

## Essay

# No to Hero's Burial: Social Movements Against Historical Revisionism

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## Introduction

His despotic regime ruled the Philippines from 1965 to 1986. A series of Left and Right protests were mounted against his fascist dictatorship. And to save the country from his fictionally-acclaimed "communist take-over," he issued Proclamation No. 1081 and placed the entire country under Martial Law on September 21, 1972. He was Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. – the dictator.

The 1986 People Power Uprising, consisting of various people's movements, toppled the dictatorship. Marcos went on exile in Hawaii, USA, until his death on September 28, 1989. For twenty-seven years, his embalmed remains stayed in an air-conditioned glass case exhibited at the Marcos mausoleum in Batac, Ilocos Norte, Northern Philippines. His family lobbied for his official burial at the Heroes' Cemetery.

In this paper, I wish to center on the formation of social movements against the hero's burial of the dictator. I would like to draw from institutional and individual forms of communicative resistance because these constitute a symbolic power that sustains or even stimulates other prototypes of movements. This is an ever burning issue, not only in local politics, but, also, in the context of shaping the historical and political landscape of a country, especially in post-revolution and transitioning societies, like the Philippines.

While there are evident political hurdles in contesting political power (referring to the Marcoses, who undoubtedly are still in positions of political power), I argue that civil society movements, as a part of today's social movements against the hero's burial for Marcos, reflect a kind of public resistance against any and all attempts to aggravate the agonies perpetrated by the Marcoses.

## **Why the hero's burial matters**

Two interrelated schools of thought can rationalize the public's detestation of a hero's burial for Marcos. From a legal standpoint, a hero's burial for the dictator would mean a mockery of the highest law of the land – the 1987 Philippine Constitution – which was approved and ratified a year after the dictatorship, on the basis of values like social justice, human rights and public integrity (“Burying Marcos at Libingan mocks the Constitution,” 2016).

From an historical standpoint, the aforementioned values were deliberately repudiated by the dictator. And this argument is substantiated by the documented abuses, including the 3,257 killed, an estimated 35,000 tortured and 70,000 arrested, from 1975 to 1985 alone as can be seen in the works of American historian Alfred W. McCoy (“3,257: Fact-checking the Marcos killings, 1975-1985,” 2016); the documented 10,059/9,539 victims of Martial Law under Marcos (Dongail, 2013); and the \$10 billion larceny in Philippine public funds, as estimated by the Supreme Court (“The \$10bn question: what happened to the Marcos millions?,” 2016).

In other words, the groups and individuals, spearheaded by the former First Lady, Imelda Marcos, and who lobbied for the hero's burial of Marcos also tried to revise the historical facts about the abuses and plunder committed by and under the dictator. Here, we are interested in questions, like: What movements were formed out of disgust over the deliberate campaign to revise the historical accounts of abuses of Marcos? What confrontational tactics and symbolic powers were communicated to counter the proposed hero's burial of Marcos?

## **People's power in social movements**

The notion of social movements deals with the capability of the public to assert its call for social change. It generally refers to “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow, 2011, p. 9)<sup>1</sup>.

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*All italics in this section can be found in the original texts unless otherwise stated.*



A number of social movements is taking place around the globe, including the public mobilization of anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Thorn, 2007); reform movement (reformasi) in Malaysia (Tapsell, 2013); Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Lee & Ting, 2015); and movements for civil rights, anti-war and women's rights in the United States (Gitlin, 1987). While there were varying perspectives on actors, strategies and historical contexts from which social movements emerged (see for example Melucci, 1996; Tilly, 2004; Touraine, 2007), common characteristics, like the political issue at hand; mobilization strategies used to attract public support; and the use of media platforms to protract the campaign, must be reconsidered.

## **Communicating resistance**

The Philippines has a thriving civil society environment. I refer to the civil society as organizations and alliances engaged in public campaigns against the hero's burial of Marcos. They asserted a political space to discredit the heroic claims of the Marcoses, and they instigated social movements to achieve the objectives of the campaigns.

A group of political prisoners in the country, the Samahan ng Mga Ex-Detainees Laban sa Detensyon at Aresto (SELDA) or Organization of Former Detainees against Detention and Arrests, is one of the foremost civil society organizations which campaigned against the hero's burial. Its membership is composed of former political detainees and victims of human rights abuses under the dictatorship. It has also formed alliances with national and local rights organizations.

