

THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE

Leni Robredo



I have often said that the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution ignited my political awakening. I was in my senior year in college when I joined the Filipinos' revolt that ousted the strongman who have long denied our country our rights, our freedoms, and our democracy. The numbers cannot be denied. By Amnesty International's estimates, 70,000 Filipinos were imprisoned, 34,000 tortured, and more than 3,000 were killed under Marcos' watch.

The EDSA People Power Revolution did not happen overnight. It was the culmination of a series of events that chipped away at the dictator Marcos' stronghold. The assassination of opposition leader, Senator Ninoy Aquino, became the climax of the people's growing anger: Enough was enough. Our collective grief and rage finally shook Marcos' once impenetrable authority.

I was a college student at the University of the Philippines when Senator Aquino was killed in 1983, and I joined the long line of mourners at the Sto. Domingo Church in Quezon City who paid their last respects to the man who believed the Filipino was worth dying for. I was fortunate to be in UP where we were taught that young people had a voice. It was, after all, our future at stake. Three years later, seeing the faith, courage, and tenacity of the millions who gathered in EDSA, I was further awakened to the truth: It was the people who had the power to decide our country's tomorrows. People power did not only mean a collective action to drive away a dictator. It meant nation-building and guarding our democracy—just as tenaciously as we had fought for its restoration.

With permission from my father who had wanted me to pursue law school right after graduation, I postponed studying again because I wanted to be on the ground and do actual work for the people. I found a job at the Bicol River Basin Development Program

**No. 100, 11th St. Barangay Mariana
New Manila, 1112 Quezon City
www.ovp.gov.ph | www.lenirobredo.com**

Office. The project's main goal was to develop growth areas that would ultimately result in communities with vibrant economies and where people can showcase their potentials and capabilities. It was also here that I met my mentor and husband, the late Jesse Robredo.

Later, after Jesse and I were married, I finally pursued my dreams of becoming a lawyer. I studied, passed the bar, and first worked at the Public Attorney's Office in Naga, our hometown, and where Jesse served as mayor. Eventually, I joined SALIGAN, a network of volunteer lawyers that focused on developmental legal work. We were counsel for those who were deprived of justice and the protection of the law only because they had less in life—farmers, fisherfolk, the urban poor, women.

In the post-EDSA years, when life for Filipinos basically returned to normal, I realized how easy it was to be lulled into complacency when we thought the worst was over. The people had high expectations from President Cory Aquino, Sen. Aquino's widow. I wondered, what standards did we set for ourselves as citizens whose role was just as indispensable in nation-building?

Mrs. Aquino was the President and Commander-in-Chief who had to fix a country severely impaired by Marcos. We were free, yet there were some who promoted divisiveness instead of unity. Still, Mrs. Aquino remained the zealous guardian of our democracy. She believed, with all her heart until her death, that the Filipino was worth living for.

It has been a long journey for the Filipino people since the EDSA People Power Revolution. Today, we see efforts to distort history for the personal agenda of a powerful few. They go as far as denying that the dictator ever stole from his people, violated their rights, and derided their dignity. Distortionists have weaponized online platforms, maintaining the architecture of disinformation, normalizing aggression, and dismantling structures for truth-telling and civic discourse.

Today, we are under a leadership who gave the strongman a hero's burial; a leadership that rules with an iron hand, convinced that the only way to solve a social ill like drug abuse is to kill, the only way to silence critics is to slander them. He flouts the Constitution, our institutions, even our long-standing traditions that are symbols of our nationhood. This is precisely the kind of leadership we fought against in the EDSA Revolution.

In his speech at the 30th anniversary of the EDSA Revolution, his last as the President of the Republic, Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III, urged young Filipinos to learn of what happened during EDSA to understand the importance of the freedom and democracy they now enjoy.

PNoy, as he had asked the people to call him, had said in February 2016: "Ako po, naniniwalang hindi natin tadhanang ulitin ang madilim nating kasaysayan; ang tadhana natin ay suma lamang ng mga desisyong ginagawa natin sa ngayon. Naniniwala ako sa kadakilalan ng ating lahi. Naniniwala ako na bagama't mahaba ang kakayahang nating magtimpi, may sukdulan din, at kung maabot iyon ay talaga naman darating ang daluyong ng pagkakaisang walang makakapigil."

(I believe that it is not our fate to repeat the grim parts of our past; our fate is the sum of the decisions we make in the present. I believe in the greatness of our people. I believe that, even if we are known for our patience, it has its limits—and if those limits are reached, then no one will be able to stop the wave of solidarity that will follow.)

PNoy reminded us that no leader is too powerful compared to their people. EDSA gifted us with the freedom to choose our leaders. The millions of new registered voters, most of whom represent the youth, hold the power to bring change and ensure that we get the leaders we need and deserve in the 2022 national elections.

For those who were in EDSA like me, I understand if we are heartbroken or disillusioned. For our children and grandchildren, I understand if they ask us if we failed to protect the gains of 1986. The skies might be overcast today, and we acknowledge that the promise of EDSA has not yet been completely fulfilled. But my faith in the power of the people has never wavered. I know that we will come together, as we did 35 years ago, to reclaim the dignity of our country and our people.

The fundamental truth of EDSA remains: Our people, standing united, can never be defeated.

LENI ROBREDO

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