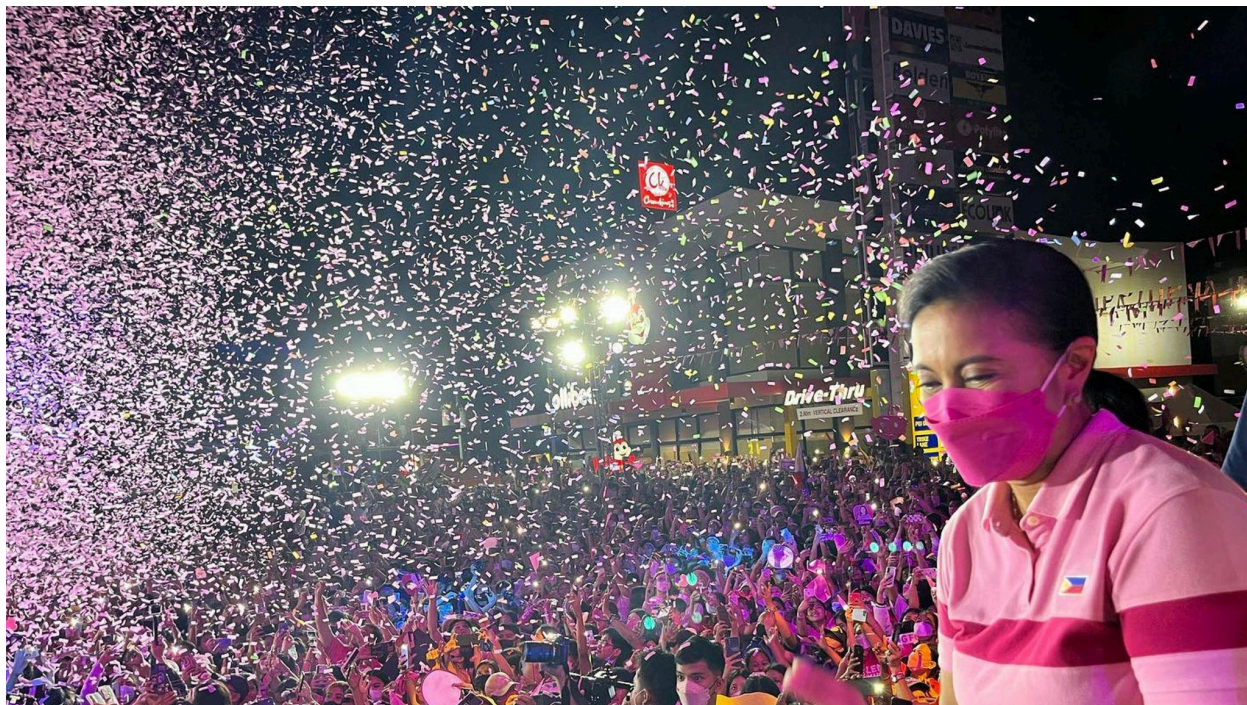




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AND SO IT BEGINS

Directed, Produced, and Written by Ramona S Diaz



WORLD PREMIERE - 2024 Sundance Film Festival - Premieres

Mins 115 | Language English, Tagalog, and other dialects | Year 2024 | Country United States, Philippines |

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AND SO IT BEGINS
Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

2024 Sundance Film Festival Schedule

World Premiere - Monday, January 22 at 6:30 PM at The Ray Theatre, Park City

P&I Screening - Tuesday, January 23 at 10:00 AM at Holiday 4, Park City

Tuesday, January 23 at 12 PM at Redstone Cinemas, Park City

Wednesday, January 24 at 6:30 PM at Megaplex Theatres at the Gateway, Salt Lake City

Friday, January 26 at 9:30 AM at Library Center Theatre, Park City

Saturday, January 27 at 12 PM Broadway Centre Cinemas 3, Salt Lake City

Online - Wednesday, January 24 at 7 AM PST - Saturday, January 28 at 10:55 PM PST

AND SO IT BEGINS

Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

LOGLINE

Amidst the traditional pomp and circumstance of Filipino elections, a quirky people's movement rises to defend the nation against deepening threats to truth and democracy. In a collective act of joy as a form of resistance, hope flickers against the backdrop of increasing autocracy.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

In a decades-long nonfiction saga of the Philippines, director Ramona Diaz presents the latest chapter on her homeland as the despotic reign of President Rodrigo Duterte is coming to an end. *And So It Begins* proffers unbridled access to all the key players in the months leading up to the country's 2022 presidential election. With her keen observational eye and deep knowledge of the socio-political history and landscape, Diaz continues to find her own forms of storytelling as political disruption.

