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**Beyond EDSA: A Quiet Revolution at
Commonwealth Avenue**

by

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Abstract

On the 20th anniversary of “Ninoy” Aquino’s death, we revisit the alignment of forces and beliefs at EDSA ’86 and argue how the *powerless state* became the historic compromise struck among mutually distrusting and loathing partners. The 1987 Constitution, bearing the brunt of these fissures, reaffirmed the powerless state. The hope was that the unresolved contradictions will be leapfrogged with the delivery of the democratic dividends. The powerless state, however, of itself and apart from pure bouts of luck did not deliver these dividends. With crises come external pressures to change but whose outcome is reversible; with crises also come *demagogues* promising nirvana at the end of the rainbow to justify a power grab. Incapacity to punish means that the next coup is not a question of whether but a question of when. But there could also emerge *demiurges* demanding attention not with empty promises but with a history of tangible beneficial facts-on-the-ground. The stirrings in “Commonwealth Avenue,” which followed “Baclaran” which followed “Riverbanks, Marikina” have the smell and feel of a new order, a new ethic and a new technology. The paper explores how state power got locally transformed into a rich harvest of public goods resulting in a positive feedback loop and how this loop may be scaled up. EDSA failed to find closure in the powerless state. Will it find closure in Commonwealth Avenue?

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PART ONE: THE LEGACY of EDSA

I. INTRODUCTION

August 21, 2003 marks the 20th anniversary of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino’s assassination. It was the event that ignited the social upheaval that culminated in the so-called EDSA I or “Edsa Revolution” which ended the Marcos rule and restored democracy. Following the deposal of the Marcos dictatorship, democratic political rights (freedom of the press, the right to vote, the writ of habeas corpus, e.g.) were restored *de jure*. Two decades removed, the jury is still out on whether those rights have, indeed, been restored *de facto*. When voters continue, and arguably rationally in the ambit of dire poverty, to sell their votes; when electoral “progress” beyond vote-buying takes the more sinister form of election vote-count buying; when freedom of the press is in the public mind less about truth than about envelopes, the case in favor of EDSA ‘86-as-revolution remains weak. It has not yet falsified what some claim that it was just a restoration of the social elite’s unearned privileges which were for a while usurped by the deposed autocrat, allegedly, for a higher purpose. Until and unless the economic dividends of democracy become incontestable for all, this doubt will linger, and demagogues and charlatans will drape idealism upon adventurism to topple it.

II. THE SHADOW of EDSA ‘86

In the subsequent frenzy to re-assert those democratic rights and enshrine one’s favorite claims, a fundamental element of the democratic project fell off: democratic responsibility. Out went the idea that “I owe democracy”; in came the conviction that “democracy owes me.” The indecent tug-of-war over the remanded Marcos billions from Switzerland is a small but eloquent commentary. The orgy of the Marcos grand larceny now seemed celebrated less in its rejection than in imitation. Gone is the regime but hardly its ethos.

The alignment of forces after the dictatorship holds lessons for the present. On one side was the military, ready to pounce and enforce its imagined birthright hastily articulated in barely coherent national recovery programs. On the other were the multi-hued political opponents of the Marcos regime, cobbled together by little more than a hatred of the Marcos regime and a fear of the military takeover. At the center was a power vacuum, *nee* the Cory Aquino Constitutional Dictatorship, which was effectively at the mercy of the dangerously balkanized military whose rules of engagement and endearment put classmates and mistahs *uber alles*. President Aquino, unsullied in intent, was as much a paper as a reluctant dictator. The chain-of-command loyalty, debauched and betrayed by Marcos, did not extend beyond the uniformed if deeply fissured brotherhood.

The fundamental democratic enterprise of the Aquino watch was the prevention of military takeover and the preservation of the democratic space. It was a race to outflank the restive military both by active accommodation (e.g., cabinet portfolios and a senate seats for Marcos lackeys) and by dissuasion behind a still-to-be fleshed out Maginot line of political legitimacy. The latter centered on the drafting and popular approval of the 1987 Constitution. If overwhelming approval could be secured for the 1987 Constitution, it would be anti-people and against world opinion to sweep it aside. The fine print mattered little. Indeed, few supporters even cared to read it. The subsequent overwhelming vote in favor was less a vote for the inherent merits of the 1987 Constitution than a vote against military adventurism.

To ensure overwhelming approval, the Constitution had to be rendered generous in one political facet: *inclusiveness*. It had to make one and all a stakeholder by being an explicit registry of sectoral demands, regardless of whether or not those diverse demands were consistent. The embrace of undefined favorite shiboliths was the ingenious instrument of universal registry. Undefined deliverables are at once always and never delivered. They are a fool’s bounty. Considerations, deemed essential in less precarious times – internal consistency, economy of ideas and precision in language, long-term resilience to accommodate new

technologies and new responses – these were of secondary importance. Other stakeholder come-ons (e.g., CARL and the Lina Law) soon followed. In a manner of speaking, the difficult terrain that had to be negotiated dictated the use of spiked wheels. To ride the same wheels in the racetrack of economic progress would be another matter.

