



Her Excellency Corazon C. Aquino Keynote Address

**An International Affair
Wednesday, July 14, 2004
Hilton Hawaiian Village, Coral Ballroom
Honolulu, Hawaii**

First of all, let me thank Governor Lingle, Dr. Charles Morrison, Dr. Edison Miyawaki and all of you for your warm welcome. Thank you also to the East-West Center Foundation for presenting me with the Asia Pacific Community Building Award.

Tonight I have the pleasure of sharing with you my experience with People Power – how it has not only restored democracy, but also built and empowered communities all over the country.

I believe that is also the work that the East-West Center has cut out for itself: strengthening democracy and building and empowering community, but on a regional scale. By bringing



together professionals and students from the United States, Asia and the Pacific to study and share issues of common and critical concern and explore mutually beneficial ways of addressing them, you have helped build a peaceful and harmonious Asia Pacific Community.

We live in turbulent times, when the need to build a harmonious and progressive society is more important than ever. Which is why I congratulate the East-West Center for the work

you have done and continue to do to keep our part of the world relatively peaceful and free from strife.

I came to the presidency on the shoulders of the Filipino people in what is known as the People Power revolution, and I survived six tumultuous years with their support.

When I left the presidency in 1992, therefore, I decided to dedicate the rest of my productive life giving back to the people, by ensuring their continued empowerment. My vehicle was the Benigno Aquino Foundation, which I established three months after the assassination of my husband, Ninoy Aquino, primarily to provide scholarships to exemplary high school students who could not afford to go to college. Education was one of the priorities of my late husband, and it was only fitting that we extended college scholarships in his name.

From scholarships, the Foundation went into economic empowerment first by helping grassroots women of my home province of Tarlac save their money for the proverbial rainy day, and then by working with cooperatives and helping them develop into viable business concerns. We also worked for political empowerment of members of the Philippine National Police by giving them human rights education.

As former president, I have also gone out of my way to support political causes that I strongly identify with, such as the early movement against charter change, protests against vote shaving (popularly known as dagdag-bawas) in past elections, and the people power movement that unseated President Joseph Estrada in 2001. Last year, I was again on the forefront of another campaign, this time to defeat what I considered a frivolous impeachment complaint filed against Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Hilario Davide, in the House of Representatives.

In the past 12 years, and even during my presidency, I led countless rallies in Metro Manila and other parts of the country, mainly to defend and protect our democratic gains against coup plotters, ambitious politicians, and bad governance. I have also endorsed candidates for national and local offices, lending whatever influence I have left to getting worthy Filipinos elected to govern us.

But last year, I put a stop to all such political activities. While planning the 20th commemoration of the murder of Ninoy Aquino in the midst of the growing disillusionment in our government and our leaders, I realized that politics, as practiced at home, is one of the major causes of our national ills.

I announced my decision not to endorse or campaign for any candidate in the May 2004 elections, and worked instead on getting people to go out and vote, and to protect the integrity of their ballot. I invited the five presidential candidates to pray together the day before the elections and asked them to pledge to keep their fight clean and fair, and to accept the election results as the sovereign will of the people.

But for my main activities, I poured my energies promoting the efforts of civil society organizations towards the genuine empowerment of the majority of our people who are poor.

The 20th anniversary of Ninoy's death was also the 20th anniversary of the first stirrings of People Power. Looking back at the last two decades, I asked myself, have we wasted People Power, as some observers have alleged, pointing to the dwindling crowds during observances of the EDSA People Power anniversary? The cynics asked, where are the cheering crowds, the marching bands, the dancing in the streets? People Power, they concluded, was dead.

But I countered that People Power is not dead. The annual re-enactment of our people's victory over the dictatorship at EDSA on February 25, 1986, is not all that People Power is about. The ouster of the Marcos Dictatorship was only the beginning of our deliverance from injustice and inequality. Since then, civil society groups have harnessed the energy of the same People Power that drove away the Dictator, to serve the needs of our people.

On the national level and in the grassroots, volunteers from NGOs are helping people build skills for jobs and livelihood, build infrastructure, deliver social services, bring about peace and order, appreciate their rights and responsibilities, and generally improve their own lives. Aided by civil society groups and some local government officials, our women are empowered with skills and knowledge, their children eat better and are healthier, the men are more focused on their responsibilities, and communities thrive and flourish.

This is People Power in action, helping Filipinos and their communities help themselves. Indeed, People Power is much more than a potent political tool; it is an ideology of hope.

Through the years, and in recent weeks in the Philippines, People Power has been misused by losing candidates, disgruntled government workers and politicized religious cults to further their narrow agendas.

Recently, in the post election period when the votes were being counted, collated and canvassed in what has become known as the slowest election count in the world, we saw partisan groups try to replicate previous manifestations of People Power by whipping up their followers to mass up and protest alleged poll irregularities. The fact that they failed shows that there is no magic wand to summon People Power.

On EDSA in 1986 and again in 2001, People Power was the spontaneous reaction of an incensed public to a political stimulus.

But People Power is also quietly, yet no less dramatically, at work, creating a dynamic, progressive, caring, compassionate and empowered society, the kind our people, including my fellow countrymen in Hawaii who are here tonight, would want to be a part of.

