

How Historical Revisionism Has Irreparably Damaged Philippine Democracy

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The history of the Philippines is one of constant struggle. Though we have escaped the clutches of centuries of colonization, we were left to pick up the pieces, leaving us an underdeveloped country still reeling from the effects of unstable institutions and a culture of violence. Amid these struggles, some Filipinos may reminisce on the era of Ferdinand Marcos, a golden age of peace and prosperity. A time when the economy was booming, to the point we were the richest country in Asia; a time when poverty, crime, and corruption were at an all-time low; a time [as quoted by President Bong Bong Marcos as a “time when the Philippines was seen as a bright light in the community of nations when we ourselves were proud to be Filipinos...”](#)

Want to know an open secret? — that’s a lie. That so-called “golden age” was one of aching pain, sacrifice, and bloodshed. The country’s economy declined significantly during the Marcos regime, with real wages decreasing and poverty, inflation, and unemployment rising. Authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and economic decline marked the regime. Despite this being so clearly recorded through multiple outlets such as in [court cases and the experiences of victims](#), why is it that so many Filipinos refuse to believe it? Ever since the election of our current president, Ferdinand “Bong Bong” Marcos Jr., a new buzzword has entered the Philippine vernacular: Historical Revisionism. This reinterpretation – or shall I say distortion – of what happened during the Martial Law period has painted this painful moment in history with paint strokes of nostalgia and commemoration, threatening to erase the stories of victims and rob us of the opportunity to learn from the past. This phenomenon has not only influenced public discourse but has also permeated various aspects of governance and societal norms, reshaping the political landscape and undermining our democratic institutions. In this op-ed, I will argue that Marcos-era historical revisionism irreparably damaged Philippine democracy, in particular our elections, the rule of law, and the protection of civil liberties. In particular, I intend to paint a comprehensive picture of not only how the Philippines was doomed from the beginning but also how this phenomenon's damaging and long-lasting effects threaten our country to future ruin.

But first... a history lesson

On September 23, 1972, President Marcos went live on television to announce that he had placed the entire Philippines under Martial Law. [On that day alone, there was a mass shutdown of public utilities and media outlets and 4 senators were arrested along with 8000 other](#)

[individuals comprising journalists, students, teachers, labor leaders, and members of the country's elite families.](#) The [statistics](#) paint a depressing picture of what living under martial law was like. Farmers became poorer, the daily wages of skilled and unskilled workers fell sharply, deforestation reduced Philippine forest cover to almost half, and outstanding external debt skyrocketed. By the last decade of martial law the price of goods tripled and by the end, 6 in every 10 Filipino families were poor. These dreadful conditions stirred discontent among the people and on February 22, 1986, street protests along EDSA called for an end to martial law, which is now known as the People Power Revolution. The uprising led to the forced exile of the Marcos family to Hawaii. Corazon "Cory" Aquino, the widow of Senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, who was assassinated on the tarmac of the Manila International Airport, became President. Following Ferdinand Marcos' death in 1989, the family was ordered to pay US\$1.9 billion in damages to the victims of human rights violations carried out under Marcos's rule. The Marcoses were ordered to reimburse the victims of human rights crimes committed during Ferdinand Marcos' regime for US\$1.9 billion when he passed away in the United States in 1989. Nonetheless, the Marcos family disregarded the 1995 decision, and the victims never received the entire amount of the family's assets. The overall fine increased to US\$2.3 billion in 2012 when an extra US\$ 353 million was levied. While the Human Rights Violations Victims Memorial Commission estimates that 11,103 people were victims of human rights violations under the Marcos regime, this number only covers those who made claims for compensation. [Amnesty International puts the estimate at well over 100,000](#) people who were killed, tortured, or imprisoned. The political economy of the Martial Law rule, as described by Primitivo Mijares, came to be recognized as a ["conjugal dictatorship" of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, marked by "kleptocracy" or "crony capitalism" of the first family and their preferred circle of oligarchs.](#)

Let me be entirely clear, Ferdinand Marcos was and will be remembered in history as a dictator. Oxford Languages describes a "dictator" as "a ruler with total power over a country, typically one who has obtained control by force", and that is exactly what he did. [By taking control over the entire government, he put himself in a position of absolute power over the laws of the land, with no legitimate body in existence to hold him in check. He personally appointed every provincial governor, city mayor, and municipal mayor throughout the nation.](#) During his administration, his family was accused of acquiring an estimated \$5 billion to \$10 billion in

wealth, much of which was embezzled from the federal treasury. He often employed his authority to quell resistance, which included the apprehension and imprisonment of journalists, activists, and political rivals. "Marcos Sr. used martial law to scrap the elections, extend his term, dissolve Congress, and centralize power unto himself, making him dictator from 1972 to 1986," argues Renato Reyes of Bayan, summarizing the situation. "That was not defending government but making government your personal fiefdom."