Implicit in this constitutional strategy but perhaps subliminally welcomed by all, was an affirmation of a *powerless state*. The constitutional overload meant that subsequent governments could be constitutionally challenged at every turn. The sale of Manila Hotel to a Malaysian group was challenged and revoked on national patrimony grounds. Empowerment took the form of “cheap veto”. The numerous calling cards in the 1987 Constitution meant, in effect, that interest groups were unwilling to entrust future policies to the discretion and wisdom of subsequent governments and future laws. Subsequent political contexts and decisions would be forever slanted by those calling cards, heavily circumscribing the power to define and pursue the architecture of the future. To advance subsequent governments, either had to wade through the mudflats of lawsuits or bribe its way through. The latter fitted the powerless state to a tee.

The 1987 constitution, however, did not create the powerless state but only reaffirmed it. Marcos had disemboweled the organs of the state in order to create a pyramid that apexed in his person. This made the dictator imperative. With Marcos gone, the Philippines suddenly had to wobble along on a set of moribund institutions. This prescribed a powerless state. Which is why even the late Jose “Pepe” Diokno opined that another (hopefully benevolent) dictator might be required to put things to right. The balance of forces allowed only a paper dictator that had neither time nor power to nurse institutions back to health.

III. POWER COASE THEOREM

Unsure of their own shot at the scepter of power, and deeply suspicious of other would-be-kings, interest groups appeared to opt for a *powerless scepter*. This squared well with the profound suspicion of central power embodied in the phrase, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” – a truism the Marcos dictatorship appeared to evidence beyond doubt. Recent history favored the likelihood of abuse of central power rather than its beneficial deployment.

What is known as the *Power Coase Theorem* (Acemoglu, 2002; Nye, 1997) may have been at work: Power will be denied the state by constituent groups if there is no credible commitment that (a) power will be used not for predation but for social production, and (b) that the groups will be apportioned their imagined rightful share of a bigger pie. If, furthermore, certain groups, favored in the spectrum of power, do better than others in the powerless state despite a smaller pie, power will fail to be delegated and the economy will languish.

This state of affairs, it should be noted, was *not unacceptable* to the military: it would retain its own fundamental implicit veto power. The state, all too aware of its limits, would never confront the military with an order to shoot its own insubordinate fair-haired boys. A powerless state, ever barely gasping for political legitimacy, is a convenient gravy train for the military which, by a well-timed saber-rattling, a coup rumor or aborted coup attempt, could pry whatever share it contrives to be its birthright of national resources. In effect, the military is the fourth branch of government, an arrangement that did not figure in old Baron Montesquieu’s democratic playbook. The ₱100m released by Malacañang following the Oakwood coup attempt is prototypical powerless state: swift to mollify, slow because unable to punish. A consensual compromise among political partners riven by mutual distrust and even loathing, the powerless state *papered over* but *did not resolve* the contradictions of the ‘80s. The hope was that these contradictions *could be leapfrogged* by the delivery of the democratic dividends.

IV. THE POWERLESS STATE and DEMOCRATIC DIVIDENDS

A novel and interesting way to share power, the powerless state seems to come straight from *set theory* where the *null set* is a subset of every set. The *null state* (powerless state) is

notionally in the pocket of every group. Though valid in logic, it is illusory in politics, which is anyway synonymous with the art of illusion.

When the state is powerless, power effectively passes into private hands. It means that governance, which should be sole the prerogative of the state, becomes effectively balkanized. Enforcement, regulation, and rule-making become fiefdoms of private interests in or out of government. This is also called the “capture of the organs of the state.” While Marcos’ was a *centralist capture*, the powerless state is a *decentralist capture* of the state. When state power is effectively privatized, it can be bought and sold in a krypto market brokered by “rents”. The powerless state is at the heart of a decentralized market for power over rules and enforcement. Where power, centralist or otherwise, is for sale to the highest bidder, rents replace *value creation* as the dominant source of wealth. Since value-creation is the true and only wellspring of economic progress, the economy languishes.

The dominant belief in 1986 was that “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Routed was the notion that some *non-negotiable quantum* of power in the state is sine-qua-non for nation building. The initial historical condition in 1986, contrary to Hobbes’ chronology, was a nasty and cruel *Leviathan* rather than the “state of warre” where life was “nasty, cruel, brutish and short.” From this vantage point, the latter, indeed, became unwittingly the garden of greener grass. This was what Jose “Pepe” Diokno dreaded: Philippine democracy after 1986 reversing the Hobbesian chronology.

Public goods, both physical and psychical (e.g., public trust), are the glue that bind a nation together and these can only be adequately provided with considerable concentration of power; the power to exact tax revenues and the power to deploy these in beneficial ways, one of these being the enforcement of laws and the protection of basic rights. That power in adequate quantum can be abused is the *fundamental gamble of democracy*.

