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An Interview with *Socdem Asia Quarterly*
Editor-in-Chief, Francis Isaac

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(NOTE: This article is a written companion to the first episode of the Socdem Asia Podcast. It has a question-and-answer format based on the set of questions that were sent to the author prior to the actual interview. He reviewed the questions after the podcast and provided written answers to each of these questions.)

You have written about the social welfare situation in the region. What are your key findings? What do they reveal about social democratic movements in the region?

Our research is based on the premise that social welfare is necessary if citizens are to enjoy the highest quality of life. As we were undertaking the study, it became clear that with Asia's phenomenal economic growth prior to the pandemic, most countries in the region had the resources needed to address the social welfare needs of their people. In fact, from 1990 to 2010 alone, the region had an average annual growth of 7%, which meant a three-fold increase in Asia's per capita GDP, from US\$1,602 at the beginning of the period to US\$4,982 at the start of the previous decade. Ironically, despite having adequate resources, social welfare services have not been sufficiently funded by most Asian governments.

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Image: www.malaymail.com

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Take health, for example. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), spending 5% of GNP for health services is a good indicator for “improving the health status of the people.” But of the 25 nations in East, South and Southeast Asia, only eight (8) countries have allocated 5% or more of their GDP for health services. These are Japan (10.93%), Maldives (10.61%), Afghanistan (10.20%), Nepal (6.29%), Taiwan (6.1%), Cambodia (6.08%), Vietnam (5.66%) and Myanmar (5.09%). It is worth noting that majority of the eight countries mentioned above are non-industrialized nations, with Japan and Taiwan as the only two exceptions.

Similarly, the United Nations (UN) recommends that at least 6% of GDP should be spent on education. Unfortunately, Bhutan is the only country in the region that has done

so, with education receiving a 6.8% share of their gross domestic product based on 2017 data. For the rest of Asia, the average spending for education is 3.45%, which is barely half of the UN standard.

With no sufficient funding from the state, social welfare benefits are hardly extended to all citizens. Several Asian countries, for instance, provide compulsory health insurance for both public and private sector employees. But they do not cover informal workers who comprise the main bulk of the region's labor force. And while free basic education is still the norm, there are ongoing efforts to expand private sector participation and reduce the role of the government. Most Asian states also do not offer universal, comprehensive, and generous retirement benefits. And neither do they have substantive unemployment and disability allowances comparable to the West.

Even Asia's most affluent countries have minimal allocation for social welfare. While Japan, Taiwan and South Korea have all established social insurance schemes, these are being managed by quasi-governmental bodies that are not formally part of the state.

This situation is a consequence of neoliberalism, which has been the dominant global economic paradigm for the past four decades. Coined by French economist Charles Gide, neoliberalism's ultimate aim is to extend the logic of the market to all areas of social life, through stringent austerity measures and the massive downsizing of the public sector. With its over-reliance on the 'Invisible Hand,' neoliberalism deliberately ignores the social inequalities inherent in capitalism, thereby condemning the poor to the tyranny of the market.

Fortunately, social democrats are currently undertaking efforts to strengthen the region's social welfare regime. We see this in Nepal, where the Nepali Congress (NC) has introduced major education reforms that have resulted in improved literacy rate and gender parity at all school levels. At the same, the Philippines' Akbayan Party has successfully shepherded a series of legislative measures to gradually attain universal healthcare. And in neighboring Myanmar, the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS) and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) have launched a joint campaign to decentralize the country's healthcare system.

What are the key achievements of Asia's social democratic movements? Why is it that social democracy has a bad connotation, at least here in the region?

Social democrats have shaped the Asian region in two ways: First, the early social democrats (or socialists, if you will) led the struggle against

Western colonial rule during the first half of the twentieth century. Their efforts enabled Asia's former colonies to finally achieve independence, and allowed socialist leaders in Burma, India and Indonesia to gain power shortly after the end of the Second World War.

But this period of remarkable triumph was soon followed by sharp reversals, when rightwing authoritarian elements from various parts of the region began to seize power by the beginning of the 1960s.

This was how events unfolded in Indonesia, when the army took control of the government on October 1, 1965. Claiming that they were trying to prevent an attempted power grab by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), military units seized control of the capital, Jakarta, by capturing the state radio station and other key installations. The PKI was then immediately banned, followed by a massive purge that killed between 500,000 to 2 million people.

