



알, 어떻게 기회로 전환할 것인가  
부산지역 제조기반 소기업 임직원 간담회



# SOCDEM ASIA

VOLUME 8 • ISSUE 1 • AUGUST 2019

## Quarterly

# 10 YEARS OF SOCDEM ASIA



## Editorial

# 10 Years of Socdem Asia

We cannot think of a better time to release this latest issue of the *Quarterly*.

Even as this piece is being written, leaders, activists and intellectuals are heading to Kuala Lumpur to celebrate the 10th year anniversary of Socdem Asia. Expected to be the largest gathering of Asian progressives in recent memory, this event aims to take stock of the victories that the Network has achieved in the last decade, and the challenges that it now has to face as it attempts to craft a better alternative for all the peoples of Asia.

In the last 10 years, Socdem Asia has issued numerous publications and organized several conferences that focus on the themes of democracy, sustainable development, people-centered regional integration and human rights. However, much has also happened in the region since the Network was formed in 2009.

Back then, Myanmar was still an international pariah, until the election results of November 2015 compelled the country's ruling junta to turn over the presidency to a civilian leader after 54 years of military rule. In much the same way, voters in Malaysia ended the six-decade political dominance of *Barisan Nasional* by giving the opposition coalition *Pakatan Harapan* an overwhelming victory in the 2018 general elections. And two years earlier, South

Korea's rightwing President, Park Geun-hye, was impeached and later imprisoned for bribery and corruption charges, after massive daily demonstrations swept through the streets of Seoul.

We do not see these three events as historically isolated moments, but as hugely significant milestones in the struggle for democracy. But the outcome of this endeavor is still uncertain, since populism is clearly on the rise elsewhere in the region. This is apparent in Rodrigo Duterte's election as Philippine president; and in the radical shift in Indian politics which is now being dominated by Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP).

The politics in the region is certainly confusing; but Socdem Asia has to make sense of these seemingly opposing trends, so that it can plot its course and set its agenda for the next 10 years or so. We are certain that these questions will generate a great deal of attention, not only during the anniversary celebration, but in the conferences that will soon follow.

This issue of the *Quarterly* should therefore be regarded as part of a conversation and as a modest attempt to deal with some of the challenges confronting our Network.

Hoping to shed light on the current global situation, the journal first turns to Prof. Thomas Meyer (Technical University of Dortmund) and his examination of the populist surge that began in the middle of this decade. Tracing its origins to neoliberalism's apparent failure in 2008, Meyer argues that the aftermath of the global financial crisis unleashed an exclusionary political doctrine that artificially "divides society...between the corrupt elites, and the 'common people'." With liberalism in retreat, Meyer sees social democracy—with its emphasis on "social inclusion and the fair distribution of public goods"—as "humanity's best hope against the populist surge."

A more regional perspective is then provided in the second article, which focuses on the Left's Post-War rise and eventual decline in Southeast Asia. Written by Filipino activist Avatar Francisco, the essay is his personal commentary on a lecture by Marxist scholar Nathan Quimpo. Closely noting Quimpo's arguments, Francisco reports that the Left squandered its initial success with its dogmatic attachment to Maoist precepts and its failure to adjust their strategy to the changing regional context. The feature then ends with the assertion that the old communist movements are now being supplanted by new social democratic formations, and that these forces represent "the most spirited—and broadest— challenge to the rule of entrenched politico-economic elites" in the region.

This optimistic assessment is shared by Dinesh Sapkota in his think-piece on the Nepali Congress (NC). A member of Nepal Student Union (NSU), Sapkota uses his knowledge of history and philosophy to weave the story of the NC. Formed as a response to the tyrannical rule of the former ruling family, the Nepali Congress has successfully preserved its "democratic and socialist spirit (even as it struggles) against domestic despotism and the global brutality of capitalism." Currently in opposition, Sapkota observes that the NC has already assumed the role of tribune, chastising the government for "rampant corruption, irregularities, and abuse of power."

In contrast to the NC's long and proud history of struggle, Thailand's Future Forward Party (FFP) is not even two years old, yet it is already the third largest party (and single biggest Leftwing formation) in the House of Representatives. FFP's meteoric rise is analyzed by Sustarum Thammaboosadee of Thammasat University, who sees a strong link between the party's clearly articulated program for building a welfare state and its stunning electoral victory. By proposing universal pension and universal childcare benefits, Future Forward Party was able to galvanize support "from the traditional working class and from young people who are demanding better welfare conditions."

Also included in this issue is a speech by Malaysia's Deputy Defense Minister Liew Chin Tong, which he delivered shortly after the historic landslide victory of *Pakatan Harapan*. Claiming that the May 2018 elections has finally transformed Malaysia into a "full-fledged democracy," Liew assured his listeners that the new government is committed in overcoming racial politics and in "making democracy work for everyone." He also called on *Barisan Nasional* to perform well in their new political role, because "for democracy to work, we need a credible opposition."

This issue then ends with a reflection piece from Francis Isaac on his desired future for the Asian region. Inspired by the social achievements of Scandinavia, he explores the possibility of developing an Asian welfare state that will "deliver various social services to all citizens, irrespective of tribe, ethnicity, gender or religion." Unlike in northern Europe where it was primarily used to tame the excesses of industrial capitalism, Isaac sees the Asian welfare state as a tool for nation-building, and as "the primary means of gathering people into more cohesive nations."

Reading though these pages, one would notice that each contributor has his own distinct perspective on the issues confronting Asia. Nonetheless, they are all united by their common commitment to social democracy and by their shared concern for the region that most of us call home.

# Contents

1 *The Populist Surge:  
A Global Situation*  
Thomas Meyer

9 *Struggling to Make  
a Comeback*  
Avatar Francisco

14 *Legacy and Challenges of  
Social Democracy in Nepal*  
Dinesh Sapkota

19 *After the Winter of Despair:  
An Awakening to the Welfare State  
in Thailand via Civic Movements  
and Political Parties in the  
2019 General Elections*  
Sustarum Thammaboosadee

27 *Embracing the Obligations of  
Revolutionary Change and Genuine  
Democratization in Malaysia*  
Liew Chin Tong

31 *Can There Be an  
Asian Welfare State?*  
Francis Isaac

# The Populist Surge: A Global Situation

by Thomas Meyer

(Editor's Note: The following article is based on a lecture that was delivered by Prof. Thomas Meyer on 28 June 2019 in Bali, Indonesia. It is divided into two parts: Part I is an abridged version of his actual lecture, while Part II records the exchanges during the Open Forum. This presentation was the opening discussion in the Academy of Progressives: Course on Ideas, Policy and Education that was organized by the Network for Social Democracy in Asia.)

## Part I: Lecture Proper

Let me begin by identifying the three competing ideologies in today's world. These are:

- Neo-liberalism (or libertarianism), coupled with market globalization
- Populism/authoritarianism
- Social democracy

All these ideologies are present in every country, with populism/authoritarianism now becoming prominent in the United States, and even in Europe. While each of these ideologies have their distinct visions of the future that they aspire for, it is only social democracy that provides credible answers to our contemporary problems.

Ideologies emerge in order to address political conflicts that beset society. Normally, political conflicts have four sources. These are:

- nation-building (center vs. periphery)
- secularization (secular vs. religious)
- capitalism (capital vs. labor)
- environment (growth vs. sustainability)

Political conflict can lead to political cleavages, with society being divided into different ideologically oriented interest groups. Today's cleavages arise from unregulated, market-dominated globalization, which is also known as *neoliberal globalization*. This process has produced both winners and losers. The winners are the *new professional middle class* and the *cosmopolitans* who are in favor of opening the market as much as possible. The losers, on the other hand, are the *old small middle class* (local shop owners) and the *unskilled working class* who have no professional experience that they can offer to the market. They are the *communitarians* who are in dire need of protection from the uncertainties of globalization.

This cleavage has produced a *new class society* that is composed of:

- the new middle class (or the cosmopolitans);
- the old middle class (or the communitarians); and
- the new lower class, who lead precarious lives, undertake degrading work, with no social protection to speak of.

This new class society is characterized by opposing directions of social mobility. The winners enjoy upward mobility (in terms of income and/or profits), while the losers suffer from downward mobility. The latter are not given social protection and are excluded from wealth distribution.

Because of this widening income gap, the lower half of society feel maltreated and alienated, which then leads to social conflict. Frustrated by their lack of representation, the old middle and new lower classes long for radical change, hoping that they could gain both social security and social recognition. Unfortunately, this predicament creates the impression that a strong authoritarian leader is needed in order to gain these social rights and entitlements.

There are two responses to this situation. The first is through *identity politics*, which can be further divided into soft identity politics or *populism*, and hard identity politics or *fundamentalism*. Populism is a political doctrine that divides society into two competing camps—between the corrupt elites, and the “common people” who are being exploited by the former. Fundamentalism, on the other hand, is a political principle that rejects diversity and identifies a specific group or community (whether religious, ethnic or tribal) as the sole bearer of truth and legitimacy. Populism invokes the idea of “we, the people,” while the appeal of fundamentalism is based on the idea of “we, the true community.” Both populism and fundamentalism are often characterized by the culture of hate.

The second response is through *class politics*, which seeks to address social inequality by ensuring genuine social inclusion and wealth distribution. This is the social democratic response. The idea of social democracy was first developed by the workers' movement during the mid-nineteenth century, in order to protect the working class from the vagaries of the market and from the excesses of capitalism. Its three basic values are freedom, social justice, solidarity.

“

*Populism is a political doctrine that divides society into two competing camps—between the corrupt elites, and the “common people” who are being exploited by the former.*

However, freedom is a very contested concept. One interpretation of freedom is *freedom from*. This is the libertarian notion of freedom which is understood as freedom from arbitrary action by the state. Social democrats, on the other hand, understand freedom as *freedom to*. They see freedom as the freedom to have access to a decent income, quality education and social security.