Thus, a powerless state, however embellished with democratic rhinoplasty, is not a vehicle to deliver the democratic dividends beyond the most paltry. A ship, overloaded with constitutional and legitimatical claims but shorn of the wherewithal to address them, was bound to founder in the shallow waters of unending legal, or worse, legitimatical, challenges. To function effectively a state requires both carrot and stick – carrot where the stick does not work and vice versa. Having no stick, however, it can only move forward with carrots, otherwise called *payola*. And payola only sows a harvest of futility, which cannot trigger a leapfrog of the contradictions of EDSA ‘86.

V. ARCHETYPES of FUTILITY

A. Divide-By-N

A state that cannot credibly commit to a position is forced live by a “divide by n” formula. This is illustrated by the “divide-by-n parable”. A hundred million pesos is available yearly for ten years for bridge construction. At ten million pesos per completed bridge, it can afford ten completed bridges a year or 100 tenth-of-a-bridge at one million pesos each. A completed bridge has a social rate of return of 20% or 20 million pesos per year of operation to ten complete bridges. An incomplete bridge has zero return rate. One hundred congressmen are in a queue for one bridge each. They decide on either Plan A or B.

Plan A: The state gives ten million to ten lottery-lucky congressmen in year 1, and guarantees the same amount to the next ten in year 2, etc., until all are given a bridge.

Plan B: The state gives one million each to all 100 congressmen first year, and same amount in the second. This is the “divide by n formula.”

At the end of nine years, assuming zero depreciation, Plan A realizes ₱0.9b on an investment of ₱0.9b. At the end of nine years, Plan A still has zero return. Plan A can fully repay the principal of a borrowed ₱0.9b. If the state *can commit credibly* and is so recognized, Plan A can be sold to 100 congressmen. If the state cannot be trusted to deliver, the 100 congressmen will opt for “divide by n” reasoning that “tenth of a bridge in hand” is better than “one in the bush.”

Divide-by-n is a rational choice. A tenth-of-a-bridge is at least a concrete reason for hope. Indeed, the tenth-of-a-bridge strategy is often used by public project proponents to ensure, by clever toehold bck-in, next year's allocation. Nor can a powerless state autonomously resist Plan B. Reminds one of CDF. Spinelessness has made divide-by-n the dominant decision rule in the Philippine state sector. Merit and productivity be damned.

B. Parable of the Waterless Dam

A state that cannot enforce will reap the harvest of boondoggles. The "parable of the waterless dam" is illustrative. A dam to irrigate ten thousand hectares is constructed. The catchment area is a lush hardwood forest. The dam takes ten years to build. When the dam is finally completed, the catchment area forest is gone; barren after the illegal loggers have done a thorough job despite the law on illegal logging. The dam is waterless and becomes a boondoggle. But the foreign debt incurred is real and will exact its pound of flesh from the economy for years to come.

C. The Pursuit of Appearances

A powerless state must still to appear to be doing something. When it does, however, good intentions become screaming rackets. Drugs are a recognized menace to society and must be confronted. This sentiment became, in our powerless state, an excuse for gouging the public – the mandatory drug-test for drivers. Every driver, jeepney or tricycle, pays ₱300 for a drug test that catches absolutely no drug addicts excepting those with IQ 20. While it is obvious this law must be repealed, most legislators fear the political contributions of these drug-test fat cats – a conspiracy that Mancur Olson called "the tyranny of the minority" in an electoral democracy. The mandatory drug test is patently unconstitutional: you are guilty until proven innocent *and* you have to pay to prove your innocence. It is the model of all scams.

The pursuit of appearances is obvious even in education undoubtedly an activity most worthy of state involvement. The 120 or so State Colleges and Universities (SCUs) with few exceptions deliver mostly and cynically the chimera rather than the reality of education. There is here no counter-argument to the claim that whatever the powerless state touches turns into muck. Even the jade-grade University of the Philippines (Diliman) is in grave danger of being turned into tinsel by relentless state interference.

And then there is the centerpiece of democracy-the right to vote. Politicians fall all over themselves aligning behind universal enfranchisement. Whether you are in America, the Middle East or Tawi-Tawi, you have the right vote. Whether your vote will be counted is another matter altogether. When it may take months to decide the outcome of nationwide contests and where perhaps half of the electoral spending occurs after the voting, universal enfranchisement is a celebration of form without substance. Inability to properly count is the best argument yet for all elections to be local.

Many other worthwhile projects become nightmares because the state can only buy off illegal holdouts and opportunists. Forty percent of the cost of roads is now accounted for by payoffs.

D. Cavorting With Maggots

The future being bleak, the powerless state cannot hold on to its best resource: brains. The powerless state's inability to collect taxes results in its being perennially in the red. After a good deal of meager national revenue has been siphoned away as payoffs (for legislators to pass the budget bill; as right-of-way bribes for roads; as bribe to unruly military, and as grease, etc.), the taxes buy little in the way of beneficial public goods. In the face of this drain even staunch citizens find in tax evasion a form of tax revolt. Or, caught out of the loop of predation either by choice or circumstance, they are forced to pursue that elusive *visa* or *green card* as ultimate salvation. Doctors are now exiting as lowly nurses. Parents who instill honesty and a

sense of duty in their children fear a future of ruptured ethics. “Can I suffer my child to go through this?” is the ever nagging question. The usual answer is, “I can’t.” Since brains are best served in level playing fields, they will flee the coop where cretins win based only on bone structure and on family or showbiz connection. No wonder there is a scamper for the exit. Even the most honestly earned success smells unsweet in a garbage dump where winners, more often than not, shall have fed on carrion and cavorted with maggots.