Historical Revisionism 101

Imelda Marcos, the widow of Ferdinand Marcos, is quoted in the documentary "The Kingmaker" as saying, "Perception is real, truth is not." This singular statement provides a wealth of information about her family's assistance, if not intentional involvement, in creating alternate perceptions of her family and the erasure of martial law history from the collective memory of Filipinos. The biggest concern when it came to Bong Bong Marcos' election victory was that it was a direct result of a revisionist election campaign aimed at rehabilitating his father's regime and labeling it as a "golden age" as teased earlier.

The Philippines consistently ranks as the [most online nation in the world](#). This statistic is especially important when you consider that Marcos Jr. used social media platforms like YouTube and TikTok for online campaigns that spread misinformation to target groups, especially younger Filipinos. The end goal was to rejuvenate the family's reputation by claiming significant economic progress while downplaying the [very well-documented human rights abuses](#). For example, in a bold move, 1.5 million watched as [Juan Ponce Enrile](#), the late dictator's defense minister, said in a YouTube video uploaded in 2018 that not a single individual had been detained for expressing political or religious beliefs or for criticizing the elder Marcos. According to Carlos Nazareno of the Wiki Society of the Philippines, there have also been attempts to remove the labels "dictator" and "kleptocrat" that describe the elder Marcos from Wikipedia. Fake news and false statements flooded social media platforms in the lead-up to the 2022 elections, inundating Filipinos with false information. Many pictures and videos portraying martial law as a "golden time" and "era of peace" have gained widespread popularity. On top of that, Bongbong's startling assertion that "if my father was allowed to pursue his plans, I believe that we would be like Singapore now" lends even more credence to this falsification of history.

Maria Ressa, a Filipina journalist and Nobel laureate, described this as ["death by a thousand cuts."](#) in which social media uses bots and phony accounts to erode facts in order to deceive users and promote an alternate world based on partial truths.

It goes beyond social media as well. Regarding the portrayal of the events surrounding the Martial Law era, the [Philippine school system appears to be suffering from selective amnesia.](#) Filipino history is frequently ignored or even trivialized, especially when it comes to the debate of Marcos and martial law, even though the Department of Education replaces textbooks every five years. The era is described in the book "Philippines, Our Philippines" with the following lines, "An example of a dictatorship is the Philippines during the Martial Rule of Marcos. The provisions of the 1973 Constitution were not implemented because Marcos had placed the country under martial law. He changed the structure of government to strengthen the powers of the president." Some works, like "Ang Lahing Pilipino, Dakila at Marangal," simply do not mention any atrocities and conclude on the day martial law was imposed. This is especially astonishing as the Department of Education replaces textbooks every five years, making it all the more surprising that these curriculums are considered inadequate in addressing this history and skewed towards positive portrayals of the Marcos dictatorship. Considering these inadequacies, it is not surprising that a [study](#) found that young people in the Philippines have a shaky understanding of martial law and therefore fall victim to online revisionist accounts.

These distortions of martial law history bring the risk of the real, the painful memories of victims being erased. Human rights campaigner and history teacher [Loretta Ann Rosales recalls being subjected to torture by the military and police during the martial law era.](#) When some of her students told the authorities that she had denounced the Marcos Sr. dictatorship, she was detained twice in the 1970s for participating in street protests. Her kidnappers waterboarded her for hours on end, partially strangled her with a belt, and covered her arms in flaming candle wax. During her most agonizing ordeal, the tormentors severed the wires attached to her arms and feet and administered electric shocks that caused her body to convulse. Not only does changing history put democracy in jeopardy, but it also denigrates the sacrifices and agony of the innumerable people who suffered such atrocities. In the end, it makes it easier for past atrocities

to happen again by erasing the collective memory of their experiences and downplaying the lessons discovered during those difficult times.

