

#PushBack for Freedom and Democracy

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A decade ago, I had the opportunity to present a paper on what I referred to as a “democratic recession” in the Philippines. Despite all our best efforts, this democratic recession has now manifested itself not just in our country but even globally. The 2018 Freedom in the World Report¹ points this out very clearly.

The world is now less free and less democratic. What had previously been just ominous dark clouds to what we thought was the global march to democracy have now appeared as menacing twin specters looming across the globe that seem ready to overwhelm us. These twin specters of violent extremism and illiberal populist demagoguery impose upon us a future world order that would no longer be rules-based, but instead grounded upon the brazen power of brute force.

This unfolding scenario can no longer be brushed aside as a mere passing phenomenon. To my mind, this constitutes nothing less than an **existential threat** against that which we and all those who have come before us have painstakingly sought to build through many years of fighting against tyranny and oppression. Our very edifice of **democracy** that respects human dignity, promotes equality for all, and upholds the rule of law, is under threat.

In the Philippines, and even the world over, the very concept of **rights** is being put to the test on a daily basis. The importance of the rights of each individual is being sidelined for other so-called priorities of the State: economic growth and development, national security, peace and order, the fight against terrorism, the war against illegal drugs and the like. It is as if human rights cannot co-exist with other human values and ideals that are good.

On 10 December 2018 we shall commemorate the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This year we are also just barely a quarter century from the time Francis Fukuyama declared the “end of history” to which many applauded. But now, it is apparent that this once ascendant democratic consensus we had all sought to promote, nurture, deepen, and widen is once again confronted by a familiar adversary—fascism, albeit manifesting itself in new, reinvented, and popular forms. Yet, fascism essentially posits the same old argument to entice all of its adherents: that in uncertain and difficult times such as the one we are currently in, the only security that is possible is that which can be delivered by a so-called strongman that we must obey and surrender our fundamental rights to.

It has come to pass that this false choice has regained renewed appeal by feeding upon the people’s frustrations with our governments’ failure to deliver on the public’s expectations, therewith generating overwhelming popular support for some utopian—even dystopian—vision of change that a “great leader” alone would be able to provide.

There are societal actors as well that view freedom and human rights as “destabilizers” and obstacles to societal order or progress. We now live in a time where there persists a strong

¹ According to Freedom House, 71 countries experienced net decline in political and civil rights, with only 35 countries registering gains. This marked the 12th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. (Accessed from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>)

current of opinion that is quite disturbingly tolerant of repressive approaches. Suppression of dissent is slowly becoming the norm, seen now as a legitimate way to maintain peace and social stability. The curtailment of rights and liberties in order to promote stability and economic prosperity is increasingly accepted as justifiable, and at times viewed to be even necessary. And many of our own compatriots now form a popular chorus for authoritarian populist leaders.

This is indeed the disturbing and challenging reality that we are all confounded by and confronted with. Many of these attacks are nothing new. But in my experience as human rights lawyer, organizer, democracy worker, and activist, the very concept of democracy and human rights have never been negated, maligned, disregarded, and even denied with such brazenness and popular support from the people.

As with other countries, the Philippines has had its share of challenges to the promotion of democracy and the protection of human rights. But our country has recently been prominent once again on the world stage for violations and attacks to human life and dignity. In one sense, the Philippines probably is a microcosm of a world society that has struggled with engendering democracy, while constantly confronted with perils to human rights.

Let us be clear about this: an attack upon any of the people's fundamental freedoms is an assault on democracy itself. Any harm inflicted upon or directed towards anyone—especially the lowliest and most vulnerable of persons—is an assault upon the core of humanity itself.

Let me clarify as well that we are not against the State's obligation to suppress crime as in the case of our so-called "war against illegal drugs." The State is duty bound to suppress crime and in fact, in human rights discourse, it has an obligation to ensure everyone's right to safety and security. However, the State must do this via legitimate law enforcement, and always within the bounds of the rule of law and with utmost respect for human rights.

Given these challenges, it is our responsibility to mount a response that will affirm truth over deception and hope over desperation. We are all called to defend our cherished core values. We need more democracy and not less of it; we must uphold human rights and not allow them to be curtailed. Democracy and human rights are important enablers of human development, creating the conditions that will help people thrive and reach their full potential.

In the face of these overwhelming threats that seek to subdue, silence, and defeat us, we must draw strength and inspiration from each other's struggles and victories no matter how small or insignificant these initially may appear. The road ahead is difficult and uncertain but we must not be discouraged. Instead, we must march forward in solidarity to affirm a politics of civility and inclusion, employing strategies of non-violence, motivated by deep love for humanity, emboldened by an unrelenting commitment to stand up for justice, and spurred by an undying hope that light shall always prevail over darkness.



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