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*Reimagining Social Democracy in Asia:*

***The Search for a New  
Social Welfare Model***

# *Reimagining Social Democracy in Asia:* ***The Search for a New Social Welfare Model***

Richard Javad Heydarian, *Editor-in-Chief*

The special edition of *Socdem Asia Quarterly* builds on the outputs and discussions from the Socdem Asia Regional Conference with the similar theme, “Reimagining an Asian Social Welfare Model” in April 13-16, 2018 in Cebu City, Philippines. It aims to broaden and deepen the discourse to Socdem Asia partners. Five national papers were solicited, which delve on specific topics covered by the regional framing paper.

The collection is an abridged version of the regional framing paper, included in the *Quarterly*, tackles the history and development of social democracy in Asia, the rise and fall of progressive forces in the region, and the challenges and prospects in bringing about an Asian social welfare model.

Born in a context of failing democracy and vanguardist socialist movement, Akbayan (Citizen's Action Party) in the Philippines pursues a party narrative of participatory democracy and participatory socialism. The paper navigates through Party discourse and debate as Akbayan carves out its niche in the Philippine political system dominated by traditional elites on the one hand and extremist left on the other.

As Rafaela David and Marlon Cornelio of Akbayan explain in the *Quarterly*, “Recognizing the trappings of elite democracy that emerged

after the dictatorship, Akbayan still saw the emerging democratic spaces as arenas for contestation. Akbayan saw the possibility of a transformation of elite democracy into a participatory and egalitarian one.”

Far from being captured by national-level politics alone, the authors argue, 'Akbayan has furthermore strived to bring together “patches of greens”, or model local governments that promotes progressive governance and social welfare.' This way, the progressive Philippine party hopes, aims to bring about a more sustainable shift in the country's overall narrative of development and political economy over the longrun.

Akbayan's experience is not unique and mirrors the task of establishing progressive parties in democratically challenged, elite-captured and extremist-laden politics in the region. Long polarized between “red” and “yellow” shirts, Thailand has been captured by a military coup. As calls of reestablishment of a democratically elected government rise, the country sees the prospect of the emergence of new political forces carrying the banner of social democratic principles. The Future Forward Party and the Commoners Party are building muscle to contest in the next election. What are in the top agenda of these emerging forces?

“No matter how many times they were charged, some scholars and activists still try to campaign against the military dictatorship -- online and offline,” Thai student activist Rackchart Wong-Arthichart writes for the *Quarterly*, underlying the resilience of the democratic opposition in the country despite the extremely repressive political environment under the junta, with newly-formed FFP and the Commoners Party each pushing for an alternative vision of a pluralistic, liberal, and democratic society, though the former is more focused on post-materialist values, while the latter is dedicated to strengthening grassroots voices.

The Nepali Congress is proud of its long tradition in fighting for democracy and building a democratic socialist country. Recently, the once indomitable Party faced a retreat in the 2017 national and local elections. While the union of the Maoist and Communist parties is seen as the bearer of bad fortune, the paper argues that Nepali Congress itself delivered their electoral defeat in failing to fulfill its promises and losing touch of its grassroots membership.

As Sanjaya Mahato, a member of Nepali Congress party and researcher at the Social Science Baha, explains in the *Quarterly*, “The massive landslide electoral loss of Nepali Congress and its weak electoral performance raised many questions in the party leadership, its principle and party organizations...This has provided Nepali Congress an opportunity to re-think their party principle and policies, renovate their organizations.”

The Mongolian People's Party is the oldest political party in Mongolia founded in 1920. Winning 65 out of 76 members in Parliament, MPP made a comeback with an overwhelming victory in 2016 elections. Back in government, MPP aims at implementing integrated policies towards creating human-centered social welfare, pro-development economic growth, and citizen-oriented public governance system for its country and people's prosperity and progress. As in other countries, MPP is faced with rising populism and declining trust for political parties compounding the roadblock for poverty alleviation and social service delivery.

As Tserenjamts Munkhtseteg (Mu Ki), an adviser to the General Secretary of the Mongolian People's Party (MPP), explains in the *Quarterly*, “Populist politics, via social media platforms, is turning into

digital populism.” As she warns, “due to the influence of a strongman authoritarian leadership in both its neighbors, Russia and China, there is a growing support among Mongolians for a strong leader and a presidential government...”

The Pakatan Harapan (Coalition of Hope), meanwhile, has secured a historic victory against the United Malays National Organization's Barisan Nasional (National Front), which has dominated Malaysian politics for more than half a decade. Reimagining Malaysia presents both a personal and a shared dream for Malaysia from the imagination of a young politician and the Democratic Action Party.

As Yeo Bee Yin, member of Malaysian Parliament (representing Democratic Action Party) for Bakri in Johor, explains in the *Quarterly*, “Malaysians have shown to the world that despite insurmountable injustice and gross abuse of power, democracy and the power of the will of the people of Malaysia, prevailed eventually.” The significance of the opposition coalition's victory can't be understated: “For the first time in the history of Malaysia, there's a change in the federal government; and most important of all, it was done without bloodshed,” she explains.

The *Quarterly* also includes longer and more contemplative essays on reinvention of social democracy by Asia. As Joel Racamora of the Transnational Institute argues in the *Quarterly*, the region has become the new laboratory for social democratic experimentations, since after all “Southeast Asian economies have reached a stage where it's now possible to pay for a welfare state.”

Francis Isaac of *Government Watch (G-Watch)*, meanwhile, interrogates the importance of social democracy in Asia, because it's a framework that explains how “democracy can be best realized not only [by] focusing on free and competitive elections, but also by ensuring the fair distribution of income and the equitable enjoyment of society's resources.”

The *Quarterly* includes a recent speech by Liew Chin Tong (Democratic Action Party), recently appointed deputy Defense Minister of Malaysia. By bringing together leading progressive policy-makers and activists from across Asia, the latest edition aims to inspire and shape the ongoing debate on best models of welfare state in Asian societies.

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# Our Socialist Dream: *Akbayan's ParDem-ParSoc Narrative*

by Rafaela David and Marlon Cornelio<sup>1</sup>

Akbayan's history has been intrinsically intertwined with the history of democracy in the Philippines, from its formation to its enduring *raison d'être* – that is the continuing pursuit for democracy in the Philippines.

Yet Akbayan's pursuit is for a particular kind of democracy – one that is both socialist and participatory.

Akbayan's assertion is that the Philippines can only be truly democratic if our society is just and humane, where everyone is treated equally and with solidarity, and where people have a dignified relationship with their work; Akbayan further contends that socialism can only be humane and just, if it allows a plurality of voices, cognizant of its own fallibility as well as of the capacity of others to be agents of social transformation.

It is this dream of a democratic socialist Philippines that has brought its founding members together, collectively weaving the narrative of Participatory Democracy, Participatory Socialism (ParDem-ParSoc) in the post-dictatorship years, a time when varying ideological tendencies were competing for the Filipino imagination.



Image: Akbayan

## A Democratic Left Project

Akbayan's narrative takes its roots from the varying branches of the Philippine left, which have digressed and converged at varying points of the country's recent history.

The fall of dictatorship in 1986 pushed many in the resistance movement to contend with questions on how to traverse the new democratic space brought about by the 1986 People Power Revolution. Is the new democratic order a legitimate space for contestation that must be maximized and transformed? Or is the then newly established state an instrument of elite hegemony and rule? Should the left engage the new spaces, or will they only endanger the socialist dream by legitimizing the new elite regime? Is liberal democracy an important first/tactical step towards a more democratic and socialist state? Or is liberal democracy to be rejected as counter-revolutionary?

Largely dominated by elite and traditional forces, the new democratic regime posed both challenges and opportunities for the Philippine Left.

Portions of the Philippine Left, especially those who have provided the infrastructure for the People Power Revolution chose to give the new spaces for engagement a chance. Progressives groups would later engage the 1992 elections, supporting the candidacy of Senator Jovito Salonga for presidency. The progressive ticket would however face defeat, with Salonga placing sixth in a race of seven. Herein, electoral formations appeared to be insufficient; the necessary work of party-building to maximize the electoral terrain and deepen democracy became increasingly apparent.

Akbayan is borne out of this context. After years of dictatorial rule, socialists from Bukluran sa Ikauunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (BISIG), social democrats from Pandayan para sa Sosyalistang Pilipinas (PANDAYAN) and ex-communists from the Movement for Popular Democracy (MPD), and other progressive and mass-based organizations would come together and take on the common political project of building an alternative political party that will take seriously the task of electoral contestation and democratic consolidation.

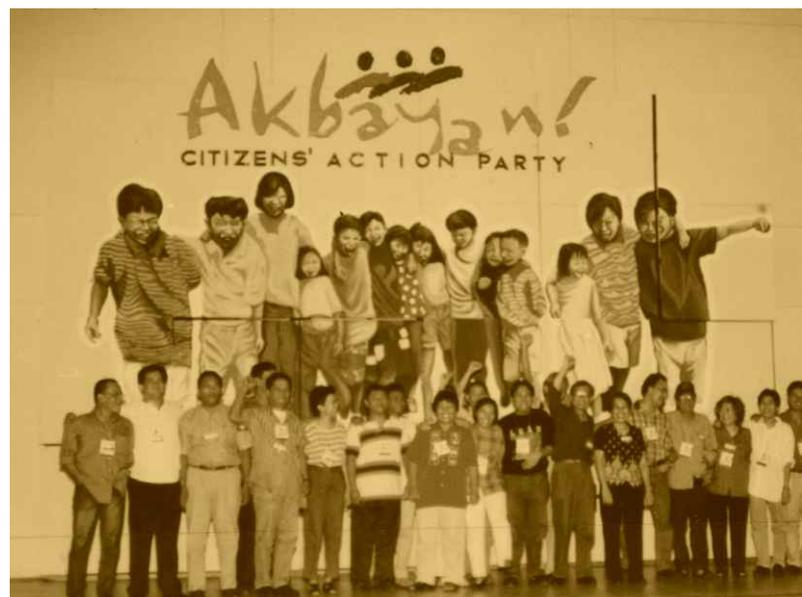


Image: Akbayan

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*Recognizing the trappings of elite democracy that emerged after the dictatorship, Akbayan still saw the emerging democratic spaces as arenas for contestation.*

In January 1998, Akbayan would formally launch itself as a new national party, after almost a decade of conversations on a progressive democratic project that the left can unite under. Akbayan got her first seat in congress in the national election of 1998.

Recognizing the trappings of elite democracy that emerged after the dictatorship, Akbayan still saw the emerging democratic spaces as arenas for contestation. Akbayan saw the possibility of a transformation of elite democracy into a participatory and egalitarian one.

Nathan Quimpo characterizes this as contested democracy, that is even though the state remains captured by the ruling elites, contestation from mass movements and civil society can have the potential to push state institutions to be responsive to the peoples' needs.<sup>2</sup>

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*Akbayan's commitment to democracy in its struggle for socialism is also most evident in the party's usage of the word “narrative” instead of ideology in setting a programmatic vision and line for its praxis.*

### **A Critique of the Extreme Left**

It is this optimism towards the new democratic space that differentiated Akbayan within the left movement, an optimism that also stands as a critique to the statist socialist models from the extreme left, as forwarded by China and Russia, and as espoused by the Communist Party of the Philippines.

At the heart of Akbayan's critique is the commitment to the idea that: socialism if it is to be just and humane must be democratic, and democracy if it is to be responsive to the people's needs must be socialist.

This is a radical shift from the CPP's primary “protracted war” strategy, whereby the CPP's democratic, electoral and parliamentary work remain tactical and secondary, geared towards bringing the proletariat armed revolution to reality.

The old left, as embodied in the “Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors” provides a decisive prescription, herein reaffirming the adherence to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tradition that sees Philippine society as semi-feudal, semi-colonial which can only be changed through a protracted people's war towards a socialist state central planning.

Akbayan guards against the extreme left's propensity to let go of authentic democratic exercises in favor of democratic centralism and armed violence, “justifying means in terms of ends, all for the sake of the breadth and depth of the class struggles”<sup>3</sup>.

ParDem-ParSoc therefore outlines Akbayan's commitment to authentic democratic exercise, through various lanes of struggles: from electoral, to parliamentary and policy reform work, to mass movement building, to coalition politics, among others.