Social Democracy further asserts that freedom is closely linked to justice, which is defined as equal freedom, or, simply put, fairness and inclusive life chances. Justice is guaranteed if all the basic human rights are protected and promoted. This should be emphasized because for libertarians, human rights are limited to civil and political rights. On the other hand, social democracy recognizes and supports all the five basic rights—civil, political, economic, social and cultural. For this reason, social democracy promotes the principle of social citizenship, or the idea that a person's citizenship entails access to all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and that these rights must be guaranteed by the state.

In other words, for social democracy, the free and just society does not only provide equal opportunities; but it is also characterized by social inclusion and the fair distribution of public goods. Because of this vision, social democracy is still humanity's best hope against the populist surge.

## Part II: Open Forum

**Aung Moe Zaw (Myanmar):** I have two questions. First, I am particularly interested in knowing more about economic democracy. What would a country look like if it has economic democracy? And is there a model or a country that we could follow? My second question is related to my country's situation. A few years ago, Myanmar began opening itself to the world and we soon experienced globalization. But that kind of openness stopped abruptly, and there has been no significant progress since then. For us, this is a major setback since we see openness as an important aspect of democratization. We immediately blame our country's leadership for this situation. But can we assume that this is because of populism? What is your opinion?

**Thomas Meyer:** First of all, let me clarify that populism can occur anywhere, and in different ways. But I think the more pertinent issue is economic democracy, and it has three main elements. One is market regulation. This means that the framework for the functioning of the market has to be established democratically at the political level. The second component is workers' co-determination, with workers and workers' organizations having a say at the factory level, at the enterprise level, and beyond. And third is the existence of independent trade unions, and open negotiations between labor and management regarding employee benefits, work conditions and other related issues. These three elements are largely realized in Germany and in the countries of Scandinavia. But in most countries, these elements are only partially realized and may even be non-existent.

When you read academic debates, you quickly realize that there are different kinds of capitalism. There is liberal capitalism, with its unregulated and self-coordinated markets. And then there is coordinated capitalism, which is characterized by political coordination, and which is more or less synonymous with economic democracy. These are major differences. If we are to fully understand capitalism, then we need to consider national peculiarities since each country would have its own version of capitalism.



The aim of social democracy is not to abolish the market but to bring it under democratic role. At the same time, social democracy does not seek to abolish private property but to put them under control for the benefit of society. This has already been done in European countries, which are also some of the most competitive economies in the world. Hence, it is not true that a country will lose its economic competitiveness if markets are regulated or if labor unions take part in decision-making processes. This is simply not the case.

I have yet to make a more thorough study of Myanmar, but we must remember that there is one odd fact about democracy. If you do not have an active and mobilized civil society, democracy will not function well. When civil society is no longer active, then democracy will become elitist, and mass interests will no longer be represented. You can have a high degree of social democratic politics if you have programmatic political parties, but it will not be sustained without civil society.

**Sylvia Estrada-Claudio (Philippines):** How would you differentiate the kind of identity politics that is being used by authoritarian regimes from the identity politics of the LGBT movement and the workers' movement?

**Meyer:** This is a very crucial question. In public discussions, especially in the United States, identity politics is mainly used by groups with strong authoritarian tendencies. But for the LGBTIQ community, their politics is inclusive—they want those excluded to have equal rights. And that is the main dividing line. Is a group that uses identity politics promoting inclusivity or is it the other way around? But if you say only those people belonging to my “tribe” shall enjoy rights and benefits, then your identity politics is exclusionary.

Having an “identity” simply means that you belong to a group that share certain features or characteristics. An exclusivist identity politics, on the other hand, means that only the Muslims or only my tribe, or that only the true born Germans, for example, are entitled to have rights. Then that is exclusionary. It is a politics that is constructed on the basis of a “friend vs. foe” dichotomy. Identity politics in this sense is always based on friend vs. foe. Friends, we trust; the rest are our foes. This is not the case with the LGBTIQ community. On this we are clear. Context plays a very important part and we have to be careful.

**Francis Isaac (Philippines):** You have a clear distinction between populism and social democracy. However, this distinction is clear if we are only focusing on right-wing populism such as Marine Le Pen in France, or Duterte in the Philippines, or Modi of India. But there are also segments from the Left that are promoting populism, such as Die Linke of Germany. Then, there's Chantal Mouffe who see populism, not as a threat to democracy, but as the “discursive strategy of constructing the political frontier.” In my readings, it seems that social democracy and Leftwing populism have a shared critique of neo-liberalism. And this is the reason why a lot of activists are tempted by populism. Given this situation, what then is the social democratic response to Leftwing populism?

**Meyer:** There must be a distinction between *popular* and *populist politics*. Popular politics means generating mass support in a democratic manner. Populist politics, on the other hand, has a certain inclination towards identity politics. I don't want to elaborate too much academically, but there was a recent conference that was attended by the world's most important social democratic philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, who is known for his theory of discursive participation. In this conference, Habermas pointed out that Leftwing populism is logically impossible. Populist politics is generally exclusionary; while Leftwing politics is inclusive in character. They contradict each other.

If we read Chantal Mouffe, we get the impression that we need a populist Left. But this is misleading. Mouffe simply argues that we need to challenge the dominance of capitalism because of its exclusionary structure wherein power is monopolized by a privileged few. And if we are to be successful, then we need to become more popular. It is unfortunate that Mouffe formulated her message in this way.

Similarly, social democratic politics must also be made popular so it can win mass support. But it should not become populist by excluding certain people using a friend vs. foe approach. Even if our aim is to radically alter the dominance of capitalist power, we must remain inclusive. We should not target individual capitalists and then oppress them. If an individual capitalist has too much power, then his power must be reduced. That is the point.

“

*Leftwing populism is logically impossible. Populist politics is generally exclusionary; while Leftwing politics is inclusive in character. They contradict each other.*



**Dedy Nur (Indonesia):** One of the basic features of democracy is freedom. We now have freedom. But how do we preserve it and prevent people from electing authoritarian and populist leaders?

**Meyer:** In the middle of the nineteenth century, European workers accepted the leadership of liberal politicians. These liberal politicians, in turn, promised that they will bring freedom, and that this freedom will be enshrined in the constitution and will be guaranteed through fair and regular elections. But workers soon realized that the kind of freedom that the liberals are offering is not real freedom. What they really need are a set of guarantees that they will get work, that they will have a steady income and that their children will receive free education. The workers came to the conclusion that negative freedom—or freedom from arbitrary constraints imposed by the state—is simply not enough. They also need positive freedom or the ability to control one's life by acting in accordance to one's own will.

If society only has negative freedom, then in six to eight years, the masses will begin to think that the freedom that is available is only freedom for the rich. Once this happens, people will abandon the liberals and instead shift their support to the social democrats. And if the social democrats also fail in delivering their promise, the people will then resort to populism.

Hence, the best way to protect freedom is by completing it—by attaining both positive and negative freedom.

“

*The best way to protect freedom is by completing it—by attaining both positive and negative freedom.*

**Fay Gumba (Philippines):** What are the weaknesses within the populist movement that we, as Social Democrats, can use and exploit to advance our alternative?

**Meyer:** Social democrats have something in common with populists—they both recognize the problems that beset today's world. They both agree that the workers and the middle class, say in the United States for example, are now suffering because of the lack of decent work, inadequate income and the absence of an affordable healthcare system. However, social democrats do not share the analysis of populists that blame immigrants for the loss of jobs and the breakdown of social welfare.

Social democrats agree that populists do have a point—that those from the lower class are extremely frustrated over the situation and that they demand action. Hence, it is important for social democrats to offer policy alternatives that can adequately address the demands for better services and social protection.



**Sergio Grassi (FES Indonesia):** In some of the discussions, it is claimed that the rise of populism is a consequence of the global economic crisis. The argument is that as the crisis intensified, governments began to lose the trust of their people, and that populism is therefore the political repercussion of this economic crisis. Do you share this opinion? If so, how then can we regain the trust of the people?

**Meyer:** The financial crisis of 2008 was the peak of unregulated libertarian capitalism. Prior to this crisis, there was a long period of unregulated capitalism until the crash of 2008. However, during the first three decades of the post-War period, capitalism was more stable and effective, and it did so by regulating finance capital and by creating various social protection measures. But these were all removed after the triumph of neoliberalism in the 1980s, which asserted that capitalism will work better if there are less restrictions on private property and the market economy. Its ideologues argued that the problems of the market are due to overregulation. If we remove all these regulations, then the market will deliver better. This is the ideology of neoliberalism.

However, neoliberalism—as an ideology—has been historically defeated in 2008. That year was the proof that neoliberalism doesn't work. Completely unregulated financial markets would necessarily produce this kind of crisis. Academics like myself have discussed about this before: that the wide degree of deregulation that had happened will lead to a major market crisis. This was not totally unexpected.

Of course, when the crisis came, those who suffered mostly from the shocks were ordinary people. Then everyone began asking, “Why did this happen?”

By this time, all the neoliberals suddenly became silent. There was no reaction from all these ideologues who, shortly before, were always appearing on newspapers, radio stations and university campuses.

“

*Neoliberalism—as an ideology—has been historically defeated in 2008. That year was the proof that neoliberalism doesn't work.*

Now, we are entering a new period of uncertainty—with millions of people losing their jobs, their hard-earned money and their small bank savings. This is creating widespread frustration and insecurity. And this feeling of insecurity is spreading worldwide.

At the same time, this period of insecurity is also forcing all of us to look for practical answers. One is populism—the belief that we need a strong leader and a more tightly knit society in order for us to survive the crisis. This is the reason why authoritarian leaders have risen in some countries. The other answer is, of course, social democracy, which asserts that we need more, not less, democracy, and that there is a need to control private property.

