

Forging Ahead: Reflections on History

“Justice may not have been fully attained in Ninoy’s murder, but his blood was not spilled in vain...”

There is something about this statement, one of the ending lines of the documentary *"Agosto Beinte-Uno: Ang Pagpatay kay Ninoy Aquino,"* that does not sit well with me. Intended as a hopeful conclusion, it inadvertently sheds light on the stark realities of our flawed justice system; that whoever masterminded former Senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr.'s assassination never received their deserved punishment. Is this country—a nation grappling with a culture of injustice, impunity, and blatant historical denialism and revisionism—truly worth sacrificing for? Are the Filipinos—who, 39 years after Ninoy's death, have reelected the same family of dictators that brought the country to its knees during their 20-year rule—genuinely worth dying for?

According to the 2022 Rule of Law Index by the World Justice Project (WJP), the Philippines holds the 97th spot out of 140 nations assessed for adherence to the rule of law. Among the 15 East Asian and Pacific nations in the index, the Philippines ranks 13th. An article titled "Philippine judiciary and criminal justice system under pressure: An insider look," published by ASEAN Today in 2021, provides insights into the immense strain faced by the PH judiciary and criminal justice system. The article highlights troubling statistics: each court is expected to serve 50,000 individuals, judges typically shoulder an average annual workload of 644 cases, prolonged court cases hinder anti-corruption efforts, legal services remain financially out of reach for many Filipinos, and the backlog in the judicial system contributes to overcrowded prisons.

Many of the present judicial challenges confronting the nation can be attributed to the administration of former president Rodrigo Duterte. Since 2016, Duterte’s brutal 'war on drugs' has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings, estimated at 12,000 to 30,000 (International Criminal Court, 2021). Government officials, including those from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), have unfairly branded human rights defenders as "terrorists" or "communists" often without proper evidence or procedures. This series of red-tagging has led to harassment, violence, and deaths. Throughout the Philippines, grave human rights abuses persist without accountability.

Amidst the crumbling judicial system of the Philippines lies the distortion of its history. A study titled "Narrating Human Rights in the Philippines" by Abuso (2019) revealed a concerning gap in the understanding of martial law among the younger generation. Despite educational initiatives aimed at enhancing comprehension of martial law and its atrocities,

students reported minimal to no education on these crucial subjects. Undoubtedly, several factors have contributed to the Marcoses' resurgence in politics, including the era of Duterte's presidency in which the controversial burial of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* took place. Additionally, the influence of social media, particularly platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook, has painted the Marcos legacy as one of progress and infrastructure, conveniently ignoring their corruption and immense debt. These factors converge to rewrite history, ultimately propelling the Marcoses back to power—a threat and outright mockery not only to Ninoy's legacy but to Philippine history.

Ninoy's death, akin to the sacrifices of past Philippine heroes and unsung modern heroes, stands not as a conclusion but as a catalyst for change, a torchbearer of historical lessons for present and future generations. Yet, as we confront the lingering echoes of history's patterns in our current reality, it raises a haunting question about the nation we have evolved into. In the shadow of biased justice, cultural divisions, and other transgressions, we are compelled to ponder the depth of our nation's development. Must lives be sacrificed to prompt enlightenment? Can these sacrifices truly fade into oblivion? These questions implore us to shape a more conscious and just future.