Though the ensuing crackdown initially went after the Communists, it soon began targeting other progressive groups, including President Sukarno's own Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI). Perceived as a potential political threat, the army cleansed the PNI of all leftist elements, and forced the remaining members to merge with other non-Islamic parties. The new PNI leadership had no choice but to comply, which led to the formation of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) in 1973. Equally devastated was *Partai Murba* (Proletarian Party) of slain national hero Tan Malaka. Seen as a bitter ideological rival of the PKI, its fortunes however turned for the worse soon after the army takeover. Though one of its founding leaders, Adam Malik, quickly became

foreign minister, his colleague, education minister Prijono, was arrested by pro-Suharto militias before he was brought to the Army's Strategic Reserve headquarters in Central Jakarta. By 1971, *Partai Murba* had lost all its remaining seats in the Indonesian parliament, thereby hastening its absorption into the PDI two years later.

But while the Indonesian left was fighting for its survival, social democrats in neighboring Malaysia had successfully organized themselves into the Democratic Action Party (DAP) on October 11, 1965. Declaring that it was "irrevocably committed to the ideal of a free, democratic and socialist Malaysia," the DPA quickly took part in the 1969 general elections. Competing against more established political parties, the DAP won 11.9% of the votes, thereby securing 13 seats in the 31-member *Dewan Rakyat* (Lower House). The election results were a stunning achievement for the DAP, which shook the conservative government of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

But even before the DAP could fully savor its victory, racial violence erupted on the streets of Kuala Lumpur, just three days after the elections. Dubbed as the May 13 Incident, the rioting caused the death of at least 143 people and reduced several shops and houses to burnt ashes. The government responded by expanding the scope of the Sedition Act and by imposing severe restrictions on free speech. When the violence finally subsided, the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was further entrenched in power, while *bumiputra* (ethnic Malay) privileges remained in place.

The situation in the Philippines also turned for the worse when the country's President, Ferdinand Marcos, declared Martial Law on

September 21, 1972. Claiming that the measure was meant to address the threat from a revived communist movement, Marcos instructed the military to occupy all radio and television stations, and ordered the dissolution of the country's legislature. By the wee hours of September 23, soldiers had arrested some 8,000 individuals that included opposition politicians, journalists and student activists. And to further consolidate his power, Marcos increased the size of the armed forces from 55,000 active servicemen in 1972 to 250,000 combatants by 1984.

Despite repeated assurances from the regime that what they had was a "smiling martial law," Amnesty International estimates that the military had killed at least 3,240 people and tortured 34,000 more. Because of this massive repression, hundreds of activists went to the mountains to join the Maoist-oriented Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), while the nascent social democratic movement was also forced to go underground.

In South Korea, supporters of executed social democratic leader Cho Bong-am joined massive street demonstrations that forced the resignation of the country's civilian autocrat, Syngman Rhee, on April 19, 1960. But barely a year after Rhee's removal, a group of army officers led by General Park Chung-hee staged a coup on May 16, 1961, which overthrew the democratically elected government of Yun Bo-seon. A military junta was then quickly established, which ordered the arrests of student activists and trade unionists, in an apparent attempt to emasculate the progressive opposition.

Though Japan remained democratic, the country's socialists were not able to repeat their stunning electoral victory in 1947,

due to factional disputes within their own party. This allowed conservative politicians to regroup and form the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has dominated Japanese politics since 1955.

To further consolidate their power, the region's authoritarian regimes began a massive campaign to discredit social democracy which they portrayed, either as part of a vast communist conspiracy, or as a cranky Western concept that is totally unsuitable to Asian conditions. And after decades of black propaganda, social democracy is still generally viewed with suspicion, which makes organizing work extremely difficult.

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Placed on the defensive, social democrats joined forces with other progressive forces to end authoritarian rule in the Asian region. This alliance was their second major contribution, since it led to the series of democratic transitions that began with the February 1986 People Power Revolution in the Philippines, which then swept through Taiwan and South Korea by the following year. It then moved to Nepal through the *Jana Andolan* (People's Movement), which forced King Birendra to hand over the reins of government to an interim civilian government. Two years later, massive street protests rocked the Thai capital, Bangkok, prompting

General Suchinda Kraprayoon to resign as Prime Minister on May 24, 1992. Asia's wave of democratization eventually ended with Indonesia's *reformasi* and the fall of Suharto on May 21, 1998.