Akbayan believes in the necessity of working on “radical reforms and sustained organizing and constituency building.... Akbayan always aims for a critical mass which at a conjunctural moment, when objective and subjective factors are favorably converged, should be guided towards a qualitative leap in the struggle.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, following Akbayan's ParDem Parsoc Narrative, Akbayan strives to build up radical democracy through non-violent, albeit revolutionary moments (mini-ruptures vs. grand revolution) through the various democratic lanes it has chosen to engage that promotes people's participation and socialist reforms rather than the armed struggle.

### **Narrative vs. Ideology**

Akbayan's commitment to democracy in its struggle for socialism is also most evident in the party's usage of the word “narrative” instead of ideology in setting a programmatic vision and line for its praxis.

ParDem-Parsoc as a narrative is an ongoing story, one that adjusts to historical conjunctures and political change, and commits itself to the constant “*dialogical and dialectical process between the leadership and the membership, a continuing interaction between party discourse and the discourses of the various communities of our people as well those of the social and political movements throughout the globe.*”<sup>5</sup>

This formulation guards Akbayan against dogmatism. Through the intentional ambiguity of the word “narrative,” Akbayan has further defined itself against state socialists which are “held together by ideological monolithic culture and democratic centralist rule.”

Akbayan further distances herself from the Leninist belief in the primacy of a vanguard party. In contrast to this, Akbayan advocates for an “autonomous civil society exercising power and constantly engaging the state,” which assumes a plurality of political centers of power. Akbayan neither sees itself as monopolizing socialist wisdom nor as having privileged access to the desires of the masses.

Narrative-building highlights Akbayan's commitment to democracy as praxis. It is a constant exercise as much as it is a vision of society. Such commitment also recognizes the need for democratization not only in the greater Philippine society at large, but also within the party itself.

### **Building an Activist Welfare State / Realizing ParDem-ParSoc**

The Pardem, - Parsoc narrative, apart from being a critique is indeed also “a proposal for construction”<sup>6</sup>. It therefore provides not only a vision for a participatory and socialist society, it is a strategy for doing politics.

ParDem-Parsoc calls for a constant construction, an active participation in elections, governance, political, economic production, cultural empowerment, etc. Meaningful contestation must be the necessary output of multi-layered contestations, and democracy a product of a successful democratization process.

It is towards this line that Akbayan has sought to promote an image of a constructive Left—a Left that does not just simply protest, but also participates in governance and institution-building. The state herein, albeit an instrument for maintaining the capitalist system, can also be an “an arena to be contested for socialist and progressive agenda.”<sup>7</sup>

Akbayan therefore works for transforming the elite-dominated state into an activist state.

The activist state promotes a state that does not seek to control, but empower the social sectors as it engages the market:

Our guiding developmental framework is a mixed economy of market, state and social sectors where an activist state and the social sector engage the markets to develop the

*Akbayan has furthermore strived to bring together “patches of greens”, or model local governments that promotes progressive governance and social welfare.*

productive forces, protects the labor and agrarian sectors, creatively expands the social sectors and fights for fair trade in the global markets.<sup>8</sup>

Akbayan drew inspiration from the Latin American articulations of participatory democracy, in which the bottom-up organizing and consultation of activist parties become the basis of progressive platforms. For Akbayan, this model serves as a negation both of centralized, bureaucratic socialism on the one hand and representative democracy on the other.

### **Narrative in Practice**

Committed to “the living practice of its guideposts: humanist, socialist, democratic, pluralist and gender sensitive”<sup>9</sup>, Akbayan has endeavored to engage governance and politics, championing radical reforms whether as part of government or of the opposition, towards promoting a modernizing activist state that seeks to promote the welfare of all its constituents.

Early on, Akbayan through its allied NGOs and mass organizations have been promoting the barangay (village) participatory development planning, inspiring the Bottom-up Budgeting implemented by the previous administration. Akbayan has furthermore strived to bring together “patches of greens”, or model local governments that promotes progressive governance and social welfare.

Akbayan has worked for the right of all citizens, especially those from the vulnerable sector, to exercise their political rights. Akbayan has promoted migrant and youth right to suffrage through the Overseas Absentee Voting Law and the Sangguniang Kabataan (Youth Village Councils) Reform Law.



Image: Akbayan

Akbayan has also been the main proponent of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Extension with Reforms (CARPER), a radical legislation that seeks to redistribute land to farmers and provide them with ample support services. Akbayan has also pushed for the Reproductive Health Law which champions reproductive rights of women and thereby empowers women to take control over their reproductive and sexual health.

While in government, Akbayan took an active role in reforming the social security of Filipinos, with at least three Akbayan leaders in key social security institutions (SSS, GSIS, Philhealth). Through the leadership of its chairperson, Akbayan has also been at the forefront at fighting for universal healthcare, passing key legislation that would ensure access of indigents to health and social protection services.

### **The Constant Imperative of Narrative-Building**

These efforts at realizing and further developing the party's narrative however remain a work in progress.

At present, the party remain unable to fully articulate and provide a clear model for the modernizing activist state that it seeks to achieve. The party platforms are promising attempts at providing key guideposts and specific prescriptions on how to transform the state from being agents of the elite, into becoming agents of the people.

These efforts however remain incomplete and have yet to provide an alternative vision that can effectively capture the imagination of the Filipino people.

Providing an alternative democratic-socialist vision is especially crucial under the current Duterte administration where the threat of authoritarianism appears most imminent. In the face of wide-spread insecurity and people's disillusionment with the democratic institutions, the allure of strong-man rule, either from the left or the right, becomes most potent.

In the face of the rising tide of authoritarianism and the changes we see in the relations of power and production in the Philippines and around the globe, the task of narrative-building therefore becomes even more imperative. How does Akbayan promote participatory socialism, participatory democracy as a viable alternative that will bring welfare to Filipinos, radically transforming social and political relations, while ensuring that that human rights are respected and secured?

With democracy in constant threat, the battle for narratives becomes more pronounced. Akbayan is once again called to task: spark hope in the people's capacity for democracy, such that Filipinos may finally share in weaving our socialist aspirations into reality.

<sup>1</sup> Rafaela David and Marlon Cornelio are members of Akbayan.

<sup>2</sup> Quimpo, Nathan. *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos* (2008: Publisher: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies; Ateneo de Manila University Press).

<sup>3</sup> Participatory Democracy, Participatory Socialism: The Akbayan Narrative (as adopted in Akbayan's 2<sup>nd</sup> Regular Congress). <https://akbayan.org.ph/who-we-are/9-participatory-democracy-participatory-socialism-the-akbayan-narrative>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

# Prospects of a Social Democratic Party in Thailand

by Rackchart Wong-Arthichart<sup>1</sup>

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*To 'reform' and 'rebuild' the country, the NCPO exercises its power to unlimited extent. This led to widespread human rights violations throughout the country in the name of peace and order.*

## **4 years of darkness**

Thai politics has been long polarized by a series of military coup's and civil unrests. The clashing between two fractions of political powers, the upper middle class who support old establishment power, and the grassroots majority led by the Pheu Thai Party, has created a vicious cycle that is hard to escape. The latest coup, in 2014, led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha has thrown the Kingdom of Thailand back into darkness.

The Junta rationalized their action as a justified response to the political turmoil, and that the country needs to be reformed. Gen. Prayuth and his National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) promised to bring peace and order to the nation (as reflected in the organization's name), reform the economic and political system, and bring back prosperity to this country.

To 'reform' and 'rebuild' the country, the NCPO exercises its power to unlimited extent. This led to widespread human rights violations throughout the country in the name of peace and order. Hundreds of people have been prosecuted under various junta's orders. Article 44 issued by the junta gives absolute power to the head of the government, Gen. Prayuth, without check and balance, overruling legislative, administrative, and

juridical powers. Article 44 is used as an accelerator to shake up the sluggish bureaucratic process by reshuffling and appointing junta-selected men into the system. It is also used to justify issuance of a variety of orders to interfere with just anything. As a result, human rights are widely violated. According to BBC Thai, at least 640 people were prosecuted with various political charges including violations of the Referendum Act, Sedition Act, Public Gathering Act, and Lèse-majesté law.

The NCPO also spent around \$2 billion on military budget buying weapons and defense systems. The military expenditure reached its all-time high in 2017 at \$6075.70 Million.<sup>2</sup> While many of the purchasing schemes were very obscure and doubtful, the junta, however, cannot escape their own ghost and is trying to put these things under the rug, and prosecuting people who are trying to investigate them.

Although, Thailand's Growth Domestic Product (GDP) has increased 3-4 % every year since the coup, the economic growth of the country does not reflect the economic health of its people. Household debt has increased and reached an all time high in the fourth quarter of 2015.<sup>3</sup> The Thai economy seems to favor the top 1% elite than the majority of ordinary citizens. With a masterplan to launch a joint venture with elite capitalists, the junta is trying to build a hegemony among the military and the elites.

### Pseudo-legitimacy

In order to smoothly exercise power, the military junta has to pave the way to become a legitimate government to some extent. In 2016, a national constitution referendum was held. The constitution was drafted by all-junta selected men and were seen by many as the worst constitution ever written in Thai history. The major changes in this constitution include that: the Senate would become fully appointed rather than partially elected, the Senate would have veto power over the House of Representatives, and the Prime Minister can be appointed from outside either house. These are seen as an effort by the NCPO to hold the power even after the election as they would have the right to appoint all the 250 senators. The NCPO also banned any activities related to the campaign against the draft constitution. Activists were arrested, detained, and intimidated under the harsh Referendum Act and



Image: REUTERS/Chaiwat Subprasom

*The constitution was drafted by all junta selected men and were seen by many as the worst constitution ever written in Thai history.*

Public Gathering Act. While prohibiting the 'Vote No' campaigners, the government set up 350,000 volunteers to promote its draft constitution nationwide.<sup>4</sup>

This neither free nor fair referendum resulted in favor of the government. The draft constitution passed the vote. Although, most of the Pro-redshirt/Thaksin influences northeastern provinces, some of the northern provinces, and 3 Muslim deep southern provinces voted against the draft constitution, the combined votes from these areas cannot surpass the votes from the central and southern provinces, which used to back the military. The BBC reported that not only the opposition to the charters were suppressed, also only a few people actually saw a copy of the draft charter, many of them are bored with the Thai politics and believe that Gen. Prayuth will steer the country toward the right direction and restore democracy as the military promised.



Image: epa/Rungroj Yongrit

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*No matter how many times they were charged, some scholars and activists still try to campaign against the military dictatorship online and offline.*

The new constitution gave some form of legitimacy to the military government. They now can use it and justify their rule as 'democratic'. The junta-appointed drafting committee then wrote 10 organic laws that dictate how the next election should be. The result is very bizarre with strict rules and regulations that make any single party to win overall majority harder -- and weaken all the political parties especially the small ones.

### **The Forces Awaken: Introducing The FFP and The Commoner Party**

Since the 2014 coup, every year, Gen. Prayuth promises to hold an election, but 2019 is undoubtedly the most likely date for it. After the funeral of the late king, and organic laws were completed, the military government has taken control of things and seem ready for an election,

finally. The Election Committee opened for political parties to register their name and logo. Among hundreds of parties that were registered, only a few are actually outstanding and worth keeping our eyes on. Not only because these parties are new, but also because of their background, their ideology and how they represent themselves are very unique and promising. Two of these new parties come from a similar background of activism and used to work together. They share the same goals and dreams, i.e. democracy, human rights, welfare, just society; however, different paths and targets have split them in to 2 parties: The Future Forward Party (FFP) and The Commoner Party.

Although the government has banned political assembly and has been cracking down on activists and opposition forces, one cannot say that the resistance was silenced. The resistance forces has persisted and has pinched the junta almost every now and then during the past 4 years. No matter how many times they were charged, some scholars and activists still try to campaign against the military dictatorship online and offline. These groups were scattered across the country and although they were trying to assemble together, it was merely temporary. However, after the junta government had a firm promise on 2018 that an election will happen, these resistant groups became active again and were looking to raise their voice in party campaigns and to participate in the parliament.

One thing that we need to understand is that many of Thai activists and scholars were influenced by leftist ideas that emerged in the 60's-70's. Many of them were prosecuted by the right-wing governments, but they continued working academically all the time. The ideas of democracy, equality, workers, welfare, and justice still capture political thought. These are the ideas in which current activists and scholars express themselves. The two parties that emerged recently are based on these legacies.

Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, son of a Thai billionaire, graduated from Thammasat University, which was built under the ideas of democracy and equality. During his study, he involved himself with social and political activism. He then saw injustice, inequality and social struggle that led to his passion about politics. Thanathorn, CEO of his family multi-million business, with Piyabutr Sangkanokkul, Thammasat University law professor who was outspoken in demanding changes to Lesé Majesté law, formed a political party called The Future Forward (FFP).

