

Background

After an encouraging surge of democratic mobilization across Asia in recent years -- with the Malaysian opposition making massive electoral gains, Indonesia electing a grass-roots-driven president, and Myanmar's junta ceding more power to the elected, civilian leadership -- a combination of authoritarianism and right-wing populism is besetting Asia's most promising democracies, from India to the Philippines.

Over the past decade, Asia has maintained robust economic growth rates, giving birth to a rising middle class. Resource-based nations such as Mongolia have been among the world's fastest growing economies, while Japan, South Korea, and China have maintained their lead in the global electronics, steel, and machinery market. New tiger economies such the Philippines have dispensed with their age-old image as 'sick man of Asia' by registering among the highest growth rates in the region and the world.

Despite these changes, growing income inequality, wide-scale degradation of the environment, and deepening sense of insecurity and income uncertainty among a significant section of societies across Asia persist. In Mongolia, extractive industries have created uneven and unsustainable growth, with corruption and cronyism undermining confidence in the political establishment, while emerging markets of Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand are coping with large-scale income divide and lack of newly-created, well-paying jobs. Meanwhile, lower oil prices are hitting hydrocarbon-rich Asian economies such as Brunei and Malaysia.

Mature economies such as Japan have struggled to regain growth momentum, with employment insecurity adversely affecting the younger-generation, which struggles to secure permanent, well-paying jobs. In South Korea, despite robust growth rates, the younger generation still faces job insecurity, while pensioners are struggling to cope with rising cost of living, especially in mega-cities such as Seoul and Pohang. Even wealthy entrepôt such as Singapore and Hong Kong are slowing down, reflecting the broader global economic recession, with extremely high property prices hitting the middle and working class hard.

These internal contradictions in Asian economies have empowered outside the box political figures, who have effectively tapped into the grievance and frustrations of the populace. The upshot manifests in bloody anti-drugs crackdown in the Philippines, resurgence of sectarian fissures within Indonesian society, right-wing historical revisionism in Japan, unstable politics in Mongolia, and the return of Hindu ethno-nationalism in India. Practically across all Asian economies, social safety nets and existing welfare programs are either insufficient, under severe strain or utterly non-existent. Over the past two decades, the Ginicoefficient, a

measure of income inequality, is either worsening among mature economies (i.e., Japan) or/and broadly unchanged among poorer Asian societies (i.e., Cambodia, the Philippines).

Values such as human rights, pluralism, and due process are among the primary victims of this disturbing mutation in the fabric of democratic societies across the region. Meanwhile, autocratic regimes in places such as Malaysia and Thailand have managed to marginalize the opposition and re-consolidate power with brute force. On all fronts, social democracy is facing the twin challenges of resurgent authoritarianism and right-wing populism.

The political victory of populist and demagogues is a wake-up call not only for the ruling elite, but also progressives, who are committed to protect human rights, pluralism and civil liberties; protect the environment against profit-oriented, extractive practices by multinational companies and states; and bring about better material conditions for the working as well as middle classes, who have witnessed the unmistakable erosion of their economic security and political influence in the neoliberal age.

Meanwhile, feudalistic conditions afflict much of the developing world, particularly in rural areas, whether in India, Indonesia or the Philippines, which have failed to close the rural-urban gap as well as the heavy concentration of newly created growth among the tiny elite atop the social pyramid.

The conference brings together social democratic party representatives, policy makers and activists from across Asia to discuss these common and emerging challenges. It provides platform to assess the current political trends and to tackle policy responses designed to regain the discourse about social justice, sustainable development and progressive politics in the region.

Conference Objectives

1. Provide an assessment of current political trends in Asia, particularly authoritarian resurgence, populist backlash and socio-economic challenges;
2. Discuss prospects and opportunities for progressive actors in the region to engage progressive discourse at different levels;
3. Draw lessons and experiences from and shape responses with fellow progressives that can reinforce social democratic alternatives in the region.

Highlights

Human Rights Under Assault: the Urgent Tasks of Progressives

The keynote speaker Loretta Ann Rosales (Akbayan-Philippines) focused on new challenges to protection of basic human rights and civil liberties in across the region. Drawing on her experience as former head of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) in the Philippines, and a victim of human rights abuses during the Martial Law period under dictator Ferdinand Marcos, she talked about the challenges posed under the Duterte administration, the right-wing populist, who has overseen a massive transformation of the Philippine body-politic within less than a year.

She talked about how Duterte has actively engaged in disparaging and undermining the ideas progressives and social democrats stand for as a community and how in the name of a popular campaign against illegal drugs, which has claimed more than 9,000 lives, human rights and due process under the law have become collateral damage in the Philippines. She talked about how various reports from Human Rights Watch and even the US State Department consistently point out critical patterns of abuse, discrimination and violence against minorities and opposition forces across the region, not just in the Philippines.