These are just archetypes of the multitude of ways by which a powerless state fails to deliver the democratic dividends. Without the democratic dividends, coups or rumors of one will keep littering this polity’s path. Such acts of defiance, elsewhere punishable by firing squad, being dealt with in the typical “everybody’s happy” fashion of spineless tolerance and eventual reinstatement with interest, the twilight of instability is not in sight.

VI. THE MISSING CLOSURE

A turbulent birthing has resulted in a serious warping of Philippine democracy. EDSA '86 tried but failed to find closure to a painful history of abuse of power in state powerlessness. If Philippine democracy’s future is to be delivered from endless challenges to its legitimacy, it must find an alternative closure, one that can deliver the democratic dividends. The closure to the abuse of state power *cannot be a renunciation of state power*. Naïve as it may seem, closure requires a leap of faith that state power *can* be harnessed in the service of the greatest good for the greatest number. We can only truly celebrate Ninoy’s martyrdom when EDSA '86 is finally rendered whole by a proper closure.

But is this closure hopelessly out of reach? Is this leap of faith too large and utterly naïve?

PART TWO: OF DEMAGOGUES and DEMIURGES

I. A STABLE BALANCE OF PREDATION

Democracy and the powerless state are not, however, inevitable partners. The present situation was a result of the unique circumstances surrounding the run-up to and the deposal of Marcos. Marcos destroyed state institutions including the judiciary and military, which the powerless state cannot rebuild. Even while unable to deliver, and despite the corruption and the lack of purpose, the powerless state has staying power. What makes it locally *stable* is precisely the *tight logic of the circle of predation* where every player is both predator and prey. It encourages the illusion that it is an open entry market where predation is freely exchanged. Citizens (as predators) evade taxes, and are served (as prey) bad roads and uncollected garbage due to contractors (predators) cutting corners which affords bribes to see-no-cheating officials (predators) who, due to low tax revenue, are low-paid (prey) and will not protect contractors (prey) from kidnappers (predators), and so on. One can say there is a virtual *predator-prey social contract* sometimes also called “business-as-usual”. Everyone in the predator-prey loop has a victim and, because it is a loop, everyone is also somehow a victim. Needless to say some victims are more equal than others. The biggest victims are those who either can’t or won’t join the cynically described “everybody’s happy” loop. The predator ethic has evolved to be the dominant strategy for survival.

How long a powerless state persists depends on many things. If it is an isolated state, then only adverse internal dynamics can lead to its breakdown. If it is part of a larger world, the system can be tripped by external pressures, or by a combination of both internal and external pressures.

In the heyday of the nation states, a powerless state is, in no time, overrun by its stronger neighbors hungry for tribute. Thus, it either quickly develops muscles or it becomes a vassal. Vassalage is generally a bad fallback position and its threat serves as a trigger for renewal and the rejection of the powerless state. Such direct external threat which worked wonders for Japan in the Meiji Period and Taiwan and S. Korea during the Cold War, seems no longer in the cards.

II. BREAKING THE EQUILIBRIUM

Are there enough internal dynamics for a state to emerge from the trap of powerlessness? At the core of a powerless state, precisely because it cannot deliver, and predation is so unequal, is a permanent reservoir of discontent. This is fueled by growing wealth inequality reflecting unequal distribution of power and cross-border benchmarking. Some of this may dissipate due to the flight of the more efficient and less tolerant citizens to the West. Much remains that can be harnessed by careful re-channeling to the upsetting of the applecart. The powerless state, in a word, has local stability draped over an ocean of potential microscopic instability. Inquiscent slumbers dwell in this deceptively quiescent ground.

How can the powerless state, if at all, be transformed from the inside? In the context of evolutionary game theory due to Maynard Smith (1982), what should a mutant bring to the table in order to successfully invade and to transform an evolutionarily stable predatory equilibrium which appears to reflect the Philippine state? Results, thus far, suggest (e.g. Bester and Guth, 1998; Gintis, 2000) that different technical environments allow different evolutionarily stable equilibrium ethic. There is strong reason to believe that an invader has to bring in, more than a mutant *ethic*, a supportive mutant *technology*. The former, without the latter, will fail. Before we explore this further, we first dwell on an obvious presence that has long engaged this polity in a tug-of-war.

A. External Pressure

Since 1986, there have been some decisive changes in the Philippine policies. These changes were originally opposed by interest groups but were eventually introduced largely because of pressures from multilateral institutions – the so-called “evil” WB-IMF-US axis. Prominent of these are trade reforms and deregulation. But that is only half the story. The other half is that the powerless state has an innate tendency to stumble because the competing claims on its resources, which it is powerless to refuse, always exceed its weak capacity to generate revenues. This leads to chronic fiscal deficits and pressure to borrow from the outside. Unable to use borrowed resources properly as in the archetypes of futility, it is chronically unable to repay. It soon stumbles into a BOP crisis and has to run to the multilateral institutions for more loans and, of course, inevitably submit to the conditionalities. Countries that have their economic houses in order need never bother with the evil axis.

