

People's Power and Government: Towards the Long-term Efficacy of a Revolutionary Tool

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"People's power" which toppled the Marcos regime at EDSA is briefly traced to previous efforts at conscientization and mobilization. To enhance its long-term effectiveness as a tool of the revolutionary government, attention should be made on how people's power may be manifested. Some suggestions on how government and other institutions may encourage and enhance people's power are advanced. The issues and hard questions raised provide impetus to encourage further dialogue and discussion on how people's power and government may work together for the full realization of democracy and development in the country.

Introduction

"People's power" as a term gained widespread currency during the Revolution of 1986, but the concept and several of its concrete forms have been known in the Philippines for many years. Ninoy Aquino — with some prescience — introduced its Tagalog equivalent, *Lakas ng Bayan*, as the name of his party in 1978 and the L sign and its acronym *Laban* became rallying symbols of what was then the opposition. *Lakas ng Bayan* could be manifested in mass actions like the February events, and like them, may be the climax of a long process of political education, analysis and conscientization. While unable at that time to produce the desired results, the earlier strikes, marches and protest rallies of labor, peasant, professional and business groups were in a sense dress rehearsals for the massive proclamation of the Filipinos' commitment to democracy that stunned the world last February.

People's Power can also be demonstrated in less spectacular ways. Many non-government organizations — and a few government programs, even under Marcos — had attempted to develop in a few communities the

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Paper initially presented at the "Symposium on People's Power: Pitfalls, Promises and Performance," sponsored by the Development Academy of the Philippines (DAP) at Pasig, Metro Manila on June 24, 1986. This paper is soon to be published by the DAP Press in a monograph on people power.

residents' sense of power over their own lives. They were known then as "popular participation" or "community organization," i.e., people becoming involved in the provision of a service not only as beneficiaries but also and primarily as problem identifiers, planners, implementors and evaluators of programs affecting them. Thus, people's power was then shown not necessarily through gathering together, although that was sometimes necessary, but mainly through involvement in cooperative activities that they judged to be in the public interest.

Unfortunately, many of these did not become known in the old days until the communities or the change agents ran afoul of the military. That situation suggests that any discussion of people's power should recognize that it (people's power) cannot fully develop under an authoritarian political system, except as a protest to or in conflict with it, no matter what lip service the tyrant may pay to platitudes like the "sovereignty of the people."

That in turn suggests a way of distinguishing true people's power from some of its bogus manifestations. Since people's power can have its full flowering only on democratic soil, it should be directed at nourishing that soil by supporting democratic and progressive elements within the government and opposing authoritarian or elitist tendencies. If demonstrations and other activities are meant to exclude many sectors, or if they seek to benefit those who are already profiting from the status quo, or if they tend to dehumanize people by simply using them as instruments to maintain the leaders' powers, then they should not be dignified by the designation "people's power" even if the forms used may be similar to the real thing.

In the past, this process had been prostituted in various ways which is best exemplified by *hakot*¹ attendance in KBL political rallies and public ceremonies featuring the Marcoses.² The mobilization of people so that they could "properly" receive specific government services is also an example of this genre. More recently, the term "people's power" has been misapplied to any gathering in protest of the current actions of the government. It has also been used to denote some activities with dubious legal and moral bases such as the forced takeover of certain government offices. Indeed, the term has been so indiscriminately applied that a regulation-prone, revenue-seeking government may get a lot of money if it decrees that a group must first get a license before it can be authorized to use the term "people's power."

This short catalog should clarify for us what "people's power" really is. It is within this conceptualization that I would like to raise several issues for discussion. These may be categorized into: (a) how the people may continue to manifest their power under a popular political leadership; (b) what government can do to show its acceptance of criticism and dissent

as legitimate instruments of popular will; and (c) what other political institutions may do in support of people's power.

Manifestations of People's Power

People's power was able to install a popular government in the country. With the realization, the people are now hoping that it can satisfy their deepest longings for a markedly nationalistic and egalitarian system. The removal of a hated ruler was effected within a few hours of negotiations although it took many years before the outraged people were mobilized into action. But further tasks have to be done. The change of the system will require many more acts: not only a new Constitution but several laws, their committed enforcement, difficult decisions to start and sustain the process of massive redistribution, renegotiations with the World Bank/International Monetary Fund, and the investment of Filipinos in productive ventures in their own land.

To list some of these requirements is already to suggest some of the things towards which people's power efforts must be directed. These would not entail massing in the streets but the use of their power in quieter strategies: drafting position papers and resolutions; engaging in small-group discussions; writing letters to involved officials; getting time slots and print space in mass media; volunteering in task forces; testifying in public hearings; putting resources in socially meaningful ventures; and showing by example what is required to turn the society around. Many of these are forms which the middle and upper classes are at home in. It may be argued that the upper class does not need to engage in people power activities anymore because they already have many representatives in the new government. Even under the despised old regime, protesting middle class groups could get their demands heard successfully and with no bloodshed. Even now however, the masses have to struggle much harder to be heard.

