

Walking on EDSA

The train heaves with an electronic whirr as it speeds through on its way to Ortigas. As the incomprehensible sight of traffic tangled in towering interchanges and the masses of people moving about their day breeze past the window, a sudden view comes into frame: the Virgin Mary, the Queen of Peace, with her maternal gaze pacific and almost melancholic, standing alone and golden at the heart of EDSA. For a moment, I share in that peace, that moment of gold, until an off-ramp wrestles itself back into view.

To be walking on EDSA feels at once momentous and empty. Since I have spent most of my life outside Manila on an island 500 miles away, it held a mythic stature in my story of the Philippines. I came to study in Manila bearing the weight of monuments I have made for EDSA in my mind, forever revering the day the world watched the future of democratization be heralded by Filipinos and our yellow ribbons, flowers, and rosaries. But to walk on EDSA is to walk on the unnavigable, narrow pavement caked in spit and remnants of other matter now reduced to a black tar, to have a fleeting glance of what may well be someone's bed for the night amid the shuffling of feet, to inhale the prickly, warm air permeating, nauseating—until I am left with the question: *Where has EDSA gone?*

When we walk on EDSA, we walk in the shadows of monuments, but we tend to forget. The peaceful revolution of 1986 and the painful 21-year chapter of history it closed are heavy memories to bear, and we rightfully give them the reverence they deserve for the important place they hold in our constant endeavor to define ourselves as a people and to write our story as a nation. However, in so doing, and despite the best of intentions, we also worship memory to the death of its meaning, often condensing it into platitudes (think the “fight for freedom,” the

“people power”) that seem unimportant to the working, the commuting, the studying, the everyday making-a-living of a country now tasked with the Filipino statecraft. Our enemy, therefore, is not oblivion; it is apathy—our collective loss of meaning and purpose for why we walk on EDSA.

And so, when one ponders the perennial problems of our country today, it is not a question of heroes. The storied events of the revolutions of 1896 and 1986 must not be anachronistically paraded, but rather situated in their proper context, as irrupting moments of the Filipino people contending with the evolving faces of power and reality. The two revolutions together make a century of our country asking itself its hardest questions, and it is in these questions that reveal their most potent power. A deeper reverence for their legacies is to make ourselves bold enough to contend with and to make sense of the dilemmas and frictions that these revolutions have brought to light and, more importantly, be more capable of supplying our own answers.

Published in the propagandist paper *La Solidaridad* in four parts between 1889 and 1890, José Rizal’s *Filipinas dentro de cien años* (The Philippines a century hence) captured the malaise sweeping over the then-colony. Rizal observed that the centuries of a brutalizing ruling caste, poverty, and subjecting natives to “divide and conquer” would end up in what he sensed: “the spirit of the nation has been aroused, and a common misfortune, a common debasement, has united all the inhabitants of the Islands.” The Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century saw its fundamental transformation from a feudal agrarian society to an actor in global trade. Beneath this economic transformation was the unraveling of Spanish rule, pressured by the increasing disillusionment of the wealthy and the begrunted lower classes bearing the brunt of the emerging new economy.

Rizal, a witness to this transformation, rightly felt that the evolving context of the Philippines meant that a transformation in government was inevitable, led either by a violent mass uprising or a “peaceful and fruitful” one from the upper classes. The eventual emergence of the disillusioned Katipunan as a radical iteration of the propaganda movement, which it now found inadequate, made manifest its resolve for democratic self-rule in the country, creating the First Philippine Republic. In the shadow of the dawning Philippine-American War, the Malolos Constitution first articulated the core principles of a budding Filipino republic emerging from centuries of colonial rule, amid an equally troubling time it was conceived in. Yet, the Constitution itself and the friction surrounding matters of structuring the revolution, domestic government, and foreign affairs, the dilemma of government and conflicting interests of the new country began to show.

Emerging from a troubled past, the Malolos Constitution laid the groundwork for restoring justice to its own people by its own terms, but still held remnants of elite capture in the form of a less-than-democratic legislature and restrictive voting rights.

