

## THE TORONTO WORKERS HISTORY PROJECT

Webinar on February 28, 2023

On the 50<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary of CAMD (the Coalition Against the Marcos Dictatorship)

A paper presented on “Memory and Forgetfulness”

By Jojo Geronimo, a member of CAMDI

Happy to be here with you all, friends and comrades, historians and activists from Toronto and beyond. It's great that Toronto Workers History Project (TWHP) is the sponsor of our conversation tonite. **History and memorialization are part of our struggle** – an essential part of all workers' struggle. *CAMD (Coalition Against the Marcos Dictatorship)*, was privileged to have found a home in Toronto as well as in other diasporas where Filipino workers live and work.

My task tonight is to celebrate the good work of the Coalition – and like any good student of history, to try to share my own understanding as part of an evolving collective analysis of a shared struggle. Specifically, I will attempt to connect the dots – between what was then (the past) and now (the present); between the here (Philippines) and there (Toronto). And to ask “where are we now?” Of course, it's an impossible task. So welcome - again - to an exciting evening!

To begin, let me recall what a dedicated and wise CAMD veteran, our friend Bernie Consul, once said at one of our rare CAMD get togethers, years after the Marcos and family fled the country. **SO WAS IT WORTH IT? WHAT'S THE USE OF ALL THAT STRIVING AND SACRIFICE WE MADE IN CAMD?**

It was and is a difficult question – difficult to articulate, difficult to hear, and no easy answers to give.

**But a necessary and critical question to ask**, especially these days. Then as now, there are many answers to the question, many ways of remembering **EDSA** People Power revolt. Memory – and history – is a contested territory. For those whose story wins, they win the battle.

For there is the **STORY OF THE BATTLE** – the story of Martial Law, the story of **EDSA PEOPLE POWER REVOLT**, the story of CAMD – **and there is THE BATTLE OVER THE STORY. Who tells the story of the battle determines who wins the war.**

“THE STRUGGLE OF MAN AGAINST POWER” (OPPRESSIVE POWER that is) – “IS THE STRUGGLE OF MEMORY AGAINST FORGETTING”, to quote *Milan Kundera*. Forget, and you lose. Remember, and you fight another day. To forget is to concede what you've fought for; to remember is to assert **why** we joined the fight in the first place and **why** it must continue into generations to come.

Today, 37 years after EDSA -IT IS back – not people power – but the Marcos rule, with Marcos Jr. now president of the Philippines.

So back to the question - *What happened?* was EDSA worth it? **What did we do wrong? And what did we do right?** Both questions have to be asked. The story of the battle has more than one side, many different story lines. *Who won, who lost? What was won, what was lost?* So, to celebrate CAMD we need to bring in the big story – the **BIG QUESTION: was the resistance movement against the dictatorship worth it all? What did the movement really accomplish?**

Jojo Geronimo/CAMD 50<sup>TH</sup>/TWHP

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We know now that Marcos and family fled the country – but they also came back to the scene of their crime. They started right away to plan for their return to, as Marcos Jr said lately, “**defend ourselves, not only the legacy of my father, but also our own survival**”. They even managed to bring back Marcos’ remains from Hawaii and interred them in the Libingan ng mga Bayani, the nation’s Heroes Cemetery.

**THEIR story of Martial Law** and the EDSA revolution is simple and straight forward: Martial Law for them was a “the golden age” of Philippine history. And they were the victims. We are the bad guys.

So one question tonight could be **HOW did they do it**, this quick reversal of fortunes, **from villain to victim, and from victim to victor**. But luckily we won’t spend time on this tonight because I think many people have explored this question well enough. Maria Ressa of Rappler in her documentary **A Thousand Cuts** told the story of disinformation and lies on a massive scale, specifically how *Cambridge Analytica* the global digital consultancy harvested Facebook data from millions of users to rebrand the Marcos image that ultimately brought them back to power.

So one question I suggest for tonight is **WHY** did their plan succeed? Put another way, WHY did all this disinformation and historical revisionism, the lies and “alternative realities” – **Why DO they succeed, not only in the Philippines** but in other similar situations?

**Let’s take Toronto politics**. Doug Ford offered “a buck a beer”, right? That won’t work for you or me - and so we laughed. But a buck (for) a beer is an intoxicating brew – it will put you to sleep, and make you forget all the worries in the world. It reduces complex political analysis to a simple equation. *It takes care of the simplest needs in the simplest and direct way of immediate satisfaction*. (If this sounds populism to you, you’re probably right.)

In the Philippines, it wasn’t “a buck for a beer”. But what the Marcos campaign offered was equally intoxicating. **It played on the hopes and fears of people**, without addressing their hopes and by exploiting their fears.

I saw this at last year’s presidential election (I was here in the Philippines then). I saw what Paulo Freire says in his analysis of oppression. How the poor are not just exploited, they’re also oppressed, their memories blurred and manipulated, the harsh realities of their lives disguised – and they don’t see they’re being exploited.