Many of those who truly understand the market economy argue that regulation is necessary in order to prevent another financial crisis from happening again. It is possible that the next financial crisis will be even worse than the previous one, and it might occur in the next five, or eight, or ten years. This will then create another set of shocks. And in our historical experience, shocks and insecurity encourage people to support right wing authoritarian leaders; because they believe that these authoritarian leaders are able to offer quick fixes and provide security. That is why this kind of situation is very dangerous.

**Machris Cabrerros (Socdem Asia):** I would like to follow up on the point that you just made. In 2008, people realized that unregulated markets are not working. But instead of people supporting the Left, we saw the rise of populist movements and the return of the extreme Right. Why was this so? Why were we not able to generate popular support despite our years of struggle against neoliberalism? What are our weaknesses as a movement?

**Meyer:** This is a big question in every country. You could say there is a certain lack of mobilizing power in civil society. We have not developed methods for mobilizing civil society that is appropriate to our current context.

We must also keep in mind that the world has also already undergone profound changes. In the past decades, it was relatively easy to mobilize tens of thousands of workers from huge factories and enterprises. That is no longer the case today.

Another factor to consider is that mainstream media has always been critical of social democracy. We initially had strong hopes for social media. But it turned out that social media is, in reality, “unsocial” media because it tends to promote aggressive, hostile forms of communication. It has become a form of hate machine that foments social polarization.

At the same time, most countries of the industrialized West have a common problem concerning refugees; and these refugees are being used by populist politicians as scapegoats for the problems that they are facing. Unfortunately, this anti-refugee rhetoric is gaining traction among a growing number of workers. To make matters worse, there is widespread fear that Russia is using its resources to intervene in elections of Western countries, by spreading fake news and disinformation.

These are the difficulties that we need to overcome. Unfortunately, the times that we are in are not favorable for a social democratic project. At the same time, the situation is prompting us to search for new forms of political action. There is therefore a need to

organize unions, to form coalitions, and to develop innovative forms of political communication that could mobilize various social groups. All these are possible, but they will not be easy.

**Aung Moe Zaw:** I would like to go back on the issue of Myanmar. Our situation is very complex. The military has too much influence in our politics. At the same time, our country's foremost leader (Aung San Suu Kyi) is very popular and has strong support from the masses. But her leadership style is very personalistic. She handles the country by herself and not through parties or institutions. We want our country to be democratic, and we want the military to withdraw from politics. But at the same time, our country's leader has made decisions that we do not agree with. It is therefore difficult to identify who our allies are and who is our main opponent. As democrats, how should we handle the situation?

**Meyer:** One of the major problems of military rule is the politicization of the army. For a country like Myanmar, depoliticizing the military will take several decades. We should look at this process as a long-term effort that must be undertaken. Otherwise, the military will always be a threat to democracy. They will always resort to physical power whenever the civilian government makes a decision that displeases them.

Let's now focus our attention on Aung San Suu Kyi. One of the basic features of democracy is that no two parties can arrive at complete unanimity. For example, when the major party in a coalition introduces a certain policy, it is likely that its coalition partners will only partly agree with that policy and not in its entirety. There may be differences, but they may not be differences of principle. To be more concrete, if the country's current leader begins violating human rights, then as democrats, it is your obligation to oppose that policy. But if she postpones certain reforms that you think are important so she can focus on her other priorities, then you can still support her since the reform measures that have been set aside can still be taken up in the future.

In Europe, most social democratic parties have faced this situation. They believe that coalition partners can disagree on a number of issues, but they can still work together as long as these differences can be negotiated. However, if the differences are already on questions of principle, then they leave the coalition.

**Wibi Andriano (Indonesia):** Indonesia is facing several challenges. We have to keep the spirit of reform alive, as well as sustain democracy. We have a vision for our country, but the introduction of direct elections has led to the rise of pragmatic politics. Given our situation, how can we fight against pragmatic politics while ensuring that we can win in the elections?

“

*If social goods are delivered by an authoritarian state, we never can be certain if all citizens will receive these benefits on a regular basis.*

**Meyer:** Pragmatism is not contradictory with vision, since the opposite of vision is opportunism. As German philosopher Immanuel Kant said, real pragmatism is a politics that moves and steps towards an ideal. It is practice in accordance with ideals. This means taking concrete steps in a given situation in order for you to approximate your ideals. But if you say, “I will set aside my ideals so I can keep my position,” that is already opportunism.

It is important to remember that compromise is the only way in which our ideas can be realized on earth. Without compromise, they can only be realized in heaven.

**Gio Tingson (Philippines):** I would like to build on the question of Aung Moe Zaw on who our real enemy is. In the Philippines, President Duterte (who is clearly a populist leader) has signed several bills providing universal access to health care and free tertiary education. So, my question is, how can we differentiate ourselves as a social democratic party from populist leaders?

**Meyer:** The social democratic agenda is, first and foremost, an agenda to promote and expand democracy. We push for this agenda because if social goods are delivered by an authoritarian state, we never can be certain if all citizens will receive these benefits on a regular basis. A populist authoritarian state can act arbitrarily, and it can easily withhold certain social goods from certain people if it wants to.

At the same time, social democrats seek the protection, promotion and realization of human rights. Authoritarian leaders, on the other hand, dismiss civil and political rights as legal niceties that impede government action. They are also often in alliance with corporate entities that seek to undermine economic, social and cultural rights.

In other words, social democrats can be clearly distinguished from populists. But it is our responsibility to communicate this properly to the people.



# *Struggling to Make a Comeback*

by Avatar Francisco

Notes on Nathan Gilbert Quimpo's Lecture on *The Postwar Rise and Decline of the Left in Southeast Asia* (Quezon City, Philippines | 13 March 2019)

From the outside, the house along Matiyaga Street in Quezon City gives the ambiance of an unassuming middle class home. But upon entering the gate, one is greeted by a host of people, each one holding a bundle of papers, some locked in heated discussion in a corner of the front yard. The sudden shift from the stillness on the street to the uproar on the patio could be a bit disconcerting, but this is the headquarters of Akbayan Citizens' Action Party—the Philippines' premiere center-left party—and incessant activity is in its DNA.

On a regular day, the first floor of the office is filled with tables, desktops and filing cabinets. But on the afternoon of 13 March 2019, this very same space was cleared of all clutter and turned into a makeshift lecture hall. At the kitchen, a large pot of hot *lugaw* (native porridge) was being prepared to feed all the guests who were expected to drop by later that day.

Scheduled to speak that evening was Dr. Nathan Gilbert Quimpo—associate professor in political science at the University of Tsukuba in Japan. For Filipino progressives, Dr. Quimpo is a



“

*The Left played a prominent role in Southeast Asian politics before, during and immediately after the Second World War. It then achieved its heyday during the 1960s and 70s, as the region became a focal point of the Cold War.*

well-known figure in the country, being a former member of the Maoist-oriented Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). But after the split in the CPP in the early 1990s, Dr. Quimpo left the communist movement to focus instead on his academic pursuits.

Visiting Manila for a few days, Dr. Quimpo was invited by Akbayan to speak on *The Postwar Rise and Decline of the Left in Southeast Asia*. He began by stating that the Left played a prominent role in Southeast Asian politics before, during and immediately after the Second World War. It then achieved its heyday during the 1960s and 70s, as the region became a focal point of the Cold War, due largely to the Vietnamese Revolution. But by the early 1980s, Leftist forces began to fade from the scene, and are now hardly significant in contemporary Southeast Asian politics.

### **Revolutionary High Tide**

Using a historical approach, Dr. Quimpo stated that Leftist movements in Southeast Asia continued their pre-war struggles against colonialism and neo-colonialism. As a consequence, communist and socialist forces in Burma, Indochina and the Malay Peninsula took leading or prominent roles in the campaign for independence against French, Dutch and British rule.

These efforts enabled avowed socialists in Burma and Singapore to eventually gain power; while in Indonesia, the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI, Indonesian Communist Party) became politically powerful especially after joining Sukarno's ruling coalition, growing to three million members by 1965. At the same time, communists in Burma, Malaysia and the Philippines took up arms against their respective postcolonial states. Revolutionary efforts would reach their high tide during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which coincided with the dramatic intensification of Cold War conflicts in the region.

But as Leftist movements attained the height of their political power, Sino-Soviet relations also began to deteriorate, with China opposing the Soviet Union's line of “peaceful transition” to socialism. To neutralize Moscow's influence, Peking greatly increased its assistance to revolutionary forces in Asia and Africa. And as the Sino-Soviet split widened, Southeast Asia's communist parties were forced to take sides, with most opting for Beijing, with Laos and Vietnam as the only two exceptions.

By aligning themselves with China, the region's communist movements embraced Maoist ideology, prompting them to characterize their respective societies as “semi-colonial and semi-feudal.” They also dismissed the developmentalist programs of their ruling elites, asserting instead that national development could only be achieved after revolutionary takeover. And more importantly, most Southeast Asian communists adopted the strategy of “protracted people's war,” parroting Mao Zedong's dictum that, “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

### **Decline of the Left**

However, by the 1980s, China began to dramatically reduce its support to revolutionary groups. The sole exception was Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, which continued to receive generous Chinese aid. As China finally withdrew its moral and material support, communist movements were left badly exposed, allowing the region's capitalist regimes to defeat armed Marxist challenges.

Dr. Quimpo identified two reasons for this radical shift in Chinese policy. First, was the end of the Cultural Revolution following Mao's death in 1976, and the subsequent rise to power of Deng Xiaoping. All these events resulted in an effective counter-revolution in China, with Deng steering the country from communism towards *de facto* capitalist transformation.