The gradual opening of the Philippine economy was largely due to this intimate powerless state dynamics rooted in economic failure, crisis and outside pressure for reform buttressing internal pressures to avoid social unrest. Some of these conditionalities can be quickly rendered ineffectual. The prime example of a loan condition was the Comprehensive Tax Reform Program (CTRP) which was effectively disemboweled on the way to legislative approval. Trade reforms are spasmodic and now face reversals. External pressures manifesting themselves in new rules or laws can be deflected by non-enforcement. Hope that globalization will be that sought for mutant technology has not panned out. The overall picture is Kaspar-Milquetoast thrice told even in obviously needed reforms.

The fact of the matter is that good economic policies, while very beneficial in strong governance environments, have marginal impacts if at all in weak governance environments. Economic agents do not change their investment behavior in response to policy changes that are deemed, because they are for sale, reversible. Indeed, reversibility triggers perverse behaviors (Dornbusch, 1989). New evidence on the “deep” determinants of growth (see, e.g., Rodrik, Subramanian and Trebbi, 2003) shows that bad governance trumps good policies. Thus, strong governance must still be crafted internally and strong governance is not importable like a steam turbine.

B. The Demagogue Cometh

As carrion is to vultures, the powerless state is an endless lure to demagogues. The reservoir of social discontent, which extends to the lower echelons of armed forces, is the demagogue’s opportunity. He or she can start to create a “web of belief” around himself: a colorful, fictional or, if eventive, bloated, story of heroic exploits; a contrived and hardly coherent story of conspiracy and greed that explain current deprivation, reinforced by direct experience of instances of betrayal and corruption and a sweeping program of renewal centered upon himself and his clique conditioned on a power grab completes the picture. At the center of this web of belief is a black hole camouflaged by assertive bravado and magnetism. These then are the demagogues’ essential elements:

1. a largely *incoherent story* of greed and malignancy blamed squarely on some other people or groups – they are the problem because while they have the power, they are wicked.
2. a vague *program of renewal* based on a grab of power;
3. a “web of belief” at the center of which is the demagogue’s persona – embellished by some imagined or exaggerated exploit or bravado;
4. the absence of tangible beneficial achievements in the form of public goods;
5. their replacement by personal magnetism and media image;
6. the promise that all will be righted by a big bang at the “end of the rainbow”;
7. a contempt for painstaking and incremental improvements as subversive of the *final solution*;

8. the belief that the final solution is “us”, or more exactly “me”.

Hitler was the child of the feckless Weimar Republic, an environment that was crying for a savior. Mussolini, a leftist turncoat, was listless Italy’s answer. Marcos, crafting a myth of medals and acquittals, was the same in a smaller pond. But demagogues, in the end, result in grief. Like a Ponzi (pyramid) scam, it eventually comes tumbling down bringing disaster to everyone. Order may at first rise and trains may arrive on time, but the limits of command soon catch up and lead to debacle.

The demagogue is playing the credible commitment game with the public: “Trust me with power because unlike them I am trustworthy.” Medals and movies are his ethical exhibits. But the ethical commitments are salivary and intangible; he can easily dump them at little cost to himself if the price is right. The technology he articulates is incoherent and pulled together only by the full delivery of power to himself. Most demagogues, no wonder, end up nestled comfortably in the arms of the system they try to denounce. Is there an alternative?

C. The Demiurgic Leadership

The demagogue is not the only possible breach of the local stability of the “powerless state.” The same dynamic conditions and discontent that catapults a demagogue can catapult a *demiurge*, a different kind of leader who gathers political momentum on the strength of *tangible* accomplishments that positively impact people’s lives directly. The web of belief that begins to surround the demiurge stems from a growing list of incontestable “facts on the ground,” public goods that improve the public’s welfare and transform mistrust to belief. You can see them, touch them smell them.

Unlike the demagogue who simply demands that all power be first delivered to him, a demiurge first learns to use the accepted, if twisted, norms of the “powerless state” to cut down obstacles to public goods projects. Rather than endlessly blame others as does a demagogue, the demiurge builds *despite, through and over* obstacles posed by others. He has to muster the workings of the powerless state by cutting it into manageable slices. *Crucially*, he has learned the art of taming the extreme suspicion of power by tangibly delivering an ample harvest of that power. In his hands, creaky and feckless institutions become part of the solution. This harvest of public goods comes in the face of confrontation and rillification.

The demiurge’s record of performance has one very important common element. At any time, his goals are *limited* and *very well defined*. He does not worry about nor promise big bangs “at the end of the rainbow”. Thus, his concern is not *universal ownership* of all forces (that comes with a power grab) but local mastery of the forces in the immediate ambient of his limited goals. Local mastery of forces is not central control but a rechanneling of various forces some even wielded by others. His idealism is thus not dreamy like the demagogues’ but supremely pragmatic. He brings with him not only *new ethic* but a new set of *technologies*.