The Thai name of the FFP is 'Anarkot Mai' which literally means "new future". The party co-founders are mainly comprised of Bangkok middle-class young bloods, with their own specific interests and advocacies: feminism, youth activism, disability rights activism, craft beer brewery, and freelance work. Some even call FFP as a 'hipster party'.

However, Thanathorn said to a French media that his party is "definitely on the left"<sup>5</sup> and Piyabutr also referred to Podemos, Syriza, La France Insoumise Party in Europe as their leftist party's role models.<sup>6</sup> They even have a Marxist professor, Sustarum, as a head of their welfare policy unit.

The FFP had their first general assembly on May 2018, which projected an image of a party of the new generation aiming to create new politics. In the assembly, they confirmed 11 guiding policies, which include: restoring democracy and human rights, modernity, green, and just economy, decentralization, welfare state, etc. "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" was adapted as the party's slogan. The Party's executive committee members come from different professional background such as former journalist, former politician, young entrepreneur, retired lieutenant general, etc. The FFP has advantages on economic assets and media exposure. So, they easily get attention and popularity, specially on social media. It also helps that many of their core

members are 'influencers' in some way and already have followership in social media.

The Commoner Party, although having similar ideology as the FFP, has progressed in party formation clearly slower than FFP. The Commoner Party was formed mainly by activists and NGO workers who have worked closely with countryfolks in different areas in the northeastern provinces for more than 10 years. The Party has leftist NGO work merit, and has communitarianism characteristic working on land rights, environment, and local politics.

At the national level, the Commoner Party has joined the resistant forces occasionally and is working closely with activists in Bangkok. Kittichai Ngamchaipisit, a renowned Thai NGO leader is the main person who helped in building the party. He is actually a mentor and a friend to Thanathorn. Kittichai and Thanathorn shared the same vision of forming a political party together. Somehow, they chose to build their own path because of different perspectives. Unlike the FFP, the Commoner Party seeks to put the poor in parliament.

The Commoner Party has yet to convene their general assembly, which is slated in August. The membership of the Party will comprise of NGO workers, the urban poor, rural villagers, and activists. The Party has 3 main core beliefs: Democracy, Human Rights, and Equality and Justice. They aim to put the grassroots in to the main political arena and have them play a prominent role in determining policies. Being an 'action party' is another unique characteristic of the Commoner Party. Since most of its members are NGO workers and activists, the Party itself cannot abandon old habits of service delivery and activism. The Party aims to participate in politics to represent grassroots' voices in the parliament. It also makes it its mission to hold hands with the people on streets to voice out their demands in every demonstration.

### **Future prospect and concerns**

The Thai military government is still monitoring every political activity and is yet to lift strict political restrictions. Every campaign has to request and get approval from the NCPO. Party regulations in the organic laws are also very complicated, and it gives little opportunity to small-sized political parties. The regulations to register a political party include: 500 initial members with 1,000-50,000 Thai Baht

contribution (30 USD - 1,520 USD) upon registration, 1 Million Thai Baht start-up cost (around 30,400 USD), 5,000 members within a year, and a branch in every region. These requirements will discourage small parties to register as a party and to raise their own voices. These requirements are restrictive to grassroots-based parties, for example the Commoner Party. It will also force small parties to merge together, which in the the end will restrict people's representation and choice.

Within the new undemocratic constitution, any party that get to be the government will face severe headaches. To be able to work, they will have to tear down the current constitution and democratically create a new one, which will be a very long process and the junta seems to know it beforehand. The military had already dug traps for any majority party. Either way, if the FFP and The Commoner are not winning the majority, they still need to keep reminding the people that the current constitution is illegitimate in the first place and that the junta does not have legitimacy.

Since the FFP and the Commoner Party are newly formed, they both are yet to come up with any certain policy. So, we cannot tell exactly what their

real ideology is. Will they be Socialist, Green, Social Democrats, or even Neo-Liberals? However, both tied themselves with leftist movement and have captured many leftist values. In either way, in this upcoming election, if there will ever be one, the people will have more choices. The most important things for Thai politics now is that these new parties are all moving towards the same goal: to create democracy and bring about justice. They are united in the same call:

### **Down with Dictatorship, Long Live Democracy!**

<sup>1</sup> Rackchart Wong-Arthichart is a student-activist from Thammasat University

<sup>2</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/thailand/military-expenditure>

<sup>3</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/thailand/households-debt-to-gdp>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/Scandals-may-hurt-referendum-30284612.html>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/04/28/la-thailande-insoumise-est-en-marche\\_1646297](http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/04/28/la-thailande-insoumise-est-en-marche_1646297)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-43251942>

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*Since the FFP and the Commoner Party are newly formed, they both are yet to come up with any certain policy. So, we cannot tell exactly what their real ideology is.*

*Image: pattayaone.news*



# *Nepali Congress, Party Dealignments and Electoral Loss*

*by Sanjaya Mahato<sup>1</sup>*

## **1. Introduction**

Amidst several doubts and dilemmas in the implementation of the new constitution of Nepal 2015 and the conflict in the Madhes region, the Nepali Congress (NC) and Maoist coalition government, headed by NC party president Sher Bahadur Deuba, held the local, provincial and federal elections in 2017. Holding successfully free and fair elections was observed as a breakthrough not only to end the transitional politics but also to resolve the conflict in Madhes and pave the way for implementing the most debated and contested issues relating to federalism.

Despite the successful leadership in holding all the three levels of elections in a very adverse situation, the Nepali Congress leadership had to face a blame for disastrous party performance and landslide election defeat in all three elections. In the local election, Nepali Congress won 105 and 84 seats respectively in mayor and deputy mayor out of a total 293 seats. Similarly, 161 chairs and 139 vice-chair were elected out of a total of 460 seats; 2287 and 2156 ward chairs and women ward members were elected out of total 6742 seats; 2101 Dalit women ward member were elected out of total 6742 seats and 4432 in ward

member (open) in total 13484 seats. In the provincial election, Nepali Congress won 113 seats (41 FPTP<sup>2</sup> and 72 PR<sup>3</sup>) out of the total 550 seats in all 7 provinces. In the federal parliament, congress won 63/275 (23 FPTP and 40 PR) seats.

The landslide electoral loss of Nepali Congress and its weak electoral performance raised many questions in the party leadership, its principle and party organizations. The blame and counter blame among the leaders in all level for the electoral defeat pressurized party leadership to review the reasons for its electoral loss. In this article, I will briefly explain the causes on how party strength has become increasingly volatile, resulting to a landslide electoral loss of Nepali Congress. First, I will explain the gradual and continuous party dealignment psychology behind the distrust among the leaders and leadership. Second, I will present some technical reasons behind the electoral defeat. And finally I will recommend some ways forward.

This paper is largely drawn from my electoral data and articles published in the Kantipur Daily since December 2017 about the loss of election by Nepali Congress and my experiences in the election campaign.



Image: AP

*The landslide electoral loss of Nepali Congress and its weak electoral performance raised many questions in the party leadership, its principle and party organizations.*

**2. The current Debate in Congress:**

After the landslide electoral defeat of Nepali Congress, the discourse and discussion on the reasons behind the electoral loss center around three themes: a) Sher Bahadur Deuba as a president of Nepali Congress should take the responsibility for the electoral loss and ethically resign from the post (See Acharya, 2018; KC, 2018; Koirala, 2018; Thapa, 2018; Tmelsina, 2018); b) the long and short term reasons for the electoral defeat (See Baral, 2018; Barma; 2018; Khanal, 2018; Mahar, 2018; Paudel, 2018; Sharma, 2018; Thapa, 2018; Pratiksha, 2018; Sapkota, 2018; Sijapati; 2018); and, c) ways on improving the Nepali Congress (Sharma, 2018; Thapa, 2018; Sijapati; 2018; Paudel, 2018; Baral, 2018 and Devkota, 2018).

A month long review meeting of central committee of Nepali Congress concluded on Sunday, 29 April, 2018 with the central committee taking responsibility for the election defeat and listing seven principal reasons: a) left alliance; b) Mahdesh-based party alliance; c) weak

party position on undeclared Indian border blockade in Nepal; d) inadequate home work on candidate selection process; e) Intra-party betrayal; f) weak party performance; and, g) failure to effectively use social media for publicizing the good initiatives taken by NC lead government agencies.

The conclusion of a month long review meeting became a big joke in the national and social media. The story behind the big joke and dissatisfaction among the Paudel and Sitaula lead faction were that the reasons for poll defeats was not only shallow analysis but was an apparent lame excuse. These reasons however cover some instant and ongoing market and media discourses but actually could not cover and analyze the long-term, profound and systemic reasons for the party dealignment, psychology of mistrust among the party members and leadership, party's failure in public policy engagement, deviation from its central party principle – social democracy, and most importantly the increasing trend of clientelism in the party.

Winning and losing the election is a common phenomenon in electoral democracy – in both party level and individual life (Giri, 2018; Thapa, 2018; Sharma, 2018; Sijapati, 2018). But if a party could not make a proper, pertinent and evidence-based review on why the party lost the election, what were the reasons, and what are the solutions to those problems. More importantly, if a party could not make members and supporters understand those reasons and possible solutions in the future the party members become desperate, aimless and start fleeing and leaving the party.

The recent Electoral loss for Nepali Congress is not the first time but this time congress became completely isolated. However, electoral loss could be a great opportunity for parties to re-emerge, improve and play creative role in making better public policy in sitting the opposition (Khanal, 2018; Sijapati, 2018; Baral, 2018; K.C, 2017). This electoral defeat has provided Nepali Congress an opportunity to re-think their party principle and policies and to renovate their organizations.



Image: AFP

*This electoral defeat has provided Nepali Congress an opportunity to re-think their party principle and policies and to renovate their organizations.*

### 3. Party Dealignment and the electoral defeats

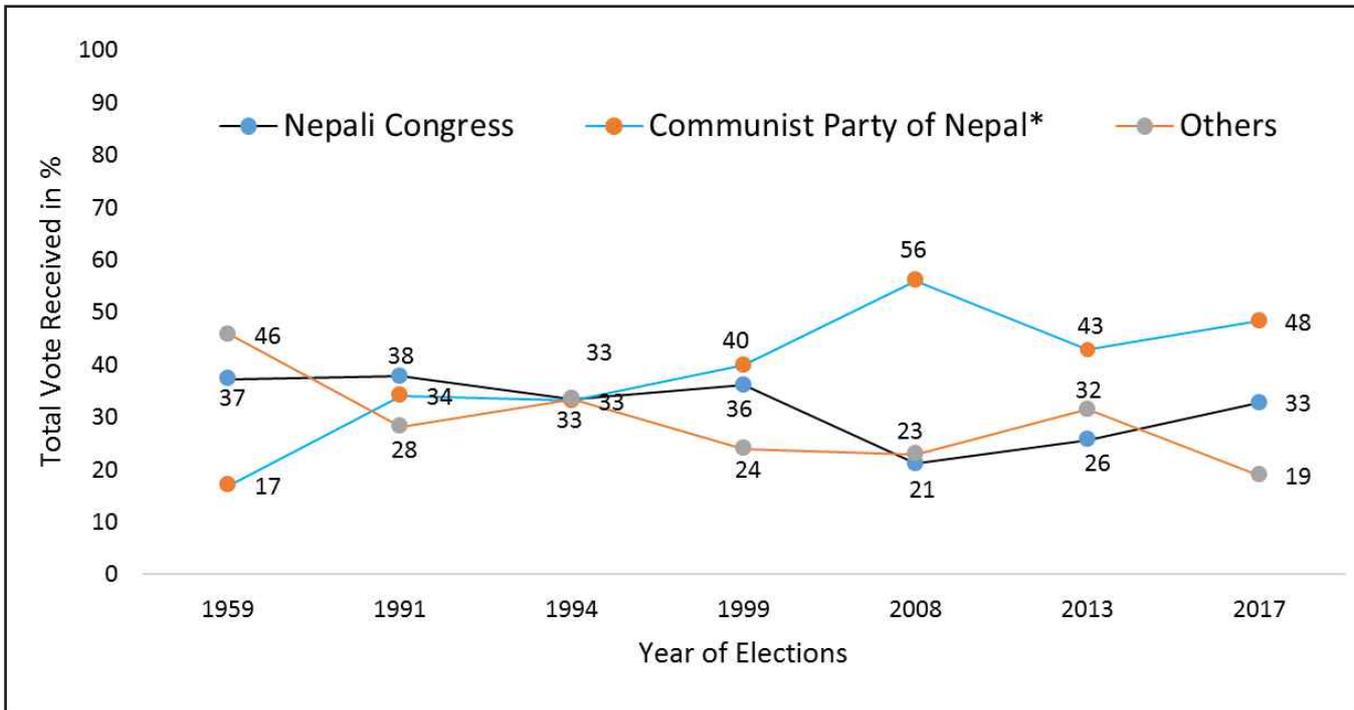
People often point out to the major incidents that happened before the elections: the impeachment of the supreme court chief justice; the conflict in inspector general of Nepal police; and, the Party's position against the undeclared Indian blockade and communist alliance. These were not the principal reasons for party dealignments; rather, the instant and apparent causes of electoral defeat and lame excuse from the party leadership. Discussing in such shallow reasons neither benefits the Party nor lead for better conclusions and corrective measures to be taken in the future. For example, it was not clear what was the motivation behind the impeachment of the chief justice Sushila Karki prior to the election and what was the role of Maoist party and CPN UML? On the other hand, Indian undeclared blockade was a serious diplomatic failure (Lama, 2018). But we can rather argue that the Party failed to voice in the parliament why Communist government headed by K.P. Oli failed to address the blockade in diplomatic ways. Therefore, focusing on structural, institutional and procedural causes for party misalignment will be more useful than providing lame excuses for the electoral defeat.