A dangerous political culture

One common criticism Marcos supporters have is that the common narrative paints Marcos as the sole source of corruption and societal ills when these issues have deeper roots in Filipino culture and history that predate Marcos. So let us delve deeper into the inner working of Filipino politics, which not only gives us the full picture but also illustrate how the Philippines was doomed from the start.

First of all, [political dynasties have long held a monopoly of power in the Philippines.](#) Unlike other countries, the Philippines is unique in the sheer extent to which such families run the country even though the constitution specifically requires the state to “prohibit political dynasties as may be defined by law.” [Research from the Ateneo School of Government](#) showed that 80% of the governors, 67% of congressmen, and 53% of mayors who won office in 2019 belonged to “fat dynasties” or families holding multiple elective posts. In the poorest parts of the Philippines, where it is easier for politicians to wield patronage, dynasties typically flourish. Studies have shown that areas led by dynastic politicians have ["lower standards of living, lower human development, and higher levels of deprivation and inequality."](#) In addition, there are fewer ways to hold these politicians accountable for effective governance. This weakens genuine political competition and keeps outsiders from entering the public sector, both of which weaken democracy. Having a well-known name and his partnership with Sara Duterte, daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte, definitely helped Marcos Jr. win as he could capitalize on the popularity of his family's legacy. Even the [Aquin](#)os are considered a political dynasty, producing two presidents five senators, and several members of the House of Representatives.

This kind of clan politics originates, unsurprisingly, from our [colonizers](#). In an effort to consolidate power, the Spanish instituted a "reducción" system, whereby they bestowed "principalía" (principality) rank on the datu, or chiefs of towns, making them members of the indigenous aristocracy. The Philippine government established hereditary positions and principalía status, so establishing the country's first political dynasties. During the American

colonial era, this system was strengthened by limiting government jobs and voting rights to Americans and principalia members, so creating a greater divide between the privileged and ordinary Filipinos.

To nail the last nail in the coffin that is our political system, paired with clan politics is a convention of authoritarianism. One of the greatest appeals an authoritarian can bring is that they can [make a complicated world feel simple and that they, and they alone, can save you from evildoers](#)—I mean, who wouldn't want a charismatic leader to come and save the day? That is certainly the sentiment of many Filipinos who have [become intolerant of the continuing poverty they experience and want the instant gratification of a strong man who can give them security](#). They have become sick of the liberal elites that were supposed to humanely and democratically govern the country towards social and economic progress in the last 30 years.

Ultimately, it is a culture of power, greed, and selfishness, leaving hardworking Filipinos to bear the brunt of the consequences.

Addressing some rebuttals

Supporters of Marcos contend that the consensus is an oversimplified scapegoat narrative that labels people as "traitors" or "heroes" because it tends to see things in binary terms. They contend that this binary perspective ignores the subtleties and complexity of his leadership as well as the historical sociopolitical background. While Marcos' intention for martial law was to prevent a communist takeover, it [spawned numerous abuses](#). What can be said to justify the numerous human rights violations that occurred during this period, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and wrongful imprisonment? Can that all truly be justified in fighting an enemy? Unfortunately, the miseducation of a large section of the Philippine populace about human rights principles has made that question more difficult to answer for some. To us, the obvious answer would be "Of course not, everyone has human rights and a right to fair investigations", but the concept of human rights has been [mistakenly linked to the defense of offenders rather than the defense of the defenseless, the defenseless, and the victims against the state's ability to abuse its power](#).

Another common defense for Marcos supporters (other than denying atrocities outright) was that the abuses of martial law were not the result of Marcos but of the corrupt politicians that surrounded him. Let's let actions speak louder than excuses. Proclamation No.1081 which enacted martial law effectively suspended the constitution, dissolved Congress, and placed all branches of government under his direct control. If that alone is not convincing enough, [documentation and testimonies](#) from former officials and victims of martial law provide clear evidence that Marcos was not only aware of but also directly ordered many of the human rights abuses. This only serves to highlight the significant role that Marcos' leadership, policies, and personal orders had in the corruption and violations of human rights that marked martial law in the Philippines.