I was with a group going door to door canvassing during the campaign, and a question we asked people at the doorstep was, **who do you have in mind for the next president** (in Tagalog, it’s more subtle than that, we ask, “what does your heart say who you should vote for?”). 80 % of the time we get a non-answer. Silence. Avoidance. Polite responses. But no wonder, we were in “Duterte country”. You don’t open your mouth. The local elites control just about everything. They know where everybody’s at.

But then I met this man sitting by the curb side - let’s call him Fernando – he was sitting in front of a huge house all painted with the colors of the Marcos campaign – bright green and red, as opposed to the pink of Robredo, the opposition candidate (*our candidate*). Fernando works for the owner of the big house. He says to me, *Marcos has been good to my employer, the owner of the big house. And the employer has been good to me*. Now get this: Martial law was good to his boss, the owner of the big house, and the boss has been good to him, one of the caretakers. Therefore martial law was good for him. **Talk of trickle down economy!**

**Multiple this one conversation a million times, with millions of caretakers of big houses, and you have fertile** and receptive ground for economic dependency, manipulation, corruption – ultimately, denial of reality and silence as the first recourse for survival. In this climate of silence and fear, lies and misinformation thrive. (Add on top of it the real possibility of a violent reprisal for speaking out, and you get oppression with exploitation.)

Jojo Geronimo/CAMD 50<sup>TH</sup>/TWHP

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So Fernando submerged his needs and interests beneath those of his boss. You cannot attack the boss, for the boss is not an oppressor to him, but a savior. But even more insidious is the effect of *divide and conquer* among the workers. Oppressed and oppressor merged as one – the oppressed defends the oppressor! And it's worker against worker. (In my work in anti-racism education, I often use the analogy, "Columbus lives in my heart " - unless I wake up and kick him out. I grew up under a racist colonial system".)

(I followed up with a second question, "How about all those innocent people who were killed during martial law?". His answer: "I don't get involved with those (subversive) matters". I said, "But look at me, I was arrested and jailed, do I look like a subversive to you?" End of conversation.)

It is in this context that the scheme of Marcos worked: he didn't even have to bribe or threaten, he just has to spread the rumor that if he wins he will give every Filipino a million pesos each!! I spent hours talking to my neighbors – arguing about the so called Tallano **gold** – I was told there's more than enough for every Pilipino because Marcos has tons and tons of these gold bars!

Did the lie work? Not all the time. But it worked often enough. One lie from him, and the trolls of social media did the rest.

This promise of the million pesos per Filipino meets the hopes and fears of the masses, like the buck for beer by Doug Ford. This is almost unbelievable until you actually hear people defend these lies and contortion of reality. It is in this environment where the most fantastical lie will work, it is here where silence and manipulation grow. **As Maria Ressa says, when there is no truth, there is no trust, when there is no trust there is no community. No hope.**

But aside from lies, there is always in your face intimidation and violence. It's not because people are gullible and naïve. But if they're dependent, disempowered, and threatened – **they're easy prey to disinformation and lies.**

Their first defense therefore is silence and denial. So we say our first task is to engage with people, help them break the silence. **Does that ever happen?** Yes it does, many times. Quickly – here's a blast from the past: When the **first quarter storm** of 1970 broke out in 1970, we saw open defiance that **re-ignited the student and youth movement** that then grew into widespread popular resistance **leading to the anti-dictatorship and democracy movement of which CAMD was a part.**

A few years later, in 1978 Ninoy Aquino formed the **coalition LABAN – meaning FIGHT!** – when he ran for the interim National Assembly under martial law from his prison jail – and on the eve of the elections, he asked people to make noise, ear splitting, continuous banging noise – a noise barrage - with anything they had. (He and all twelve opposition candidates lost the elections and in 1983, Ninoy was assassinated by his military escorts upon his arrival at the airport after 3 years of political exile. But once again the people rose – two (2) million people joined Ninoy Aquino's funeral cortege or lined the streets, crying in defiance – **DI KA NAGIISA (YOU ARE NOT ALONE!** And that moment led three years later **to EDSA where millions filled the street which fronted two military camps, faced down the tanks, and on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the confrontation kicked Marcos and his family out of the country.)**

But then the "betrayal" of EDSA came soon after that shining moment.

But – **if I were to tell the story** – the Spirit of EDSA lives on, to keep alive the unfinished revolution. **EDSA was 1986.** The Philippine revolution against Spain broke out in **1896**, a hundred years apart. *That* revolution we’ve always called also **an unfinished revolution.**

Latest survey a few months ago says 62% of the adult population believe the spirit of EDSA lives, it was worth the fight. When asked, many of **the survivors and victims of martial law** responded, yes, they will do it again – *join, get arrested, jailed, tortured.* They have no other choice, some said, but to fight in the face of naked oppression.

So **that perhaps** is part of the answer to Ka Bernie’s question: **was CAMD worth all the sacrifice?** Historically, across generations, the answer has been an unqualified YES. The struggle continues. That’s what I heard when I was in Toronto last summer at the SONA NG BAYAN (SONA – State of the Nation) organized by a united opposition, the people’s state of the nation address, to CHALLENGE the inaugural address of President Marcos Jr.