#### 3.1. Deviation from the party principle:

Nepali Congress has the glorious past in the struggle for democracy – fighting against the totalitarian Rana regime for democratic transition in 1951, struggling against the autocratic monarchy for the restoration of democracy in 1990, successful leadership for the peace process, and promulgating the new constitution of Nepal 2015. After the democratic transition in 1990, Nepali Congress took sole ownership of the democratic transition and got the highest popular vote of 36 percent winning 110 total seats with majority in the parliament in the legislative election 1991.

Sijapati (2018) argues that the dealignment of Nepali Congress started after the 1994 legislative election. Deviation from the principal social democratic principles of the Party has been reported as the main reason for the party dealignment. Sijapati (2018) argues that Nepali Congress could not even respect the people's mandate, which is often observed as a sign of party dealignment and start of factionalism in Nepali Congress (Thapa, 2018; Khanal, 2018; Baral, 2018; Sharma, 2018, Giri, 2018).

Figure 1: Percent of Votes Received by Nepali Congress and Communist Parties



Note:

- 1991 and 1994 Election:** Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) entails Communist Party of Nepal – United Leninist Marxist (CUPN-UML); Samyukta Janamorcha and Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party.
- 1999:** CPN encompass CPN UML, Communist Party of Nepal – Marxist Leninist (ML), Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party, Rastriya Janamorcha and Samyukta Janamorcha.
- 2008:** Maoist Center, CPN(UML), ML Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party, Janamorcha, Rastriya Janamorcha, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified) and (United).
- 2013:** Maoist Center, CPN(UML), ML, Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party, Rastriya Janamorcha, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified)
- 2017:** Maoist Center, CPN(UML), Rastriya Janamorcha and Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party

Source: *The Kantipur* 16 Dec 2017 and Election Commission of Nepal 2018

The increase of political corruption among the leaders, the degradation in the capacity of political leadership further defamed parties among the people. During the 1990s Congress was the single party who remained mostly in power. But because of the lack of better public policy engagement and formulation, the charm of the party gradually decreased.

Congress leaders are always proud of being a member of social democratic party but they neither made public policy and programs guided by social democratic principles while they are in government nor applied it to party governance.

Giri (2018) argues that party principle, policies and programs matters more than its glorious past. If the party redefines its social democratic policies and make it contextual, accompanied by its glorious history, no party can be compared with Nepali Congress (Sharma, 2018).

Within two and a half decade of time after 1990, Nepal experienced several political ups and down: democratic transition in 1990; Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006; people's mass movement in 2006; and, transformation from a Hindu kingdom to a secular federal republic state.

The Party leadership seems quite reluctant to hold the Mahasamiti meetings to discuss party principles, strategies and programs. Giri remembers, after 1990, the Party hardly held 3 Mahasamiti meetings – Nepaljung and Pokhara meetings were quite effective in terms of policy discussions, party programs and policy recommendations. He further adds that most probably party leaders did not entertain the question raised by the members of Mahasamiti to the party leadership and therefore they stopped calling them for meetings. Giri argues that Nepali Congress could not make clear vision and defined them in party policies.

### 3.2. Systemic Clientelism

Clientelism in politics is the exchange of goods and incentives for political support. Kitschelt (2000) remarks “Clientelism not only involves reciprocity and voluntarism but also exploitation and domination” (Pg. 949). Clientelist relations can be both full of opportunities as well as betrayal and defections. In a reciprocal relation, people usually maintain reciprocity norm – you should help them who help you (Gouldner, 1960; Auyero, 2001). This norms create the space for brokers and brokers use these norms to harvest votes.

Clientelism fosters individualization and underestimates institutions. For example, parties distribute incentives to voters for electoral supports rather than using public policies to mobilize certain group of people. The intensification of clientelism in political parties has dramatically increased the electoral cost and fostered political corruption. Most importantly, it seriously affects the party institutionalization and increase the factionalism within a party. Thapa (2018) argues that leaders do corruption not because of their family basic subsistence but because they need money to win the election. He further argues that the cost of maintaining the power for long time in a party costs more than winning the elections.

Usually, election and leadership is maintained based on the popularity of a person. The chances of winning the election for the party leadership and government office is based on a person's popularity and competency. But clientelism ignores popularity and institutions and requires the resources. Winning the election depends on the how much resources one has. The clientelism

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## *Clientelism fosters individualization and underestimates institutions.*

in political parties has dramatically intensified over the time. Therefore, a person's ability to spend money in the electoral campaign and fund the party mostly determine getting the electoral ticket.

Since, clientelism ignores the institutionalization process and tries to break the system which ultimately establish individual rule which is prevalent in Nepali Congress. And if the system of a party is ignored, there is probability of 'carteling' the membership – party membership is distributed to those who are loyal to certain faction or to certain person. Therefore, scholars and leaders argues that there is a need to reform the system and procedures of party membership and the electoral system of the party for better leadership (Thapa, 2018; Sharma; 2018; Khanal; 2018). Sapkota(2018) argues that, Deuba's resignation from the party leadership is not a remedy for improving the party leadership but the trend and system that elect Deuba as a party president should restructure for real party transformation.

### 3.3 Serious Flaws in Strategic Constitution Mapping

Strategic constituency mapping is a method of assessing the strengths of constituencies and the listing and selection of potential candidates for the election. Strategic constituency mapping helps to figure out competitive constituencies and put a potential candidate in a respective constituency. For instance, it helps to assess the local party networks, public support, and popular vote received in the past elections and who can be the possible potential candidates for the particular constituency to win the election. Fielding right candidate in a right constituency leads to greater electoral success.

Usually, a party holds the election within a party to select the popular potential candidate for the election. In major parties in Nepal, including Congress, the central party committee decides the

list of final candidates ignoring the constituency and district level recommendations. Clientelism dominates the decisions of the electoral candidates without assessing their strength.

If the less popular candidate is fielded in the election against the local party committee recommendation and sentiments, it suddenly affects the psychology of party members and common voters. In such situation, party members become less active for election campaign and sometimes some influential leaders from the same party make invisible alliance with other parties which is commonly known as '*Antarghat*' (intra-party betrayal).

Parties often declare the candidates for the election based on the party funding and capacity for electoral financing. This ignores not only the system of party but also ignores the most popular and potential candidates. This ultimately represented disrespect to the local level party members and supporters. Many political leaders acknowledge that party funding is rampant to influence the leadership for electoral ticket (Thapa, 2018). Many electoral candidates acknowledge they even fund the party to be a candidate for the municipal election.

### **3.4. Unhealthy Coalition:**

Coalition is a process of making a group to achieve a common goal (Gamson, 1961). Coalition in politics is usually done to maximize their share of payoffs and if no single party can maximize their payoffs (Gamson, 1961). But, political coalition has certain principles, norms and values. For instance, the probability of coalition is higher among parties who have similar party principles and goals. But sometimes coalition are made between completely opposite forces to achieve short term personal or group benefits. These kinds of coalition could not last long and have a serious negative impact on public policies and damages on party structures.

The decision of Congress to make election coalition with the Maoist in the local election shocked local leaders and supporters. They could not understand the politics of coalition with completely opposite forces. The Congress coalition with Maoist party was done not to maximize the election payoffs but to reach power. The coalition ended with landslide electoral loss. Similarly, with many dissatisfaction from the local level, the party

leaders made a coalition with Rastriya Prajatantra Party and other Tarai based parties which was mostly seen as reaction against the communist alliance.

Both coalition with Maoist party and Rastriya Prajatantra Party did not work. The unnatural and unhealthy coalitions seriously impacted the Congress voters' psychology and therefore, in most of the places the Party could not win the election. How did the Congress leadership think of the reaction of the Party supporters whose families were displaced and killed by Maoist? Thus, the unnatural and unhealthy coalitions do not work and is one of the main reason for the landslide electoral loss of Nepali Congress.

### **Conclusion and Way forwards**

In conclusion, the 7 reasons identified by Congress as reason for its electoral loss have less influence on party dealignments and its long-term systemic reasons. There has been a systematic party misalignment because of the three main reasons – deviation from the party policy; structural and procedural problems. Nepali Congress almost deviated from its social democratic principle for public policy making process and in party level processes. Similarly, the party organization has almost become dysfunctional because the party could not form its sisters organization in time. And finally, there is serious problem in strategic constituency mapping.

Despite the landslide electoral defeat in the 2017 election, Nepali Congress' popularity among the people has not yet faded. If we see the total vote received by the Party in PR system, the vote received is almost equal with that of the CPN UML. Therefore, this defeat for Nepali Congress is an opportunity to restructure, renovate and steer the party back in right track. Change is possible only in liberal parties, the possibility of change in Congress is quite high compared to the communist parties. We can take the example of Jeremy Corbyn in Labor Party in the UK and Bernie Sanders in Democratic Party in the US (Sijapati, 2018). Referencing Tony Blair in the Labor Party in the UK, Giri points out that giving new pace and improvement of Nepali Congress is possible in the coming days and that the Party have several potential youth leaders who can take the lead.

*Despite the landslide electoral defeat in the 2017 election, Nepali Congress' popularity among the people has not yet faded.*

### **Ways forward**

*Revision of Party Principles and Policies:* Nepali Congress has its robust *Mahasamit* elected from each constituency and nominated from the central committee. This is the apex policy forum of Nepali Congress to discuss principle, policy and programs and provide corrective measures for the Party. Therefore, the party leadership must hold *Mahasamiti* meetings periodically to discuss, revise, and amend party policies. The Party should have clear vision and position on secularism, federalism and foreign policy.

*Restructure and renovate party organization:* Since the last 15 years, the party organization has increasingly become weak. This is all because of the inability of party leadership to form its sister wings and local units in time and periodically follow up, train and provide encouragements.

*Serious improvements in party membership:* There are serious flaws in party membership. Party membership is based on the loyalty to the party leadership and factions. That means that if one is not loyal to the party even when one believes and follows the Nepali Congress' principles and policies, a person cannot be a member. "Carteling" in membership of the party often has been a dispute in the party and among the leaders. Therefore, party membership should be distributed based on a person's commitment in the party principle and policy.

*End of clientelism:* The increase of clientelism in the party caused the dramatic increase of party funding and electoral finance and finally increased political corruption. Most importantly, clientelism in the party has caused leadership deficit and stopped the change in leadership. The Party should develop the system to elect leader based on his/her popularity not because of his/her access to resources.



Image: AFP

*Policy Think Tank:* The Party must form a policy think tank in the party and make the group more active and functional as a support to *Mahasamiti* (Sharma, 2018). The think tank should do research and provide advisory roles to the central committee and better policy recommendations.

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<sup>2</sup> First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system

<sup>3</sup> Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system

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# *Rising to the Challenge:* ***The Mongolian People's Party Experience***

*by* Tserenjamts Munkhtseteg<sup>1</sup>

The Mongolian People's Party is the oldest political party in Mongolia founded in 1920. Following the country's independence in 1921, it became the ruling party of one-party state Mongolia.

In the last 2016 elections, MPP scored an overwhelming victory of 65 out of 76 members in the national parliament. Back in government again, MPP aims at implementing integrated policies towards creating human-centered social welfare, pro-development economic growth, and citizen-oriented public governance system for its country and people's prosperity and progress. As in other countries, MPP is faced with rising populism and declining trust towards political parties – in turn, compounding the roadblock for poverty alleviation and social service delivery.