A second and more complicated reason was the re-emergence of communist splits in Indochina, particularly between Cambodia and Vietnam. This was due to the Khmer Rouge's virulent anti-Vietnamese nationalism, which drove Vietnam into formal alliance with the Soviet Union. Their tensions eventually prompted Vietnam to invade Cambodia in December 1978. Assisted by splinter group of the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese army overthrew the Pol Pot regime and installed a new government that was friendlier to Hanoi.

To rescue the Khmer Rouge, China launched a bloody attack on Vietnam, occupying part of its territory until the early 1990s. It also allied itself with Southeast Asia's capitalist regimes in order to isolate and eventually crush the Vietnamese Communist Party. Thailand's ferociously anti-communist regime, for example, hosted the Khmer Rouge and other non-communist Cambodian guerrillas on its territory, and helped funnel Chinese aid to these groups. Backed by both China and the United States, ASEAN countries also supported the Khmer

Rouge materially and diplomatically, and even helped the Pol Pot regime to retain its seat in the United Nations (UN). In exchange for their support, China severed most aid to Southeast Asia's communist parties in the early 1980s.

### Explaining the Left's Defeat

Dr. Quimpo pointed out that by the early 1990s, the Left has already become a marginal political force in the region. Because of this situation, Leftist forces were not able to assume any major role in the series of popular uprisings against authoritarian rule that rocked Southeast Asia from late 1980s. These include the Philippines' "People Power" Revolution of 1986; the mass uprisings in Burma from March to September 1988 that toppled the Ne Win government; Thailand's "Black May" protests in 1992 that forced Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon to resign as prime minister; Indonesia's *reformasi* movement that brought the Suharto dictatorship to an end in May 1998; and the monk-led "Saffron Revolution" against Myanmar's military regime in August-October 2007.

Adjusting to the region's changed political terrain, some former revolutionaries became active in civil society; while others were absorbed into the government bureaucracy. The only Leftwing groups that remain influential are FRETILIN of Timor Leste and Malaysia's Democratic Action Party (DAP).



“

*The failure of armed revolutions is due to the revolutionary forces themselves.*

According to Dr. Quimpo, the failure of armed revolutions is due to the revolutionary forces themselves. He particularly identified the Left's fixation on Mao's "protracted people's war" and their inability to seriously consider more suitable strategies. Dr. Quimpo argued that the Maoist strategy of building "stable base areas" is best suited to a large country such as China during the 1930s and 40s. In contrast, the countries of Southeast Asia are comparatively small, with no single country being more than 1/12 the size of China. He also added that smaller countries, such as Cuba and Nicaragua, did not adopt protracted people's war but instead used popular insurrections; while unarmed popular uprisings (or "People Power" revolutions) became prominent in Egypt, Tunisia and the Philippines.

But apart from questions of strategy, several other factors are also important in explaining the Left's decline in Southeast Asia. Dr. Quimpo pointed out, for instance, that the Left's reputation and appeal were greatly tarnished by the totalitarian rule of Stalin and Mao, and by the massive horrors perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. This was compounded by the relative success of state-led development efforts in the region, which eventually built popular support for conservative authoritarian rule. The situation became even worse after China's retreat from revolutionary internationalism, which severely limited the sources of international aid and support for revolutionary movements.

Dr. Quimpo observed that the Left's decline in Southeast Asia contrasts starkly to the experience of the Left in Latin America. After waging armed struggle against various military and authoritarian regimes from the 1950s up to



*Image: news.abs-cbn.com*

70s, the Latin American Left largely shifted to parliamentary struggle in the 1980s, thus transforming their mass bases in guerrilla zones into electoral bases. After winning some parliamentary seats and capturing some local governments, including those of some major cities in the 1980s, Left parties emerged as major—if not the main—opposition parties by the 1990s. And by the following decade, Left parties had swept to power in half of Latin America.

For Dr. Quimpo, Latin American Leftists were more inventive and imaginative, which allowed them to try out various strategies for capturing power, instead of slipping into a Maoist straitjacket. Their flexibility and broadmindedness, he further pointed out, enabled them to shift to a parliamentary-electoral road, and eventually capture political power. Conversely, all of Southeast Asia's major communist parties remain mired in hopeless insurgencies.



## **Elections: The Only Remaining Option for the Left**

After the Cold War, there is very little support for armed struggle. Hence, if the Left is to gain power and attain its social justice objectives, Dr. Quimpo avers that it has little option other than to take the legal, democratic route—elections. Of course, the electoral route will not be easy, because as Dr. Quimpo admitted, such a strategy would mean openly competing in electoral regimes that have been crafted, and remain dominated by entrenched politico-economic elites.

Because of this changed condition, most Leftist movements are unable to transform themselves into highly effective electoral parties. However, this has also allowed new Leftwing forces—which are mostly social democratic in orientation—to emerge in the region. Dr. Quimpo described this revitalized social democratic movement as “the most spirited—and broadest—challenge to the rule of entrenched politico-economic elites” in Southeast Asia.

Composed of political parties and pre-party formations, social democratic groups are present in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Timor Leste and the Philippines. They are also gathered together in the Network for Social Democracy in Asia (SocDem Asia), which is the broadest formation of social democratic parties and organizations in the whole Asian region.

Dr. Quimpo concluded his lecture by stating that dire material conditions and staggering inequality in Southeast Asia provide ripe opportunities for revitalizing the Left. But in order to succeed, Leftist forces would need to operate in a coordinated way, both at the regional and international levels.

The presentation provoked a lot of questions from the audience, and Dr. Quimpo gamely tried to each and every query. Some of his listeners, however, were not fully satiated, and they continued debating among themselves as they left the hall and walked into the warm summer night.

“

*Most Leftist movements are unable to transform themselves into highly effective electoral parties. This has also allowed new social democratic forces to emerge in the region.*

Image: [noticias.sapo.tl](http://noticias.sapo.tl)



# *Legacy and Challenges of Social Democracy in Nepal*

*by Dinesh Sapkota*

For social democrats, life's highest goal is to achieve a form of freedom wherein each individual has appropriate opportunities to realize the inherent protean needs within themselves. The final goal of mankind is not to attain material affluence but to improve social morality. A moral or real social democrat works to create a conducive environment for solidarity. Higher moral strength is required for stronger solidarity. The more political and the more moral a person is, the more would he/she be democratic in thinking and social-oriented in manner. The wider and stronger form of solidarity including ecology is the founding principle of social democracy where animals are also an important part of it. Such a moral social democrat can lead the movement toward greater humanity. Politically, social democrats have the responsibility to inspire people and provide leadership for democracy and socialism.

The moral foundation of all social democratic movements lies in their pious goal of creating solidarity among the people. We know from the history of the Enlightenment that without being rational and democratic, there would not be any possibility of unity within society. Social democrats make citizens understand that

“

*A real social democrat works to create a conducive environment for solidarity.*

individuals in society are like molecules that form part of a larger whole. Social democrats work to distill society's common agenda in order to create stronger solidarity and peace.

In fact, the very inception of the Nepali Congress (NC) was based on the idea of solidarity. NC leader B.P. Koirala called on exiled party workers to participate in the anti-colonial movement in India, and lead the non-violent demonstrations against the British Raj. B.P. Koirala was convinced that without getting rid of colonialism in the sub-continent, the dream of achieving democracy at home would be more difficult and treacherous. He expressed his solidarity for the Quit India Movement,<sup>1</sup> and in the process was imprisoned by British authorities. Nepali Congress had hoped that a new independent India would also express solidarity for the cause of democratic change in Nepal.



“ Throughout its history, the NC used various means of struggle for the single cause of democracy.

Image: s.yimg.com

Nepali Congress believes in building a morally strong party instead of focusing on the means-versus-ends debate. Throughout its history, the NC used various means of struggle (i.e., armed resistance, peaceful mass demonstrations and *satyagraha*<sup>2</sup>) for the single cause of democracy. It launched armed struggle against the despotism of the Rana family. And later, it mobilized thousands of masses around the country in peaceful protests against the Rajas. The NC received support from people who yearned for democracy, irrespective of the means that were used. The NC firmly believe that the moral strength of a socialist party justifies its political action, rather than on any instrumental purity and impurity vis-à-vis the means of revolution.

Nepali Congress feels proud to be part of the people's democratic will for almost eighty years. People put their faith in the NC, not only because it successfully used various means to achieve political change, but also because it had established democracy by uplifting the political ethics of Nepali society. The NC successfully concluded the first armed struggle against the brutal family despots. Subsequent movements were concluded in a peaceful manner. When

the NC finally came to power with a two-thirds majority in 1960, the succeeding political movements for democracy were done through peaceful means. The NC led the people's revolution for democracy and socialism even when the country was still ruled by the Rajas.

NC is well-aware that capitalism has brought deep psychological problems on contemporary society. Capitalism's hyper-consumerism and individualism have created a collective delusional state where people seek to realize ends through monetary means. Social democrats should be aware that such psychic problems of the masses have spread in different forms and with the various symptoms in different parts of the world. Whether we call it “alienation,” “neurosis,” or “schizophrenia” as argued in the respective theoretical diagnoses by Western thinkers such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, local societies have suffered more from such socio-psychic problems because of their cultural reproduction by global capitalism. Capitalism has achieved new forms of cultural reproduction in the locality which then breeds various forms of mental problems. Bourgeois

discourse tries to normalize this abnormality by describing it as the “signs of modernity.” Such global diseases and social dysfunctions are the real challenges of present-day politics that the global social democratic movement must contend with.