She talked about clear and present threats to the state of human rights across Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, for instance, trade unions and anti-government forces are systematically attacked under laws that restrict freedoms of assembly under the guise of national security. More than 200,000 prisoners, she shared, are locked up in 27 jails that can only accommodate 11,000. Meanwhile, pre-trial detention of 6 months and 18 months await misdemeanors and felonies, a highly draconian and unfair penal system.

In Thailand the military junta retains its grip on power with an interim Constitution, which allows it to maintain control over the military and civilian institutions. Through emergency decrees, junta, Rosales shared, citizens could be subjected to detention for 30 days without filing of charges, allowing military officers to arrest and detain suspects for 27 violations that range from human and illegal commodity trafficking to defamation to arms smuggling.

The situation is also troubling in the region's biggest nation, and the world's 3rd largest democracy, Indonesia, where controversial conviction of Governor Ahok, based on charges of heresy, underlines the growing strength of fundamentalism and xenophobia against leaders from minority (Christian-Chinese) background. It underlines, the keynote speaker shared, the growing force of religious-based militancy, which can severely undermine the

secular, democratic foundations of the post-Suharto Indonesia and the on-going, yet troubled, process of *reformasi*.

In Malaysia, the second largest Muslim-majority nation in the region, leaders of Bersih 5, the movement calling for political and electoral reforms and fighting against corruption in the Najib government, have been arrested, including Howard Lee who is IUSY President and member of Socdem Asia. This marks a dangerous erosion in basic democratic rights of citizens in a multi-cultural and relatively prosperous society like Malaysia.

She called upon progressive to articulate a shared vision of an alternative future, where inequality is banished, rights of every citizen is protected and promoted – a vision of a society where collective safety, and well-being should never come at the expense of another human life. She called upon progressive to reclaim the space in which peoples are able to appreciate and link the meaning of a better future with human rights. For her, progressives need to articulate the centrality of human rights as inalienable entitlements that are inherent in every human being.

She discussed the long arc of history, and how it has bent towards human rights and rule of law, beginning from Code of King Hammurabi to Magna Carta (1215), the English Bill of Rights (1689), the French Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), and the US Constitution and Bill of Rights (1791), which have been the basis for the development of modern constitutions in post-colonial nations such as the Philippines. She emphasized the emancipatory potential of human rights and the need to rediscover and amplify progressive strategies to defend it. The battle, Rosales emphasized, should be lead from the front, with a clear vision, and unrelenting mission by social democrats and progressives.

Corruption, Erosion of Democracy and Religious Extremism

Teresa Kok (DAP Malaysia) discussed the troubling demise of democratic values, pluralism and accountability in Malaysia, a multi-ethnic and multicultural country, where the Malay is a majority race and Islam is the official religion. She talked about the iron-fist rule and corruption which have gripped the country since its independence.

At its core, the Malaysian state is led by Barisan Nasional, a race-based party that thrives on race-based policies to the exclusion of the minority and the detriment of the country's democratic aspirations. Kok discussed the emergence of an increasingly robust, ideologically-based and grassroots driven opposition, which gained momentum with the DAP's unprecedented victory in 2008, when it managed to take control of Penang, a strategic and prosperous state. Subsequently, the DAP formed a coalition with other

progressive and reformist parties called *Pakatan Rakyat*, which ruled mostly in Selangor and Penang.

Yet, just as the opposition inched closer to electoral victory, it began to suffer splits and massive counter-measures by the UMNO, which relied on radical gerrymandering and corruption to secure its grip in power. The ruling party then proceeded to pursue and incarcerate opposition leaders, including Anwar Ibrahim, and soon the *Pakatan Rakyat* began to experience internal splits. The massive 1MDB Scandal, which personally involved the Prime Minister, also seen as the biggest money laundering case in the world, provided some whiff of hope for regime change, yet the ruling coalition has held on by using intimidation and outright corruption of Malaysian state institutions. She also raised concerns about the push for introduction of *hudud law* – stern Sharia-based punishments – in the country, which could adversely affect the country’s modern, pluralistic penal and judicial system.

Nonetheless, the DAP’s largely successful creation of a welfare state in Penang shows the potential for creation of progressive governance on the state level, thus presenting a model for reform on the national scale. Despite many setbacks on the national level, and constant harassment by the UMNO, the DAP, Kok explains, believes that social democratic policies are the keys towards achieving SDGs.

Farhat Parveen (National Party, Pakistan) discussed challenges of governance in Pakistan, a federal government, where different parties are ruling different provinces, but where the military wields considerable influence on the national level. In Balochistan, she shared, that there are more than 50% of Balochistan’s population living under poverty line. Despite some improvements in basic indicators of human development, progress does not trickle down to the majority of people. Up to 2.5 million children are out of school and hospital facilities are simply not there. Government recognizes that more than 6.5 million people as workers (the figures does not include the informal sector), with up to 70% of the population working in the informal sector with minimum legal protection and tax contribution.