## **Mongolia in Brief**

Mongolia is a landlocked country sandwiched between Russia and China. Roughly the size of Western Europe, yet with a population of just 3 million people, it is the world's most sparsely populated country. Traditionally, Mongolia has been a country of nomads with a heavy dependency on agriculture; a third of the population still depends on animal husbandry.

Democratic changes in communist countries in the late 1980s also swayed regime change in Mongolia. After 70 years of communist rule in Mongolia, there occurred a peaceful revolution in 1990 and started transition to a free society.

Since its first free democratic election in 1992, Mongolia held 7 parliamentary, and 7 presidential elections. In 1996, the current opposition party, Democratic Party (DP), won majority of the seats. In the 2004 and 2012 elections, no single party received a clear majority; while, in 1992, 2000, 2008, and 2016 elections, the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) scored clear victories. The 2016 election cycle placed the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) in a position of political preponderance with 65 of 76 seats in the parliament and majorities in most provincial and local citizens' representative assemblies. On the other hand, the Democratic Party (DP) maintains 9 parliamentary seats, enabling it to form a party caucus; 1 seat went to the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), and 1 to an independent candidate.

In recent years, the country has taken considerable steps forward in establishing a more modern and vibrant economy, with a booming mining sector driving double-digit economic growth.



Image: Getty Images

Mongolia displayed unprecedented growth rates in 2011 and 2012 and became one of the fastest growing economies in the world, largely driven by a booming mining sector. However, the end of the mining boom in 2013 put the natural resource dependent country in a challenging situation. Mongolia's economic growth slowed to 1.0% in 2016. China's economic slowdown and the drop in commodity prices – namely copper and coal, Mongolia's most valuable natural resources – had a strong impact on the country's mining sector and its contribution to the national economy.

Since its first free democratic election in 1992, Mongolia has seen a marked shift in the past two decades toward a two-party system. Currently, three out of the 28 parties registered at the Supreme Court of Mongolia have seats in parliament.

### **The Mongolian People's Party (MPP) and its vision**

The Mongolian People's Party (MPP), founded in 1920, the oldest and currently the ruling political party in Mongolia, played important role in the Mongolian Independence Revolution of 1921.

Following independence, it became the ruling party of one-party state Mongolia. The party's ideology is social democracy, and was previously Marxism-Leninism.

The MPP is a political organization of voluntarily united individuals, based on the social democratic ideals, respect for the national independence, freedom and core interests of the nation. The most treasured values of the party are esteem for national history, language and culture, preservation of national traditions, high morals, wisdom and humane feature of the people, respect for and guarantee of independence, sovereignty and solidarity of the nation.

*The MPP sets its mission as follows:*

- Decent work and equitable income for every citizen;
- Adequate public health services for people;
- World-class knowledge and competitive education for all;
- Healthy and safe living environment for the society; and
- National economy capable to sustain the all of the above.

The MPP believes that with the implementation of these integrated policies aimed at creating a human-centered social welfare, pro-development economic growth, and a nation and citizen-oriented public governance system, the country and its people will achieve prosperity and progress.

### **Challenges for MPP and the democratization in Mongolia**

The Mongolian People's Party and the Mongolian democracy face several challenges. The main challenges are distrust in political parties, the rise of populism, and the emergence of social media fueled fake news.

There has been a dramatic decline in political trust among the electorate. Public opinion surveys have continuously confirmed that the majority of Mongolians do not or have little trust in political parties. Expectation for an authoritarian leadership is spreading among the voters. A significant segment of the population is disillusioned with the performance of parliament and dysfunctional cabinets; thus prefers a strong, democratic presidential system. Debates about the

effectiveness of parliamentary versus a presidential system exist. Moreover, perhaps, due to the influence of a strongman authoritarian leadership in both its neighbors, Russia and China, there is a growing support among Mongolians for a strong leader and a presidential government, according public opinion polls in the recent year.

The Mongolian presidential election, held in June 2018, was one of the biggest example of rising populism and utility of fake news in the country's political science. Populist former martial arts star and businessman Khaltmaa Battulga from Democratic Party (DP) won the presidential election, receiving 50.6% of votes. MPP's candidate Enkhbold trailed behind Battulga with 41.2 percent of the vote.

Along with the factor of political party affiliation, individual characteristics played an especially important role during the last presidential elections. In the recent election, Battulga, among

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*The Mongolian People's Party and the Mongolian democracy face several challenges. The main challenges are distrust in political parties, the rise of populism, and the emergence of social media fueled fake news.*

Image: Reuters



the other candidates, distinguished himself as a strong populist figure and a well-known personality; whereas, Enkhbold was known more as a party leader and was not particularly popular among the masses. Battulga is a well-known and respected athlete of sambo (a wrestling style similar to judo), which is the most favorite and a traditional sport among Mongolians.

Battulga's campaign primarily employed anti-Chinese advertisements and fake news. Battulga's team, exploiting Mongolians' historical fear and distrust of China, spread fake news using videos of random crime scenes with political messages of Chinese against Mongolians. Throughout the election campaign, Battulga successfully ran mudslinging and corruption accusations in Facebook against his main rival Enkhbold, who in turn launched a negative political campaign against his main opponent Battulga using the Twitter platform. Battulga dominated the campaign in the social media as evidenced by his ads, live videos and coverage attracting the highest amount of viewership and engagement throughout the whole election campaign period.

Battulga's team started posting three related but separate videos titled: "The death of a brave mongolian", "Enkhbold's ethnic lineage", and "Insulting Great Genghis Khan" on June 1 and 2, 2017, even before the official start of election campaign. "Enkhbold's ethnic lineage" claimed that Enkhbold is a mixed ethnic with Chinese origins. This video was distributed in the largest Facebook groups with membership of more than 40,000, such as Offshore, Zugaatai zaluus (Fun Guys), Automashin zarlal (Vehicle Classified), Information, Online Sale among others. The video went viral with 99,000 views 2,403 shares within 48 hours since its posting. Consequently, the video was published in 10 news sites with the title "Enkhbold proven to be the mixed blood with hard evidence".

Most of the comments on these videos were driven by hatred and xenophobia against the Chinese: "Enkhbold is a Chinese, and that is why we should elect a genuine Mongolian." The fact that people believed without questioning the authenticity of the videos was fueled by the traditional xenophobia, which was of great influence to the voters. Many people tended to take these views and comments on social network without questioning them, according to surveys. Checking

the validity, reliability and accuracy of posts and its sources were ignored and conscious filtering of information was ignored in the social network. Hence, the election team of DP candidate Battulga successfully posted series of negative campaign ads. This was especially effective for social network users under the age of 35.

The fact that candidates engage in mudslinging and a smear tactic to damage each other's reputation, by propounding negative propaganda on social media in order to attract public attention has been observed during the monitoring study on the influence of social media and press conducted during the 2017 presidential election by Political Communication Institute.

In general, the 2017 presidential election campaigns was not of the platforms and policies of the candidates, but of fake news and negative campaigns. Enkhbold's election campaign team had mainly focused on giving proper responses, rebuttals.

## Conclusion

Elections are increasingly witnessing growing trends in the use of mass media, especially online social networks to appeal to the fundamental cultural characteristics such as tradition, shared values, identities, religious beliefs of a group, ethnicity and nation in order to motivate their opinion and direct their emotions and build attitudes to reach election results that best fit the interest of politicians.

Taking advantage of the current situation with lack of editorial control and fact checking in the social media platforms, populist politicians and political parties pervasively spread fake news, mudslinging, smear tactics among the populace which have been observed in recent elections in Mongolia, as well as in liberal democracies in the USA, France, the Philippines, among others. Populist politics, via social media platforms, is turning into digital populism.

Amidst the looming digital populism, coupled by distrust in political parties, social democratic parties, such as the Mongolian People's Party, must recapture the imagination, steer the emotions, and win the hearts of its people. Backed by a long history of struggle and a clear vision and platform forward, MPP should push on.

# Reimagining Malaysia

by Yeo Bee Yin<sup>1</sup>

## Historic Change of Government in Malaysia

Malaysia is a beautiful and colorful country of 30 million people from different ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan and myriads of minorities. Until 9th May 2018, this beautiful country had been ruled by the same coalition – the National Front (Barisan Nasional, BN) for 61 years since the country achieved independence in 1957.

Before the fateful day, few expected the Coalition of Hope (Pakatan Harapan, PH), a coalition formed by Anwar Ibrahim's People Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, PPBM), and National Trust Party (Parti Amanah Negara, PAN), would win the country's 14th General Election (Ge14).

The odds were hugely against us. In terms of finance, we had little resources compared to BN, in the scale of 1 to 100, if not more; mainstream media was tightly controlled with constant suppression of freedom of speech; and most difficult of all, the election was rigged.

Just a month before the election, the Election Commission (EC) carried out the most blatant gerrymandering exercise in the country's history.

With BN having majority in the parliament, the parliament passed EC's proposal of new election boundaries that made the already unfair constituency boundaries even more unfair - urban constituencies, which usually support PH became many times bigger than rural constituencies, which usually support BN.

EC's one-sidedness was getting more serious. They ignored blatant vote buying conducted by BN in the rural areas elections after elections. And the most ridiculous of all, they even set the voting day to be on a Wednesday – a blatant move to reduce the number of voters, who worked in the cities, to go back to their home town to vote (because this demography would usually vote for PH).

But on the 9th of May 2018, a miracle happened in Malaysia. Malaysians have shown to the world that despite insurmountable injustice and gross abuse of power, democracy and the power of the will of the people of Malaysia, prevailed eventually. For the first time in the history of Malaysia, there's a change in the federal government; and most important of all, it was done without bloodshed.

With this peaceful change of government, the next generation of Malaysians would forever know that they - not the powerful and privileged few, are the masters of the country.

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*Malaysians have shown to the world that despite insurmountable injustice and gross abuse of power, democracy and the power of the will of the people of Malaysia, prevailed eventually.*

#### Lost of Hope and The Reason to Reimagine

It was a completely different voters sentiment even as close as two months before the election. On 15 March 2018, I launched my book “Reimagining Malaysia”. The mood for change then was low. Such “hopeless” mood was not without reason. In fact, the book was not written when we were at the best of time - I started to write the book when we were at the worst of time.

At the time of writing, Malaysia was facing the biggest corruption scandal in our country's history – 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) – which has grabbed not only local but also international headlines. It is also being investigated in the US, Singapore, Switzerland, etc. However, the then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, whose personal account allegedly contained funds syphoned from 1MDB amounting to RM2.6 billion, remained strong in the highest position in the land.

Malaysians were left with seemingly no viable alternative.

The previous opposition front, Coalition of the People (Pakatan Rakyat), was fractured with the right-wing Islamist party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), breaking away from other coalition partners. Coalition of Hope, which was the newly formed opposition coalition, has just begun to gain strength slowly.

Indeed, as a young person who entered into politics wanting to see change in the country, I struggled for a period of time with disappointment and disillusionment at seeing the political developments in Malaysia. Then I realised that we cannot give up on our country just because it appears hopeless.

We need re-imagination for this nation to fight against the disillusionment. We need to define and know what kind of future we want to see and then fix our eyes on the goals, overcoming the challenges along the journey.

We need re-imagination to rebuild this country.

That is why I decided to write the book. I wanted to share with my readers the nation-building issues that are close to my heart, in terms of where we are now and what I dream for them in the future, based on the assumptions that if there are enough people who will believe and work on these ideals and ideas, everything is possible.

#### **Reimagining Malaysia**

Below are the summary of the book with the most recent context (the book was written before GE14).

##### *Rebuild Institutions*

If there is only one thing you can change for your country, what will that be?

Six years in politics made me realize that the most important aspect of a government is governance. Strong governance is the prerequisite to good economy, education, social welfare and everything else. To quote Abraham Lincoln, “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.” This is why we need strong check-and-balance institutions. We must always remember this: Good leaders come and go, only good institutions remain.

In Malaysia, there are three aspects of check-and-balance institutions that we need to restore from their faltering situations now:

- i. Firstly, we need to return Malaysians a free and fair election. The first step towards electoral reform is that the EC be made independent from the executive and free from political and corporate influences, as well as money politics.