The events of the 1896 revolution cannot be taken as a monolith, but rather as a product of interactions enmeshed in conflicting realities. So too is the context of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. Despite its often singular treatment as a signpost of our history, Abinales and Amoroso write in *State and Society in the Philippines*:

...we should also remember what people power was *not*, in the political sense. It was *not* an act of unmediated love of nation or a dissolving of social divisions. Filipinos came to EDSA as members of social forces opposing the dictatorship in varying degrees for varying lengths of time—as student activists, Catholics, business executives, or urban-poor leaders.

Post-EDSA, President Corazon Aquino had to contend with the emerging conflicting interests of the broad coalition of civil society that brought down Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. This manifested not only in the framing of the 1987 Constitution but also in key and contentious national issues that defined her administration, including the debt crisis left behind by the fleeing Marcos as a result of decades of crony capitalism, military discontent beleaguering her administration, and the demand for land reform in the country.

The pressing realities of running a Filipino nation and the ideals of the revolutions that have earned us our freedom have resulted in the present dilemma we face today. This is not to say that the revolutions themselves were useless in practice; in fact, the revolutions of 1896 and 1986 have given us our clearest, most unambiguous articulations of our Filipino-ness in the national imagination. From Emilio Jacinto's *Kartilya ng Katipunan* that implored Filipinos be "consecrated to a lofty and reasonable purpose" to Benigno Aquino Jr., concluding that "The Filipino is worth dying for." The question now is whether, in the face of the mirrors they hold up to our society, we still choose to surrender to the unraveling forces of fracture. Commemoration of our revolutions as monoliths alone will not suffice. To situate these events in Philippine history is to locate them within ourselves in the hope that we, too, could understand what it is to be Filipino.

And today, society writhes with a new malaise, perhaps the same one with a different name. The same pressing questions of 1896 and 1986 loom as specters over our project of nationhood, and the silent gaze of the Virgin Mary greets the massing Filipino people once again. Systemic corruption, the vastness of embedded patronage, and the unfulfilled promises of social justice and social transformation altogether reveal a crisis of institutional strain, one potentially fatal, testing the integrity of the national fabric that binds.

It is the image of a fatal fracture that enters the imagination. The lessons of post-Katipunan and post-EDSA warn of fissures that abound in the Philippines: political, social, cultural, and economic, all corroding the resolve that defined our revolutions. The country in 2036 will especially have to weather the potential and near-inevitable “death by a thousand cuts” described by Nobel laureate Maria Ressa.

In the age of the algorithm, where our lives are increasingly inhabited within digital spaces, where our perception of the world becomes increasingly shaped by information indexed, artificially generated, weaponized, and commodified, and where *memory* now abounds on the scale of terabytes and zettabytes, the soul of EDSA at fifty does not risk a death in forgetting, but in the death of its meaning. The true failure of EDSA would be the day a Filipino no longer sees their place in it.

This threat is more so when, in 2036, the fissures of the country no longer encompass our lived experiences, but entire realities we locate ourselves within. The emergence of populism that has become a potent force today, occupying the divides of this country, has found a home in weaponized social media. In 2036, echo chambers permeate entire minds, becoming the new frontier where forces that sow inequity and injustice not only taint discourse but also create truths. Infinite fracture. A death by a thousand cuts.

A Filipino has once contemplated the image of a fatal fracture. Taken away by blindfold and thrown naked in a cell, Benigno Aquino Jr. sensed in the situation the immediate prospect of execution. “It was not to kill him yet, but to break him first, and with him, break the compelling proof that men can stand up to a dictatorship,” said his wife, Corazon Aquino. It was this experience in mind that Aquino likened his life to a dying candle in the dark. Grasping at straws,

hoping that one gathers its melted wax, hoping that “For another fleeting moment/My candle can once again/Light the dark,/Be of service/One more time.”

We walk in the shadows of monuments, but we tend to forget. We must actively remember that we exist in and contribute to Asia’s oldest, most daring experiment of democracy. We locate ourselves in this constant negotiation, the writing and rewriting, the defining and redefining, the constructive and rebuilding endeavor of charting the Filipino story.

We are here. Walking on EDSA. Every day.