Taking place in the thick of the Covid pandemic, *And So It Begins* is a shape-shifting story of the raucous collective act of joy expressed in a quirky resistance movement that pits itself against the haunting specter of increasing autocracy. Weaving together multiple narratives against the backdrop of a gloves-off campaign for the most powerful office in the land, what emerges is a dazzling cinematic portrait of a beleaguered nation fighting for its very soul.

LONG SYNOPSIS

In a decades-long nonfiction saga of the Philippines, director Ramona Diaz presents the latest chapter on her homeland as the despotic reign of President Rodrigo Duterte is coming to an end. *And So It Begins* proffers unbridled access to all the key players in the months leading up to the country's 2022 presidential election. With her keen observational eye and deep knowledge of the socio-political history and landscape, Diaz continues to find her own forms of storytelling as political disruption.

Maria Ressa, co-founder and CEO of Rappler, an independent online news service in the Philippines, is still very much part of the story. Ressa is the brave and passionate protagonist of Diaz's 2020 multiple award-winning documentary thriller, *A Thousand Cuts*. Just as Ressa, in her 2021 Nobel Peace Prize speech in Oslo wants to "break the formality" of political rhetoric, so Diaz sets her latest film in the midst of a "multiverse of disinformation" three and a half decades after the People Power Revolution of 1986 ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos, forcing him and his family into exile.

Now, amidst a tidal wave of marginalized citizens taking to the streets in support of the change they want to see, Marcos's eldest son, Ferdinand (Bongbong) Marcos, Jr. is the frontrunner for President. His campaign strategy consists mostly of an unrelenting and vicious social media campaign against his opponent, then-current Vice-President of the Philippines, Leni Robredo. In the operatic opening sequence, a veritable sea of people holding pink flags aloft wave in time to renditions of pop songs praising the socially conscious attorney. A joyful new people's power movement in Robredo's name seems to be on the rise as massive numbers of working-class citizens perform song-and-dance numbers in the streets of their villages in her honor. Hope refuses to die.

Leni Robredo's acolytes call her "Ma'am", the same moniker the people used for Imelda Marcos when she entered the world's stage on the arm of her husband. Diaz's first feature film, *Imelda* (2003) was a singular portrait of the First Lady of the Philippines, post-exile. But Robredo, a widow and the single mother of three daughters, protests when a bystander offers to shelter her

AND SO IT BEGINS
Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

from the burning sun with an umbrella during a stump speech. “Please, no”, she says, laughing. “I don’t need someone to hold an umbrella for me. I’m not Imelda.”

Diaz continues to portray the Philippines within the framework of the legacy of the martial law imposed under Ferdinand Marcos, who created a terrifying and violent period that lasted for twenty-one years. Yet, many Filipinos still remember a paradise during that time. Taking place in the thick of the Covid pandemic, *And So It Begins* is a shape-shifting story of the raucous collective act of joy expressed in a quirky resistance movement that pits itself against the haunting specter of increasing autocracy. Weaving together multiple narratives against the backdrop of a gloves-off campaign for the most powerful office in the land, what emerges is a dazzling cinematic portrait of a beleaguered nation fighting for its very soul.

AND SO IT BEGINS
Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

DIRECTORS STATEMENT
RAMONA S. DIAZ

1. How did this film come about? How did the idea originate? What inspired you?

This film was conceived as a companion to *A Thousand Cuts* (2020). The question many people were asking after virtual Q&As throughout 2020 and 2021 was, “How does it end?” What was Maria Ressa’s fate? Was she going to jail after being found guilty of cyber-libel? I pitched the idea of a follow-up to Raney Aronson-Rath, the editor-in-chief and executive producer of *FRONTLINE*, and she green-lit a one-hour Frontline episode. I returned to Manila in September of 2021 when the country was still in COVID-imposed lockdown, and I had to quarantine for 14 days. Knowing whether we could make the film and keep the crew safe and healthy was hard. The film expanded as it almost always does. Maria is still very much a part of the film, but the causes of her disquiet – disinformation, the weaponization of social media - opened up the story to something that was happening on the ground: the Philippine presidential elections of 2022 and the specter of the dictator’s son returning to power on the wings of a weaponized social media army. The integrity of elections depends on the integrity of facts, as Maria has often said.