Social democrats constantly reform and change their means to attain the amicable environment for solidarity in accordance with the historical needs and larger goal of humanity. The NC has been continuously in line with the interest of the people despite Nepal's many political ups and downs. It has preserved its democratic and socialist spirit while struggling against domestic despotism and the global brutality of capitalism. The NC rejects further capitalist adaptations and adjustments. It believes that the time of compromise with capitalism has come to an end. It is time for all socialists to come forward to safeguard the democratic rights of people at this present time of global jingoism, militarism, and interventionism. The emergence of juntas and so-called “elected” despots around the world makes us concerned about the future of democracy and socialism. At the same time, we are also worried about the horrible consequences for humanity if the global economy collapses and if unfair competition for material accumulation persists. As we have witnessed, growing tensions are the result of the greed of nations and anxiety over possible global systemic collapse. This situation provides horrific portents of the future. But it also provides new opportunities for social democrats to take up the challenge of bringing people out of the discursive trap of the “end of the history!”

Echoing the Buddha's syllogism, NC ideologue and Nepal's first elected Prime Minister B.P. Koirala defined nationalism as solidarity among the people. He said that there are problems before the people, and the people want to solve these problems. He further said that these problems are solvable. The common spirit of the people to solve these problems and their shared interest is nationalism. For him, nationalism is the solidarity of the people to solve their national and international problems. For B.P. Koirala, solidarity is not only meant to solve problems, but it is also a way to bind people together for the common good for society.

“

*The NC has been continuously in line with the interest of the people. It has preserved its democratic and socialist spirit while struggling against domestic despotism and the global brutality of capitalism.*

Image: [www.asianews.it](http://www.asianews.it)



There are a lot of problems around the world that are posing serious threats to humanity. Global warming, terrorism, jingoism with militarism, rampant disinformation, and most importantly economic collapse, are just some of the problems of our world. We can build a new roadmap to help us navigate these fundamental global problems, but these are not enough for social democrats. Hence, the NC is now pondering on the two fundamental dimensions of present-day politics.

Domestic and international challenges are posing serious threats against democracy. Domestic politics has fallen in the hands of filthy Marxists, known as *dalals*,<sup>3</sup> those that are acting as syndicates inside their party, and plundering the country through intimidation. The country is not moving towards socialism as the Constitution envisioned it. We hoped for socialist economic policies from the new government, but that dream has been shattered. In fact, the *dalals'* fascist tendencies are threatening our core values. They betrayed the people's mandate. In contrast, the leadership of Nepali Congress promulgated a democratic socialist Constitution through a second Constituent Assembly (CA) and held three-level elections during their term.

Nationalist rancor has steadily increased in the last decade. There is heightened insecurity because of the growing trust deficit among both the majority and minority strata. The aimless “first” and “second” ranting in international society and insane militarization have become the present-day challenges of socialist politics. The international market has almost completely taken away the basis of local production. Small industries have collapsed due to the ruthless wave of globalization.

Social democrats have to recognize the various problems of the communities in this era of globalization. The NC believes in mutual coexistence in both foreign and domestic relations. The NC understands that solidarity is a prerequisite of both democracy and socialism, but it is not something that is easily achieved. We need to create an environment for solidarity, and hence cultivate a feeling of coexistence in



Image: [thehimalayantimes.com](http://thehimalayantimes.com)

“

*The NC firmly believes that without democracy, socialism cannot be achieved. The NC view democracy as a way of life. It is not just the procedure of bourgeois elections.*

our common world. The NC firmly believes that without democracy, socialism cannot be achieved. The NC view democracy as a way of life. It is not just the procedure of bourgeois elections. Democracy as a way of life is our framework in leading the country towards a socialist economy for greater equality.

The NC fought for democracy in the Jute factory in the 1940s, arguing that democracy is needed for workers to gain their legitimate

rights. From the beginning, the NC has fought for union rights, which has since borne fruit in terms of decent wages and rights for workers in the Nepali labor market. Along with democratic rights, the NC has enacted policies that mandate the state to guarantee the fundamental rights of the people—i.e., education, health, and land reform to ensure the equal distribution of opportunities and the means of production.

The NC's larger goal is to help people in realizing their potentials with the feeling of responsibility toward society. It is obvious that individuals will not be able to realize their protean needs without the use of reason in the democratic way. Without democracy, it would not be possible to have the highest use of human reason; and without the use of the highest form of human reason, there would not be any room for ethical politics. The NC, as a social democratic party, very strongly believes that political morality is the primary condition of leaders and cadres to have a historical consciousness of interdependency and coexistence between species. The NC has upheld this holistic understanding of the world in its effort to create universal solidarity.

We know that society cannot properly function without solidarity, because solidarity is the morality of society. Of course, the NC wants to build a complete frame of struggle against present global challenges. The global system of capitalism has brought about serious cultural degradation in our communities. The NC is appealing to all our international socialist friends to recognize the present cultural problems that emanate from capitalist delusions. The NC believes that all social democrats have the responsibility to recognize, address and defeat this moral problem within ourselves, in our locality and in the world.

The NC is well-aware of the moral problem of Nepali politics—*dalali*—which has been manifested in the form of rampant corruption, irregularities, and abuse of power. The moral degradation due to the rapid and forceful adaptation of the local caste system with global

capitalism has become a major problem of society. In present-day politics, rigged elections are not the biggest challenge for social democracy. Rather, it is the individual tendency of buying elections, buying MP<sup>4</sup> tickets from the party, buying jobs and academic illegibility, and even justice. The internal caste contradiction and the capitalist imposition of means-end delusion have inflicted problems on society where rulers are drawn into the trafficking of morality for monetary benefits.

The glorious history of the Nepali Congress, with its years of sacrifice for democracy and socialism, is a source of inspiration for future revolutionary change. The NC fought for these core values against the Ranas, the Rajas, and now against the seeming threats to democracy from the *dalals* who call themselves “communists.” Their unstoppable plunder of state resources and the intolerance against dissent makes everybody concerned about the future of the democratic and socialist Constitution of 2015. At present, the NC has begun organizing peaceful demonstrations against the growing fascism at home, and by resisting the growing cultural fascism at the international level.

<sup>1</sup>*The Quit India Movement was a civil disobedience campaign that began in August 1942 which called for an immediate end to British rule, after Britain unilaterally brought India into the Second World War. After Mahatma Gandhi's “Quit India” speech in Bombay on 8 August, Indian nationalists organized factory strikes and streets demonstrations all over the country. The British responded with a wave of repression, arresting thousands of pro-independence activists including Gandhi and future Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru – the editor.*

<sup>2</sup>*Satyagraha literally means “holding on to truth.” It is a form of non-violent resistance that was developed by Mahatma Gandhi during India's struggle for independence – the editor.*

<sup>3</sup>*Dalal literally means broker or fixer – the editor.*

<sup>4</sup>*Member of parliament – the editor.*

# *After the Winter of Despair: An Awakening to the Welfare State in Thailand via Civic Movements and Political Parties in the 2019 General Elections<sup>1</sup>*

by Sustarum Thammaboosadee

## **1. Introduction**

This paper will illustrate the movement for a welfare state from leftwing politics in Thailand during the years 2018-2019. Since 2014, Thailand has been ruled by a military regime. The undemocratic Constitution that was introduced in 2017 has increased the power of the military and conservative elites in Thailand. Under military rule, the political atmosphere is not only undemocratic; several projects have also been introduced for the benefit of big business and conservative elites. The welfare policy in the 2017 Constitution is a means test residual welfare policy. The implication of this is that only poor people will be granted welfare support. There have been several attempts to destroy the spirit of universal welfare in Thailand under the present regime.

In 2018-2019, several movements were created by civil society, academics and political parties demanding the introduction of a welfare state instead of the junta's means test program. Civil society is composed of long-standing separate movements on housing welfare, labor rights, universal pension, universal health care, and

“

*The welfare policy in the 2017 Constitution is a means test residual welfare policy. The implication of this is that only poor people will be granted welfare support.*

other pro-poor civil groups. It was the first time that a broad national alliance of pro-poor movements have been formed under one umbrella network—“We Fair-We Need Welfare State.” Among academic circles, there is a big debate on the necessity of the welfare state in Thailand. The welfare programs being cited are the Nordic Model, the East Asia productivist welfare model, and private-led welfare. Several research papers confirm the existence of inequality and the possibility of a welfare state in Thailand.

Finally, in the run-up to the 2019 general elections, several left-wing parties advocated for a welfare policy in Thailand. It became a big debate during the elections on what type of welfare policy is best suited for Thai society.

This article is divided into three parts: the first part is on the general perception of Thai society on the welfare-state. The second shows the contesting paradigms from academics, civil society and political parties. The third part is a concluding remark on the movement for the welfare state in Thailand.

“

*In the run-up to the 2019 general elections, several left-wing parties advocated for a welfare policy in Thailand. It became a big debate during the elections on what type of welfare policy is best suited for Thai society.*

Image: Twitter @May Wong



## 2. General Perception of Thai Society on the Welfare State

Thailand is one of the most unequal countries in the world. It is obvious that a minority control most of the economic resources of the country. The poor majority lack economic security which leads to limitations on their political freedom (Speece 2014). The resolution for economic inequality always results in a means test or residual welfare policy that only reinforces further inequality. At the same time, addressing structural inequality is considered as an impossible task. Nevertheless, since the 1932 democratic revolution, the movement for the welfare state has been evolving according to the democratic movement. Pridi Bhanomyong, the leader of the People's Party, advanced the idea of universal welfare in the *Economic Manuscript-1935*. The proposal led to the military coup and the strike back of the conservative group. During the Cold War period, the military government introduced welfare for bureaucrats in order to strengthen the anti-communist movement in the rural areas. The conservative elites constructed donation-based rich-poor relations to support informal authoritarian structures. In 1973-1976, the rising of the democratic movement resulted in labor law reforms. However, these progressive reform measures were obstructed by the semi-democratic regime and the introduction of export-oriented industrialization during the 1980s. The other evidence which shows that the development of democracy goes along with the progression of welfare policy is the rise of universal health care in 2001 after the constitutional reform of 2001. As part of the strike back of the military group in 2014, a means test welfare was systematically reintroduced (Thammaboosadee 2017).