The demiurge demands trust on the strength of a history of performance; the demagogue demands loyalty on the strength of the immensity of assurance.

III. THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Whether demagogue or demiurge, the eventual outcome is less often celebrated in success than in failure. In macroscopically stable systems, as is the powerless state, the interest groups and those favorably empowered have a lot of sunk investment and control of exclusive gravy in the current if creaky dispensation. There is no guarantee that a different dispensation with greater possibility of a larger pie will indeed deliver a better outcome. Thus, any contrarian tendency, allowed certain initial elbowroom in a local area, will be dealt, if not with payola, with demolition in the macro front. One sure way to co-opt a would-be reformer – an outsider who has made waves – is a *senate seat*.

The blip of encouraging noise and the eventual reabsorption may be called the *Climaco phenomenon*. Cesar Climaco made noise as Customs commissioner and raised hopes of permanent reform. He became a senatorial material as the “incorruptible one,” but his election was also the last gasp of that hope. The system has room for and is reaffirmed when erstwhile publicly recognized or hyped-up incorruptibles board the gravy train called Congress or Senate. Another clever ploy that sustains stability is the “disembowel rule.” Well-intentioned reformers are allowed to hope and to propose reform bills in Congress. Congress does not readily reject a reform bill – that is political suicide. Congress will pass some bill often with the same name but which, in fact, is a disemboweled unrecognized version of the original. It may have the opposite effect as the original. The NARA’s disembowelment appears well on the way.

If the demiurge proves intractable, the next step is *demolition*: “He is worse than us, only he dissimulates better. He is more corrupt but more clever. That makes him even more dangerous.” The demolition crew goes into high gear. Former BIR Commissioner Rene Bañez was the obvious victim of demolition.

The demiurge is more vulnerable than the demagogue to demolition and therefore success is even less likely. First, the demiurge’s strength comes from the skittish educated and thinking public who demand evidence and tangible facts and whose choice set includes “exit” from the quagmire. This segment of the population is highly skeptical, is aware of past betrayals and may even demand perfection only known to God. They are thus difficult to lead to battle if they haven’t already migrated. The demagogue, by contrast, has by definition followers who choose, born of desperation, to be blind. The showbiz nature of his act requires no *facts*, only fireworks and shibboleths. And “the poor marines” believe him, mount a coup and are left in a lurch in some hotel.

This is where the demiurge, if he is to move ahead and not be absorbed, becomes a creature of his true public – the segment of the citizenry who are *among* but *not of* the chattering loopers of the powerless state. It is his public, fellow outsiders, who must sustain his “outsidership.” This public is usually a decided numerical minority and, thus, must conflate and inflate its weight in the polity. It has some resources, but must overcome its innate and rational resistance and ennui to taking a stand. Most importantly, this public must make positive noise not only for a specific demiurge but for the collection, however small, of demiurgic tendencies. The stirrings at PCGG are one such. If this public is to keep its demiurge on the straight and narrow, it must transform itself into an *Olsonian minority*, one that throws a weight disproportionate to its number.

PART THREE: THE QUIET REVOLUTION

I. TIME COMPRESSION at COMMONWEALTH AVENUE

Commonwealth Avenue, QC, from Quezon Memorial Circle up to the Litex Road is experiencing a transformation that can only be considered a revolution. It appears like the dawn of a *new order*. Whence is this transformation? Why suddenly this beachhead of *order* where *disorder* was once unchallenged?

For starters, the prohibition of *left turns* and the provision of U-turn slots have reduced travel time through the stretch by about 50% or more (40 minutes to 20 or less minutes on average). To complement these innovations, the islands around the Quezon Memorial Circle were removed to allow a free flow of traffic. Trees were balled and removed to the chagrin of tree lovers. But one suspects that the net environment impact of faster traffic flow is positive. The proper way to address the tree-controversy is not by absolute cost or absolute benefit but by a balance sheet of both. The system is now largely *self-enforcing*, a feature which has reduced the number of visible MMDA traffic agents from a dozen on rush hours at each intersection to two or three to monitor the U-turn slots. The cost savings implied is of the order of magnitude of a major technical innovation in manufacturing and must be valued similarly.

This is the *time compression* phenomenon that transformed East Asia in the last three decades of the 20th century. In those fateful decades, the travel time from downtown Bangkok to Bangkok Airport dropped from two hours to 30 minutes or less. Travel time from QC to NAIA, by contrast, had risen from 30 minutes to one hour and thirty or worse in the daytime. In 1970, bus travel time from Tutuban Station to Baguio City was six hours and you could set a lunch date at your arrival time. In 2000, bus travel from Manila to Baguio lengthened to between 8 hours to 12 hours and the actual time of arrival is a throw of a dice. We have a national artery in Central Luzon where tricycles and funeral processions dictate the speed limit as it ambles through town and barangay centers. This is where we missed the East Asian miracle boat. National competitiveness is a joke until we can begin to properly run our highways and collect our garbage. Which is why what is happening in Commonwealth Avenue (CA hereafter) is more crucial for nation-building than 20 years of endless blab in the nearby *Batasang Pambansa*.