When Leni Robredo decided to run, which quickly became a two-person race for the Presidency – the beleaguered Vice President against Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. – it became apparent that this was how Maria’s point would manifest in real-time. I knew then that I had the container of the film. Raney and I also knew that because of this expansion, it was apparent that it was no longer a one-hour Frontline but a feature-length cinematic documentary film, given the spectacular nature of elections in the Philippines.

Although *And So It Begins* expanded what was started in *A Thousand Cuts*, it is possible to watch this film without ever having seen *ATC*; it is a self-contained story.

2. How long did it take to make the film? From concept to finish.

As mentioned, we conceived of the film in the summer of 2021, started production in the fall of 2021, and filmed throughout the year until May 2022. We did pick-up shoots throughout 2022 and 2023, even as we cut the film.

3. Why did you make this film? Here, talk about having the voices heard and these stories be told. Also talk about the importance of why this story is important to tell now. Where does this live in this current time

The Economist has called 2024 the “biggest election year in history,” with the most populous nations in the world (including the US and India) set to hold elections in 2024. During an event

AND SO IT BEGINS

Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

at the National Press Club in fall 2023, Maria warned, “We will know whether democracy lives or dies by the end of 2024.”

The Philippines is a canary in the coal mine and serves as a cautionary tale for this coming year. Having said that, this film is not meant to be reportage. I hope my films are evergreen and stand the test of time. Universally, it is of this moment, but it is also culturally specific, making it timeless. The film leans into the very particular way that elections are carried out in the Philippines.

4. Share a story about filming; anything that you found interesting along the way with your filming journey.

I compare how I make documentary films to a high-wire act, often with no safety net below me. Because I follow stories as they unfold, I never know what will happen daily. I have an idea, but the details become clearer once we start rolling. And to top it all, in *And So It Begins*, the intense travel schedule (this film took us to every nook and cranny of the Philippines), the logistics of getting from place to place, be it by car or plane or ferry every two or three days, took a lot of our producing energy. However, when we finally got to our destination, the beauty and sometimes devastation of the place (as in war-ravaged Marawi) and the locals energized us anew. It’s hard to describe the feeling of seeing places for the first time through the eyes of the hundreds and thousands of volunteers we met on the ground. Their excitement gave us the energy and persistence to keep moving forward.

5. Did the film change from your original idea for the film as you were filming or in Post?

It constantly changes because...life. See above for how it changed and evolved from being one thing to expanding and morphing into something different.

6. What were the challenges in making this film?

The biggest challenge was making it while COVID was still in full force, especially in the Philippines, where people were still in lockdown. The fact that we were only shut down once (our production driver tested positive) was a testament to the single-mindedness of my field producers, who adhered to stringent protocols. I’m not sure how many times I tested, my nose was sore, and I have to admit, I rebelled sometimes, and they put me in my place. They were right. If we had been shut down more than once, we would have had to re-think the feasibility of making the film.

And, of course, just the physicality of keeping up with a campaign that traveled all over the Philippines was brutal. The country has 7,100 islands, and Leni Robredo made it a mission to visit most of them. Imagine that!

AND SO IT BEGINS
Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

7. What were the successes that you had in making this film?

That it got done in time for Sundance. We had many personnel changes, and every time it happened, it seemed like the end of the world. In reality, it wasn't. The right person and circumstance always presented itself. I adhere to a zen saying in life, but mostly in making films: The obstacle is the path. Never more so than in this film.

8. What do you want audiences to take away from this film?

I'm not prescriptive when it comes to what audiences should take away. I've learned that what they take away from it varies depending on their life circumstance, their lived experience, their cultural lens, and their worldview. It'll always be different as it should be. All I hope to do in my films is give people an experience they would otherwise not have.

9. Was there a something special technically that you utilized in making this film – your cameras or sound or editing etc... and why were these important.

Not really.

10. Where do you find inspiration or who/what has influenced you as a filmmaker?

I find inspiration from the people I film. I usually enter people's lives during watershed moments, which are the times that reveal who people are. And it's a profound privilege to be invited to a front-row seat during the most challenging times in people's lives.