But right now the picture looks grim – déjà vu - but not hopeless. For hope begins by remembering and understanding how oppression works, how subjective hopelessness combined with objective forms of violence are used by the power elite to force their will on the working poor.

And this brings us back to the post EDSA Revolution – **why it failed, (or, that is how some people remember it)** But No, it did not fail. We failed the promise of EDSA - but if we remember EDSA the right way, we can do it again.

In 1999 a conference was held in Manila called: **MEMORY, TRUTH TELLING AND THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE: A Conference on the Legacies of the Marcos Dictatorship.**

One of the papers presented at the conference said **EDSA failed because our memory failed.**

(Perhaps it was a failure of memory, but twenty some years after that conference, I think we have the benefit of hindsight. It was as much a case of “memory theft” as “failure of memory”. We failed because they “stole our memory” from us, desecrated it, erased it, and re-placed it with a poor and ugly fake, full of twisted lies, half truths, and systematic disinformation.)

So the planned Truth Commission did not materialize. Forgetfulness triumphed over memory, (or rather historical revisionism triumphed over truth.) Then denial followed. Museums were not built, except for a poorly resourced private foundation but still much loved, The Bantayog ng Mga Bayani or Shrine of heroes. The history curriculum of martial law atrocities was never written and taught in schools, although The Human Rights and Victims Reparation and Recognition Act “provides for an institutional mechanism on how victims of human rights violations during the Marcos regime are to be compensated and documentation of said violations.”

And last year, they started to raid libraries and remove so called forbidden subversive **books**. They even banned a series of children’s books like these. All these efforts just to erase the memory of our resistance, the inner fight that lights up the movement. (All this brutal and systemic effort intended to reduce the historical narrative of EDSA as a people’s revolution against a dictatorship to simply a family quarrel between two warring political dynasties of the Aquinos vs. the Marcoses).

In contrast, I went to Vietnam and saw the amazing WAR REMANTS MUSEUM a tribute to decades of Vietnamese struggle against US imperialism – Cambodia has its genocide museum, and countries in south America have their tribunal, truth commissions, amnesties so on. Canada has its own Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address the genocide of First Nations, although it needs more work.

So kudos to TWHP – for keeping the fire burning, for remembering even the painful moments because it is in these memories that hope lies dormant, to rise up one day. First we grieve, we say, then we organize. Remember martial law, EDSA revolt, and CAMD and all the acts and moments of resistance. Never forget. No to dictatorship and |No to |martial law.

(To close, let me quote from John Carroll’s paper presented in the conference on the “Legacies of the Marcos dictatorship”:

*“My concern then is that we, in the Philippines, are in a state of denial with regards to the crimes of the Marcos regime. And that the willingness to forget these massive crimes against the nation and against communities and against individuals, reflect the weakness of the common conscience, a weakness of the nation and of the common good. And that unless the nation rises up to vindicate and reaffirm those values, it may be condemned to wander forever in the wilderness of valueless powerplays among the elite”.*

*Punishment of a crime is not, and I repeat, is not a matter of revenge, or even of justice for the victim. Punishment for crime is the community rising up to reaffirm one of its values when this value has been violated.*

*“Other nations...acted in the belief that a sober recording of the facts, even gruesome memorials in Cambodia and the skulls of Pol Pot’s victims on display there, lists of victims engraved on the walls for future generations to see, publications of the names of the torturers and killers, all this will somehow – beyond the shock and the shame – be a re-affirmation of values violated and the assurance that will never happen again.”*

**POSTSCRIPT: Slective QUOTATIONS FROM THE BOOK MEMORY, TRUTH TELLING AND THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE: A Conference oe Legacies of the Marcos Dictatorship.**

From John Carroll’s paper:

“The desire for “stability and order” prevailed over the desire to bring out the truth. The same thing happened after the Japanese occupation during World II. The “collaborators” among the Philippine political elite were not prosecuted because they the political elite came back to power and were unwilling to prosecute their own. “Elite solidarity” erased the memory of the crimes during the period of the puppet regime...

A People’s Court, which was to deal with collaboration cases, was proposed, “but of more than 5000 cases filed before the Court, only 156 had resulted in conviction.”

“For the coherence of the elite was not surprising, for their mandate to rule had been repeatedly renewed by the Filipino people”. (quoted from Golay)

“Stability and the survival of the regime thus came to take priority over justice issues once again. Members of the elite were re-elected and retained their landholdings and political bases.... The new regime needed the participation and support of these families if it wanted to maintain both stability and control.”

“We need to speak truth to power.”

“Thirteen years after EDSA, the Filipino people still have not made a definite choice between false reconciliation based on forgetfulness, oblivion, and deceit and one based on truth and justice.... Indeed sometimes our collective memory seems to be a blank slate for the powerful to write on.” P 73

Various countries have tried truth commissions, trials, amnesties. But I believe Filipinos have to do is *tell our story.*” Maria Serena L Diiokno

“Our memory of martial law is also, part of an unfinished, larger national project to build a community of Filipinos on solid, equitable, and just foundations.” – P. 79 (John Carroll)