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# Disinformation and the end of democracy?

***How to Stand up to a Dictator: The Fight for our Future***, By Maria Ressa. London: Penguin Random House, 2022. 301 pages. ISBN 978073559208.

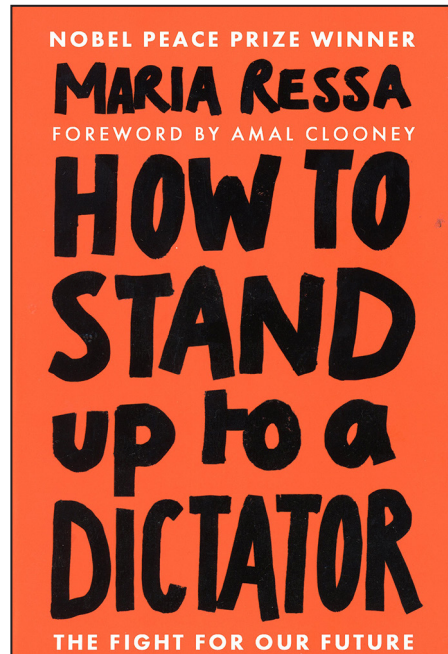
AS WE marched in our pink t-shirts in solidarity with the diaspora supporting outgoing Vice-President and opposition leader Leni Robredo in Auckland's Centennial Park in the lead up to the Philippine presidential election in May 2022, the thought weighed heavily on our minds: 'Surely, Filipinos wouldn't elect the son of dictator Ferdinand Marcos just 38 years after his corrupt father had been ousted by People Power?'

Pink for the defence of democracy.

Our hopes were strong. People Power had been the global inspiration of a generation.

The peaceful revolution had ousted a dictator who had been in power for almost 21 years. Pro-democracy uprisings followed in quick succession elsewhere in the world—in South Korea in 1987, Myanmar in 1988 and China and Eastern Europe in 1989.

It even inspired me into joining the 1988 International Peace Brigade and writing a series of investigative articles about New Zealand's controversial



Bukidnon forestry project in the southern island of Mindanao and Philippine human rights violations (Robie, 2014).

Sadly, the hopes for the survival of genuine Philippine democracy were crushed at the polls with the dictator's tainted son triumphant, swept to power by an avalanche of disinformation and a rampant army of social media trolls.

Truth to power? No, the powerful elite cynically removed truth in a salutary warning to the world (Trump's playbook too). Leni Robredo had been the victim of a massive 'red-tagging' campaign (Bollo, 2022).

In a damning indictment of the Duterte and Marcos Jr administrations and the rise of the disinformation era globally, investigative journalist and Nobel peace prize laureate Maria Ressa warns in *How to Stand up to a Dictator* how democracy everywhere is under threat

from the authoritarians and the power of the technology corporations—the new media gatekeepers—enabling a torrent of hate and lies to dominate.

She herself is still in danger of going to prison in her fight for the truth after years of harassment, threats and lawsuits. Her predictions about President Ferdinand Bongbong Marcos Jr have been borne out with the International Press Institute becoming the latest media watchdog to give thumbs down to the dictator's son.

'One year since Ferdinand Marcos Jr took office as president, little progress has been made in improving press freedom in the Philippines,' an IPI correspondent reported, calling the Marcos electoral pledge to 'better protect the press' (Dailey, 2023).

The Duterte government frequently targeted and attacked journalists and critics whom he accused of being 'corrupt' and 'not exempted from assassination'. During his eight-year term of office until 2022 and his notorious 'war on drugs' (Sepe Jr, 2018), 20 journalists were killed—all with complete impunity. This was a higher death toll for scribes even than during the Marcos dictatorship.