### 2.1 Means Test Welfare

Means test or residual welfare is one of the most popular welfare programs in Thailand. Welfare is not considered as the right of the people, since the ruling elite themselves holds the legitimacy of welfare provisions (McCargo 2005). The means test regulation allows the bureaucratic mechanism to define the category



of poor who will receive the benefits. Moreover, the means test welfare obstructs the possibility of providing universal benefits for all people. The benefits are minimized under the logic of moral hazard and financial discipline.

## **2.2 Workfare Regime**

The introduction of export-oriented industrialization in 1985 led to the rise of a new middle class that gained benefits from the market economy. Distinct from the traditional bureaucratic middle class of the Cold War period, the new middle class drew their power from savings and investments. Based on their perception, market mechanisms are more trustworthy compared to welfare provisions from the state. They believe that lowering the income tax and increasing purchasing power is a more favorable option than progressive taxation and the welfare state (Springer 2009).

## **2.3 The Avoidance of Market Failure**

The other alternative is based on the perception that welfare could help avoid market failure. Given this logic, welfare can only be introduced in specific areas where the market cannot work efficiently. This approach allows minimizing welfare rights to specific areas and allows the commoditization of welfare benefit in other aspects (Lekagul 2008).

## **3. Contesting Paradigm from Academics, Civil Society and Political Parties 2018-2019**

### **3.1 Academics**

#### **3.1.1. Liberal Welfare Economists**

Liberal welfare economists in Thailand try to explain the welfare state as a part of public policy rather than as a new mode of power relations. The approach comes with the idea that a “sustained economy” creates “sustained welfare.” They assert that the compromise between economic growth and generous welfare is a prime condition for welfare development (*Asia News Monitor* 2017).

#### **3.1.2. Third Way: Depoliticized Welfare**

Disappointed with the lack of democratic development in Thailand, third-way economists developed the idea of market-state compromise. The idea is to allow private enterprises to engage as service facilitators. The state arranges basic services, but the individual will pay for additional and better-quality services. The result is the hierarchy of welfare services which is determined by individual purchasing power (Chantanusornsiri 2018).

*Image: Facebook /Future Forward Part*



### 31.2. Social Democratic-Leftist Scholars

Distinct from the two previous groups of scholars, social democratic scholars emphasize that welfare should be part of the fundamental rights in modern society. As the basic political infrastructure, the economic and policy mechanism may come after the social democratic consensus of rights.

#### **3.2 Civil Society**

##### 3.2.1. Traditional NGOs

The emergence of Thai NGOs emerged with the decline of leftist political parties during the 1980s. They emphasize issue-based politics which lessen the political goal of full-scale democratization. They focus on specific topics such as housing benefits, social security or pensions. The need for universal and comprehensive welfare is seemingly absent from the agenda of NGOs (Nam 2018).

##### 3.2.2. Communitarian

After the financial crisis in 1997, the spirit of localism and de-urbanization was adopted by several civic groups in Thailand. The important phrase “the answer lies in the village” came to the mainstream. They propagated the idea that inequality can be addressed by micro-scale management such as village savings and economic self-sufficiency which stands apart from macro-social reform via the welfare state (Seubsman, Kelly and Sleight 2013).

##### 3.2.3. We Fair-We Need Welfare State Network

Because of the silence of political movements during the recent military coup of 2014-2019, a new network emerged composed of social activists and academics loosely connected with political parties. This new network is called the We Fair-We Need Welfare State network. Unlike traditional NGOs and the communitarian movement, this new network brought together experienced social activists from the various strands of the welfare movement, and academics. During the political campaign for the 2019 general elections, the network drafted

“

*Social democratic scholars emphasize that welfare should be part of the fundamental rights in modern society. As the basic political infrastructure, the economic and policy mechanism may come after the social democratic consensus of rights.*

and lobbied for the idea of welfare state policies to the democratic-oriented political parties of Thailand.

#### **3.3 Political Parties**

The main policies and political positions of the parties were collected from official websites, debates and statements to the media (Thaitrakulpanich 2019).

##### 3.3.1. Phua-Thai: Neoliberal Workfare

Phua-Thai Party (For Thais Party) is the third reincarnation of the liberal-oriented party of Thaksin Shinawatra. The party played an important role in welfare development during the first decade of the 21st century. Universal health care was introduced in 2001 together with a 100% increase of the minimum wage in 2011. But somehow, the party has no universal welfare goal. The primary goal of the party is political democratization and economic liberalization. It believes that welfare services may be arranged as market failure avoidance tools.

### 3.3.2. Phalang Pracharat/Democrat: Mean-Test

Phalang Pracharat (the military-supported political party) and Democrat Party (the country's oldest political party) both promote welfare via the means test policy. In 2018, the military government introduced the poor-card registered scheme to transfer money to poor people amounting to ThB200 (US\$6.40) a month. During the campaign, both parties insisted on continuing this program. In addition, the Democrats also insisted on guaranteed incomes for poor workers who earn less than ThB120,000 (US\$3,840) a year. These programs reinforce existing residual welfare policy.

### 3.3.3. Future Forward Party (Social Democratic Party)

A newly formed political party in 2018 called the Future Forward Party (FFP) emphasize the radical mission of democratization and addressing economic inequality. The party proposed a policy package as the first step in building the welfare state by introducing universal childcare benefits for those ages 0-6 years old. They also addressed the problem of unfair education loans through universal students' salary. The party also promised to upgrade the country's social security scheme in order to meet the demands of informal workers. Finally, the party proposed the idea of universal pension for all. However, their radical welfare state scheme along with their demand for full-scale democratization earned the antagonism of conservative groups in Thailand.

“

*A newly formed political party in 2018 called the Future Forward Party emphasize the radical mission of democratization and addressing economic inequality.*

Image: [www.bangkokpost.com](http://www.bangkokpost.com)



#### 4. The First Step to Welfare State: Who Voted for Welfare State in 2019 Elections?

Because of the precarious economic condition for the majority of Thais, it was understandable that the primary political campaign focused on welfare policy (World Bank 2018). According to opinion surveys prior to the elections, 60% of the sampling respondents prefer a welfare state (basic fundamental rights) while 40% of the sampling respondents prefer workfare regime (higher income-self-responsibility on welfare benefit)<sup>2</sup>. But somehow, the general perception was that both the media and the public had difficulty distinguishing the two options. It was evident that if the dominant political party adopted social democratic issues, they were likely to win more seats.

Phua-Thai Party received most of its votes in the North and Northeast. Some leading members of Phua-Thai Party formed a separate party called Thai-Raksa-Chart Party (Thai Save the Nation Party), which many believed was a “backup party.” However, Thai-Raksa-Chart Party was

later banned by the Thai Elections Commission after the controversial candidacy of Princess Ubonrattana. Phua-Thai Party fielded candidates in only 70% of the districts. Due to the unclear regulation which may result in their banning, the Phua-Thai was not able to articulate any progressive policy during the last month of the campaign.

The Democrat Party, on the other hand, has been deeply divided. Party leader Abhisit Vejashiva declared that he opposes Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the military prime minister, to continue in office after the elections. However, other prominent party figures issued statements that were different from Vejashiva.

And as expected Palang Pracharat, which support Prayuth Chan-o-cha, easily won seats in the party-list.

Because of this situation, the Future Forward Party was the only significant party to advocate for a welfare state during the last month of the campaign (PrachaThai Staff Report 2019; Bangkok Post Reporters 2019).

All 500 seats in the House of Representatives

251 seats needed for a majority

Registered 51,239,638

Turnout 74.69%



Candidate	Sudarat Keyuraphan	Prayut Chan-o-cha	Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit	Abhisit Vejajiva	Anutin Charnvirakul
Party	Pheu Thai	Palang Pracharat	Future Forward	Democrat	Bhumjaithai
Last Election	265 seats; 48.41%	New Party	New Party	159 seats; 35.15%	29 seats; 3.94%
Seats won	136	116	81	53	51
Seat Change	▼ 129	▲ 116	▲ 81	▼ 106	▲ 22
Popular Vote	7,881,006	8,413,413	6,254,726	3,957,620	3,734,055
Percentage	22.24%	23.74%	17.65%	11.17%	10.54%

Welfare ideology labeled by Author

The unclear political standpoint of the Democrat Party resulted in their big loss in the elections. Phua-Thai won the expected seats in their base regions. Unsurprisingly, the military-drafted Constitution enabled Palang Pracharat to become the second largest party after the latest general elections. But the surprise result came from the Future Forward Party which became the third largest political party in the country.

Media analysts suggest that FFP gained votes from “New Voters” and other radical democratic advocates. Brief surveys from unofficial results show that FFP's votes come from sections of the working class, middle-aged persons, and senior citizens (Tantawanich 2019). In one district in Chonburi, trade union leader Jaras Khumkhainam defeated a prominent politician from Palang Pracharat. It is obvious that FFP won votes from the traditional working class and

from young people who are demanding better welfare conditions. However, we cannot deny that there were voters who chose FFP because of the charisma and “new figure” image of party leader Thanathorn Jungrungrangkit. That being said, we should not ignore the fact that there are big groups of voters whose decisions are based on economic and welfare policy.