11. Anything else you want to add about the making of the film and it's importance?

I've always wanted to make a film about the Philippines that leans into music, performance, and joy as a form of resistance. I think I captured some of that in this film.

AND SO IT BEGINS

Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

FILM PARTICIPANTS

Leni Robredo

Maria Leonor "Leni" Santo Tomas Gerona is a Filipino lawyer and politician who served as the 14th vice president of the Philippines from 2016 to 2022. She previously served as the representative of the 3rd district of Camarines Sur from 2013 to 2016. She is the second woman to serve as vice president of the Philippines.

Robredo has spearheaded multiple programs in the Office of the Vice President (OVP); her flagship anti-poverty program, *Angat Buhay* (lit. 'Uplifting Lives'), has helped address key areas including education, rural development, and healthcare, in partnership with more than 300 organizations. During the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines, the OVP under Robredo responded by providing free shuttle services for frontline workers, swab tests, telehealth services, and raised funds for relief operations across the country. Robredo was awarded by the government of Thailand in 2016 for her work and advocacy in women's empowerment and gender equality. Under her leadership, the OVP also received the ISO 9001: 2015 certification for the office's quality management systems.

Robredo was born in Santo Tomas Gerona in Naga, Camarines Sur, Philippines. She earned her degree in Bachelor of Arts in Economics from the University of the Philippines School of Economics at UP Diliman in 1986, and proceeded to study law at the University of Nueva Caceres, graduating in 1992. Robredo served in the Public Attorney's Office, a role in which she often took up the defense for cases pursued by her husband, who by then had become Mayor of Naga.

From 1998 to 2008, Robredo became the coordinator of *Sentro ng Alternatibong Lingap Panligan (SALIGAN)*, a Naga-based alternative legal support group. SALIGAN's work aimed to encourage young legal professionals to take on leadership roles, and involved visiting distant rural communities to provide legal services to residents who would otherwise have little or no access to such services, as well as conducting legal advocacy by proposing amendments and new laws based on the needs of these marginalized communities. Later, the group's focus shifted to include helping rural women to acquire capital in order to participate in competitive markets. In addition, Robredo founded the *Lakas ng Kababaihan ng Naga Federation (Women Power of Naga Federation)*, an organization that provides training and livelihood opportunities for women, in 1989. In 2012, Robredo was named the chairperson of the Liberal Party in Camarines Sur.

Robredo announced her presidential campaign in the 2022 presidential elections with Liberal Party leader Senator Francis Pangilinan as her running mate.

Maria Ressa

Maria Ressa, A journalist in Asia for more than 37 years, co-founded Rappler, the top digital only news site that is leading the fight for press freedom in the Philippines. As Rappler's CEO and president, Maria has endured constant political harassment and arrests by the Duterte government, forced to post bail ten times to stay free. Rappler's battle for truth and democracy is the subject of the 2020 Sundance Film Festival documentary, *A Thousand Cuts*.

In October 2021, Maria was one of two journalists awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her "efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace."

AND SO IT BEGINS

Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

For her courage and work on disinformation and 'fake news,' Maria was named one of Time Magazine's 2018 Person of the Year, was among its 100 Most Influential People of 2019, and has also been named one of Time's Most Influential Women of the Century. She was also part of the BBC's 100 most inspiring and influential women of 2019 and Prospect magazine's world's top 50 thinkers. In 2020, she received the Journalist of the Year award, the John Aubuchon Press Freedom Award, the Most Resilient Journalist Award, the Tucholsky Prize, the Truth to Power Award, and the Four Freedoms Award. In 2021, UNESCO awarded her the Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.

Among many awards for her principled stance, she received the prestigious Golden Pen of Freedom Award from the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, the Knight International Journalism Award from the International Center for Journalists, the Gwen Ifill Press Freedom Award from the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Shorenstein Journalism Award from Stanford University, the Columbia Journalism Award, the Free Media Pioneer Award from the International Press Institute, and the Sergei Magnitsky Award for Investigative Journalism.