She talked about the challenges of religious extremism, with terrorist attacks plaguing Pakistan throughout the years, perhaps more than any other country in the world. She also discussed the problem of unionization, and the cultural constraints faced by secular, progressive advocates in a deeply conservative nation. She also talked about the challenges of misogyny, patriarchy, and Violence against Women (VAW), which has become a major national issue, especially in light of the spate of “honor killings” in recent years. She also talked about the corruption of the 5th estate, the media, and how they instigate fear mongering and engage in mindless criticism of various politicians based on business and ideological interests of their owners.

Conflict and Democracy

Bae Jun-Ho (Justice Party, South Korea) talked about the tortuous history of the Korean Peninsula, traumatized and divided by the echoes of Cold War and the constant specter of nuclear annihilation and total war. He discussed the experience of democratization in South Korea, which started after the collapse of the military regime in 1987, not long after the assassination of strongman Park Chung-hee. Less than two decades after the people power revolution, social democrats begin to gain ground, with the Democratic Labor Party gaining seats in the National Assembly to push for genuine pro-people reform, he shared. Over the next six years, progressives failed to address the problem of economic oligopoly, with few *chaobols* (conglomerates) controlling key sectors of the Korean economy.

As tensions with North Korea took a dangerous turn, with Pyongyang moving ahead with nuclear tests and pulling out of diplomatic talks, progressive groups were split on the question of whether Seoul should engage or/and deter its neighbour. He talked about the continued rise of inequality in the country and that there was greater impetus and social support for progressive parties, which managed to impeach the right-wing, reactionary government of Park Geun-hye. He also underscored the importance of participation by the youth to truly reform the society. The election of President Moon Jae-in provides new spaces for progressive reform. Social democrats can look at possible areas of cooperation but independently should also continue progressive programs that will mark its identity.

Oyun (Member of Parliament, Mongolian People's Party) talked about the experience of his party, as a social democratic one, which won a decisive supermajority of about 65 seats out of 76 seats in latest elections. She talked about how despite decades or rapid growth, unemployment and distribution of wealth remain big issues in Mongolia's highly commodity-mining-driven economy, pointing out that it closely echoes the experience of other developing countries in the region. He talked about the necessity for advocating sustainable development policies, which truly benefit the average citizens, who themselves should be actively involved in everyday politics. The Mongolian People's Party will battle in the elections under the platform of prosperity, anti-corruption and citizens' inclusion.

Dusmanta Giri (Association for Democratic Socialism, India) raised that social democracy is natural and perfect fit for the socio-economic landscape in Asia given the alternatives it provides to distribution wealth, care for the marginalized and at the same time guarantees the safeguard of democratic rights and institutions. Tomasito Villarín (Akbyan Party, Philippines) raised concerns about the impact of countries like China (or Russia) on democracy in smaller regional states, in the light of the collapse of the US-led TPP free trade deal and Trumpian protectionism in the West, just as China forges ahead with various initiatives such as the AIIB, and the Belt Road Initiative (BRI). These questions/issues of regional importance, according to him, should be confronted at the regional level by progressives.

Reinforcing a Viable Programme for the Global Progressive Movement

Jo Leinen (Social Democratic Party of Germany) took a broader global view, discussing ten overarching priorities for social democrats to shape globalization. He talked about how the current political landscape may not be good shape, but how everybody needs to needs contribute to an agenda that makes this world better for the next years. He talked about the SDG-based framework of development, which has been acceded to by all nations of the world.

He reiterated the earlier discussion that social democrats and progressives should prioritize education to empower people, including life-long learning in light of an era of disruptive technological advancement, Artificial Intelligence, and automation across a whole slew of industries. He underlined the importance of tax justice, with authoritative studies consistently showing how tax collection, especially vis-à-vis the top one percent, is extremely inefficient, thanks to regressive tax holidays, blatant tax evasion, and tax havens.

Streamlining fiscal policies to create a more progressive tax system, Leinen shared, is crucial to raise sufficient funds to sustain and expand welfare systems for the majority. He also talked about the necessity for transparency, accountability and public interest protection in the realm of cyberspace, considering concerns over data protection, private ownership of cyberspace, and the dominance of few technology giants in the Internet industry. Thus, he talked about necessity for Internet justice, giving democratically elected governments more power to ensure the interest of the demos against tech oligarchs.

There is the necessity for returning to basic questions of poverty, both relative and absolute, which is afflicting capitalist economies the world over. Since inequality, poverty and other major challenges are global, we need to, Leinen argued, strengthen the spirit of multilateralism and multilateral mechanisms to address shared concerns, which can't be addressed by individual nations.

The conference ended with the participants recommending future topics for the Network and approval of two resolutions- Defending Indonesia's Non-sectarian and Democratic Character and for Cambodia's Free and Fair Elections. #