

PEOPLE POWER: PHILIPPINES TO EGYPT

"Occupation: Housewife." Last office held: valedictorian of her sixth-grade class. The chief and only political strengths of the novice candidate for the highest office in the land were her innocence of politics and the moral symbolism of her name. In Spanish, Corazon means "heart"; to Filipinos, Aquino meant her husband, Benigno Aquino, the chief rival of President Ferdinand Marcos. When the February 7, 1986 snap election cast Marcos as the winner, real life drama unfolded on the international stage to protest. When Marcos called out troops, old women hugged armed militia while little girls offered flowers to the soldiers. Nuns kneeling and praying the rosary placed themselves between Marcos' tanks and the people. The quiet heroism of Filipinos across the entire country reminded Marcos loyalists that they were all brothers and led to their defections. At the end of February, the peaceful revolution prevailed. Marcos flew to Hawaii in exile. Cory Aquino raised her hand to take her oath of office, and was inaugurated to her rightful place as the duly elected leader of the Philippines.

Corazon Aquino, the shy housewife who was drawn by fate into an arena characterized by macho politics, won her country's hearts with her deep felt sense of humanity, calmness, and grace. Through her soft spoken leading of civil disobedience, she restored the promises of democracy without bloodshed. Her heritage of nobility as a daughter in the prominent Cojuangco family was fortified by her living faith in God. For her determination and courage in leading a democratic revolution that riveted the world, Time Magazine named Corazon Aquino its "Woman of the Year" for 1986.

No doubt there are a few of us for whom the images last week of Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo, Egypt brought memories of those days of February 1986, when another U.S. ally, Ferdinand Marcos, relinquished his presidency. The sight of Egyptians offering flowers to the soldiers paralleled the Filipinos whose offering of a token of national unity softened the hearts of military men. Like the "People Power" revolution in the Philippines, where General Fidel Ramos and Minister of National Defense Juan Ponce Enrile changed over to support Aquino, the decision of the army in Egypt to break away from Mubarak to carry out the will of the people was key to his stepping down. The only seeming counterpart missing from the Egyptian scene was one for Cardinal Jaime Sin, who brought the strong influence of religion to pressure the departure of Ferdinand Marcos.

Mubarak held the reins of power in Egypt for nearly 30 years; Marcos was in office 20 years. Both were regarded as allies of the U.S. and their stories parallel each other in other ways.

The heavy investment in infrastructure during Marcos' first term (1965-69) made him so popular that he won re-election in 1969. The loans came due right after, however, leaving the country largely in debt and plunging it into desperate economic conditions. It was in his second term that Marcos elevated himself to cult status, requiring his official portrait displayed at all businesses or schools on pain of closure for failure to do so and displacing billboard ads across the nation with his propaganda. The decisions of the Marcos Administration, however, left much of the country in want. Filipino university students took to the streets in massive rallies and demonstrations. After three years of civil unrest, Marcos responded by declaring martial law in 1972. Justifying it to quell the active criticism, he said the times were too tumultuous to be left to traditional democracy.

Two years after Ninoy Aquino was assassinated, Marcos called a snap election. Ninoy's widow Corazon was catapulted into the campaign by a nomination of one million signatures. She promised

to restore democracy to the weary nation. When the election left Marcos in power, Aquino responded by calling for mass civil disobedience. Eighteen days later, on February 25, 1986, the People Power Revolution ousted Marcos and Aquino was installed as President of the Philippines.

Hosni Mubarak became president of Egypt in 1981, after the assassination of President Anwar al Sadat. Unlike Sadat, Mubarak survived six attempts on his life. His tight hold on the presidency was secured by an Egyptian constitution restriction that prohibited anyone from running against the President, giving that right to parliament. Manipulating this rule, Mubarak would have himself nominated by the largely rubber stamp parliament and confirmed without opposition in a referendum.

On January 25, 2011, a nationwide series of riots, rallies, labor strikes, street demonstrations, marches, and violent clashes began, the largest in Cairo and Alexandria. Their legal, political, and economic grievances were many: high unemployment, low minimum wages, high food prices, uncontrollable corruption, lack of free elections, lack of free speech, police brutality, and oppressive life under "emergency law." On February 1, in the "March of the Millions," protestors demanded the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, an end of its corruption and police repression, and the restoration of democracy. The protests escalated, and in the 18 day episode, more than a 300 people died and over 3000 were injured. Cairo was described as a "war zone," leading foreign governments to try to evacuate their citizens from Egypt. After the Egyptian Army defected to the side of the people and the U.S. expressed its belief that the presidency was at its end, Mubarak resigned on February 11, "Farewell Friday." As Egyptian Mohammed El Baradei said, "Egypt is free."

The dramatic events of both then and now should remind us how privileged we are to live in peace and freedom, in a political structure that openly accepts challengers, peacefully permits the transition of power, and holds our government officials to their role of providing for the general welfare not their own personal gain. Let us with humility give thanks that our nation, even with its flaws, stands as a testament to the world for this precious freedom we enjoy.