- ii. Secondly, there must be greater freedom of expressions in Malaysia. Even with free and fair election, when there is no freedom of expressions, the electorates will be made to believe that certain party is better than the other. All the laws that hinder freedom of expressions such as Printing Presses and Publication Act, Sedition Act, University Act and many more oppressive laws, must be amended or abolished by the new parliament to allow the people to express freely.
- iii. Thirdly, there must be an effective separation of the three branches of government in Malaysia – executive, legislative and judiciary. Under BN, there was a serious centralization of power to the executive in the recent years. The new government must restore the power of the legislative and judiciary arms to provide effective oversight to the executive. In addition, we must enact the Freedom of Information Act, establish the Office of the Ombudsman, as well as move towards open government, to allow the public greater scrutiny of politicians and government servants. Sunshine is the best disinfectant - when there is high level of transparency, corruption and other bad practices can be reduced.

## **Reform the Education System**

The world is not fair. By accident of birth, some people get better starting points than others. A good public education is a great equalizer - providing more equal opportunities for children of the haves and the havenots. Public education makes the unfair world fairer. In addition, good public education also will result to higher labour productivity and jobs creation at the macro-level. The three most important steps to take in the education reform in Malaysia are:

### Maximizing Return on Investments in Education

As of now there is low return on investments in education in Malaysia compared to other country, for both basic education and higher education. At our level of spending, Malaysia's education deserves better student outcome according to international benchmarking.

Therefore, there must be a mechanism that measures the education outcome with respect to the investment as well as an accountability structure that keeps the education ministry accountable so that tax-payers monies will not be further wasted in the name of “education reform”.

### Reinventing Human Resources Development in Education

The quality of teachers is the most important school-based determinant of student outcomes. According to a research done in the Tennessee, USA in the mid-1990s, which showed that when two average, eight-year-old students were assigned to high-performing and low-performing teachers separately, their academic performances would differ to the scale of 50 percent within 3 years. Hence recruiting and developing good educators should be the main focus of education reform.

In order to do that, we need to reinvent the salaries structure, career development plan and promotion pathway of the teachers. Teachers' compensation and promotion structure must be such that it incentivizes teachers and school leaders to produce the best student outcome.

### Adapting Education for Future

Ideally, education prepares our next generation with skills of tomorrow, enabling our children not only to survive but to thrive in the future. The question is what does the future look like?

The world that we are living in is changing so fast. General Electric's Discussion Paper in 2014 “The Future of Work” estimated that 65% of children entering primary education today will end up in new jobs types that do not exist today. McLeod, Scott and Karl Fisch estimated that with the current rate of technological changes, nearly 50% of subject knowledge acquired during the first year of a four-year technical degree become outdated by the the third year of their study.

Artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, big data, internet of things, 3D printing, nanotechnology and others will revolutionize our near future. Technology are displacing jobs in an unprecedented manner. Machines are not susceptible to human errors, have superb memories, no emotional swing, and no relationship or family problems; they don't need holidays and surely not a sabbatical leave. They will make better “employees”.



Image: REUTERS/Akbar Nugroho Gumay/Antara Foto

## *The Malaysian youth are faced with two big job challenges – unemployment and underemployment.*

Therefore, to “compete” with machines, we need to make sure that our children acquire skill sets that will not be replaceable by machines anytime soon, such as creativity, empathy, critical thinking as well as leadership and social skills. The school activities and syllabus must be such that they allows these skills to be developed.

Overall, the world is moving so fast that school syllabus, must be constantly monitored and adapted to close the gaps between skill sets acquired in schools and those needed to thrive in the workplace and real world.

Let us be reminded the words of Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman for World Economic Forum, “In the new world, it is not the big fish which eats the small fish, it's the fast fish which eats the slow fish.”

### **Empowering the Youth**

To me, the best way to empower the youth is to provide them with good and right jobs that pay them well. However, the Malaysian youth are faced with two big job challenges – unemployment and underemployment. As of 2015, 1 in 10 youth does not have a job compared to around 3.1 in 100 workers of all ages; youth unemployment is about

3 times the national average. In addition, the starting salaries of young graduates have been relatively stagnant (minus the inflation) since a decade ago.

Here are the things the new government should do to create an economy that works better for the Malaysian youth.

- i. Firstly, we need to solve the problem of the mismatch of supply and demand of labour force and skills. The curricula of the courses at the tertiary institutions should be more industry and market driven. There should be aggressive reskilling and upskilling programmes to catalyse upward movement of labour skills and subsequently pay cheques.
- ii. Secondly, we need to narrow the skill gaps of graduates in terms of technical and soft skills deficiencies to improve their employabilities. Overall, our tertiary institutions need to equip its graduates with more transferable skills, such as the ability to learn new things quickly and independently, to adapt to new technologies and environments, and to think analytically, critically and creatively. Other desirable

traits include a good working attitude as well as good interpersonal, communication and leadership skills.

- iii. Thirdly, it is high time that we move away from being a labour-intensive economy and move towards becoming a knowledge-and skills-intensive economy. The government needs a comprehensive carrot-and-stick system to facilitate the adoption of technology by businesses. They could do this by restricting industries' reliance on foreign labour gradually, while at the same time providing attractive incentives in terms of subsidies and grants for the industries to invest in technology. Transformation of businesses from labour-driven to knowledge-driven can create medium and high-skilled jobs that pay higher wages as well as improve business profitability and long-term competitiveness.
- iv. Fourthly, we should incentivise youth entrepreneurship. Small and medium enterprises create more than 70 percent of the jobs in Malaysia; thus, more jobs could be created for the youth when they start their own businesses.
- v. Finally, Malaysia needs strong institutions to command market confidence for private sector development, so that individuals and firms can plan and invest. There must be prudent economic policies, which encourage strategic investment in infrastructure that stimulates innovation, removes market rigidities and bureaucracy and enhances regional integration such as ASEAN trade, labour and border control, and so on.

### **Empowering Women**

The former Secretary General of United Nation, Ban Ki Moon, once said, "The world will never realize 100% of its goal if 50% of its people cannot realize their full potential."

According to WEF's Global Gender Gap Report 2016, Malaysia ranks 106 out of 144 countries in gender equality, putting us at the bottom quarter of the countries assessed. There is gender inequality especially in the sphere of politics and economy, despite the fact that our women are increasingly better-educated and probably better than men now.



Image: Kow Gah Chie / malaysiakini.com

According to The World Bank data, Malaysia secondary and tertiary education enrollment rates as of 2015 among the females are 81% and 32% respectively while males are lower at 75% and 21% respectively. This shows that despite no apparent formal barrier, direct discrimination and a complex pattern of hidden barriers prevent women in Malaysia from achieving their full potential in economy and politics.

### Malaysian Women in Politics

Only slightly more than 10 percent of lawmakers in Malaysia are women. Malaysian needs to do a lot to encourage more women to join politics. One of the most popular special measures taken by many countries is quota system with more than half of the world's countries having some form of electoral gender quota system. Although controversial, there is merit to gender electoral quota system to "fast-track" women representation. However, such affirmative action must be temporary.

Article 4 of the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) recognizes the need of special measures but these measures must be temporary and “shall be discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved.” Furthermore, the “quota period” should be used to build up structure and culture as well as eliminate invisible barriers to allow natural rise of women once the quota period ends.

### Malaysian Women in Economy

The World Bank estimates that the number of Malaysia 'absent women'—women who could be expected to be in the labour market but are not—range from 500,000 to 2.3 million. In fact, Malaysia's female labour force participation rate of 54% is one of the lowest in the Southeast Asia region.

Encouraging higher female participation in the workforce will lead to a more competitive labour market and therefore a more competitive economy. This is especially true as Malaysian women are well educated. The United Nation Development Program (UNDP) calculated that increasing female participation rate to 70% would boost Malaysia gross domestic product (GDP) by 2.9%.

By advocating increased women participation in the workforce, I am not suggesting that working-age women cannot choose to be housewives. However, freedom to work must be made available to women in Malaysia. Will more women go to work if they get the following policy and macro-environment support?

- i. Good quality of childcare available at the workplace or nearby their home (accessible) and are affordable; and
- ii. More companies offering flexible working hours, non-discrimination against pregnant employees, effective women returning to workforce program, supportive corporate environment for pregnant ladies and breast-feeding mothers, etc.

The answer is probably yes. That is the freedom to work that every Malaysian woman deserves.

Having said that, we also cannot ignore the fact that increasing women workforce will exert extra pressure to the women community. According to

World Bank's World Development Report, globally, women need to work 1 to 3 hours more than men in housework and 2 to 10 folds the amount of time men spend to care for the children, old or sick member of the family.

Because of the deeply entrenched gender role in the family, women will have to do more unpaid work than men in house and care works, so working mothers will have less time than working fathers for leisure and others.

Hence, while advocating policies to increase the number of women workforce in Malaysia, I reckon that the deeply-rooted traditional women roles in the family cannot be changed in a short time.

Therefore, the effort to increase women workforce should also be accompanied by efforts to recognize and reward unpaid house and care work, policies in helping working mothers to cope with the physical, mental and psychosocial demand from both the work places and families and lastly, hopefully with the support of men, a mindset shift towards more equal sharing of houseworks in the future.

### **Others**

As an engineer by training, I am naturally drawn to developmental and sustainability issues in nation building. Therefore, one part of the book talks about energy, water governance as well as how we should be prepared for climate change.

Another part of the book touches the issues related to the weakest members of the Malaysian society, namely the indigenous people, people with disabilities and the voiceless foreigners on the land - migrant workers, trafficked persons and refugees. I am always reminded of the words of Mahatma Gandhi, “the greatness of a nation is measured by how it treats its weakest members.”

### **Conclusion: At Least a Daring Greatly Generation**

“Reimagining Malaysia” discusses my imaginations, hopes and dreams for Malaysia. Frankly, when I wrote the book, I didn't expect us to win the GE14. I just thought that it was important for this generation Malaysians to dream again for our country and to know what kind of future we want for our country in a more systematic and policy-driven manner.

I am sure you have dreams for your countries too. Do declare them boldly and pursue them wholeheartedly. The miracle of 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018 in Malaysia was the beginning of turning the dreams I have for my beloved country into reality.

Indeed, we are nowhere near the “promised land” yet. Nevertheless, may the miraculous win become the inspiration for the young generation in Asia that if we dare to dream and work on them, change can and will happen.

When criticisms and skepticisms come, these words of Theodore Roosevelt always encourage me,

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who

does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

The young generation must choose to be in the arena, get our hands dirty, keep on trying even if we come short again and again. God willing, we will be able to rewrite the history of our countries and our region. Even if in the end we still fail to achieve our dreams, let us at the very least, fail while daring greatly.

<sup>1</sup> Yeo Bee Yin is currently the Minister of Energy, Technology, Science, Climate Change and Environment in Malaysia. She is a Member of Parliament from the Democratic Action Party (DAP) representing Bakri in Johor. Yeo Bee Yin shares her aspirations for Malaysia in her book “Reimagining Malaysia” (2008), which she provides the gist of in this article.

*Image: AFP*



# *Reinventing Social Democracy*

by Joel Rocamora<sup>1</sup>

*(Note, the article was written on April 7, 2018, prior to the Malaysian general elections, which saw the historic victory of the opposition.)*

I watched the fall of the Berlin Wall on Television in Amsterdam in 1989. I wanted to provoke my companions who were mainly national liberation movement supporters. I said out loud – “That's it, now we're all social democrats”. Little did I know that the coming years would bring about not the ascendancy of social democratic parties but their slow, and seemingly inexorable, decline. It is no consolation that national liberation movements also left the stage of history.

Today if we look at Western Europe, the heartland of social democracy, it is only in Portugal where there seems to be a viable “Left” political trend. In Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain, most recently Italy, social democratic parties are being marginalized by right wing, populist parties. Austerity policies have decimated the social security structures, the main achievement of social democratic parties.

Non-Communist progressive political parties in Southeast Asia<sup>2</sup>, whether they call themselves “social democratic” or not, have not had the experience of running governments, occupying mainly opposition spaces at varying distances from the center of power. They all face the challenge of shaping a coherent alternative to corrupt,

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*Austerity policies have decimated the social security structures, the main achievement of social democratic parties.*

authoritarian and populist ruling regimes. The experience of European social democracy provides important lessons, positive and negative.

In the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia, progressive parties are small, besieged by authoritarian regimes. In Indonesia, they confront a veritable cabal of political parties and impossibly high requirements for participation in elections. Political parties have been marginalized by the military in Thailand. While formally the ruling party, the NLD in Myanmar has to operate within constitutional limits set by a still dominant military. As of this writing, it's only in Malaysia where the opposition coalition, **Pakatan Harapan**, has a good chance of winning in the upcoming elections.