The second part is the clearing and demolition of illegal structures and squatters along Commonwealth Avenue. The burgeoning squatters along CA and other public corridors essays twenty years of decline of QC presided over by a series of inconsequential and feckless mayorships which delivered the capital city to filth and squalor. In one inspired moment of courage and resolve, the shoulders of CA were cleared. An interesting sidelight of the clearing must be told. When the left-hand shoulder of CA was being cleared, the right-hand shoulder squatters, realizing this clearing was inexorable, began dismantling on their own. Gone was the tire-burning traffic-jamming defiance that stopped half-hearted demolition of old. The majesty of the law has its uses. Singapore is one material evidence. None was spared who illegally encroached – rich or poor. Now, CA is being remade and looks poised to become a modern artery fit for the 21st century.

II. COMMONWEALTH AVENUE as ANOMALY

How did all these come to pass in a “powerless state”? Why was this force not trumped by an endless barrage of TROs and coddling and nattering politicians which are the normal fixtures of these events? How did the “powerless state” suddenly gain muscle during the Commonwealth episode?

The fact of the matter is that the CA did not happen overnight. It had very deep roots and a lengthy gestation period. The whole story of CA iceberg needs to be told.

Focal in the concatenation of events seemed to many to be Bayani Fernando (BF) accepting the MMDA chairmanship. He immediately defined his mission as *regaining* the *sidewalk for the pedestrians and the roads for motorists*. While this seemed downright low tech,

he sensed that this was one key out of the powerless rut. The road is every citizen's first daily encounter with the government. To do this, he greatly empowered the Sidewalk Clearing Operation of MMDA with logistical ammo to give the impression of irresistible force and unbending resolve. Buses, haulers, dozers gave the impression of an army in operation. This was quickly trained, amidst loud defiance and skepticism, towards the clearing of Baclaran, an obvious challenge to rational traffic management and considered an immovable object. There it got its first baptism of battle and a taste of victory. The Litex clearing along Commonwealth of the "kerosene spray" notoriety followed soon. It was followed further by the Batasan Road intersection clearing which people said will never happen because "nambabaril ang mga vendors doon." They were cleared.

The demolition of illegal structures along Tandang Sora beside UP was a signal triumph. For more than a decade, UP authorities have petitioned local authorities for relief from this emerging red light district. Nothing. Then, in one evening, the MMDA Clearing Unit demolished the detritus of decades. The majesty of the law was finally being upheld. This is very new in Quezon City. How did the MMDA, so long viewed as part of the problem, become part of the solution?

III. THE MARIKINA WATERSHED

The prologue to the sidewalk wars in Metro Manila was the battles and victories in Marikina. "Riverbanks, Marikina" is a triumph of pitbull determination and a clear vision. It is now a national shrine to order and a strong state. Clearing of the Marikina riverbanks was one thing; it would have been useless had there not been a vision to build and the wherewithal, financial and political, to pursue that vision.

A. Higher Real Estate Taxes

The *battle for higher real estate taxes* in Marikina cannot be overemphasized. While in other cities, e.g., Quezon City, the loud opposition of the affluent scared skittish politicians away, the noisy demonstrations in Marikina failed to stop higher taxes. BF, by standing up to the rich, secured the moral beachhead to stand up to the illegal poor. And the financial wherewithal to pursue a vision to boot. It was a moral and a fiscal victory.

That BF succeeded in delivering public goods in return for the initial pain was the next critical layer. He made the sacrifice worthwhile. For, on this basis, he was returned to office. "You demolish, you lose the next election" is now shown to be false. The mayor had carved a place in the national consciousness. Democracy need not forever cohere with powerlessness. Along the way, he made many enemies but many more friends of converted enemies and skeptics. The Riverbanks hurdle made Baclaran which made Commonwealth Avenue and possibly the Pasig River clean-up possible. There are other hurdles. But the balance of belief is now more positive. This stringing of successes is typical. It is also axiomatic: effective government must painstakingly earn the right to govern. It can only do that by focusing on activities it can do best: public goods.

The delivery of public goods in return for the tax sacrifice creates what is known as *strategic complementarity* which in turn results in a positive feedback loop.

B. Bigger Than the Office

When BF accepted the MMDA chair, he was already "bigger" than the office. He could demand and exercise a hand free from customary endless meddling. He could "say no." He could also, if overly meddled with, step down and not be diminished. BF had clearly demonstrated to all and sundry that power re-concentrated can be employed sometimes *brutally if fairly* in the service of the law. Power need not always be pressed in the service of the heavily escorted Explorers and F150s or of Swiss bank accounts. Power can be employed to deliver tangible public goods.