Progressive parties are operating under harsher conditions for at least half a decade. We are confronting the phenomena of populism, authoritarian resurgence and even autocratization. Can socialism or social welfare be pursued despite our situation?

I don't think it's a question of 'can' but a question of 'how.'

Please bear in mind that the commitment to social welfare is the distinguishing feature of social democracy. Our friends, the liberal democrats, promise basic political freedoms—which are important! But they also view healthcare and education, not as collective needs, but as goods that are best distributed through the market. It is not a perspective that we share as social democrats. If we are to realize human dignity, then citizens should not only enjoy the widest latitude of freedom, but they should also have the means to enjoy those freedoms. To be a social democrat, therefore, is to be committed to both (1) social welfare and (2) democratic governance. This is how we operationalize the French Revolution's twin ideals of *liberte et egalite*.

In fact, our campaign for social welfare should be part of our strategy for attaining power. If we want to gain popular support and expand our political base, then it is not enough that we promise freedom and democracy. We should also guarantee a life of dignity for all. And human dignity can be best secured by providing free education, universal healthcare and social protection.

Image: nglsh.alarabiya.net



For a social democrat, social welfare is non-negotiable. On this issue, there can be no compromise.

There are arguments that socialism has stricter controls over the economy, and in some countries, even controls over civic freedoms. Can there be a compromise between socialism and democracy? Between freedom and equality?

Yes. And fortunately for us, we do not have to look too far, since social democracy is the most successful attempt to fuse the essential elements of democracy and socialism. It is, in fact, the best programmatic expression of the twin principles of liberty and equality—with its respect for human rights, its adherence to free and fair elections, and its 'womb to tomb' welfare system. This synthesis has been achieved due to the strong presence of (1) autonomous mass movements; (2) mass-based political parties; and (3) a well-established system of accountability.

Understood as organized and sustained campaigns of claim-making, mass movements enable the poor and the oppressed to assert their rights, and can even compel the state to meet their demands (provided that appropriate strategies are adopted). They are also needed to thwart possible attempts from entrenched interests that seek to undermine social protection, universal healthcare and better labor conditions. Parties, on the other hand, are the instruments that progressives use to gain political power, so that they can transform their social democratic agenda into actual government policy.

These two types of organization are needed to ensure accountability, which is defined as the process whereby decision-makers are held responsible for their actions. It can even be described as the hidden

dimension of democracy since accountability, alongside elections, enables the *demos* (people) to exercise its *kratos* (power).

If proper accountability mechanisms are in place, then it can prevent state abuse and compel public officials to perform their duties. It also an important feature of most social democratic parties, since it guarantees the answerability of party leaders to the general membership.

Accountability, therefore, perfectly embodies the statement once made by Marxist theoretician Rosa Luxemburg that, “the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee.”

What is the best argument or arguments that progressives have in defending democracy and socialism at the same time? What are the past mistakes that should be avoided? And what are the lessons that should guide our political conduct?

We must always bear in mind that the struggle for socialism cannot be divorced from the struggle for democracy. If we define the latter as a process that enhances the voice of ordinary people in decision-making, then socialism can be understood as the democratization of the means of production and exchange, since control over these resources are transferred from the privileged few to the general public.

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Image: www.nirbhayfoundation.org



“Any attempt to impose socialism through terror and executive *diktat* would lead inevitably to the brutalization of public life.

On the other hand, any attempt to establish socialism without cultivating proper democratic norms will have horrible consequences. Despite the revolutionary idealism of the early Bolsheviks, for example, the Soviet Union quickly degenerated into a totalitarian monstrosity—with a Stalinist despot at the top, assisted by a privileged caste of party bureaucrats known as the *nomenklatura*.

This descent to autocratic rule was hastened by the Communist Party's decision in 1921 to subordinate all existing trade unions to the Soviet state as “schools of communism.” Leon Trotsky, surprisingly, criticized this measure as too provisional, and proposed that labor unions be abolished instead. He argued that under capitalism, unions perform the highly important task of articulating workers' demands. But with the victory of the October Revolution, they have become extremely redundant since the proletariat's class interests are now crystallized in the newly established workers' state...or so he thought.