These lead to major queries: How can the people show that their demands for nationalistic and egalitarian policies *must* be met if the government is to remain popular and legitimate before them? What strategies would ensure that the voices of the poor majority will not be drowned by the noises of the few who have the most to gain from the continuation of the oppressive social and economic structures? How can the government encourage the current political elite to consult and dialogue with the people for important decisions pending before the nation?

Other decisions would not have nationwide implications and in that sense would be less difficult than the above. I refer to those specifically affecting some local areas but not others as is usually the case in the twin issue of decentralization and local autonomy. Given the wide range of

conditions in our local areas; selective decentralization rather than the delegation of similar powers to all types of local units of a certain level may be tried. For those which are more capable, the central government may provide only policy and technical guidelines. For others, it may assume more educational and assistory functions. This is already provided for in the Local Government Code. However, "capability" may be redefined to include not only those of community groups already existing in these areas especially if they have already shown how they have been able to plan and prosecute needed projects better. People's power may be used for strengthening such non-governmental associations and also for creating and generating such organizations where they do not yet exist.

Since demands for local autonomy tend to be focused more on receiving greater benefits than on accepting greater responsibilities, how can the central government differentiate among local areas which would be deemed fair and acceptable by both officials and their constituents? How can the people signify their ability and willingness to bear the burden of local decisions?

In the past, a number of councils involving some representation by certain sectoral groups have been created. Problems these councils have encountered include: the process of choosing who should represent which groups; the problem of tokenism, e.g., appointing a woman does not mean feminist demands will be heard or acted upon but it could silence claims of non-representation; the tendency of such representatives to be the devil's advocate at all times (and thus perhaps to immobilize the proceedings) or to identify him/herself with the government and not with his/her original group. In many counties, it has been found that representatives of the poor may use their position as representatives not to speak for their group but for their own individual advancement.⁴ Another problem is, that such representatives do not have formal and actual accountability to the groups they claim to represent.⁵ The issue is thus how people's organizations can demand that whoever deigns to speak for them must be accountable to them for their actions.

In the current government, and especially until a legislature is in place, the need for the continuing invocation of and resort to people's power is urgent. But because of the popularity of the government, people are unlikely to go to the streets to protest each and every act which they disapprove. Thus, they are seeking alternatives to the parliament of the streets from the government itself which must now make known to them the procedures for the regular exercise of people's power. Otherwise, frustrations may build up which can shake their confidence in the government they put to power by such extraordinary means. Some of the issues are:

a. Who are consulted in appointments? People are wary of the "we belong" movement.⁶ What procedures can be set up by which persons nominated to take up important posts are subject to popular scrutiny prior to actual appointment? What are the procedures for recall if certain appointees are perceived and proven to be tainted?

b. What about public ethics and accountability? The public applauds the search for hidden wealth and the redress of the human rights violations and injustices of the previous administration. It is equally concerned about the way the government acts now to maintain its accountability to the people. The first acts are those of an erstwhile opposition newly installed into power; the second are acts of a government secure in its legitimacy which accepts its responsibility and seeks no scapegoats as it presents its performance to the people. While the first has been quite emphasized, there have been less effort towards ensuring the ethical, committed and just acts of the current officials.

The usual answer is for the citizenry to be vigilant: How can this be concretized? Especially, how can this be done in a positive way — not waiting for wrongs to be done and then correcting them, but allowing for alternative policy choices to be discussed before the actual course is decided upon? Again, what is the procedure for consultation? Should citizen councils be created? Should the people, like the party in socialist states, have organizations parallel with the bureaucracy to keep political and administrative officials alert? Should there be regular reports to the people after which the people can air their comments? Would the radio chats of then President-elect Aquino over Radio Veritas or the weekly evening interviews with the President suffice for this purpose?

There is the continuing question: what is people's power? How can a government official recognize what is a truly popular cause and one which is simply espoused by a person/interest group with more resources? In a democracy, this is gauged most easily through voting but elections occur infrequently. Would regular public opinion polling take its place? Is this alternative acceptable to the people?

These are just a few of the concrete areas in which those interested in continuing the use of people's power can devote themselves.

