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Reclaiming 'people power' for the people

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In what has been dubbed the "Arab Spring", a wave of demonstrations and protests in the Middle East and North Africa that started in December 2010 has led to the ousting of two leaders – Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14 and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on February 11.

These events took place half a world away, but from the perspective of Philippine President Benigno S Aquino III, clearly, some lessons can be drawn for all countries. For one, they serve as stark reminders that a country's political leadership is beholden to its people and that it should be responsive to the people's dreams and aspirations. President Aquino was speaking at Singapore Management University (SMU) recently, as the distinguished speaker at the [Ho Rih Hwa Leadership in Asia Public Lecture Series \(http://www.smu.edu.sg/hrh/2011/abouthrhiapls.asp\)](http://www.smu.edu.sg/hrh/2011/abouthrhiapls.asp).

Aquino should know. After all, his country is sometimes credited with the introduction of "people power" into the dictionaries of political science as a means of sustained campaigning led by civilians against a political regime with a view towards non-violent revolution. This was what happened between 1983 and 1986, when the country's people took to the streets in their millions, ending the 21-year rule of former president Ferdinand Marcos.

Marcos is by no means alone. "Some of these uprisings have ended peacefully and in a relatively orderly manner. Others have degenerated to violence and uncertainty. Still, others are just starting and the responses of the governments in question will determine whether those leaders survive or thrown out; thrown to the dustbin of history," said Aquino.

Nevertheless, the current unrest aside, Aquino, thinks that there is "renewed optimism in our part of the world." Singapore, the host of his visit, has recovered strongly from the recent downturn. The country better known for its economic efficiency has also been seeing an awakening in its arts and culture, the visitor pointed out. On the other hand, "my country is experiencing a surge in confidence as my government aggressively pushes programmes to encourage private investments, alleviate mass poverty and battle corruption," he said.

Government for the people

Going to the core of his speech, entitled 'Consensus-Building and Responsive Governance', Aquino said: "This reaffirms two fundamental truths. First, governments exist at the sufferance and authority of its people, regardless of political system. And, second, the government's strength lies in its responsiveness to its people's dreams and aspirations."

What this means is that when a political regime loses sight of these two truisms and is instead solely focused on the preservation of its power, it is inevitable then that change will come.

"This change is often initiated by disaffected youth – mostly well-educated and eager for professional rewards that the economy is too weak to offer," he explained. "And when they coalesce with the middle class, the collective voice becomes too strong for tyrants to ignore."

Government by the people

Touching on the Philippines' own domestic affairs, Aquino conceded that his country's economy over the past decade has been "far from ideal". The problems are manifold and clear. "Yet it appeared that paralysis had crept among our youth who had seemingly grown so cynical and apathetic that the only dream left for them was to leave the country," he said.

But, last year, Aquino noted that new version of 'people power' has emerged. "The same emotions that fuelled the onset of revolution in 1986 (which led to the downfall of Marcos) were harnessed by my people in the Philippines' election of 2010," he said. "The spirit of people power catapulted to the presidency an opposition figure who at first was even reluctant to run."

Whatever reluctance there might be, there was no escaping from the prestige of the illustrious family name, Aquino. Popularly known as "Noynoy", the president is the son of the late Corazon Aquino, who was the country's president from 1986 to 1992. "Cory", as she is fondly called, was the widow of Benigno Aquino Jr, the most serious opposition figure then, and who was assassinated in 1983.

After Corazon Aquino succumbed to cancer in 2009, there was a groundswell of support for her only son (he has four sisters) to run the presidential elections of 2010. In August 2009, a group of lawyers and activists led by Edgardo

Roces formed the Noynoy Aquino for President Movement (NAPM) to collect a million signatures to persuade Aquino to run for presidency. Incidentally, back in 1985, Roces' father, Chino Roces, ran a similar campaign to convince Corazon Aquino to run against Marcos in the 1986 presidential snap elections.

People power

The family background and experience has probably helped to even sharpen Aquino's perceptivity to the importance of respecting the will and power of the people. "You see, in history, from Marcos to Mubarak, the world has marvelled at political titans being toppled by no other means than a collective expression of outrage by the unarmed," he said.

