the Left was not unknowingly co-opted, but well aware that the Estrada crisis was in fact 'a struggle within the ranks of the ruling classes. . . . which therefore represent[s] opportunities which can be exploited for the benefit of the insurgent classes'. He argues:

The anti-Estrada forces consisted of diverse and often fundamentally opposed political forces united at a tactical level to achieve a short-term minimum goal. They were, one might say, horizontally integrated in a very fluid and temporary fashion rather than vertically unified under the 'universal leadership' of the 'best elements' of the oligarchy (2008:156).

It might be that the broader social and ideological composition of People Power II as compared to EDSA I was due to the democratic framework – guaranteeing political and civil rights – in which it took place. The new role of the Left engaging with mainstream politics can therefore be seen from a positive angle: 'By integrating with the broad mainstream democratic struggles and playing lead roles in them, the forces of the Left have overcome the "outsider" and "left-out" status it was consigned to after mistakenly boycotting the election struggle of 1986' (Reyes 2001).

There is more than one truth. Whereas EDSA I, People Power II, and Poor People Power all had elitist – disempowering – imprints on them, people could not have been mobilized if they hadn't seen the opportunity of empowerment, that is, to change the state for the better, and make it more responsive to their needs. In that respect, all protests were genuine. One might thus term the three episodes *moments of empowerment*, which, however, always carried in them the seeds of disempowerment in that they helped bringing back to power traditional politicians (*trapos*). Yet to the degree they were successful, participants could retain a feeling of empowerment beyond the immediate event. They are the hanging sword Philippine presidents at least have to reckon with. As Lorraine Salazar (2001a) concludes:

Edsa 2 *and* [italics added] Edsa 3 represent the urgency, great potential and expectation for change. They are intrinsic part of the political maturation process, of a continuing struggle to build democracy and undo the mistakes of the past.

A future challenge remains to transform extra-parliamentary opposition into a sustained democratic force (e.g. political parties) within the state system. Thus, the recent absence of People Power can either be lamented, or be seen as a sign of the realization that it takes more than protest to make democracy work.

## **People Power Fatigue: An exploration**

In order not to end on an all-too positive note, the perception of 'people power fatigue' under Arroyo has to be further discussed. Hutchcroft (2008:147) noted in relation to the failure of ousting her in the wake of an election scandal surrounding the 2004 presidential elections:

Many at the time spoke of 'people power fatigue', but there was probably a deeper disillusionment at play. This time around, it was difficult for citizens to nurse hopes that a mere change in leadership would fix the problems of the country. Many seemed tired of being pawns in intra-elite squabbles that ultimately brought little change.

Indeed, Arroyo's staying power suggests that the oligarchs finally won while the people stand, disempowered as they are, idly by. And it is not only them who got disillusioned by the result of People Power II which brought another corrupted and widely disliked president to power. Recently, former president Aquino apologized to Estrada: 'I am one of those who plead guilty for the 2001 (uprising). . . . All of us make mistakes. Forgive me.' Archbishop Angel Lagdameo (2008), president of the Catholic Bishop Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), wrote in a similar vein:

[W]e now look at People Power II with mixed emotions and interpretations. Sadly, People Power II installed a leader who lately only has been branded as the 'most corrupt' and our government is rated 'among the most corrupt governments'. Is this the reason why many in civil society regard another People Power with cynicism and indifference?

The reason behind the non-appearance of another popular uprising is, of course, not just disenchantment. Benito Lim (*in* Lopez 2008) has cited four *political* factors conducive to People Power but lacking at the moment: '1. The top military leaders still support President Arroyo. If there is military opposition it comes from junior officers, who are unfortunately in prison; 2. The church is divided; 3. NGOs are divided; and 4. There are too many [potential] candidates [for the presidency].'

Indeed, whereas the role of the military in People Power II seemed at first

relatively negligible, its withdrawal of support for Estrada paid off in the long run. As Hernandez (2001:73) notes: 'Arroyo 'has continuously heaped expressions of gratitude on the military and police hierarchy . . . . These expressions have also been transformed into material benefits, despite huge budget deficits . . . .' Abinales (2008:300,304) further argues that Arroyo's skilful creation and maintenance of ties to local politicians has helped her keeping people from protesting:

One should not ignore the possibility that elites are keeping people off the streets, of course, given their determining role in local politics . . . . 'protest fatigue' [is] a label whose popularity is directly proportional to the users' lack of curiosity about its factuality. Arroyo's staying power lies elsewhere, and this is in the way she has struck a balance between governing the country and pleasing her bevy of allies at the local level. As long as this concord is unshaken and appropriately bolstered by the support of military, police, and international allies . . . Arroyo, despite her consistently low popularity, will remain secure in her post.

Lacking the influential voice of deceased Cardinal Sin, the Catholic Church is also split, reflected in the undecided stand taken in a 2008 pastoral statement of the CBCP to guide the clergy on how to react to political issues. Whereas many had hoped to hear a call for Arroyo's resignation, Caloocan Bishop Deogracias Iñiguez said the CBCP would not call on Arroyo to step down "unless it becomes a moral issue." "Now it is still [a] political [issue]" (Natividad/Burgonio 2008). However, the statement's content was disputed: '[A]ccording to activist priest Fr. Robert Reyes, the CBCP issued a "lethargic statement" because progressive bishops were outnumbered by their conservative colleagues' (Natividad/Burgonio 2008).

The church then serves as an example to prove generalizing assumption of 'blocs' at work wrong. Even under threat of ouster from the presidency, Archbishop Lagdameo (Philippine Inquirer 2008) repeated calls for 'a new kind of People Power':

This is a People Power with a difference. (This is) not concentrated in Manila and only calling for resignation of the President. . . . [N]ew People Power" addresses graft and corruption at all levels of government and the whole country'.

## **Conclusion**

Popular uprisings in the Philippines constitute moments of empowerment, when existing grievances motivate large numbers of people to take to the streets against their government. These grievances have been expressed in the normatively laden language of democracy and good governance against an abusive state, or in the raw – but equally valid – frustration of the poor. However, in taking the lead or using established structural and coercive means, elites were successful in suppressing potentially more threatening modes of protest for *substantive* change.

All three uprisings teach lessons on the shortcomings of the current state of democracy in the Philippines that have to be addressed as the country's transition unfolds. The absence of People Power under Arroyo not only reflects her ability to balance those powers that turned against her predecessor, but possibly the increasing awareness among people that change is not just a matter of ousting an individual leader, but of transforming a political system more patiently from within and challenging its overall structural and institutional faults.

For in a democracy, protest should complement, but not regularly replace, the power of the ballot. The single-term of the president ends soon. Yet, if Arroyo tries to cling to power, or if Estrada stages a comeback as recently indicated (Cruz 2009), the world may well see that People Power keeps coming back.

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