Soon enough, Trotsky came to realize his own folly following the bitter power struggle that ensued shortly after Lenin's death in 1924. While Trotsky enjoyed considerable mass appeal due to his oratorical skills and his reputation as the main organizer of the Bolshevik insurrection, his rival Joseph Stalin, on the other hand, was a cunning (though initially obscure) political figure who used his position as the Party's General Secretary to appoint several trusted stooges to key government posts. This enabled the

latter to slowly gain control over the entire state apparatus, while Trotsky was gradually eased out of the Party leadership.

Hoping to halt Stalin's steady rise to power, Trotsky and a few others formed the Left Opposition, and called for the immediate restoration of internal party democracy. But with no independent labor union and with no social organization outside of the state, the Left Opposition was deprived of any social base that it can rely upon to sustain it in its struggle. This then resulted in the complete collapse of the dissident movement by the late 1920s, which forced Trotsky into exile—first in Alma-Ata (the former capital of Kazakhstan), and finally in Mexico, where he was eventually assassinated by Spanish operative Ramon Mercader upon the orders of Stalin.

The tragic fate of Leon Trotsky and of the Soviet republic that he helped establish validate Luxemburg's claim that any attempt to impose socialism through terror and executive *diktat* would lead inevitably to the “brutalization of public life.” Denouncing the Bolsheviks for suppressing all opposition, Luxemburg reminded her fellow revolutionaries that, “socialist democracy is not something that begins only in the promised land after the foundations of socialist economy are created; it does not come as some sort of Christmas present for the worthy people who, in the interim, have loyally supported a handful of socialist dictators. Socialist democracy begins simultaneously with the beginnings of the destruction of

class rule and the construction of socialism. It begins at the very moment of the seizure of power by the socialist party.”

It is an advice that we must always keep in mind.

What is the current challenge for socialist or social democratic movements in the Asian region?

The Asian left, at the moment, is trying to regain the former strength that it had before the region became dominated by rightwing authoritarian regimes. We are able to undertake this very difficult process of recovery because in spite of its numerous flaws, the current liberal democratic setup provides the progressive movement with the needed space to organize the oppressed segments of society and compete in regular free elections.

But even before we could fully recover from the reversals that we had experienced during the latter half of the twentieth century, social democrats must now confront the rising threat of rightwing populism, which aims to exclude certain segments of the population from the body politic. According to Australian political scientist Simon Tormey, 2016 could be regarded as the year of the populist “explosion,” with the UK's Brexit referendum and the surprising election of Donald Trump as president of the United States.

But here in Asia, the period of populism began two years earlier, when Narendra Modi of the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) became India's 14th prime minister. Emboldened by Modi's rightwing rhetoric, Hindu extremists began harassing Muslims, leftists, and members of the LGBT community. This includes the January 2020 mob attack on the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) by the BJP's student wing, *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (ABVP), which left 39 teachers and students injured.



Image: www.aljazeera.com

“Because of capitalism's obvious flaws, socialism has once again become an attractive political vision for a lot of young people.

The situation in the region then turned for the worse when Rodrigo Duterte was elected as president of the Philippines in 2016. Telling voters that he would throw drug dependents to the bottom of Manila Bay to “fatten all the fish there,” Duterte began a bloody drug war that has claimed the lives of more than 27,000 individuals. But we are not bereft of hope.

Because of capitalism's obvious flaws, socialism has once again become an attractive political vision for a lot of young people, especially in the West. This is apparent in the popularity of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders, who continue to generate considerable support from younger aged voters in the United States.

But the first intimation of socialist renewal began in Europe, when the radical left group Syriza became the largest party in the Greek parliament after the 2015 general elections. Pledging to rid Greece of its terrible debt burden, the party gained 149 of the available 300

seats, with 36.3% of the votes. This then paved the way for Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras to become prime minister—the country's youngest since 1865.

The Danish left also made a big political comeback in June 2019 when the Social Democratic Party and their allies in the 'red bloc' won a majority of the seats in parliament. Voters responded favorably to the Social Democrats' campaign promise to increase public spending and address climate change, which enabled party leader Mette Frederiksen to become Denmark's youngest and second female prime minister.

The success of the Danish center-left was replicated a few months later by the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP), with the appointment of Sanna Marin as prime minister on December 10, 2019. The second youngest prime minister in the world, the 34-year old Marin is now devising a way to address the gender pay gap and make her country carbon neutral by 2035.

