

Imelda Marcos and her road to vindication

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BATAK CITY, Ilocos Norte — All roads in Ilocos Norte do not necessarily lead to the capital Laoag. In this season of politics, it seems, all roads lead to where Imelda decides to go.

On Tuesday afternoon, Imelda Marcos, widow of the late strongman Ferdinand, entered a shack in Nueva Era, an interior town nestled among the rolling foothills of the Ilocos Range. She wanted to visit the wake of one of her staunchest supporters, Andres Peralta, who was gunned down two days earlier.

"This is crazy. This is criminal. Politics is for justice and not for killing people," said the former First Lady, who wore a black dress with matching pants and sandals. Her hair sports her signature bouffant, her cheeks are rouged, and a finger is adorned with a ring encrusted with diamonds.

As her eyes well with tears, Imelda promises the wife and children of the slain supporter that she would give them her salary should she win as the Lower House representative for the province's second district.

Imelda cites the plight of the newly-orphaned children as the motivation for her planned re-entry into politics. "I am campaigning not to be a congresswoman but to be a mother, or considering my age, a grandmother. I know all the leaders of this world and I can find the solutions to our problems," says Imelda, herself an orphan who once walked barefoot on the streets of her native Tolosa, Leyte.

"In Latin, mother means *anima*, which means soul. In politics, you don't only use your heart or head. You also use the soul of a mother, the selfless giving of a mother," she adds.

Imelda — the Steel Butterfly who literally flutters when she walks, the other half of what many people saw as the conjugal dictatorship she shared with late husband Ferdinand — is adamant. She denounces Peralta's killing, and reminds everyone that her husband never committed human rights atrocities against political critics and dissenters at the height of his 20-year rule.



Imelda looks pensive as she recounts the years her husband Ferdinand was in power.
Sophia Dedace

Indeed, one is thrust into hyper-reality the moment one is exposed to the compelling presence of the 80-year-old Imelda, who has achieved world fame for her extravagance, notorious edifice complex, fabled hundreds of pairs of shoes, Manhattan condominiums and antique gem collections.

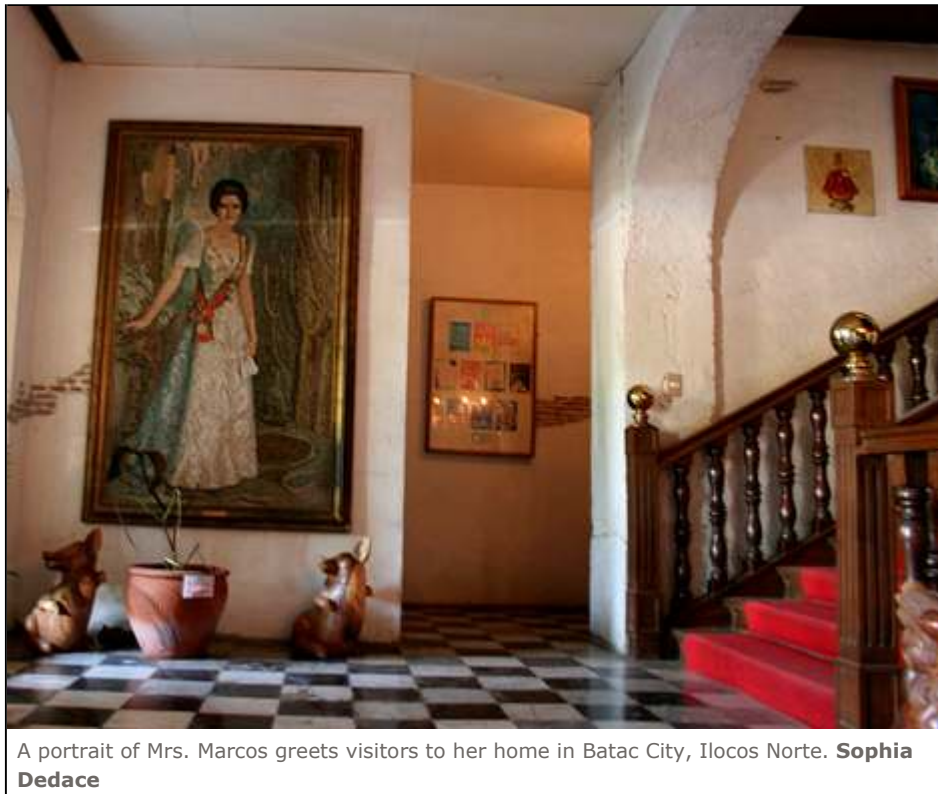
She with the full name of Imelda Remedios Visitation Trinidad Romualdez Marcos confesses to opulence not just in name but in other respects: "If they