“

*The surprise election result came from the Future Forward Party which became the third largest political party in the country.*

Image: news.mthai.com



## 5. Concluding Remarks

The informal election results of 24 March 2019 led to an unexpected result. Though it was an apparent unfair election which was determined by the junta-drafted Constitution, the democratic movement still won a large number of MP seats. The Future Forward Party won 80 MPs in parliament; four members came from the trade unions (three in the party-list and one from the districts). At the same time, the military party won the second largest number of MPs, replacing the conservative Democrat Party. The unclear formula leads to the ambiguous situation of the future government until May 2019.

The welfare state is an important issue for most Thai people. But only the party that support democracy and oppose the present authoritarian government raised this issue during the campaign and the Thai people know that. Somehow, numerous laws were approved during the last year of the military government which may obstruct the construction of a welfare state. The road to universal and comprehensive welfare will not be easy. More than parliamentary movements, the movements from civil society and academics are required for this long-term mission.

<sup>1</sup> *The idea of this paper was first presented at the Alternative Futures and Popular Protest international Conference on 15-17th April at The Manchester University. This paper has not been published elsewhere before.*

<sup>2</sup> *The survey was conducted by Future Forward Party's campaign team prior to the elections. There are around 400 samplings separated by two categories: Welfare Rights or Workfare Regime.*

---

## References

*Asia News Monitor*. 2017. "Thailand: TDRI Wants Better Screening Process for Social Welfare Programs. 20 October.

*Bangkok Post Reporters*. 2019. "Thanathorn Pledges More cash for All." 12 February. .

Chantanusornsiri, W. 2018. "TDRI Urges Higher VAT to Solve Disparity," in TCA Regional News. 15 December.

Lekagul, K. 2008. "Summary of the 2007 TDRI Year-end Conference on 'Tackling Poverty: Liberalism, Populism, or the Welfare State'," in TDRI Quarterly Review; 23 (1), 3-10.

Mann, M. 2012. *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 3 (Global Empires and Revolution, 1890-1945)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McCargo, D. 2005. "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand," in *Pacific Review*; 18 (4), 499-519.

Nam, I. 2018. "Partnering for Universal Health Coverage in Thailand: Bureaucrats and NGOs," *Asian Survey*; 58 (2), 213-239.

Peerapat Tantawanich. 2019. "Age and Party Selection: Statistic Analysis of 2019 Election." <https://themomentum.co/age-and-parties-in-thailand-general-election-62/>. Accessed on 12 April 2019.

Prachatai-Staff Report. 2019. "Welfare State Policies in the 2019 General Election." <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7980>. Accessed on 30 March.

Speece, M. 2014. "By the Numbers: Thailand's Performance on International Indices Under Thaksin." *Proceedings of International Academic Conferences, International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences*.

Springer, S. 2009. "Renewed Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Undermining Democracy through Neoliberal Reform, in *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*; 50 (3); 271-276.

Seubsman, S., M. Kelly, and A. Sleight. 2013. "The Sufficiency Economy and Community Sustainability in Rural Northeastern Thailand," in *Asian Culture and History*; 5(2).

Thammaboosadee, S. 2014. "Quiet Japanese: The Political Economy Analysis of Japanese Capital Toward 2014 Military Coup in Thailand." *Thailand-Japan International Academic Conference 2014, Tokyo University*.

Thammaboosadee, S. 2017. "From Invisible to Indispensable: Political Economy of Welfare Rights Struggle in Thailand 1932-2016." *Public Seminar-Forum for Asian Studies. Stockholm University*.

Thaitrakulpanich, A. 2019. "Thai Election For Dummies: Guide To The Parties." 30 March.

World Bank. 2018. *Intergenerational Mobility around the World*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2018/05/22/intergenerational-mobility-around-the-world>. Accessed on 4 August.

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

by Liew Chin Tong

*(Editor's Note: This is a speech that was delivered by DAP National Political Education Director Liew Chin Tong on 27 May 2018, three weeks after Malaysia's 14th general elections that brought Pakatan Harapan to power. Liew's address first appeared in the August 2018 issue of Socdem Asia Quarterly. We are again featuring this article since it corresponds to the main theme of this issue by outlining the legacy and challenges of progressive politics in Malaysia.)*

Image: davidstloh.exposure.co



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*,<sup>1</sup> 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 lose were among the arsenal of *Barisan Nasional*.<sup>2</sup> 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 around. 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<sup>3</sup>, has committed to give RM50,000 (US\$12,000) annually for the operations of officers and the 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, jewelries, and branded handbags in Kuala Lumpur, these are merely the tip of the iceberg. To have Datuk Seri Zahid Hamidi<sup>4</sup> and Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein<sup>5</sup> 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 (US\$27.4 million) cash seized from properties related to Najib belongs to the party, has shown the absurdity of the current



Image: [www.japantimes.co.jp](http://www.japantimes.co.jp)

“

*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.*

UMNO leaders. It will be difficult for them to make a comeback for the 2023 general election. Second, “Malaysia Baru”<sup>6</sup> is defined by the common pursuit 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 times 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<sup>7</sup> 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 Indonesian “Ahok”<sup>8</sup> situation by whipping up religious sentiments. Yet I'm confident that 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<sup>9</sup>. 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.

“

*Malaysians triumphed over their racial politics. Bangsa Malaysia prevails.*

Image: asia.nikkei.com



“

*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.*

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 bipartisan 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 elections, 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. The 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.

<sup>1</sup> *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope) is the current ruling political coalition in Malaysia. It is composed of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the National Trust Party (AMANAH), the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU) and the People's Justice Party (PKR) – *the editor*.

<sup>2</sup> *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) or BN is the political coalition that ruled Malaysia from 1957 to 2018. Its member-parties include the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) – *the editor*.

<sup>3</sup> Dato' Osman Sapian is the current Menteri Besar (head of government) of the Malaysian state of Johor, and a member of BERSATU – *the editor*.

<sup>4</sup> Datuk Seri Zahid Hamidi is the President of UMNO – *the editor*.

<sup>5</sup> Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein was UMNO's Deputy President from 12 May to 30 June 2018 – *the editor*.

<sup>6</sup> Malaysia Baru literally means New Malaysia.

<sup>7</sup> Malaysian Nation.

<sup>8</sup> Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, more commonly known by his nickname Ahok, was governor of Indonesia's capital Jakarta from 19 November 2014 until 9 May 2017. He was often the target of racist comments from extremist Islamic groups because of his Christian and ethnic Chinese background. In May 2017, Ahok was found guilty of blasphemy and of insulting the Qur'an by the North Jakarta District Court. He was released from prison on 24 January 2019 – *the editor*.

<sup>9</sup> 14th general election.

# *Can There Be an Asian Welfare State?*

*by* Francis Isaac

As the Great Depression was bringing the entire world to its knees, voters in Denmark went to the polls on 22 October 1935. The elections resulted in a resounding victory for the Danish Social Democratic Party which received almost 50 percent of the popular vote. Winning 68 seats in the 149-member Folketing (Danish parliament), the Social Democrats became the largest party in the legislature, enabling them to gain control of the government with Thorvald Stauning as Prime Minister. For the next four decades, the Party dominated each succeeding election, ushering Denmark's golden age of social democracy.

While 1935 was a truly significant year in Danish history, it was also an important turning point for the rest of Scandinavia, which marked a radical shift in regional politics in favor of social democrats. In Norway for example, the Labor Party came to power after its stunning electoral victory in October 1936. With more than 40% of legislative seats under its control, Labor would remain as the country's dominant political party until the fall of the Gerhardsen Cabinet in 1965. Similar events also occurred in Sweden, which began with the Social Democratic Party's electoral sweep earlier in

“

*Social democrats quickly introduced several reform measures that have now become closely associated with the modern welfare state.*

September. The country would then be governed by successive Social Democratic governments for the next forty years, guiding the Swedish people through the chaos of the Second World War and the subsequent tensions of the Cold War.

As they ruled over the whole of Scandinavia, social democrats quickly introduced several reform measures that have now become closely associated with the modern welfare state. These include universal healthcare, free public education, and a comprehensive social security system that provides unemployment insurance and generous pensions for all retirees and senior citizens.

## Cultural Homogeneity

Funding such extensive social programs, however, entail considerable costs. And to attain their objectives, successful welfare states had to create a strong sense of solidarity wherein every individual willingly engages in productive work and pays the appropriate taxes. This allows their respective governments to generate adequate resources, which are then redistributed to all citizens in the form of social services.

Since all three Scandinavian countries were culturally homogeneous for the most part of the previous century, it was fairly easy for these nations to foster mutual solidarity among their citizens. But this situation also gave the impression that the welfare state is a political system that is uniquely applicable to Nordic societies.

In his study of Sweden for example, Canadian academic Henry Milner argued that “Swedish-style social democracy cannot serve as a relevant model for under all circumstances.”<sup>1</sup> Analyzing the region's culture and geography, Milner pointed out that the welfare systems that we see in Scandinavia have all emerged “within the contexts of relatively small and culturally homogeneous societies.”<sup>2</sup> This situation has led Sweden to develop a “small country mentality,” which is characterized by (1) a single predominant national culture that facilitates cultural consensus, and (2) a sense of common vulnerability in the face of external forces.

A similar argument was also made by Denmark's former finance minister, Mogens Lykketoft. In an essay published in 2009, Lykketoft asserted

“

*Successful welfare states had to create a strong sense of solidarity wherein every individual willingly engages in productive work and pays the appropriate taxes.*

that Denmark is a “small, homogeneous nation-state with a distinct cultural, social and democratic development,” and that mainstream Danish society is marked by “a national feeling founded in Christianity.”<sup>3</sup>

## Nations and Capitalism

This strong sense of nationhood is a result of Scandinavia's very long history that stretches all the way back to the Early Middle Ages. Denmark, for instance, was established as early as 936 by Grom the Old, making it one of the oldest monarchies in the world. By the 13th century, the Danish kingdom had grown into an important regional power. But a series of humiliating military defeats from the 16th to the 19th centuries forced the country to turn inward and modernize its institutions—eventually becoming a constitutional monarchy in 1849.