C. Tactical Warrior

Clearing illegal squatters is a risky business that has ample potential for disaster. A noisy resistance and a sensationalist press can derail legally mandated demolition. One episode of bloodletting and the project is dead. Sound tactics have to be employed. Here's one: A demolition day is announced. Resistance is organized. The press is called in. Excitement mounts. The day comes. No demolition. Another demolition day is announced. Resistance is organized. No demolition. Resistance dwindles. Demolition is announced the nth time. No one believes it. No resistance, no press. Suddenly, ambulances arrive and stretchers are laid out, all part of a psy-war of overwhelming force and singleness of purpose. Then, the clearing team descends with military precision and great number, does its job without a hitch and, more importantly, without casualties. The "Cry wolf strategy," strikes again. Another tactic thrown in is the "thief in the night," which was used to demolish illegal structures along Tandang Sora. After previous announcements of eminent clearing, the team came one night and demolished without a hitch. An overpowering team, insight into the psychology of resistance, which shapes a tactic tailored for each situation and the law, so long flouted, is invested with majesty.

D. Importing Benchmarks

When BF started as mayor, he brought municipal employees en masse to Subic Bay to see and feel for themselves a higher meaning of *order* and *cleanliness*. New benchmarks of governance had to be *imported*. A street sweeper reared in a squatter area has a very different definition of "clean" or "orderly". He has to *see* and to *touch* and to *feel* another definition of order implemented, in order to disabuse his mind of low accustomed standards. People are at the heart of change. And embraced benchmarks are how people judge others and themselves. You only need to give the pursuit of higher benchmarks a sense of social mission and purpose. BF would have brought them to Japan but finances would not allow. When Park Chung Hee became president of S. Korea in 1964, he packed his cabinet for an excursion to Taiwan (not Washington, mind you), then the fledgling model of global market orientation. This was state-of-the-art and this was doable. Thus began the S. Korean miracle. Ideas and benchmarks must sometimes be imported. BF's own benchmarks of order and cleanliness are Japanese, easily the cutting edge of that technology.

E. Creating Benchmarks

Marikina's garbage collection spending per capita is only half that of other contiguous municipalities. Other municipalities have a lot of explaining to do. Marikina, though far from perfect, is a national benchmark. The Marikina city hall is a positive learning experience. Educators should make Marikina a field trip stop for their young changes. This is beginning to stir up local governments. People now know the threshold of the doable and are demanding more.

F. Empowering Institutions

While BF at times had to create new institutions, for the most part, he simply empowered and revitalized existing institutions. This happened at MMDA. That institutions can be shaped up enough to deliver is new in the Philippines.

G. A Philosophical Outsider

That CA ever happened is due to a confluence of forces whose combined horsepower was harnessed by the already-bigger-than-office MMDA chairman. When BF was designated concurrent DPWH Secretary, the clearing of CA shoulders also came under his responsibility. He parlayed two advantages, one logistical, the other philosophical: (a) BF as MMDA chair had an already battle-scarred Sidewalk Clearing Operation Unit, and (b) BF rejected the old DPWH

adage of engagement: “Clear only when funds to develop (e.g., roads) are on hand.” BF’s alternative rule of engagement is: “Remove illegal structures whether or not development funds are available. *Public lands belong to the public.*” BF then exploited the prohibition of the issuance of TROs for public works projects issued by the Supreme Court. Add a street-wise tactical mind and a CA phenomenon happens.

IV. THE ROAD to DEMIURGIA

Is BF a demiurge? We will never know for sure. The new ethic and the new technologies are plain to see. Whether or not he is, he is still closer to being one than any other has ever come. Even if he quits now, what he has already accomplished demands national attention. In a world increasingly and perversely dominated by press releases and “pakulo”, he is already a unique role model.

BF’s claim to our trust is a string of tangible public goods. These are not promises; *these are facts*. He is, in effect, the polar opposite of fast-talking charlatans and demagogues who spin incoherent *national recovery programs* and promise paradise at the end of the rainbow. Nor is he anything like the false heroes who, having made their names peddling good looks and bone structure in third-rate flicks or dribbling balls in hard courts, now also believe they can steer the national destiny, despite utter paralysis from the neck up.

His philosophy for nation building is as valid as it is biblical: do the little things exceptionally well and exceptionally smartly, and the big things will take care of themselves. This is downright low gear. This means sidewalks, garbage, roads, highways. There are no empty-headed sparks and gyrations from media and showbiz denizens. The self-lacerating, if all too accurate, description of Pinoys by Pinoys: “We are all talk and bluster; no implementation,” does not apply to BF.

Should we trust him with power?

The Power Coase Theorem says that power will not be delegated in the hands of a player, however efficient he is in its use, *unless a credible commitment* against abuse of that power exists. If a demiurge’s history of tangible justifications of power, the fact that he has become *defined* by those “tangible facts on the ground,” will not serve as credible commitment, nothing will. He has a lot to lose with betrayal. Whether BF has crossed the point of no return in the journey to demiurgia, only he knows.

If he has, the immune system of the powerless state will reject him as a dangerous threat. After all, he is far from perfect and the political demolition crew may be getting busy to drag him to the gutter. Many a good man has become a victim of this crew. This is where the demiurge needs his public – those of us who have seen, touched and smelled the rich harvest of power in his hands. He needs us not only to blunt the demolition job but also to keep him on the road to demiurgia.

Filipinos have to work hard to deserve democracy; to complete EDSA; to finally become “worth dying for.”

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