accuse me of being the greediest, then I plead guilty. I am greediest for the true, the good, and the beautiful. Everybody's aim is to be excessively good, extravagantly good and beautiful, because that is godly and saintly." The classic Imelda hasn't changed a bit since the 1970s.

It was said that Imelda's embarrassment of riches — while the country was mired in abject poverty — was one of the reasons why the Marcos government was besieged by public outrage at the height of its power.

It's inconceivable how the First Couple could have paid for their luxuries just by relying on Ferdinand's ostensible President's salary. But Imelda insists that her family never stole a single cent from the Filipino people. Ferdinand's wealth, she claims, came from the gold treasure he had acquired before he became president.

In their prime, Ferdinand, Imelda, and their cronies amassed ill-gotten wealth, reportedly amounting to billions of dollars. However, the Presidential Commission on Good Government, formed by the Aquino administration to go after the fabulous hoard, ended up admitting that the government had only found a little more than \$1 billion's worth of cash and non-cash assets.



A portrait of Mrs. Marcos greets visitors to her home in Batac City, Ilocos Norte. **Sophia Dedace**

But Ferdinand died in 1989 while in exile in Hawaii, leaving Imelda by herself to fend off the sword of justice and the nose of hidden-wealth hunters.

According to records of the Philippine anti-graft court Sandiganbayan as of 2005, Mrs. Marcos continues to face 11 criminal charges and 25 civil cases. Since the 1990s, she has faced more than 900 cases, most of which were dismissed for lack of evidence. The few convictions were overturned. "I faced the trial of the century in New York [for fraud] but I was acquitted in 1990,"

she says.

To date, neither Imelda nor any of her coterie accused of ill-gotten wealth during the Marcos regime have spent a minute in jail. The government has had little success in recovering the Marcos wealth, if only those that are ensconced in a range of corporations and properties.

But for Imelda, this only proves there was no ill-gotten wealth at all. "The truth is starting to prevail. I am at peace with the truth. For me, the sun will rise tomorrow. We'll be vindicated because of the spirit of the Marcoses," she says.

She then tells her accusers, "Even in hell, there is a special place for the oppressors of widows and orphans. I am a widow and an orphan and they have insulted me."

Return to power

They may have fallen from grace 24 years ago, but Imelda believes Filipinos still "miss" the Marcoses and clamor for their comeback.

Imelda herself attempted to test the waters and venture back into politics almost two decades ago. In 1992, she ran for president but placed fifth in a seven-way race. But after all, only one year had passed since she returned to the Philippines from Hawaii.

In 1995, she was elected Leyte congresswoman. It was the last public office held by Imelda, who also served as member of the Interim Batasan Pambansa and as Metro Manila governor during the Marcos

regime.

This year, the fallen First Couple's only son, Ferdinand Jr. or "Bongbong," is running for senator under his father's old Nacionalista Party banner. He is the first Marcos to seek a national post elected at large since his mother lost the presidential race in 1992. Can he win? Surprisingly for the anti-Marcos crowd, Bongbong hovers among the top 12 in pre-election surveys.