Maria was born in the Philippines but grew up in the United States after her family migrated to Toms River, New Jersey in 1973. She took up premed at Princeton University, where she graduated cum laude with a B.A. degree in English and certificates in theater and dance in 1986. She returned to Manila on a Fulbright fellowship in 1986 and worked for the newly liberated government station, People's Television 4, as director of newscasts then as head of its special projects team. In 1987, she began reporting for CNN and joined ABS-CBN as the director and producer of Probe, the first and longest running investigative news magazine in the Philippines, before helping set it up as a separate company, Probe Productions, Inc., in 1988. Before co-founding Rappler, Maria focused on investigating terrorism in Southeast Asia. She opened and ran CNN's Manila Bureau for nearly a decade before moving to Indonesia and opening the network's Jakarta bureau, which she ran from 1995 to 2005. That was when she returned to Manila as the senior vice president in charge of ABS-CBN's multimedia news operations, managing about a thousand journalists for the largest news organization in the country.

Maria wrote *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of al-Qaeda's Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia* and *From Bin Laden to Facebook: 10 Days of Abduction, 10 Years of Terrorism, and How to Stand up to a Dictator*.

AND SO IT BEGINS
Sundance 2024 - Press Notes
FILMMAKER BIOS

Ramona S. Diaz / Director, Writer, Producer

Ramona S. Diaz is a Peabody, Gotham, IDA, Emmy award-winning, PGA and Independent Spirit award-nominated Asian American filmmaker best known for her compelling character-driven documentaries that combine a profound appreciation for cinematic aesthetics and potent storytelling. Ramona's films have demonstrated her ability to gain intimate access to the people she films – be they rock stars, first ladies, dissidents, mothers, teachers, or journalists – resulting in keenly observed moments and unforgettable nuanced narratives. Her films have been screened and won awards at Sundance, Berlin, Busan, Tribeca, SXSW, IDFA, HotDocs, and many other top-tier film festivals.

Ramona's feature-length independently-produced films— *Imelda* (IL, 2004), *The Learning* (POV, 2011), *Don't Stop Believin': Everyman's Journey* (IL, 2012) and, *Motherland* (POV, 2017), *A Thousand Cuts* (Frontline, 2020)—have been nationally broadcast on PBS, Arte, and the BBC amongst others. Ramona is both a Guggenheim Fellow and a USA Fellow – prestigious awards given to artists with singular visions who have significantly contributed to the arts in the United States. She was recently named the inaugural McGurn Family Trust Resident in Film by the American Academy in Rome. Ramona is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences and the Producers and Writers Guilds of America. In 2017, she received a Women at Sundance Fellowship, a Creative Capital Award, and a Chicken & Egg Pictures Filmmaker Award. For the past ten years, Ramona has served as a film envoy for the U.S. State Department's American Film Showcase in partnership with USC and, more recently, for Film Independent's Global Media Makers program. Ramona is a graduate of Emerson College and holds an MA from Stanford University.

Aaron Soffin / Editor

Aaron Soffin is a documentary film editor compelled by the puzzle of each unique story. His award-winning feature documentaries include Sebastian Junger and Nick Quested's analysis of the Syrian crisis, *Hell on Earth: The Fall of Syria and the Rise of Isis*; DA Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus' retelling of Bill Clinton's 1992 victory, *The Return of the War Room*; Andrew Jacobs' uplifting tale of a community of Holocaust survivors refusing to surrender their joie-de-vivre, *Four Seasons Lodge*; and Andrew Berends' verité portraits of Iraqi families during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, *Blood of My Brother* and *When Adnan Comes Home*. Aaron is drawn to intimate stories that bring viewers into times, places, and the lives of people they would never otherwise imagine. Aaron lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Bruce Sakaki // Cinematographer

Passionate and dedicated, I am a commercial cinematographer based in the vibrant landscape of the Philippines. With an innate ability to weave diverse narratives through the lens, showcasing the beauty and complexity of the human experience, I recently embarked on an inspiring journey into the realm of documentary filmmaking.

David and Linda Cornfield // Executive Producers

David and Linda Cornfield are philanthropists with backgrounds in the tech industry who believe in the power of images and storytelling to spark curiosity and foster understanding. They are executive producers of the Emmy® award winning nature documentaries *Chasing Ice* and *Chasing Coral* as well as other documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma*, *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, *Inventing Tomorrow* (2019 Peabody award), *The Human Element*, and *Dark Money* (2020 duPont-Columbia University award).

