

People Power II in the Philippines: The First E-Revolution?

Julius Court

With the new Century over a year old, technology has now played critical yet very different roles in bringing two of the world's leaders to power. Among others things, Florida will be remembered for technological hitches that plagued the ballot counting and possibly pushed the outcome of the U.S. election in favor of George W. Bush.

On the other hand, a new information and communications technology (ICT) - the mobile phone - was the symbol of the People Power II revolution in the Philippines. Arguably, the most lasting image of Ms Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's new Presidency was when, on being asked in a news conference whether a Lt. Gen. Espinosa was planning a coup, she called him up on her mobile phone. In a moment of high drama she asked him directly if this was the case and after a brief conversation reported it wasn't.

But it was the use of cellphones for "texting" rather than calls that was the most intriguing part of People Power II and was also the key to its success. The lack of attention to the role of technology is surprising. People Power II was arguably the world's first "E-revolution" - a change of government brought about by new forms of ICTs.

"Texting" allowed information on former President Estrada's corruption to be shared widely. It helped facilitate the protests at the EDSA shrine at a speed that was startling - it took only 88 hours after the collapse of impeachment to remove Estrada. The use of mobile phones was why the mobilization (or perhaps "mobile-ization") was so large and so rapid and thus so decisive. Estrada himself blamed his ouster on the "text messaging generation."

Mobile phone technology was not just critical in the days preceding People Power II; it had been important over a number of months. In Spring last year, Estrada ordered key government agencies to do something about alleged text-messages abusing him. The same week, texters started passing around messages using an exclamation mark as a symbol to call for an end to the Estrada government's corruption, cronyism and incompetence.

This exact form of revolution could probably only have happened in the Philippines. Manila is the texting capital of the world. Philippines, a relatively poor country, has 4.5 million mobile phones. Texting is much cheaper than making phone calls, making it so popular in a country like the Philippines. Filipinos can often text with either - and sometimes even both - hands. They also text while driving - no mean feat on Manila's dangerous streets.

Normally used for brief and frivolous communications, the public outrage at the breakdown of the impeachment, the degree of ownership of mobile phones and the networking potential of text messages combined to ensure the Philippines was the

location of the first political revolution facilitated by modern ICTs. In the week of People Power II, Philippine Mobile handled over 70 million text messages! As Reuters reported on January 24th, technology literally put the power in Filipino peoples' hands.

The Philippines case does raise some big questions about the broader implications of technological advances on political action around the world. It is impossible to predict the exact outcomes, but the evidence does point in interesting directions.

Will the example of the Philippines be repeated around the world? The Philippines has a history of starting political trends. The first people power uprising in 1986 was a seminal event and one of models for similar uprisings in South Korea and Eastern Europe as well as most recently in the former Yugoslavia. Certainly many countries have more widespread mobile phone and internet access than the Philippines. So too the latest events may prove as important as those of 1986. However, the model will not be in the nature of the event but rather in how it was carried out.

Reflecting the debate regarding the "New Economy", does this indicate the start of a "New Polity"? To some degree, it probably does. The mobilizing power of new technologies, particularly the internet, have certainly been demonstrated by interest groups at the global level. It is often argued that the Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI) was defeated due to the resistance mobilized via internet. So too, the internet played a crucial role in organizing and mobilizing people for the anti-globalization protests in Seattle, Washington and Prague.

But the use of ICTs are sometimes far from benign. The leaders of the recent prison revolt in Brazil that left 20 people dead used mobile phones to stage co-ordinated uprisings in 29 jails. The internet carries many neo-Nazi, racist and pornographic websites. New ICTs have made international crime easier to organize.

The pace of adoption of internet and mobile phone technologies around the world is staggering. At the same time, the technologies continue to advance. For example the latest I-mode mobile phones allow the owner to view TV and audio reports streamed over the internet. These continuing advances and the increasingly widespread access to technology will make it easier and easier to share information and organize political action. The challenge is to ensure it is for the better not for the worse. And to ensure it is not just a "connected" few but that everyone has access to technologies.

ICTs are unlikely to change the main principles of politics. But, in particular in less established democracies, this is unlikely to be the last time that the stunning advances in ICTs play a crucial role in helping the people remove a bad leader. The people of the Philippines will have shown one way and for that we should thank the "Text Brigade".

Julius Court is a Programme Officer at the United Nations University and co-director of the World Governance Survey project. These are his personal views.