I launched the People Power People Movement on August 20, 2003, to seek out and project the empowering work on NGOs among our people. In my travels around the Philippines visiting models of people power, I have met many common folks doing extraordinary things, people who have made the personal choice to take responsibility for the space around them and build a better life for their communities.

There are countless examples of People Power at work in the Philippines. Last January, the World Bank and its development partners presented over a hundred examples of small but meaningful efforts by civil society to build our nation from the bottom up at its first development marketplace held in Metro Manila.

In the world of big business, the buzzwords are ‘corporate social responsibility’. In recent years, we have seen big business plow back a portion of their corporate earnings to the community for the protection of the environment, to build classrooms, send underprivileged children to school, empower the youth for leadership, and seek out and reward outstanding teachers, policemen, soldiers and other civil servants.

Church-based groups are also actively participating in people empowerment. You may have heard of Gawad Kalinga, a shelter and livelihood program for depressed communities all over the country initiated by Couples for Christ, a Catholic group.

Through fund raising, donations of building materials and volunteer labor, Couples for Christ aims to build 700,00 homes in 7,000 sites in seven years in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.

Besides transforming depressed areas into clean, beautiful and peaceful communities, Gawad Kalinga assists the beneficiaries to become productive and self-sufficient.

Gawad Kalinga has provided government with a workable model of low-cost housing and community development with a minimum of funds and a maximum of the spirit of volunteerism.

Another church based initiative is “Pondo ng Pinoy” introduced by the new archbishop of Manila, Gaudencio Rosales, which asks Catholics to contribute 25 centavos – less than one half US cent – per day, towards a fund for development programs for the poor.

When he was assigned to Metro Manila, Archbishop Rosales learned that of the 10 million inhabitants of the metropolis, 52 percent are classified as poor and very poor. The national figure is even worse: of 84 million Filipinos, 64 percent are poor and very poor.

Like the US cent, a 25-centavo coin does not get much respect. But from such crumbs, which even the poor can afford to give, the good Archbishop hopes to raise hundreds of millions of

pesos for pro-poor projects. With some eight million Catholics in Metro Manila contributing 25 centavos a day, the Pondo ng Pinoy could generate up to P624 million in a year.

Archbishop Rosales initiated a similar program in his former archdiocese where it was a great success. He reported that in their micro-lending program, the repayment rate was around 95%.

The 25-centavo a day solution is not unlike the work of our NGOs in the grassroots, who tirelessly introduce small innovations and initiatives into the nation's needy communities. Put together, such "crumbs" will eventually gel into trend, then a movement. The political, economic and moral empowerment of the grassroots, I believe, is the only sustainable means to put our country on track towards an enduring democracy.

Of late, I have been asking people to imagine what the Philippines would be like if enough of us stopped complaining about how bad things are and took responsibility for our communities, if we placed duty to country and people ahead of our personal interest, if we set aside politics for the higher goal of national unity and progress.

It has not failed to inspire audiences to think of how together, we, the Filipino people can transform our society.

The People Power People Movement is my way of re-defining People Power by bringing its essence of selfless service into our daily lives.

As such, the People Power People Movement singles out civil society organizations and individuals that have distinguished themselves as true public servants through volunteer work that has made a difference in the lives of their clients. Initially, we named 20 such groups, but only to show the public, examples of People Power People. There are thousands more out there and we intend to document their achievements for our people and the world to appreciate and emulate.

The People Power People Movement also connects people and organizations who may wish to volunteer their time, talent and treasure to any of the groups we have recognized.

Instead of marching in the streets to remind our people of our struggle against tyranny and oppression, I want to refocus attention to the continuing challenge of liberating the poor from poverty and paving the way for our unity as a nation. While we must always be ready to do battle with the enemies of freedom and democracy when the need arises, we must be constant and sustained in our efforts to harness our resources and energy for the creation of a truly empowered and harmonious national community.

I intend to see this movement take root and flourish, its fruits benefiting the Filipino people. I have invited all Filipinos to join me in this endeavor. Instead of despairing about the seeming

chaos in our country, I have challenged them to help our people cope with poverty and helplessness by supporting the work of People Power People.

You must be aware of the recent events in the Philippines, especially our recent presidential election which was truly a confusing and divisive exercise. Although we have proclaimed Gloria Macapagal Arroyo as our duly elected president, our politicians remain polarized and passions continue to run high. From where you stand, the Philippines must look like a failing democracy.

I can assure you that it is not.

The Philippines is, in effect, still a fledgling democracy. But we are getting there, with the grassroots approach of civil society in empowering our people from the bottom up.

Never has the need for popular involvement in the national life been so critical as it is now when resources are few, unemployment is high and the people's needs are urgent. Clearly, it is not politicians and their politics that will bring this about. Rather, it is the People Power People who, quietly, willingly and without fanfare, are providing constant, dependable, non-partisan service to the community that Filipinos badly need.

I accept the Asia Pacific Community Building Award, in the name of these selfless Filipinos who have put in the hard work of building our communities in the spirit of People Power. They have been the saving grace of my country these past two decades.



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East-West Center
1601 East-West Road
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96848 USA

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