With today's easy access to information, how do we educate young people about the link of socialism and democracy? Can young people influence the bigger and global fight against democratic backlash and capitalist excesses?

I have no doubt in the ability of today's youth to build a world that is more just, equal and democratic. Their zeal and energy are everywhere, and it is infectious.

We see this in the ongoing student-led demonstrations in Bangkok, which began in February 2020. Apart from calling for fresh elections and the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the protesters are also demanding a thorough overhaul of Thai politics by having a more democratic constitution, real freedom of speech, and abolition of the country's *lesè-majesté* law which penalizes even the slightest criticism of the Thai royal family—including their pet dogs.

In Hong Kong, university and high school students have initiated a series of massive demonstrations that started in June 2019. Triggered by a controversial bill that would have allowed the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China, the protests have since evolved to encompass demands for greater democracy and a full inquiry into cases of police brutality.

Outside of Asia, we have the Youth Strike 4 Climate that began in 2015. Led and organized by young people like Greta Thunberg, the movement is now present in over 100 countries and has mobilized more than 50,000 people worldwide. In fact, the Youth Strike is now so influential that it has already prompted several cities in Germany to declare a state of “climate emergency.”

A similar student-led campaign was also formed in the Philippine province of Negros Occidental, 700 kilometers south of Manila. Calling on the provincial government to ban the construction of coal plants, the students began their weekly “Wednesday Youth Strike” in 2015. As the campaign gathered momentum, the students were able to forge a broad coalition that included the Church, business groups, school administrators, the LGBT community and other civil society organizations.

But their biggest strike was held on March 6, 2019, which gathered more than 2,000 student-protesters. As the crowd massed in front of the Provincial Capitol, Governor Alfredo Marañon appeared on top of the building's marble steps, waving a sheet of paper in his hand. It was a copy of

the executive order that he had just signed, prohibiting the use of coal and ordering the provincial government to immediately shift to renewable energy. As Marañon read the document, the assembled students broke into boisterous celebration; and for a brief moment, the governor's voice was drowned out by the cheering crowd. Because today's youth are so adept in using digital technology, they have become extremely effective in mobilizing people for the causes they believe in. This is hardly surprising since Millennials have grown up in a world where the internet is already ubiquitous and deeply embedded in everyday life. In fact, the present generation has been described by American author Marc Prensky as “digital natives” since “they have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers...and all the other toys and tools of the digital age.”

“The world needs to change. We should let the Millennials teach us how.

Image: www.youtube.com



On the other hand, the experience of my fellow Gen-Xers is slightly different. I was in high school when the World Wide Web became publicly available in 1991, and since then, social reality as we knew it had changed completely. Because of that singular event, Gen-X became the last generation to see the world without the internet and the first generation to be exposed to the ICT Revolution. We, of course, quickly embraced this new technology. But while we are able to flick through our electronic devices with relative ease, we can also easily recall a time when cars had no seat belts, when computers had no mouse, and when most landline phones had rotary dials instead of keypads. Because of my background, I am in no position to advise the youth on how to organize themselves using digital technology. In fact, I should be the one asking that question, and it is our generation who should be learning from the young.

The world needs to change. We should let the Millennials teach us how.

Is there really an inextricable link?

Yes, there is. And it is our duty to maintain that link.

It is important to remember this point, for while democracy guarantees freedom, democracy alone will not guarantee human dignity. That can only be achieved if proper social welfare policies (such as universal healthcare and free education) are in place—and social democrats are in the best position to implement those policies. Let me be clear: democracy and socialism are distinct concepts. But they are both needed if we are to build a far better future, not only for ourselves, but for those who will come after us.

Wilhelm Liebknecht, one of the founders of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), said it best: “Socialism and democracy are not identical, but they are simply different expressions of the same principle; they belong together, supplement each other, and one can never be incompatible with the other. Socialism without democracy is pseudo-socialism, just as democracy without socialism is pseudo-democracy. The democratic state is the only feasible form for a society organized on a socialist basis.”

Liebknecht has shown us a glimpse of the future, and the future is social democracy. 📍

“While democracy guarantees freedom, democracy alone will not guarantee human dignity. That can only be achieved if proper social welfare policies are in place.

Image: news.sky.com



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