In early August this year, the group filed a petition for certiorari before the Supreme Court against the government's plan to bury Marcos at the Heroes' Cemetery. According to SELDA's Spokesperson, Father Cabillas, the group launched a series of protests and caravan campaigns to fortify their call against the hero's burial for Marcos ("Martial law victims to file TRO petition vs Marcos hero burial," 2016).

On Facebook, a campaign, dubbed as Campaign Against the Return of the Marcoses to Malacañang<sup>2</sup> (CARMMA), was launched by a network of martial law victims, militant groups and freedom advocates to contest the vice-presidential aspiration of the son of the dictator – Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. – and the family’s attempt to return to presidential power. Its Facebook wall photo features three crosses that signify the network’s campaign against the hero’s burial of Marcos. Under the name Marcos on each cross, the messages were translated as (from left-right): (1) Plunderer, Killer - Not a Hero; (2) Hitler-like, Dictator, Fascist - Not a Hero; (3) Hazardous Waste - Not a Hero (see photo 1).



Photo 1. Facebook wall photo of CARMMA. Retrieved 26 October 2016 from [https://www.facebook.com/pg/CARMMAPH/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/CARMMAPH/about/?ref=page_internal).

In addition, CARMMA laid out on Facebook some of its campaign demands, which were as follows:

The minimum demand of CARMMA was for Bongbong Marcos to acknowledge the abuses of the Marcos dictatorship and to issue a public apology to the Filipino people, particularly to those who suffered the most in the dark days of Marcos’s martial rule.



On top of the public apology by all of the Marcoses holding major government positions, the Marcos family should let go of their ill-gotten wealth. This means that, at the minimum, they should drop all the cases they have filed against the government to defy sequestration. They should then surrender their ill-gotten wealth as a form of atonement and, thus, enable the government to indemnify the victims of Martial Law.

The network utilized videos and documentaries to portray the human rights abuses during Marcos's Martial Law, including the showing of Dukot (Desaparecidos or victims of enforced disappearances) and life-narrative documentaries of some of the victims of Martial Law.

At the individual level, netizens (or online citizens using social media, like Facebook and Instagram, to air their political concerns) popularized "hash-tagged" messages, like #MarcosNotAHero and #NeverAgain, to symbolize that Marcos does not deserve to be buried at the Heroes' Cemetery, and that the Filipino people must never again tolerate the abuses of a Marcos dictatorship.



The Manila Collegian added 8 new photos.

August 31, 2016 · 🌐

HAPPENING NOW: Several Anti-Marcos groups, led by BAYAN, gather at the Supreme Court (SC) to perform a protest action concurrent with SC's oral arguments on Ferdinand Marcos' burial at Libingan ng mga Bayani.

A group of Marcos supporters was also present, agitating the Anti-Marcos group.

#MarcosNotAHero



Photo 2. Student publication coverage of the Supreme Court decision on the Marcos hero's burial. Retrieved 26 October 2016 from <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Philippine%20Collegian%20marcos>.

Through these individual efforts, the campaign of not considering Marcos a hero was bolstered in the online public space. Student and media publications also covered the phenomenon and used the message, #MarcosNotAHero, in their reportage. Below is a photo capture on Facebook featuring the report of The Manila Collegian, the student publication of the University of the Philippines Manila:

## **Prospects for social movements**

Drawing from Tarrow's conceptualization of social movements, the challenges, solidarities and contentious political dynamics were apparent in the issue of the hero's burial for Marcos. The burden in collective challenges rested heavily on the side of civil society organizations because, on one hand, they had to extend the message of the campaign to other sectoral and state institutions and they needed to ensure that such messages got across the public discourse. From here, solidarities were formed among the groups and individuals who subscribed to the quintessential purpose of the campaign.

On the other hand, the dynamics, between those who were acting for the campaign and those who were on the other side of the political fence, remain contentious either explicitly (e.g., public indignation protests) or subtly (e.g., individual efforts to verbalize concerns on social media).

In this paper, the institutional and individual forms of communicative resistance were proven to be capable of stirring social movements. Such resistance was seen as a product of sectoral and collective actions towards the realization of common goals. The groups and individuals engaged in this campaign did not merely challenge the current government's pronouncement to bury the dictator at the Heroes' Cemetery, but, also, they had put forward a clamour not to distort the historical dilemmas caused by the Marcos dictatorial regime.

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