Finally, some assert that no historical revisionism is occurring; instead, people are adhering to narratives they are already familiar with. They claim it is not about revising history but about replacing a false narrative with a true one: shifting from the belief that the country was saved from a vicious dictator by heroes to recognizing that it merely transitioned from one corrupt regime to another. The preceding discussion does not imply that every president following Marcos has been a saint. The current state of our country, with the poor becoming poorer and the rich becoming richer, attests to the contrary. However, allowing the Marcoses to perpetuate their revisionist history sets a dangerous precedent, enabling future self-serving authoritarians to manipulate historical narratives to their advantage.

Actions speak much louder than words. Why must we sit down and settle for dealing with the status quo when we can and are entitled to have so much better? This is what is at stake. An entire country that was doomed from the start is set to doom itself even further until a point of no return. Clan politics and a history of authoritarianism are just the beginning. Let's now delve into how historical revisionism puts the cherry on top for this jenga-tower of Philippine democracy to come crashing down.

Elections and political participation

Elections are the foundation of democratic governance, as they provide a mechanism for citizens to participate in shaping their nation's direction. However, historical revisionism has put

those who benefit from it at an unfair advantage by purposely shaping the information the public relies on to choose who to vote for. The terrifying experience of life under dictatorship and martial law was systematically downplayed by Marcos through the parallel reality he implanted in the minds of voters. On top of that, he gave the Filipinos the authoritarian-like response they were looking for. [He appealed to those disappointed with a string of administrations that failed to fulfill their expectations, promising them prosperity and a cure for the country's problems if only they united behind his leadership.](#) When authoritarian leaders come to power through elections, it normalizes the idea that authoritarianism is compatible with democracy and undermines the integrity of democratic institutions and processes, making a repeat of history all the more likely. In particular, authoritarian leaders always follow a pattern of concentration of power and suppression of dissent, and when they come to power these are bound to repeat. Consequently, this influences the political landscape by encouraging future leaders to exploit the same tactics. This, then, leads to a vicious cycle of the public's faith in the government diminishing, with human rights violations and corruption increasing, and then another, charismatic, authoritarian comes to magically save the day, and then the cycle is doomed to repeat.

The most damaging aspect is its effect on political participation, or rather the polarizing effect it can bring during elections which can become almost unbearable. Historical revisionism has led to a [false nostalgia for the Marcos era](#), which can undermine the progress made in reforms and promote an authoritarian revival. The 2022 elections showed how elections can become a [referendum on the basic pillars of our political order: democracy, accountability, and liberalism](#). To an extent, the tremendous amounts of disinformation proliferated in the campaigns were meant to shore up support for these broader differences in perceptions of democracy. Revisionist narratives often create a sense of urgency and polarization, where voters are forced to choose between two opposing viewpoints. This has led to a heightened sense of conflict and division among voters. For instance, Marcos' insistence that he, and he alone, was the embodiment of national unity fuelled the [polarization seen during the last election cycle](#). You could never enter a social media platform without being met with heated debates over the candidates. It does not help that social media has created an echo chamber of highly engaged viewers' confirmation of their opinions, reinforcing larger patterns of divisiveness, stalemate,

and discord. They applaud the shift toward an “uncompromising mind” that favors deadlock and political advantage above compromise and consensus solutions.

This divisiveness and historical revisionism have far-reaching long-term effects that go well beyond certain election cycles. They weaken the foundation of democratic dialogue and social cohesiveness. The ability of citizens to have productive conversations declines as they solidify their positions, making it more challenging to handle complicated national issues. This divisiveness has the potential to erode trust not just between the people and their government, but also within the people. As a result, there is social division, making it almost hard to reach a consensus and casting ideological conflicts over the pursuit of shared objectives. Rewritten historical narratives also run the risk of spreading false beliefs and distorted worldviews among younger generations, which could pave the way for recurring cycles of authoritarian tendencies.

The rule of law

Concerning the previous aspect of democracy, when authoritarian leaders get elected through such historical revisionist tactics, they often tend to bend the law to their will. [The arrest of former vice-presidential candidate Walden Bello](#) on charges of cyber libel has raised concerns about freedom of speech under the new government. In July, the [Philippine Court of Appeals affirmed the conviction of Maria Ressa](#), two years after she was arrested for the same crime. This confirms the fears of journalists who have been warning that Marcos Jr would take a hardline stance on press freedom.

