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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Joseph Scalice

12.05.2022

The election of Marcos in the Philippines and the death rattle of democracy

Thirty-six years ago, in February 1986, millions of Filipinos gathered on EDSA, the main thoroughfare of Manila, in open defiance of the brutal regime of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. With immense courage, they stood their ground in the face of the tanks and military might of the dictatorship, which had in recent memory opened fire on demonstrators. They demanded the installation of the democratically elected Corazon Aquino as president and the ouster of the hated Marcoses, who had ruled the country in a military dictatorship for fourteen years. A section of the military withdrew its support from the president, and Washington removed its backing. The Marcoses fled the country. The EDSA event became known as People Power and was the source of immense pride.

On Monday, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was elected president of the Philippines, defeating his nearest opponent by more than 12 million votes. He ran a campaign dedicated to rehabilitating the dictatorial legacy of his parents, depicting martial law as a “golden age” in Philippine history. On his coattails ride openly fascist forces, including a political party run by former police chiefs dedicated to the creation of bands of government-funded anticommunist vigilantes. Another, Duterte Youth, is openly modeled on the Hitler Youth organization—with black uniforms, red armbands, and a fascist salute—and committed to the violent suppression of supposed communists.



Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. at a rally in Quezon City, Philippines on April 13, 2022. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

Millions of Filipinos—many of whom voted for the liberal opposition candidate, Leni Robredo—watched the results of the election with a sense of national shame mingled with bewilderment: How was it possible that the hated legacy of the Marcoses had been embraced by a seeming majority of their countrymen?

The outcome is a result of the impact of US imperialism on the country's history expressed in a concentrated form under the conditions of the current global crisis of capitalist rule.

The last century-and-a-half of Philippine history has been a striking but tragic confirmation of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. Trotsky argued that in countries of belated capitalist development the capitalist class could no longer play a progressive role in a democratic revolution. The tasks of this revolution included the overthrow of colonial rule, national unification, and the solution to the agrarian problem. The capitalist class, tied to imperialist markets and the landed estates, and hostile to the growing working class, would turn on the revolution and betray the workers and peasants. The fight for democracy required a fight against the capitalists, and waging such a fight would require socialist measures. The fate of any socialist revolution rested with its spread internationally.

The first democratic revolution in Asia was waged in the Philippines, which overthrew Spanish colonialism and established the short-lived Philippine Republic, with its own constitution, a wide-ranging set of rights, and a declaration of independence. At various

stages in the development of this revolution, the capitalist class turned on it, murdering its leaders and selling out the struggle first to the Spanish and then to the Americans.

The fledgling Philippine Republic was crushed beneath the boot of US imperialism in a brutal war of conquest that killed over 200,000 Filipinos. The organs of Philippine democracy, which included mass suffrage and public education, were extinguished in the bloodshed. American imperialism claimed that Filipinos were not ready for democracy and needed the “benevolent assimilation” of the United States. The Philippine elite quickly made peace with their new rulers, while the Filipino masses fought tooth and nail in a losing war that lasted until 1907.

The revolution and its defense planted the deep roots of a democratic tradition in the Filipino masses, above all a commitment to freedom of speech and a belief in equality. The spirit of this tradition, however, never touched parchment. The Americans stabilized the rule of their allies in the Philippine elite by drawing up a constitution that enshrined military dictatorship in the legal code and left trial by jury out.

The postcolonial Philippines was a country of two democracies—the democratic tradition of the masses and the formal parliamentary institutions of the elite—with no organic, historic connection between them whatsoever. The mass tradition expressed itself in the Huk peasant rebellion of the early 1950s, demanding land reform and a solution to the agrarian problem. The formal institutions were the apparatus of elite rule, bent on preserving existing property holdings. Washington repeatedly stabilized the formal institutions by crushing the mass movement.

The institutions of formal democracy in the Philippines did not emerge out of the great struggles of the masses, but in opposition to them. The goods on display in America’s showcase of “democracy” in Asia were artificial.

When the peasants of central Luzon revolted, Edward Lansdale, head of the CIA in Asia, oversaw the conduct of the warfare, both military and psychological, to crush the rebellion. He handpicked Ramon Magsaysay to run for president and effectively coordinated his election. Magsaysay oversaw the bloody process of defeating the peasant uprising.

The masses were straining to carry out the tasks of the revolution. The capitalist class sided over and over again with US imperialism and the landed estates. Here, Stalinism played a critical role. In service to the privileged national interests of the bureaucracy in Moscow, Stalinism instructed Communist parties around the globe that a section of the capitalist class would play a progressive role in the democratic revolution, and the task of workers was to ally with this section. Using this program, they traded the support of the working class for favorable relations and improved trade with capitalists around the globe. This was a fundamental betrayal of the working class.

The Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) was founded in 1930 on the program of Stalinism. The PKP, in keeping with the Popular Front policy of the Moscow bureaucracy, instructed Filipino workers and peasants to support US colonial rule in the Philippines because Washington was deemed an ally in the antifascist struggle. It was on instructions from the PKP that the Huk peasant army which fought courageously against the Japanese occupation handed over their weapons to the US military when General MacArthur returned to the Philippines. Many of the disarmed peasants were arrested, some were executed and buried in mass graves. The elite who had collaborated with the Japanese occupation were rehabilitated, and their estates were taken from the peasants and handed back to them.

Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law in 1972, citing the clauses written into the constitution drawn up by the United States, to crush the immense growth of social struggles among workers and youth that threatened capitalist rule. There was common consent from nearly every section of the Filipino bourgeoisie, including Marcos' opponents, that dictatorship was necessary. US President Richard Nixon informed Marcos in advance that the US would back—"and to the hilt"—Marcos' imposition of military rule. When Marcos declared martial law, Washington tripled its military aid to the Philippines.

The character of the martial law apparatus, funded and trained by Washington, was etched in the memory of an older generation: tortured corpses were routinely discarded by the military in vacant lots surrounding Metro Manila, billions of dollars were stolen from the coffers of the state, 70,000 people were arrested without warrant, thousands more disappeared—fathers or mothers who one day just never came home.

When the mass movement of People Power ousted the hated tyrant in February 1986, Washington at the last moment intervened. The Reagan White House recognized that if it did not assist in the removal of Marcos, it would lose hold of Washington's former colony. Reagan informed Marcos that it was time to depart, and the Marcos family, with their stolen billions intact in Swiss banks, were taken by helicopter from the presidential palace and given a comfortable exile in Hawaii.

This was a turning point in Philippine history. It was a revolutionary situation. Nothing had yet been stabilized. Mass strikes broke out across the country. It was the Stalinists in the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which had broken with the PKP in the 1960s to follow the line of Mao Zedong, that cultivated illusions in the Aquino administration and stabilized elite rule. On May Day 1986, Jose Maria Sison, head of the CPP, stood on a stage in front of thousands of workers with President Aquino and Fidel Ramos, head of Aquino's military and chief architect of the torture regime of the Marcos dictatorship, while the band played "The Internationale."

Aquino, head of the largest sugar plantation in the country, had no intention of implementing genuine land reform. When peasants demonstrated in early 1987, appealing to her for land reform, she had her military open fire on the demonstrators, killing a score of them.

No substantive reforms were gained from the restoration of the institutions of formal democracy. The country opened up to the first waves of capitalist globalization. Real wages fell. Within a decade, overseas employment became a necessary solution for the working class in order to provide for their families. Families were broken up and the conditions of life worsened.

Over the course of three decades the rot at the heart of liberal democracy became ever more apparent. The Stalinists repeatedly stabilized capitalist rule, promoting illusions in one or another faction of the elite. In 2016 they gave enthusiastic support to the fascistic Rodrigo Duterte, claiming that his vulgar, volatile, brutal politics were the politics of the left.

The election of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is the culmination of this process and is a marked manifestation of global developments. Around the world we see the growth of far-right

and authoritarian forces and the rotting away of democratic liberalism in a situation of immense social crisis.

It is an interconnected global process. Rodrigo Duterte's election in May 2016 preceded that of Donald Trump by half a year; both men displayed vulgar scorn for the basic norms of democracy and aspired to be tyrants. A year before the election of Marcos Jr., Trump attempted to remain in power by means of a fascist coup. At the beginning of this year, Joe Biden declared that he was not certain if the institutions of American democracy would survive the decade.

The parties of democratic liberalism have been essential to these developments. As openly fascist forces batter the door of democracy, liberalism has laid out a welcoming mat. It was the Liberal Party, of which Robredo is chair, that made Duterte a national political figure in the Philippines.

The past six years of the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte have been years of violent reaction, marked above all by the murder of nearly 30,000 poor Filipinos in the name of a war on drugs. Robredo announced in her campaign that she intended to continue Duterte's drug policy, but that she would not focus exclusively on killing. She similarly declared her intention to continue the Anti-Communist task force created by Duterte, an apparatus of murderous McCarthyism. In the end, she promised a moderated, a more polite, version of the repressive policies of her predecessor.

The Democrats in the United States have done everything possible to normalize relations with the Republican conspirators in the fascist coup attempt of January 6, 2021. Donald Trump, the man who attempted to overthrow American democracy, travels the country giving speeches and the Biden administration has done nothing. The Democrats are poised to face a devastating defeat in the 2022 elections and yet they will do nothing to rouse a mass constituency.

Similar developments unfold in France, Brazil, the United Kingdom, India and Germany. Driving this global process is the advanced crisis of world capitalism. Inflation and war have sent the price of essential goods skyrocketing. Over 20 million people have died in the pandemic because their governments, determined to defend profits, refused to take the

basic public health measures necessary to put a halt to its spread. Conditions of life have become unbearable for a majority of the world's population.

Mobilizing mass support would require speaking substantively to these social problems, to which the liberal democrats have no solution. In the United States, they speak of nothing but race and gender and war in Ukraine; in the Philippines, it is clean government.

It is this that fuels the rise of the far right. The populist lies of Marcos, his promises of a return to a golden age, found traction among the lower middle class and remittance-dependent poor of the country—market vendors, corner store owners—because they did not see an alternative that seriously addressed the horrifying conditions they confront. Marcos provided them a scapegoat, liberal democracy, and a way out, martial law.

The liberal parties of capitalist democracy no longer have anything progressive to offer, not even the defense of the gains of the past. The right to an abortion is being stripped away in the United States; other rights will soon follow.

We are witnessing the death rattle of democracy. Social inequality has so hollowed it out that formal equality can no longer sustain itself. The election of Marcos is a milestone in this global process. He represents the naked rule of reaction, promising dictatorship and drawing in his wake fascists and political scum.

Democratic rights can only be viably defended by a program that addresses the social cancers that have eaten away at its foundations. The fight to defend democracy must become the fight for socialism.

World Socialist 11.05.2022