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*The key here is that in Western Europe industrialization created large proletarian populations which became the social base of social democratic parties, enough to launch these parties to power.*

### **European Experience**

What then are the lessons we can glean from the European experience? We have to start with their very different histories and social and economic situations.

As Olle Törnquist explains, “[t]he typical sequence in the first generation of social democracy in the North was strong collectivities, democratization and basic rights plus self-help, in addition to Keynesian policies; this was followed by interest representation, social growth pacts and welfare state programs. In the South, however, weak industrialization implied fragmented interests and collectivities; and the linkages between state and society were usually undemocratic and inefficient. Thus, social growth pacts and welfare states were unrealistic.”<sup>3</sup>

The key here is that in Western Europe industrialization created large proletarian populations which became the social base of social democratic parties, enough to launch these parties to power. In some countries, in Scandinavia, for example, labor union power was institutionalized in social growth pacts. Political parties were obliged to push Keynesian economic policies and social welfare programs demanded by their social base. Long histories of state formation marked by union activism assured democratic rights.

In Southeast Asia, the common experience was colonialism, the subjection of local economies to the needs of colonial mother countries, and the imposition of territorial boundaries with uncertain integration of populations into the new polities. In almost all of these countries armed insurrections challenged ruling governments. State formation under these conditions meant weak central governments with constant temptation to resort to authoritarianism. Except for the period of Sukarno in Indonesia, and the unique case of the Peoples' Action Party in Singapore, political parties were weak.

In most of Southeast Asia outside of Indochina, communist parties were defeated in the 'fifties and 'sixties. It is only in the Philippines where the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) continues its armed struggle within a Marxist-Leninist-Mao Tse Tung Thought framework. While the future of the CPP is, in my opinion doubtful, its ideas continue to influence other Left groups. Central to CPP strategy is “smash the state”, a clear cut separation between the old and the new, what the theory calls “rupture”.

Orienting strategy towards “rupture”, a radical break with capitalist structures, limits tactical possibilities in relations with the state, and a tendency towards opportunism in relations with other political groups. This is true not just for the CPP but also other Left groups, those grouped in Laban ng Massa (Struggle of the Masses). Even in Akbayan, which has broken with old Left ideas more decisively, these ideas continue to have some influence. Despite periodic affirmations of the need to build a base in local politics, Akbayan continues to focus most of its organizational resources on politics in Manila.

As Erik Olin Wright explains, “[t]he theory of ruptural transformation is not a plausible basis for constructing a democratic egalitarian transcendence of capitalism. While there have been revolutionary challenges to capitalism, the historical examples of ruptural transformation have never been able to sustain an extended process of democratic experimentalist institution-building...it is likely that the concentrated forms of political power and organization needed to produce a successful revolutionary rupture with capitalist institutions are themselves incompatible with the participatory practices needed for democratic experimentalism.”<sup>4</sup>

The decline of social democratic parties in Europe is linked to the failure of the “Third Way” pioneered by Tony Blair in the UK but followed in other European countries. “The collective class

capacities of potential challengers to capitalism have not systematically strengthened with capitalist development. In part this is because of the heterogeneity of interests within the broadly defined working class, but it is also because of the robustness of various forms of class compromise which undermine the capacity for challenging the system,” wright continues.<sup>5</sup>

Rapid economic growth in much of Southeast Asia has opened new possibilities. Victims of “development” have generated counter movements. “These are mainly for social justice, public welfare reforms and the implementation of them. The prime argument is that such movements might pave the way for the re-sequencing of social democratic development, if they congregate behind reformist-cum-populist leaders who need wider backing to win elections. In such processes, it might then be possible to build the broader alliances that are necessary to foster both the missing solid and democratic linkages between state and society (including interest representation) and social growth pacts,” Tornquist explains.<sup>6</sup>

Tornquist and Djani's account of two movements in Indonesia, one the story of President Jokowi's rise from mayor of Surakarta to the presidency, the other about the remarkably broad and successful KAJIS (*Komite Aksi Jaminan Sosial*, Action Committee for Social Security), in which unions and civil society activists worked in tandem with progressive politicians in Jakarta to promote social policies and legislation for health protection. Unfortunately, the result was “populist transactionalism”, exchanging struggles for progressive policies with particularistic favors to social movement leaders, and only in the best cases, to their organizations.<sup>7</sup>

### **Building Blocks**

I believe the building blocks for the reinvention of social democracy exist in Southeast Asia. Except for the CPP in the Philippines, one of the elements, the abandonment of armed struggle is in place. A related element, moving away from “rupture”, from a “smash the state” perspective, only has a few adherents left. There are a few civil society groups pushing “ignore the state” projects, but these projects with their anarchist antecedents, are more prevalent in the North, in Europe and North America.

Far from being a long term threat, populism provides a historic opportunity. Whether in the North or in the South including Southeast Asia, populism is built on widespread and deep seated dissatisfaction with the way things are, with governments and the politicians who run them. This in turn is the result of widening inequality and the scandalous income gap between the owners and managers of capitalism and ordinary workers. Deep in the structures of capitalism and its crisis is the way that finance capital is more and more distant from the real economy.

Social democrats also have to move away from ambitions for centrally planned economies. As Wright argues, “[i]n lieu of the anarchy of the market, socialists believed that the people's lot would be improved by a rationally planned economy, implemented through the institutional design of a centralized comprehensive plan. But the 'perverse', unintended consequences of central planning subverted its intended goals, with the result that few people today believe it to be a viable emancipatory alternative to capitalism.”<sup>8</sup> This does not mean the wholesale abandonment of industrial policy.

It's a given that social democracy has to move beyond its dependence on the industrial working class. “While it is certainly true that the course of capitalist development has incorporated a growing proportion of the labor force into capitalist employment relations, at least in the developed capitalist world this has not resulted in a process of intensified proletarianization and class homogenization, but rather in increasingly complex class structures,” Wright continues.<sup>9</sup> In Southeast Asia, class formation is even more complex.

Building strategy based on the complexity of class structures requires mastering coalition politics. This means, to start with, consolidating the forces of the Left, in turn requiring moving away from the sectarianism and “small is beautiful” attitudes on the Left. The admonition can be as simple as “work with people you may not want to invite to dinner”. This means we have to build up from coalitions and coalitions of coalitions. We have to accumulate power within the state, which means mastering elections, which means, in the end building new social democratic parties.

The social democratic welfare state is in retreat even in its homeland of Western Europe, thankfully not as fast as the retreat of social democratic parties. As Wright explains, “Capitalism's expansionist drive threatens to subject ever wider domains of human activity to market forces: the commodification of health, childcare, elder care, human reproduction...”<sup>10</sup> Southeast Asian economies have reached a stage where it's now possible to pay for a welfare state. There are experiments in state provision of health and other social security services. Progressive parties can learn from the European experience in consolidating these tentative steps into full-fledged welfare states. We have to move decisively from “smash the state” to “use the state”.

We can only call ourselves Leftists if we anchor our organizing on the poor and marginalized, on the urban and rural poor. But we should not disregard the middle class. Leftists tend to look down on middle class groups, seeing them as “petty bourgeois”. One of the victims of neoliberal policies in the North is the wide spectrum of middle class, whose income has been stagnant for decades. Southeast Asian middle classes, whether in the service or agriculture sectors, face many obstacles that the Left can mobilize around. In the Philippines, for example, peasant groups still devote most of their energies to pushing agrarian reform, largely disregarding land reform beneficiaries and their issues.

Organizationally, politics in general is a matter of communication. The reinvention of the social democratic alternative has to move from theory to figuring out the best way to communicate with groups we want to organize or coalesce with. We have to understand that the civil society base of Left parties have distinct discursive language different from that of the urban and rural poor. In the Philippines, it is the Right that has made full use of social media to advance their politics. We need to catch up, intensify organizing among the youth who are more adept at social media.

After so many years on the political margins, Leftists tend to focus on advocacy, to “bearing witness to injustice”. There will always be people who prefer to remain in these political spaces. But we should be clear about what we want: we want to build strong social democratic political parties, strong enough to win elections, take over government, and “using the state” build new welfare states. It is only by doing this that we can win not one but many victories.

## *Southeast Asian economies have reached a stage where it's now possible to pay for a welfare state.*



Image: Reuters

- <sup>1</sup> Joel Rocamora is a former Secretary and Lead Convenor of the National Anti-Poverty Commission in the Philippines.
- <sup>2</sup> I do not know enough about the situation in South and East Asia to say much that's intelligent about them. I have also excluded Vietnam and Laos because the problems of socialist transition are very different from situation in the rest of Southeast Asia.
- <sup>3</sup> Workshop on “Perspectives on the Democratic Developmental State” School of Government, University of the Western Cape, 27-28 February 2018. Populist Challenges of Renewing Social Democracy Olle Törnquist (University of Oslo)
- <sup>4</sup> Erik Olin Wright, “Compass Points - Towards a Socialist Alternative” *New Left Review* 41 September-October 2006
- <sup>5</sup> Wright, *ibid.*, p.103
- <sup>6</sup> Törnquist, *op.cit.*, p.1
- <sup>7</sup> Joel Rocamora, “How Should the Left Relate to Populists – A Review”, February 19, 2017. Luky Djani and Olle Törnquist, *Dilemmas of Populist Transactionalism*, Jogjakarta: Polgov Publishing, 2017.
- <sup>8</sup> Wright, *op.cit.*, p.100
- <sup>9</sup> Wright, *op.cit.*, p.103
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100

# *Social Democracy's Asian Saga*<sup>1</sup>

by Francis Isaac

Think of the word “social democracy” and the first thing that comes to mind is Western Europe. This, of course, is hardly surprising since social democratic parties have been the dominant political force in that part of the globe for much of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

But despite this common perception, social democratic ideas have also had considerable influence outside of Europe, inspiring leaders, artists and intellectuals the world over. Japan, for example, had its first Social Democratic Party (*Shakai Minshuto*) as early as May 1901. Unfortunately, the party had an extremely short-lived existence since it was immediately banned by the Meiji government two days after its establishment.

Though this action was a terrible blow to Japan's then nascent progressive movement, it also showed that social democratic ideas were beginning to seep into the Asian region by the early 1900s. Its proponents, however, seldom used the term “social democrat,” preferring to call themselves “socialist” instead. Committed to the principle of working class emancipation, Asian progressives were also actively involved in their

national independence struggles and strove to end Western colonialism in the region.

Indonesia's foremost leader, Sukarno, for example, was described by author Max Lane as a “Leftist” and a “socialist” who stood “for nationalization of foreign business, for land reform, (and) for worker participation in management.” His socialist ideals were expressed in the early version of the *Pancasila* (Five Principles)—the official ideology of the Indonesian state—which included the notion of *Kesejahteraan Sosial* (Social Welfare). It also found its way in Article 33 of the 1945 Constitution, which guarantees that “nationally important branches of production, and land, water and natural resources, would be regulated by the state.”

Similarly, the highly revered General Aung San saw himself as an “anti-fascist” and part of the “left forces in Burma.” Together with other pro-independence leaders, Aung San formed the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) in August 1944, which he described as the “central organisation” tasked with “organising and mobilising our entire people...for our common national objective.”

Even Jawaharlal Nehru of India also expressed socialist sympathies. Years before the end of British rule, Nehru wrote from his prison cell that, “democrats were full of notions of liberty and equality and every man's equal right to happiness.” But they eventually realized that “happiness did not come by merely making it a fundamental right,” since “apart from other things, a certain measure of physical well-being was necessary.” He therefore concluded that “a person who was starving was not likely to be happy (which then) led them to think that happiness depended on a better distribution of wealth among people. This leads to socialism.”

### **Years of Reversal**

Because of the contribution of leftwing progressives in the struggle for independence, socialism was initially seen as a positive force for radical change. This image, however, would be fundamentally altered by the beginning of the 1960s, as socialist movements began to suffer sharp reversals throughout the Asian region. Their dwindling appeal can be greatly attributed to the shameful practice of various authoritarian regimes to invoke socialism to shore up legitimacy and justify the repression of their own people.

One stark example occurred in April 1975 when the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia after a long and bloody civil war against the Western-backed dictatorship of Marshal Lon Nol. Just a few hours after assuming power, the country's new communist rulers ordered the residents of the capital, Phnom Penh, to march out of the city and were later stripped of all their possessions. The rest of the population were then forced to work in collective farms as the first step in “building socialism.” At the same time, the Khmer Rouge began an extermination campaign against supposed “class enemies” and “traitors” that left approximately two million people dead.