After growing up and being educated in the US, Ressa returned to the Philippines in 2004 on a Fulbright scholarship for political theatre studies, but she preferred 'real-life theatre'—she chose journalism, initially with the post-Marcos People's TV. She set up and headed CNN's Jakarta regional bureau for five years, gaining a reputation for tenacious investigative reporting. She recalls:

Marcos and Suharto left behind similar problems that lay just beneath the surface. In the Philippines, it was cynicism and patronage politics. In Indonesia, it was called KKN (pronounced 'ka-ka-en'): corruption, collusion and nepotism. That top-down, oppressive, controlling political system took its toll on the people. Their leaders' biggest sin was that they failed to educate their people. (p. 64)

Ressa then teamed up with three other dedicated and courageous women journalists to establish *Rappler* as a pioneering digital-only news website in the Philippines. One of her colleagues, Glenda Gloria, was a keynote speaker at an Auckland University of Technology conference in November 2021 (Gloria, 2022).

Using Facebook and other social media platforms, *Rappler* sought to 'create a new standard of investigative journalism' and 'build communities of action for better governance and stronger democracies'. With crowd-sourced breaking news, the website also targeted action for climate change.

At *Rappler*, we exposed corruption and manipulation not only in government but increasingly in the technology companies that were already dominating our lives. Starting in 2016, we began highlighting impunity on two fronts: President Rodrigo Duterte's drug war and Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook. (p. 3)

The book is divided into three parts following a prologue provocatively titled 'the invisible time bomb' about the destructive side of social media. 'Part 1:

Homecoming: Power, the Press, and the Philippines, 1963-2004' deals with Ressa's split lives and families and her 'kidnapping' to the US at the age of 10 and then her return to her homeland.

'Part 2: The Rise of Facebook, *Rappler*, and the Internet's Black Hole, 2005-2017' articulates the transformation of the 'CNN effect' with global satellite news gathering into cellphone reporting and her experience in rebuilding ABS-CBN into a trusted television news service, until it was destroyed by the Duterte administration.

Of particular interest to me in this section was when ABS-CBN anchor and friend Ces Drillon and her two cameramen were seized in 2008 as hostages for ransom in Mindanao by Abu Sayyaf, 'a homegrown terror group linked to Al-Qaeda' (p. 89). This incident triggered 10 days of negotiations with the gunmen by Ressa and her colleagues (who later formed the *Rappler* core group).

Had the negotiations failed it could have been a tragedy. Just a month earlier a group of labourer hostages had been beheaded and their heads delivered to the company that refused to negotiate (p. 90). For several years I used this crisis as a course case study on the dilemmas of journalist safety for my postgraduate Asia Pacific student journalists.

Another shocking incident among many was the Maguindanao massacre on 23 November 2009, when 58 people, including 32 journalists, were murdered in broad daylight. The Committee to Protect Journalists described

it as 'the deadliest single attack on journalists anywhere in the world' (p. 93).

The book's final—and most disturbing—section is 'Part 3: Crack-down, Arrests, Elections, and the Fight for our Future, 2018-present'. The chapter titles give a hint to the grim narrative and analysis— 'Surviving a thousand cuts' (Chapter 9), 'Don't become a monster to fight a monster' (10), 'Hold the line' (11) and 'Why fascism is winning' (12).

Inspirational as she is, Maria Ressa admits that there are times when she struggles:

Because I refuse to stop doing my job, I've lost my freedom to travel. I can't plan my life because I still have seven criminal cases that could send me to jail for the rest of my life. But I refuse to live in a world like this. I demand better. We deserve better. (p. 262)

In her 2021 Nobel peace lecture, Ressa appealed for a 'people-to-people defence of our democracies—of our freedom, of equality. I've tried to flesh that out in this book.' And she has certainly succeeded.

*How to Stand up to a Dictator* should be required reading for any young journalist, not least because of its refreshing non-Western perspectives, an antidote for the smug complacency of liberal democracy media.

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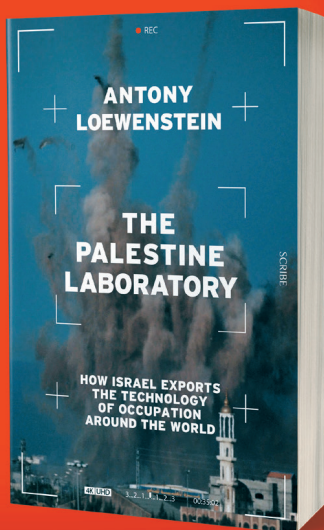
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