

Lessons from Luneta and other places

September 25, 2017

The newspaper headlines told the story: “Protesters Seen with 2 rifles, 1 shotgun, a pistol”. “Protests: Journalists say they were beaten and arrested by police”. “Police Shut Down Protest: 120 Arrested”. “Protests Turn Violent”.

“Twenty-eight thousand Demonstrators March”. “Activists light up, carry candles”. “Max tolerance for protesters, say cops”. “Peaceful Day of Protest”. “A day for protests, a prayer for healing”.

The events behind these headlines happened recently in two different countries. Citizens took to the streets in protest of what is seen as abusive and unjustified use of force by law enforcement. In one place, potentially thousands have been killed; in the other, perhaps several hundred.

One nation has a score of 89 out of a possible 100 on the “Freedom in World Index” for 2017. This nation has the highest possible rating of 1 out of 7 (Most Free) for both “Political Rights” and “Civil Liberties”. This nation places at number 18 out of 113 countries on the Rule of Law.

The other country scores a total score of 63 out of 100. For both “Political Rights” and “Civil Liberties”, it receives a score of 3 out of 7 and is considered “Partly Free”. This nation places at number 70 out of 113 countries on the Rule of Law.

In the 2016 “Human Freedom Index”, a joint project of the Cato Institute, the Fraser Institute and the Liberales Institut at the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, the United States ranked number 23 out of 159 nations and territories with a score of 8.27 out of 10. This index measures both personal and economic freedom. The Philippines came in with a ranking of 101 out of 159 and a score of 6.53 out of 10.

Based on all these measures of basic freedoms, it would seem that the right and ability to openly protest against the government and its leaders would be most severely curtailed in the Philippines, not in the US. If the government is repressive about the people’s freedom of expression, it would make sense to assume that there would be crackdowns on the protests in the Philippines and not in America.

If conditions are so dreadful and the abuse of the human right to free expression so prevalent, an observer might expect Filipinos and not Americans to wake up the morning after the protest

march to this headline: “Twenty-three businesses were damaged, with dozens of windows broken”.

For the past several decades, Filipinos have become accustomed to taking their grievances against the government to the streets. No matter which side to an issue they may stand, it is undeniable that this has been an effective way to get the government’s attention. Freedom of expression by the people is alive and well in the Philippines. These protests are good reminders to both government and the people that government was created by the people to serve the people.

What we find both interesting and reassuring is that—unlike in the US—mass-action protests by Filipinos have rarely seen the kind of destruction and damage turned against the businesses and property of other ordinary Filipinos.

Perhaps, Filipinos—even as they object to and fight against what they see as wrongdoing from successive governments—also respect each other’s rights. Maybe we are a better people than we give ourselves credit for.