More than a decade earlier in Burma, the military launched a coup in March 1962 that toppled the civilian government of Prime Minister U Nu. Claiming that the country's elected politicians were mostly agents feudal and capitalist interests, soldiers began arresting civilian leaders and opened fire on students and Buddhist monks protesting on the streets of Rangoon. A month later, the ruling junta issued a pamphlet entitled *The Burmese Way to Socialism*, outlining their

plan to restructure the economy by eliminating private enterprise, modernizing agriculture, and nationalizing commerce and industry. The junta's policies, however, left the nation's economy in ruins, prompting the United Nations (UN) to include Burma in its roster of “least developed countries” in 1987.

On the other hand, conservative Asian governments that were threatened by Marxist insurgencies responded by enacting harsh legal measures that either banned the spread of communist ideas or allowed the detention of suspected political offenders even without trial.

Malaysia, for instance, enacted the dreaded Internal Security Act (ISA) in August 1960, which allowed the government to arrest and detain any individual who “has acted or is about to act or is likely to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia or any part thereof or to the maintenance of essential services therein or to the economic life thereof” (Section 73). The law also empowers the authorities to detain any person without trial for a period of up to two years, which may even be extended indefinitely the Minister of Home Affairs.

While its original intent was to neutralize any armed communist threat, the ISA was later extended to other opposition groups, including political parties. Three of the victims included Lim Kit Siang, Karpal Singh and Lim Guan Eng—all prominent leaders of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) who were detained in October 1987 for allegedly “inciting racial violence.”

The ISA was also introduced in Singapore at the time when the city-state was still part of the Federation of Malaysia. Similar to its Malaysian counterpart law, Singapore's Internal Security Act empowers the authorities to detain any individual for up to two years without trial and may be extended for another two years at a time upon the direction of the President. Under this Act, socialist politician Chia Thye Poh was arrested in October 1966, and spent the next 32 years of his life in various detention facilities.

In more extreme cases, the military was able to gain control of the government—either through a coup or through a legal imposition of martial law—followed by a systematic campaign to crush the organized Left.

This was the experience of the Philippines, when then-President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law in September 1972. Claiming that the government was threatened by an impending communist revolt, Marcos commanded the armed forces to occupy all radio and television stations and ordered the dissolution of the country's legislature. Despite repeated government assurance of a 'smiling martial law,' Amnesty International estimates that at least 3,240 people were killed by the military and tortured 34,000 more.

In neighboring Indonesia, the military took control of the government in October 1965 to prevent what they claim was an attempted power-grab by the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI, Communist Party of Indonesia). Despite having three million members and more than 20 million followers, the Communist leadership soon found itself on the run and later executed one by one. As part of the fallout, the PKI was later dissolved by the government, following a massive purge that killed between 500,000 to two million people.

But apart from the Communists, the military also targeted radical elements in Sukarno's own party, *Partai Nasional Indonesia* (PNI, Indonesian National Party). After being cleansed of all Leftwing influence, the PNI was then forced to merge with other secular parties and form *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia* (PDI, Indonesian Democratic Party)—one of two nominal opposition parties that were allowed to exist by the military-backed *Orden Baru* (New Order) regime.

### **Bitter Fruit**

Because of these massive socialist reversals, the region has been largely dominated by conservative and authoritarian governments for more than half a century. But despite decades of unchallenged rule, Asia's aging set of leaders have failed to improve the overall conditions of the peoples of Asia.

In its latest edition of the annual *Democracy Index* for example, The Economist Intelligence Unit (The EIU) described the year 2017 as "Asia's year of regression." Once hailed as democracy's "star performer," Asia has now become "the worst-performing region," with its two biggest democracies (India and Indonesia) falling sharply in the rankings. But while "the majority of Asian

countries are (still) classified as democratic," none of them are *fully democracies*. In fact, of the 26 countries that have been included in the study, 13 of them fall under "flawed democracies," with six (6) others classified as "hybrid regimes, while the rest are categorized as "authoritarian states." The biggest disappointment, however, was Japan which (from the being a "full democracy" in 2015) has now joined ranks of Asia's flawed democracies.

At about the same time, Transparency International released the latest results of its Corruption Perception Index for the Asia-Pacific region. According to this report, more than half of the countries scored less than 50 on the index, with the worst performers being Cambodia, North Korea and Afghanistan. The study further revealed that there was "little progress across the region" and those who challenge corruption are either harassed or killed. In a separate statement, the same organization also indicated a strong correlation between corruption and human rights violations, since "most countries that score low for civil liberties also tend to score high for corruption."

This observation was further corroborated by Amnesty International in its latest *State of the World's Human Rights Report*. Covering 159 countries and territories, the document concluded that the human rights situation in the Asia-Pacific region for 2017 has been "mostly characterized by government failures," coupled with increasing attacks on human rights defenders.

To prove this point, the report cited Myanmar's continuing inability to end the suffering of the Rohingya refugees. With more than two million people living in temporary shelters in Bangladesh's Cox Bazaar district, UN officials now describe the Rohingya issue as the "world's fastest growing refugee crisis and a major humanitarian emergency." Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have both blamed the Burmese military for the crisis, accusing them of "ethnic cleansing." To verify these reports, the UN Human Rights Council created a three-person UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar as early as March 2017. Unfortunately, the Burmese government has not yet granted entry visas to any member of the Mission.

Along with the problem of human rights abuse, the number of poor people in the region remains significant, which is now estimated at 330 million.

This situation is even more burdensome for women since Asia, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has the worst gender gap in the world.

## **Ways Forward**

Because of the enfeebled state of the Left, the task then of activists and progressive is to develop a clear and detailed agenda that could capture the imagination of the peoples of Asia. The scope of this article is too limited for such an undertaking. Nonetheless, it is clear that the core of this agenda has to be based on a social protection program that is specifically designed to shield the poor and other vulnerable groups from both the vagaries and excesses of capitalism.

Of course, for the conventional mind, social protection is simply a technocratic response to cushion the possible consequences of income loss. But as writer and scholar Arun Swamy points out, social protection not only provides temporary relief, but also enables the poor to develop their sense of agency. This then allows them to perform autonomous political decisions, thereby challenging the dominant systems of dependency and patronage.

However, this program will not gain popular appeal unless it is complemented by rigorous and systematic organizing work. It is therefore important for Asian progressives to strengthen their political parties and movements, so as to initiate national-level campaigns for social protection. This would mean engaging in a whole range of actions including public advocacy, community base-building, as well as electoral work.

And though they may be limited in strength at present, progressive parties and movements can further solidify themselves through the Network for Social Democracy in Asia (Socdem Asia), which is by far the biggest gathering of socialist groups found anywhere in the region. With 13 member-parties operating in 10 Asian countries and with several other affiliates, Socdem Asia is an excellent venue to share experiences, exchange ideas and forge future ideological consensus.

Without doubt, the struggle is far from over, and the Left is still a long way from regaining its once dominant position in the Asian region. But no victory is achieved without sacrifice, and no future is secured without the shedding of tears. For as the nationalist writer Jose Rizal aptly reminds us, “Victory is the child of struggle, and redemption is a product of sacrifice.”

<sup>1</sup> This article is a shortened version of a draft framing paper for the Asian Network for Social Democracy (Socdem Asia). The author expresses his thanks to Comrades Machris Cabrerros, Iben Merrild and Steen Christensen, and to his colleagues from De La Salle University, Keren Arroyo and Tezla Raquinio, for their earlier comments on the said draft.

# *Embracing the Obligations of Revolutionary Change and Genuine Democratization in Malaysia*

Speech by *DAP National Political Education Director* Liew Chin Tong at the GE14 thanksgiving event at Lam Lee, Yong Peng, on Sunday 27th May 2018.

How BN can learn to be an effective opposition I would like to thank the voters in Lam Lee, Yong Peng, who have voted overwhelmingly for change on 9th May 2018. While I did not win in Ayer Hitam, we won together in Johor and nationally. Malaysia has won! The most important achievement on 9th May is that from now on Malaysia becomes a full-fledged democracy in a very peaceful manner without any chaos or bloodshed. Despite collectively voting for Pakatan Harapan, some people were still worried that the transition of power wouldn't be smooth and peaceful.

In all previous elections, the fear factor and the threat of violence should BN loses were among the arsenal of Barisan Nasional. People used to fear the former BN government. In the new Malaysia, it is the government that must fear the people, not the other way round. That's the essence of democracy. The struggle of Democratic Action Party and Pakatan Harapan is not just to win power. Our struggle is about making democracy work for everyone, including for the Opposition. Pakatan Harapan aspires to be a government for all, including our political opponents. For example,

the Johor Pakatan Harapan Government, via a statement by Menteri Besar Dato' Osman Sapian, has committed to give RM50,000 annually for operations of officers and hiring of staff by all Johor state assemblymen, regardless of parties. For democracy to work, we need a credible opposition.

To be a worthwhile opponent, BN must deal with three fundamental challenges. First, UMNO-BN must disassociate themselves from the legacies of kleptocrat Datuk Seri Najib Razak. Najib and his wife Rosmah Mansor have been a toxic factor for the former government, at least since July 2015. With the discovery of bags of cash, jewelleryes, and branded handbags in Kuala Lumpur, these are merely the tip of the iceberg. To have Datuk Seri Zahid Hamidi and Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein as the new leaders of UMNO won't do much to salvage BN's reputation. They are still associated with Najib's legacies; and for UMNO to claim the RM114 million cash seized from properties related to Najib belongs to the party, has shown the absurdity of the current UMNO leaders. It will be difficult for them to make a comeback for the 2023 general election. Second, "Malaysia Baru" is defined by the common pursuit



Image: Shafwan Zaidon

*That's the essence of democracy. The struggle of Democratic Action Party and Pakatan Harapan is not just to win power. Our struggle is about making democracy work for everyone, including for the Opposition.*

of change by all ethnic groups on 9th May 2018. The “camaraderie in adversity” that we all shared in our struggle against the Najib kleptocracy and the collective suffering, humiliation and persecution we faced will continue to guide and shape our politics in time to come.

Despite Najib's propaganda machine trying very hard to project a “Malay versus non-Malay” narrative, Malaysians triumphed over their racial politics. Bangsa Malaysia prevails. Some BN leaders are now mulling a multiracial future but I don't know if they have the political will to pull it through. I don't deny that there are also elements in the society who are hoping to create a “Donald

Trump backlash” by whipping up racial sentiments among those who are economically left out. We have to be aware of this possibility. I also don't deny that there are those who may want to create an Indonesia's “Ah Hock” situation by whipping up religious sentiments. Yet I'm confident peace and harmony will prevail.

The reconciliation between the two political giants Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the sense of common purpose and destiny in the recent election that was felt by all, and hopefully an economic policy framework that favours ordinary Malaysians, would help build a common Malaysian future.

Third, the youth factor. The average age of Pakatan Harapan candidates and elected representatives are younger than those fielded by BN in GE14. The irony was that the DAP, which UMNO accused as a Chinese party (of course we are not), has fielded more Malay candidates who are below 40 years old than UMNO itself. Even the UMNO Youth deputy chief was not fielded because Najib wanted to keep the old UMNO warlords. Najib also feared Youth Chief Khairy Jamaluddin's influence. As the Opposition, it will be even harder for UMNO-BN to attract the young generation to their side, given that the Malaysian political tsunami on 9th May was also the rise of the youth.

In fact, I would like to propose to the Pakatan Harapan Government to implement various reforms to the electoral system as recommended by BERSIH, civil society groups and the bi-partisan parliamentary select committee on electoral reforms of 2012. One of the important proposals was to bring down the voting age to 18, in line with international practice.

The more youth participate in election, the harder it will be for the ageing Barisan Nasional (BN) to make a comeback. Having said this, Pakatan Harapan must not rest on its laurels. The new Government must remember that Malaysians no longer fear the government of the day, and they know that a change of government will be peaceful. They are no longer afraid to make change.

Each congratulatory message from ordinary Malaysians that I received since 9th May sounds like this: "We are very happy that Barisan Nasional is out, please run the country well, or else we will vote you out".

We must always be reminded of the Canadian election of 2015 which brought Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party into office. Liberal Party was the third and significantly smaller party in the political scene before the election. Perhaps if Khairy Jamaluddin quits UMNO and forms a new multiethnic party, it will keep Pakatan Harapan on its toes; and that will be good for the people.

*Liew Chin Tong*

*The more youth participate in election, the harder it will be for the ageing Barisan Nasional (BN) to make a comeback.*

Image: AFP/Manan Vatsayana