Eldest daughter Maria Imelda Josefa, more popularly known as "Imee," is running for Ilocos Norte governor and is challenging reelectionist cousin Michael Marcos Keon, son of Ferdinand's sister, Elizabeth.

Bongbong and Imee have held key positions at the provincial level or to represent the province in Congress prior to their electoral bids this year.

Bongbong has been the second-district congressman from 1992 to 1995 and governor for three terms from 1998 to 2007. He was elected congressman again in 2007. Imee for her part, served as the province's second-district congresswoman while her brother was governor from 1998 to 2007.



Imelda tours GMANews.TV to the Marcos photo gallery building, a cavernous hall whose walls are decked with photographs of the Marcoses at the height of their power. **Sophia Dedace**

This year, Imelda is going against Mariano Nalupta Jr., a former Ilocos vice governor and erstwhile Marcos ally.

Asked why she chose to run in Ilocos Norte instead of her home province of Leyte, Imelda explains: "This [Ilocos Norte] is the center of the world," she says, showing a world map where the Philippines is placed at the center.

"I am running to save the earth. I am here for Mother Earth, to make a human settlement in paradise. And the great thing is that it

can be done," she gushes. "There should be no poor Filipinos, because this country sits on top of gold."

Upside-down history

Philippine history has it that Corazon "Cory" Aquino turned into an icon of democracy for restoring the pre-martial law institutions of formal democracy, which were abolished or suppressed by Ferdinand Marcos, the tyrant.

But history according to Imelda says otherwise.

Calling Cory a corrupt dictator and usurper of power, Imelda says: "I built a school called the University of Life, but Cory took that building and named it the Department of Education. We can surface before the world now and say, 'Who's the thief?'"

She also accuses the erstwhile Aquino government of having locked onto whatever money her family had. "I have no money now because they took away all we have," she says, referring to the Marcoses' sequestered properties, frozen bank accounts, and confiscated collections of jewelry and art works.

Once, when she was interviewed on television, she put her dramatic flair to good use by waving her late husband's Veterans' Bank passbook and saying that she had come to depend on the measly pension that hopefully would arrive monthly.



Imelda's living room is fit for a queen. **Sophia Dedace**

Despite her claim that she is going broke, Imelda is hardly poor.

Her two-storey house in Batac City, located beside the mausoleum housing her husband's preserved remains, is still par for the royalty's course. Her Ford Expedition takes her to the back roads of peasant villages, such as to the wake of Andres Peralta. She has an elegant penthouse among the glittering buildings of Makati City's Ayala Avenue.

As for her jewels in the government's possession, she says

she no longer wants to go after them. Imelda now manages her own jewelry collection made from pieces of old accessories and beads she bought from 168 Mall in Divisoria.

"They stole all my jewelry. They threw all the junk at me. Now, I'm turning the junk into jewelry," she says. "This brooch made of black beads I'm wearing now is less than a dollar!"

Thus, she proudly relates the title she gave for her gem collection made of scrap. "The Imelda Collection: Guaranteed to tarnish and disintegrate. Be Imeldific, be creative, and unleash the beauty in you," says Mrs. Marcos.

While she laments not being able to shop anymore at Cartier and Fifth Avenue in New York, Imelda says there is one addiction she can't let go of. "I only collect beautiful things, like a beautiful Filipino," she says.

She admits that she was broadly reviled because of her penchant for pomp and glamor. But she believes her return to the Philippine political ballroom is welcomed and well underway.

In the thick of the campaign season, Imelda, who has been getting only two hours of sleep every night due to her numerous appointments, draws a throng of supporters wherever she goes. It feels like old times once again.

With ingenuous simplicity, she tries to describe the road she has travelled so far: "I have been blessed not because I was a genius, not because I was a scholar. What Imelda had was common to all: common sense."—**Sophia Regina M. Dedace/JV, GMANews.TV**



"I only collect beautiful things, like a beautiful Filipino," says Imelda. **Sophia Dedace**

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