A revisionist history also has set the stage for the manipulation of historical precedents which, low and behold, has already taken place. By distorting the historical record, it shields individuals from accountability for past abuses and violations of the law, undermining the principle of equal justice. This can be seen when the Philippine courts sanctioned the President’s decision to bar the return of Ferdinand Marcos from exile, but twenty-seven years later they granted the former dictator a [hero’s burial](#). [The Court stepped in after Marcos failed to immortalize himself as a hero, acting as his agent by sifting through data and declaring Marcos worthy of burial in a cemetery for heroes](#). There is an undeniable link between the law and the creation of memory, and creating a fictional difference between Marcos as the war hero and

Head of State and Marcos as a brutal dictator further revised history. Although the law has been used to document crimes committed around the globe, the Philippine Supreme Court chose to utilize it as a shield against criticism of Marcos. The Marcoses, whose political fortunes have been boosted, appear to be the only people who have benefited from this decision.

Not only are historical narratives being manipulated, but legal institutions are being bent, undermining democracy and setting a risky precedent for future government. An unbiased judge of justice and a check on administrative power are compromised when the court participates in historical revisionism. The potential ramifications of this institutional integrity degradation could be extensive, possibly culminating in a legal system that selectively enforces the law to favor the powerful. Furthermore, as seen by the cases of Walden Bello and Maria Ressa, the chilling impact on press freedom and free speech threatens to muzzle critical journalism and dissenting voices. The repression of different viewpoints can result in an echo chamber of narratives sanctioned by the state and is incompatible with the ideals of a thriving democracy. It gets harder for citizens to obtain objective information, make wise judgments, and hold their leaders responsible as long as this cycle persists.

Protection of civil liberties

Lastly, by altering our collective memory, historical revisionism has weakened the common identity and purpose that is essential for a robust civil society. When a society forgets the struggles and sacrifices of previous generations for democracy and human rights, it may become complacent and less vigilant in protecting these values. It minimizes the impact of repression and other infringements on human rights by [erasing the victims of repression](#) and portraying it as a necessary measure to maintain order and protect the nation. The culture that unquestioningly embraces revisionist history has started to discourage civic engagement and critical thought. Enlightened and engaged citizens who challenge, discuss, and hold authority responsible are essential to the health of civil society. Manipulating historical facts and marginalizing opposing viewpoints has hampered the critical analysis of contemporary concerns and lowers public engagement in civic life.

Intergenerational solidarity and societal advancement are significantly impacted by the deterioration of collective memory and common historical understanding. Younger generations may not understand the value of their current freedoms and liberties if they are not exposed to the real experiences of their forebears. A hazardous complacency when the value of democracy is taken for granted instead of actively fostered and safeguarded might result from this gap. Furthermore, by placing people who support the revised version of history against those who reject it, the revisionist narrative frequently forges fictitious divisions within society. It is more difficult for communities to come together around shared issues or problems as a result of this fragmentation, which erodes social cohesiveness. Over time, when a society loses its connection to its true history, it leaves fewer common benchmarks for responsibility and truth, making it more vulnerable to manipulation by the powerful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this op-ed presents a compelling argument about the detrimental effects of historical revisionism on Philippine democracy. I have illustrated how the distortion of history, particularly surrounding the Marcos era, has undermined key pillars of democracy: free and fair elections, political participation, the rule of law, and the protection of civil liberties.

This highlights how social media platforms and inadequate education have facilitated the spread of revisionist narratives, leading to a polarized electorate and the erosion of democratic values. It also explores the deeper roots of Philippine political culture, including the prevalence of political dynasties and a tendency towards authoritarianism. I have argued that this revisionism not only whitewashes past atrocities but also sets dangerous precedents for future governance. By manipulating historical narratives, those in power can shield themselves from accountability, undermine the integrity of democratic institutions, and suppress dissenting voices.

Do I foresee any meaningful change in the future? To be honest, I am not entirely sure. Many Filipinos, such as myself, have grown up with political dynasties and the cycle of authoritarianism, never knowing any other system. But one can dream, and I dream for my country to finally break free from the shackles of historical revisionism. Ultimately, it would be fair to warn that unless this trend is reversed, our country risks digging itself into a deeper hole than it already has and the dismantling of our democratic institutions in its entirety.

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