Image: [www.thelocal.se](http://www.thelocal.se)



“

*To prevent the complete collapse of society, social democrats proposed a radical solution: **the welfare state.***



Image: britannica.com

Neighboring Sweden, on the other hand, emerged as an independent kingdom during the early 12th century, but was later absorbed by Denmark in 1397. After the massacre of Swedish noblemen in 1520, the country revolted against the Danish king in what is now known as the War of Liberation. This rebellion would culminate in Gustav Vasa's election as king of Sweden on 11 June and the capture of Stockholm six days later. Gustav's ascension as king is now celebrated in Sweden as National Day, while the War of Liberation is seen by historians as the beginning of Swedish nationalism.

Norway's history is even older, and it began when Harald Fairhair unified the different Nordic tribes into a single kingdom in 872. The country, however, was later colonized by both Denmark and Sweden at different periods of its history. But during the Romantic Period, the country experienced a surge of nationalism as writers, artists and intellectuals portrayed Norway as a unique national community with its own distinct character. After years of agitation, the country finally gained independence in 1905 when parliament voted unanimously to dissolve its union with Sweden and elected Haakon VII as their new king.

But despite being fully mature nations, all three countries became deeply polarized as a result of the social dislocation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. As manufacturing began to grow, factories quickly multiplied, spreading all across the major cities of Europe. These establishments, in turn, employed thousands of workers who toiled day and night under the most inhumane conditions.

Hoping to end their misery, workers began forming unions to demand decent wages, an eight-hour work day, and an end to child labor. Factory owners, however, rejected these proposals, prompting radical segments of the labor movement to call for socialist revolution. Frightened by the growing power of organized workers, the ruling classes became even more belligerent, and appealed to both the army and the gendarmerie to uphold the principle of private property.

To prevent the complete collapse of society, social democrats proposed a radical solution: *the welfare state*—a novel political arrangement that will use the power of the state to regulate the market in order to curb the excesses of capitalism and redistribute the nation's wealth to uplift the socially vulnerable. Believing that “political power (can) reshape society and the economy,” social democrats came to the conclusion that “the state could and should control markets without destroying them.”<sup>4</sup>

Adam Przeworski underscored this attitude of social democrats who view the state as an institution that can “regulate crises to maintain

“

*In contrast to northern Europe, most countries in the Asian region are multiethnic states with weak cultural cohesion.*

full employment.”<sup>5</sup> He also pointed out that since the mid-1930s, the message of European social democrats have been fairly consistent, telling voters that, “society is not helpless against the whims of the capitalist market, (that) the economy can be controlled, and (that) the welfare of citizens can be continually enhanced by the active role of the state.”<sup>6</sup>

By the early 1960s, the success of the welfare state model was already beyond question as Denmark, Norway and Sweden all became the prosperous nations that we now know today.

### **Asian Diversity**

In contrast to northern Europe, most countries in the Asian region are multiethnic states with weak cultural cohesion.<sup>7</sup> Indonesia, for instance, is culturally divided into more than 300 ethnic groups scattered throughout the country's nearly 18,000 islands. The Philippines is also similarly situated, with over 170 ethnolinguistic groups living in various parts of the archipelago. Further to the north, the Myanmar government officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups, which are then further grouped into “eight national ethnic races.” And at the foot of the Himalayas, more than 125 ethnic groups are dispersed across the tiny, landlocked country of Nepal.

This predicament is largely a consequence of the region's colonial history, when Western powers redrew the map of Asia to suit their own narrow interests. As they did so, ancient communities were dismembered while new territories were created incorporating various (and sometimes mutually hostile) ethnic groups.



Image: [britannica.com](http://britannica.com)

Following the devastation caused by the Second World War, Europe's overseas empires crumbled in quick succession, enabling Asia's colonized peoples to finally gain independence.

But the new states that emerged inherited the political boundaries that had been established by their former colonial masters, which brought together peoples of diverse ethnic backgrounds. This made political unity extremely difficult, since these states did not generate automatic loyalty from their citizens who remain emotionally attached to their respective ethnic communities.

But how can this predicament be addressed? Can ethnic differences be overcome? And can Asia's post colonial states become more homogenous and politically coherent?

“

*Citizens must first develop a sense of shared history and a common belief that they all belong to the same political community. States can hasten this process by undertaking efforts to unite their people, bridge ethnic divisions and transform themselves into fully mature nations.*



Image: [www.nst.com.my](http://www.nst.com.my)

### **Nation-Building**

In his book *Imagined Communities*, the late scholar Benedict Anderson repudiated the notion that nations are fixed primordial entities based on language, kinship or geography. Instead, he argued that nations are socially constructed, since they are “cultural artefacts” that “have come into historical being.”<sup>8</sup> Anderson even provided his own definition of the nation, describing it as “an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>9</sup>

A nation is imagined, according to Anderson, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>10</sup> It is also limited, he further adds, since it has “finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the nation is imagined to be sovereign “because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.”<sup>12</sup> And finally, the nation is thought as a community because “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, for Anderson, nations do not emerge *ex nihilo*. They are imagined into existence.

If this is so, then ethnic differences are not permanent, since people of diverse cultural backgrounds can band together to form larger nations. But for this to be realized, citizens must first develop a sense of shared history and a common belief that they all belong to the same political community. States can hasten this process by undertaking efforts to unite their people, bridge ethnic divisions and transform themselves into fully mature nations. Fortunately, history has already provided us with the most appropriate instrument for accomplishing this task.

Based on their general design, welfare states are meant to deliver various social services to all citizens, irrespective of tribe, ethnicity, gender or religion. Doing so transforms the state into a humane and caring institution whose primary concern is the wellbeing of its people. It also creates a deep sense of loyalty among citizens who receive regular services and benefits from the state.

This nation-building objective, therefore, is expected to be the distinguishing feature of the Asian welfare state. In Europe, the model was introduced in order to defuse class tensions and prevent further social division. But here in Asia, the welfare state shall be the primary means of gathering people into more cohesive nations.

At this point, there is still no full-fledged welfare state in the region.<sup>14</sup> But some of its elements have already been introduced and are now being implemented in a number of Asian countries. In Nepal, for example, a series of legislative measures were enacted in the early 1990s that guarantee a 60-day maternity leave for women and paid sick leaves for all employees. The government has also begun providing senior citizens with monthly allowances and has also created a Health Insurance Fund to provide health insurance for all Nepali citizens. Meanwhile in Indonesia, the state has introduced a mandatory social protection program called JAMSOSTEK (Social Security for Private Employees) that began in 1992. Covering all workers in the formal sector, the scheme aims to reduce the impact of various social hazards such as accidents, illnesses, old age and even death. And in the Philippines, a landmark Reproductive Health Law was enacted in 2012 that ensures universal access to various methods of family planning (whether natural or modern), and provides free and affordable maternal health services, as well as age-appropriate reproductive health education.

But building a welfare state will not be accomplished overnight since it will certainly generate resistance from various political groups. Neoliberals for instance, with their free market ideology, will oppose its creation, since they are strongly convinced that the state should not assume any role beyond peace and order, and basic infrastructure. Corrupt politicians, on the other hand, will also not allow the welfare state to provide welfare benefits to all citizens. Instead, they will try to strengthen patronage and offer welfare access as a reward to their political supporters.

Of course, such opposition is to be expected. But if nation-building is the greatest challenge of our time, then all efforts must be made to develop welfare states all across the region. If we are successful in this endeavor, not only will we unite our communities, but our people will no longer feel abandoned by their own governments. But such an undertaking would require a strong regionwide movement with a clear political vision and a deep sense of purpose. I am certain that Asia's social democrats are more than up to the challenge.

<sup>1</sup> Milner, Henry. 1989. *Sweden: Social Democracy in Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Lykketoft, Mogens. 2009. *The Danish Model: A European Success Story*. Copenhagen: Economic Council of the Labour Movement; p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Berman, Sheri. 2006. *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; pp. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Przeworski, Adam. 1985. *Capitalism and Social Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> I have limited my examples to four countries—Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal and the Philippines—which are all covered in an ongoing research project by Socdem Asia entitled *Re-Imagining an Asian Social Welfare Model*. While these four cases do not provide an exhaustive regional picture, their situation nonetheless are still indicative of the complex ethnic dynamics within Asian societies.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised Edition). London and New York: Verso; p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Even the more affluent countries of Asia such as Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea cannot be considered as welfare states since they provide very little funding for social welfare and focus instead on rapid economic development. For a more comprehensive discussion on this issue, see Ian Holiday, "Productivist Welfare Capitalism: Social Policy in East Asia," *Political Studies* (Volume 48; 2000): 706-723. See also Roger Goodman, Gordon White and Huck-ju Kwon (eds.), *The East Asia Welfare Model: Welfare Orientalism and the State* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).



## ***About the Authors***

***Avatar Francisco*** is the nom de plume of a Filipino activist and longtime member of Akbayan (Citizens Action Party).

***Francis Isaac*** is a graduate student in De La Salle University in Manila. He is currently completing his thesis on local peasant movements in Indonesia and the Philippines.

***Liew Chin Tong*** currently serves as Malaysia's Deputy Minister of Defense.

***Thomas Meyer*** is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the Technical University of Dortmund and editor-in-chief of the journal *Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte*.

***Dinesh Sapkota*** is a member of Nepal Student Union (NSU). He acquired an M.A. in English from Tribhuvan University and International Relations from South Asian University.

***Sustarum Thammaboosadee*** is Assistant Professor in International Relations, College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Thammasat University. He is also the Welfare State Policy Adviser of Thailand's Future Forward Party.