Encouragement of People's power

What Government May Do to Encourage People's Power

All government want more support and less criticism. How can existing groups that have cut their milk-teeth as part of the opposition and which

are now avid supporters of the new regime, continue to provide reasoned critiques to it without being made to feel disloyal or poor sportsmen (because of suspicion that they make those critiques because they were not given government positions)? The real question is: how can criticism again be made a legitimate and vital part of our political system? Remember that in the past regime, much of criticism and dissent was simply defined as "subversion" and dealt with accordingly. Moreover, how can the new government be prevented from developing its own version of the *hakot* groups and the yes-men that blinded the past regime to the erosion of its credibility and legitimacy before the nation?

Within the government itself, the concept of participatory management has been paid lip service for a long time. Real applications may now be thought of, used, and experimented upon. Participatory councils such as those said to be operational at the Ministry of Trade and Industry are examples. However, it must be recalled that "staff meetings" have been in the arsenal of the civil service for a long time. In many cases, their fates have been like "lecture-discussions" which deteriorate into teacher's monologues over time. How would openness to ideas — especially critiques from the staff — be developed in bureaucratic structures where the chief may have the authority of position but may not yet be as comfortable about the authority of his knowledge and leadership? What are the areas which may be opened for discussions by the total organization?

This is particularly difficult now with the possibility of being purged (allowed by Executive Order No. 17) or of being reorganized out hanging over every civil servant's head. The new officials are dismayed with the meekness and lack of initiative displayed by the civil service they have inherited. But this is only to be expected by a government which has extended the hand of reconciliation to every group in the society — the dissidents (Muslim or Marxist), the political prisoners, the military — but has refused to recognize that many civil servants' commitment to the public interest has not waned even during the Marcos period.⁸

Query: What participation, what critiques from within can then be expected from an intimidated bureaucracy given this climate? A bureaucracy operating under a popular democracy must provide service that is accountable and responsive. Emerging from twenty years of authoritarian rule, many sectors of the civil service need to be reoriented so that they can be attuned to the demands of the people they are supposed to serve, and to make reasonable and humanizing departures from rules and regulations without sacrificing the interests of the larger society. However, there is a thin line between making exceptions in order to serve better and departing from rules for corruption purposes. People's organizations may provide watchdog committees or groups to keep bureaucratic behavior effective

and ethical. Related queries that have to be pondered upon include: What kinds of links should the reoriented bureaucracy develop with its clientele so that it can maintain responsibility and responsiveness to them? How can these be developed without prejudicing the interest of unorganized small clients? How can citizen groups such as these function without degenerating into a pressure group for the interests only of its own members?

All bureaucracies develop technical language and closed files which limit the access to knowledge and information of the general public. Under the Marcos regime, this was burlesqued into such lengths that even presidential decrees could be kept secret and public documents — such as annual reports — could be open to only a few. Such limited access facilitated favoritism and corruption. At the same time, we must recognize that the curiosity of the people is insatiable and can become a nuisance at times, taking officials away from more substantive work. Given these, how can we make this government accept the idea that what would be kept secret should be justified while openness is the original principle? At the same time, what management skills would be needed to allow for openness while being able to get things done?

People's power will be truly attained when citizens do not see any clear break between them and the government, when the latter is seen simply as a formal structure to effect their will. Pending that utopia, the government may develop certain advocacy structures that can be regarded by the people as speaking for them within the halls of the state apparatus itself. My top candidate for this role is the *Tanodbayan* — supposedly our version of the ombudsman — which should see itself not as part of the government on its toes. All independent constitutional bodies should define their role this way. But the *Tanodbayan* is special in that unlike the courts, it can be active in seeking out grievances and demanding redress from erring government officials/agencies, functioning within the law but not legalistically. This role could also be played by an independent Civil Service Commission through a revitalized system of discipline and accountability.

However, the job of people advocacy should not be the monopoly of independent bodies. Other agencies can speak for the people, too. Even in the Marcos government, for instance, personnel in such agencies as the Citizens Legal Assistance Office and the Bureau of Sugar Workers played important roles as spokespersons for victims of injustice. President Magsaysay's Presidential Complaints and Actions Commission have left good memories on the common people whose ten-centavo telegram made high officials sit up and listen. Some specific questions are however left unresolved. How can the people develop the agencies I have named and others that may be set up to systematically play this role? How can these agencies utilize people's power to enhance their performance?

What Other Institutions May Do to Enhance People's Power

The press now informs, provokes arguments and provides a forum for disagreements. Many newspapers give wide play to letters to the editor through which they become not only news disseminators but also unofficial ombudsmen for the public at large. Many citizens are still euphoric about this newly restored freedom and are using it as the functional equivalent of going to the streets to protest. As regards press freedom, some serious questions are evolving.

Query 1: Does the new government see the mass media as an extension of people's power? Does it take its critiques into account as it makes its decisions? Does it say: "Can we defend this to the Inquirer/Malaya/Times/Bulletin/Business Day, etc." the way they used to say "Can we defend this in Plaza Miranda?"

