**[Past imperfect](https://www.dawn.com/news/1689106/past-imperfect)**

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BACK in 1986, when the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines was overthrown by a ‘people power’ movement that propelled the then little-known Corazon Aquino to power, supporters of Benazir Bhutto were keen to cite the phenomenon as a model for a transition to democracy in Pakistan.

It may have been an imperfect analogy, but the political demise of Ferdinand Marcos resonated across Asia at the time. He had by then been in power for 20 years, including a nine-year period of martial law. Previous popular revolts had been repressed, but the 1986 uprising proved to be too formidable a challenge, amid evidence of record-setting corruption.

Eventually, his American benefactors advi­sed Marcos to evacuate. The president and his family were helicoptered out of their palace and went into exile in Hawaii. Marcos died three years later, and his family was permitted to return to the Philippines in the early 1990s, where it immediately embarked on the project of rebuilding its political fortunes.

That did not prove too hard in the family’s home province of Ilocos Norte, which had escaped the Marcos regime’s worst excesses. The presidential ambitions of Imelda Marcos, the former first lady whose reputation for personal extravagance was exemplified by the 3,000 pairs of designer shoes discovered in the presidential palace after the Marcoses fled, were rebuffed twice in the 1990s.

Alarmingly, Filipinos have gone back to the future.

But the family’s eldest scion, Ferdinand Marcos Jr — nicknamed Bongbong — fared better in his initially less ambitious political endeavours before making his way into the national legislature and then running for vice president in 2016. He escaped a five-year prison sentence on corruption charges, while his mother’s appeal against an 11-year sentence is still pending.

Bongbong lost narrowly in 2016 to Leni Robredo, a human rights lawyer. Unlike the US model, presidential and vice-presidential elections are held separately in the Philippines, and Robredo has been something of a thorn in the side to Rodrigo Duterte, the exceptionally callous and crude president for the past six years.

Duterte allied himself early on with the Marcos family, permitting the preserved corpse of the old dictator to be repatriated to Manila and reburied with honours in an exclusive cemetery. That hasn’t prevented him from occasionally mocking Bongbong for his weakness and alleged drug use. But then, he has also not been averse every now and then to denigrating his daughter, Sara Duterte-Carpio, whose vice presidential candidacy in support of Marcos Jr lifted the latter’s fortunes.

Bongbong launched a case against Robredo after losing to her in 2016, which was eventually dismissed. But he defeated her by a landslide in Monday’s elections after a fairly impressive grassroots campaign on behalf of Robredo failed to pay off.

The rehabilitation of the Marcos family has been a decades-long phenomenon, but its reliance on social media went into overdrive in the months leading up to this week’s elections. That’s fairly common across much of the world, and it’s hardly surprising that the process involved a steady barrage of disinformation. What’s disconcerting, though, is that such a large proportion of the population readily lapped up the efforts to depict the 20-year Marcos era as some kind of golden age that had unfairly been distorted in its aftermath.

Many of today’s voters were born after 1986, and quite a few others were kids whose recollections of the period are coloured by what they have been told since. All too many people, and not just in the Philippines, rely largely or even exclusively on social media for news. The Marcos army of YouTube blog­gers and Face­book and TikTok influencers inevitably proved effective.

Partly as a consequence, no one really knows what the fut­ure holds for the Phil­ippines. Both Marcos Jr and Sara Duterte avoided media interviews where awkward questions might be asked. And they got away with it.

That’s not particularly shocking in the context of global trends. Nor, for that matter, is the so-called dynastic cartel incorporating the Marcos and Duterte families much of a novelty — Pakistan currently falls in a similar category, and dynasties are something of a pan-Asian curse.

Another explanation for Philippine voting patterns lies in the wide-ranging disenchantment with the electoral process since 1986. Not every leader has been despicable, but not much has changed in economic terms. When the going is good, the rich prosper. When it isn’t, they remain comfortable. The poor — the vast majority — alternate between bad and worse.

No one in this election offered a meaningful alternative. That, depressingly, is how it goes in much of the world. The blow came with an added sting, although even that is not unique to the Philippines. “It will determine not just our future but also our past,” is how the Nobel laureate journalist Maria Ressa described it. “If facts don’t win, we’ll have a whole new history.”