AND SO IT BEGINS

Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

TIMELINE - IMPORTANT DATES

- **September 1972**

The late dictator Ferdinand Marcos declared the entire Philippines to be under a state of martial law. He cited the threat of communists as the reason behind his proclamation.

- **August 1983**

Former senator Benigno Aquino, Jr., a political opponent and vocal critic of Ferdinand Marcos, had just arrived in Manila after three years in exile when he was shot dead. His assassination spurred a chain of events that led to the People Power revolution in 1986.

- **February 1986**

Backed by the military, millions of Filipinos marched along EDSA to put an end to Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship. The revolt, known to be the People Power revolution, ousted the dictator and forced him and his family to seek exile in Hawaii.

- **February 1986**

The Marcoses arrived in Hawaii after Ferdinand Marcos was ousted during the People Power revolution. According to the US Customs Service, he and his family brought with them millions of dollars worth of jewelry, cash, and gold.

- **September 1989**

Ferdinand Marcos died while in exile in Honolulu, Hawaii after battling with a degenerative kidney disorder.

- **November 1991**

Former first lady Imelda Marcos returned to the Philippines after being driven into exile when her husband, Ferdinand Marcos, was ousted in 1986. She was allowed to go home to face charges of graft and tax evasion.

- **1998 - 2007**

After returning from exile, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., son of the late dictator, ran for Ilocos Norte governor and won. He served for three consecutive terms.

AND SO IT BEGINS

Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

- **August 2012**

Jesse Robredo, former Naga mayor, Interior and Local Government Secretary and Leni Robredo's husband, passed away after his plane crashed into the waters of Masbate City. His body was found three days later.

- **May 2013**

Leni Robredo won the congressional seat in Camarines Sur's third district. She won against Nelly Favis Villafuerte, a member of the Villafuerte political dynasty.

- **May 2016**

Leni Robredo won the vice presidency during the 2016 presidential elections, defeating rival Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos. This spurred cheating allegations from the Marcos camp which later on filed an electoral protest against her.

- **January 2020 - October 2021**

The Commission on Elections opened a new round of voter registration for the May 2022 elections. The department announced that almost 67 million voters were eligible to vote.

- **October 2021**

Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, the son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, filed his certificate of candidacy for president. He ran under Partido Federal ng Pilipinas, the political party closely allied with the Duterte administration.

- **October 2021**

After a long discernment process, Leni Robredo, then Vice President of the Philippines, announced her candidacy for presidency. She filed her candidacy under an independent party.

- **October 2021**

Journalist and Rappler founder Maria Ressa was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize. She was in a virtual panel discussion when the Norwegian Nobel committee called to inform her of the news.

- **November 2021**

Sara Duterte-Carpio, the daughter of then President Rodrigo Duterte, filed her candidacy for vice presidency. She ran under the Bongbong Marcos' political party.

- **December 2021**

AND SO IT BEGINS

Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

Maria Ressa delivered her Nobel Peace Prize lecture in Oslo, Norway. During her speech, she mentioned how multiple countries are battling disinformation despite a looming election that will dictate the course of the country's future.

- **February 2022**

CNN Philippines held a presidential debate. Bongbong Marcos was the only presidential candidate who did not attend.

- **April 2022**

Renowned comedian and actor Vice Ganda made a surprise appearance at a campaign rally and officially endorsed Leni Robredo for president.

- **May 2022**

Election results showed that Bongbong Marcos won the presidency. He won by a landslide and received more than 31 million votes, while Robredo came in at second with only 15 million votes.

- **May 2022**

Thousands of supporters flocked to Leni Robredo's thanksgiving rally where the former Vice President announced her plans to create a massive volunteer-led movement. During the rally, Robredo assured her supporters that although she lost the presidency to Marcos, the fight still continues.

AND SO IT BEGINS
Sundance 2024 - Press Notes

CREDITS

Ramona S Diaz
Writer Producer Director

Aaron Soffin
Editor

Christian Almiron
Score

Bruce Sakaki
Cinematographer

Henry Lu Philip
Sound

Allana de Guzman
Associate Producer

Executive Producers
Carrie Lozano
Lois Vossen

Executive Producers
Stephen Gong
Donald Young

Executive Producers
David J. Cornfield
Linda A. Cornfield

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Cinephil
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Philippa Kowarsky

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