Query 2: Does the press recognize this? What can people do to make the press more responsible, less scoop-conscious, more thoughtful of the principle of hearing both sides before publishing a controversial story, etc.? If the press is an extension of people's power, then its acts must be subjected to the critique of people's power also.

What about political parties and similar political organizations? In this country, parties are simply organizations that campaign during election periods and dispense political patronage in the event of victory. They are otherwise moribund. Yet they can play important roles in articulating and aggregating demands, analyzing and synthesizing issues, fiscalizing the government (especially the opposition), bringing the government closer to the people (especially the party in power). It would be useful at this point to identify the political parties and organizations currently operating along these lines.

The military has been mentioned as a problem institution under the old government in that it was the main instrument for repressing people's organizations and activities. How can the New Armed Forces be developed now as an ally of such organizations? What massive reorientation will this entail? What civil activities may it undertake which will not be suspected as "counter-insurgency" operations by the populace?

Community and cause-oriented organizations will continue to have a role in the long term. They have succeeded in making their presence felt in government and society. If the above are heeded, they will also develop new responsibilities to the government and to the more organizationally developed sectors such as workers, the peasantry, and the middle classes. A bigger challenge faces these groups which in a sense started it all, they must

not rest on their laurels but should maintain their tasks of political education and conscientization of more people and more communities. This should not be difficult if not for the fact that a number of their leaders are now in government and thus may lose the critical eye that made them so effective in the first place.

Query: Can the organizations maintain a steady set of new leaders and spokespersons to replace those who are drafted into government? Can they continue to be unbiased fiscalizers when they may also be invited (or may want to be invited) to join the government any time? Can they be trusted by the populace to continue to work for the general interest under the circumstances?

Concluding Statements

I hope the listing above will encourage further dialogues and discussions on how people's power and government may work together in the coming days. I have tried to raise the issues and the related questions but have provided few answers. This is because I believe that most of them will have to be thought about and discovered by the key actors: (a) the people and their organizations as they continue to concern themselves with national and local issues; (b) other political institutions as they participate in the democratization process; and (c) the government as it struggles to feel the nation's pulse and lead the people closer towards our collective vision of the good society.

There are many more issues that can be raised but the foregoing may suffice to show that the strength of the people can be harnessed for myriad purposes, and that it is up for all of us to discover and develop ways by which it can be fashioned into an instrument for the realization of full democracy and development in our beloved country.

Endnotes

¹"Hakot" is a Filipino term which means to haul (persons or things) in large numbers, referring to persons paid or coerced to participate in certain political rallies or "mass" gatherings.

²KBL stands for Kilusang Bagong Lipunan, or New Society Movement, the ruling party under the Marcos regime.

³See, for example, the contrast between the successful relocation of the copper smelter from San Juan, Batangas, and the unfruitful protests against the sintering plant in Misamis Oriental, the first conducted through surveys and convocations by the educated groups in San Juan, the second by protests of the displaced poor peasants. I discussed these cases more fully in "Some Issues in the Pursuit of Social Development in the Philippines," *Philippine Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. XXII, No. 2 (April 1978), pp. 140-154.

⁴See, for instance, Gilbert Steiner, *Social Insecurity and the Politics of Welfare* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1966) and Kuldeep Mathur, "Administrative Institution, Political Capacity and India's Strategy for Rural Development" in Inayatullah (ed.), *Approaches to Rural Development: Some Experiences* (Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Centre, 1979), pp. 171-198.

⁵Neil Gilbert, "Assessing the Service Delivery Methods: Some Unsettling Questions," *Welfare in Review* (May-June 1972), pp. 25-33.

⁶"Bulong" is a Filipino word which means "to whisper." This expression is used to refer to the exercise of political influence by getting the ear of the President or another top political official. This is a pun on the "We Belong" Movement, the name of the reformist military group that supported the People's Revolution in February.

⁷Executive Order No. 17 which was signed by President Aquino on May 28, 1986, provides government officials broad powers to dismiss any of their personnel "in the interest of honesty, efficiency and effectiveness." However, there were charges (not without basis) that what has resulted from the implementation of the executive order was apparently hasty, ill-advised and misguided dismissal of civil servants.

⁸Similar sentiments are expressed in "Who Will Defend Our Career Civil Servants?," *Manila Bulletin* (May 7, 1986) p. 9 and "An Appeal in Behalf of the Civil Service," in Domini T. Suarez, "Talk," *Tribune*, June 1986. It may be pointed out that such acts against the civil service often accompany abnormal regime changes. See John H. Herz, "On Reestablishing Democracy After the Downfall of Authoritarian or Dictatorial Regimes," *Comparative Politics* Vol. 10, No. 3 (July 1978), pp. 559-562.