

My Recollections
Fidel V. Ramos, President of the Republic of the Philippines
By SGI President Ikeda

It was 5:30 a.m. In spite of the early hour, the Philippine people were crowded around their radio sets, from which issued the impassioned plea: "I call out to all who love the Philippines — now is the time to stand up! Tomorrow will be too late!"

This broadcast took place Feb. 23, 1986. It was the prelude to the "people power" revolution of the Philippines that shook the world.

The voice delivering that rousing plea belonged to General Fidel Ramos, vice chief of staff of the Philippines Armed Forces. The previous day, Feb. 22, he and Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile had barricaded themselves in Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City, along with a small force of supporters. The time had come for a decisive battle against the corrupt Marcos regime, which had ruled the nation for two decades.

Ramos had had enough. He wanted to work for the Philippine people, not Marcos and his cronies. And he was prepared to die fighting. He was determined to restore justice and democracy to his homeland.

The urgency in Ramos' voice stirred his listeners. Another presidential election had just been held, where the people had elected Mrs. Corazon Aquino, but Marcos refused to concede defeat. He resorted to the most shameless poll-tampering to fake victory and, in spite of the people's protests, announced his inauguration on the morning of Feb. 25. He also continued his violent attacks on Mrs. Aquino and her family.

Would the "people power" that had taken the Philippine people this far now succumb to lies and oppression? No. The people had reached the limits of their endurance of Marcos' abuses.

But what could they do? That's when Ramos stood up, declaring an end to lies and deception. In response to his call, people took to the streets. In the churches, the priests urged the people to lend Ramos their support. Mrs. Aquino's supporters also announced their backing.

Though Ramos was ensconced in a military camp, he had only 500 soldiers with him. Both his allies and enemies knew he faced overwhelming odds against the powerful force Marcos commanded. But soon the compound was surrounded by another force: the human barricade of Philippine civilians. The troops Marcos dispatched to quell the rebellion could not pass.

When the government soldiers aimed their guns at this human wall, the people cried out: "Don't shoot! Your mothers are here among us!" To Filipinos, mothers are symbols of conscience. Unafraid of the guns pointed at them, the people came forward to hand the soldiers flowers, symbols of love and hope. The people gave sandwiches to the soldiers, saying they must be hungry, and struck up conversations. Everywhere, the people prayed and sang.

Once the people began to voice their repressed cries for freedom and justice, nothing could stop them. Though Marcos warned them to stay at home, they did not obey. They heard the stirrings of history; they answered the call.

After the dictator had been driven into exile, Ramos supported Aquino and her government for six years. His remarkable abilities were demonstrated in crisis after crisis — from quashing a series of attempted military coups to coordinating relief efforts after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, the most violent volcanic explosion this century.

After Aquino stepped down, he was elected president. I met President Ramos about a year after his election, in May 1993. Praising his contribution to the bloodless revolution in

his country, I quoted a poem by the American poet Edgar A. Guest (1881–1959):

*The only happy time of rest is that which follows strife
And sees some contribution made unto the joy of life.
And he who has oppression felt and conquered it is he
Who really knows the happiness and peace of being free.*¹

President Ramos' mother was a teacher. She loved poetry, and had given her young son the nickname Eddie after the poet. The president expressed his appreciation and delight that I should quote from a poet who held such fond memories for him.

Ramos' voice was vigorous. On every subject, he was clear and unambiguous. When speaking of Japan's role in the Pacific, for instance, he said that China had the potential to become Japan's economic rival, and for that reason the Philippine people hoped that the two countries would continue to have friendly relations and contribute to the peace and development of Asia and the Pacific.

Full of energy, Ramos works from 6:00 or 7:00 a.m. until late at night. His staff wonders when he sleeps! His joy and excitement at having restored democracy and launched efforts for the future prosperity of his homeland are apparent. It is wonderful to behold.

The Philippines' prosperity is not something that the Japanese can afford to ignore. We must remember the terrible cruelties we inflicted upon the Philippines during the Pacific War. So closely is the Japanese military associated with oppression and inhumanity in the minds of the Philippine people that even during the Marcos years Filipinos referred to their own country's soldiers as *Japon*, or Japanese, when they harmed the people.

Sadly, however, there are Japanese university students today who don't even know that Japan invaded the Philippines! Such ignorance is frightening. How can a true human alliance be established under such conditions? We can talk all we want about the age of Asia and the Pacific, but under these circumstances it can have no true meaning.

"I believe in your country's future," I told Ramos. "I respect the 'people power' of the Filipinos, who through their own efforts scored a historic victory. I urge people around the world, especially in Japan, to learn from your example."

What attributes must one possess to make a positive contribution to history?

In response to an interviewer asking about the qualities he admired in a person, Ramos listed two: "One is the determination to accomplish the mission for the welfare of the majority.... Secondly, and this is connected with it, is stability under pressure."² On another occasion, speaking of his stand against the Marcos regime, Ramos explained that he was determined to simply fulfill his duty to the Philippine people as a soldier. It was a sense of mission that led him to rise up and call out directly to the people, initiating the struggle for freedom and justice.

The human barricade was another manifestation of a powerful sense of mission, as roused in the hearts of the common people when the time had come to act. The government forces, in contrast, merely awaited orders from above. This was the crucial difference. It was the key to the people's eventual victory.

In March 1996, the 5th Pacific Basin Symposium, sponsored by Soka University, was held in Manila in the Philippines. Scholars from 17 nations and regions assembled to discuss the theme "Technology and Culture." Ramos kindly wrote the keynote address, which was read by a representative. His speech, "Technology in the Service of Humanity," stressed that the time has come to redefine the concept of national interests in a way more compatible with global imperatives and world peace based on humane values.

Yes, that is the true meaning of the age of Asia and the Pacific — the age when the

oppressed rise up to demand their freedom; the age when the people strike back against the tyranny of nationalism, imperialism, militarism and materialism that they have endured for so long, replacing it with humanism; the age when people the world over throw off their chains and come together with the shared desire to lead happy lives. The “people power” of the Philippines was a dramatic beginning for this new age.

Ramos believes in dialogue. He witnessed the Korean and Vietnam wars, and from them learned to avoid bloodshed. The incredible efforts he exerted to settle the Muslim uprisings in Mindanao bore fruit in September 1996 with the conclusion of a peace treaty with the Moro National Liberation Front. It signaled an end to a bitter conflict that spanned almost three decades and claimed the lives of more than 100,000 people.

At that peace ceremony, Ramos declared that not only were we witnessing a historical moment but creating one. His voice reverberated with emotion, with the joy of victory. His voice rang out from the new Philippines to the farthest corners of the world.

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1. Edgar A. Guest, “Improvement” in *Just Folks* (Chicago: The Reilly & Britton Co., 1917), pp. 115–16.
2. From the Nov. 16, 1996, *The Philippine Star*.