"What these toppled leaders have in common was that they came to represent both the unwillingness and the inability not just for a leader but for an entire governing system to respond to the needs of the times and to the legitimate clamour of their peoples," said Aquino.

More than once has history shown, a country's masses of unemployed youths will be the biggest source of unrest and dissatisfaction. When an increasingly impatient middle class – nudged towards the breaking point -- joins the fray, it is inevitable that they would opt for a revolution to rid the ailing statesmen presiding over an ailing economy. But, President Aquino cautioned that this is used only as a last resort.

"I would argue that no nation and no people have viewed people power as an end goal but rather as an instrument of last resort," he said. "Those nations that never have had to face people power must seek a meeting of minds with those who have lived through it. If only both can recognise a fundamental lesson about power in general."

The president explained that leaders must remain responsive to the people and let the national institutions continue to evolve especially in changing times of needs and aspirations. He added that fundamentally, everyone wants the same set of things: "prosperity for all, personal and collective security and orderly succession in the leadership, and of course, the rule of law".

"Power lies in the ability to forge the kinds of consensus that allow leaders to recognise the time has come to make way for a new generation of leaders, and where everything from regulations to institutions can be re-fashioned and, in a sense, refreshed to better address the material and aspirational needs of society," he said.

"Southeast Asia has had its people power era. Countries like my own had to resort to people power to bring down governments that would not give way and would not give up, leading Filipinos to give their leaders ultimatums," he added.

Living the shared ambitions

The Philippines and Singapore have their own traditions, histories and particular political institutions. However, "what our systems and institutions have in common is their commitment to remain responsive to the people's needs," he said. Both countries do recognise that if the shared ambitions of its peoples are addressed, it would lead to "social harmony and political solidarity". Otherwise the "rising crescendo of complaints" will ensue.

The crux of it is an insistence on accountability, meritocracy, and abhorrence towards corruption. "This is true in the political sphere and this is true in the business sphere as well," he said.

The president, who once worked in a sugar refining company before entering politics, added that the best companies are not those whose workforce measure professionalism through punching time-cards; rather, they are the ones whose employees are willing to go the extra mile in the pursuit of the shared corporate vision.

To this end, Aquino lauded members of his own cabinet for willingly taking a pay cut in the name of public service. "I'm fortunate to have a committed cabinet, members of which have salaries that would amount to perhaps a single digit percentage of their expense accounts had they chosen to remain in the private sector," he said. "But instead they chose to join the Philippine people at this time of hope."

Seeking to somewhat draw closer links between the two countries, Aquino said that both Philippines and Singapore leaders are committed to fulfilling the visions for their respective states. "Within our own cultural and political milieus, we have arrived at the political consensus where we have our respective mechanisms for succession, where we have institutions that have adapted and are adaptive to rapidly changing economic and demographic conditions, and where increasingly, the autonomy of the individual is being harmonised with the legitimate concerns of the whole," he said.

"It has taken longer for some of us and shorter for others, but we have already put in place the necessary institutions and have arrived at the vital consensus that can move our respective countries forward and forge increasingly deeper and more meaningful ties among Asean nations," said Aquino.

On the right tracks

Drawing reference back to the events of Middle East and North Africa, Aquino said: "Those of you who ask if this could happen here in our part of the world where it all began need to ask only one question: have our governments, whatever form they take, been able to successfully address the economic and political aspirations of the respective peoples?"

He believes to this question, Singapore can "clearly answer in the affirmative". "Your government's vision and your people's passion to seeing its fulfillment serves as an inspiration to me and my people".

"My nation has its own challenges to overcome but I am certain that no one doubts that we are on the right track. We are well on our way to healing our wounded national psyche. We are ridding ourselves of the cycle of despair and mediocrity," said the president.

He said the whole world is also seeing this today where a new form of people power are casting aside the "old, ailing ways" in favour of "new aspirations and new solutions", where the spirit of hope overcomes the cynicism, paralysis and apathy. "The Filipino people will reclaim its rightful place in the community of nations," Aquino promised.

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