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**PRAKSIS** is a semiannual publication of the Network of Social Democracy in Asia (Socdem Asia). It seeks to combine theory and practice by providing cogent analyses to inform the strategy of the progressive movement and help shape the policy direction that should guide the region's governments.

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# Responding to the Challenges of Our Time

**I**n 2016, the world had changed in ways that no pundit could have completely foreseen.

From the northern portion of the Atlantic to the western shores of the Pacific, popular despots had suddenly come to power, upsetting the “liberal international order” that had governed global affairs since the end of the Cold War. The Varieties of Democracy Institute described this slew of events as “the beginning of a decline,” with political polarization ravaging the world’s advanced democracies, even as millions of people “continue to live under repressive conditions without much hope for greater democratic rights and freedom.”

Stanford University’s Francis Fukuyama shares a similar analysis, adding that all the major developments in each individual country form part of a “broader trend in international politics.” While “the period from 1970s through the mid-2000s”

corresponds to the “third wave of democratization,” the present moment, he argues, is now characterized by “democratic recession,” in which “the aggregate number of democracies fell from their peak in virtually all regions of the world.”

But unlike in the past when power was seized through armed insurgency or military coup, today’s global decline has come about through the very means that is most closely associated with democracy—elections. In their book *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt observed that the main challenge to liberty no longer comes from “men with guns,” but from elected leaders “who subvert the very process that brought them to power.” The two authors further maintain that while democratic governments are now rarely overthrown in “spectacular fashion,” they can still “erode slowly, in barely visible steps.”

This democratic decline coincides with the global rise of rightwing populism, with its vicious agenda of excluding segments of the population from the body politic. For Simon Tormey, a political science professor at the University of Sydney, 2016 can be regarded as “the year populism *exploded*,” with the UK’s Brexit referendum and Donald Trump’s surprising electoral victory in the United States. He also locates the origin of this explosion to the Asian region, citing the election of Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Philippines. According to Tormey, Duterte’s victory was “the first glimmer that something was afoot,” since he not only “threatened to turn his back on the United Nations,” but also “made no effort to hide his disdain for the rule of law.”

With the rising threat of rightwing populism, a more vigorous ideological response is now expected from social democrats. To overturn this latest authoritarian

wave, progressives must develop a compelling vision of the future that addresses the anxieties of the present while remaining rooted to social democracy's foundational principles of freedom, justice, and solidarity.

This challenge is especially pressing here in the Asian region, where there are only a handful of strong social democratic parties that can win elections and form governments at the national level. Since most of these parties are still in the process of accumulating political strength, the idea of social democracy has yet to reach a wider audience to fully influence public discourse. And unlike Europe or the United States with their clear electoral rules and firm human rights guarantees, the world's largest continent is still dominated by rightwing authoritarian regimes that view democracy as an alien Western concept that is completely unsuited to Asian conditions.

If we are to overcome the rising threat of rightwing populism, then it is vital that we have an organizational nexus where like-minded progressives can exchange ideas and foster a common vision for the region. The Network for Social Democracy in Asia (Socdem Asia) can potentially take on this role since it is the widest formation of social democratic parties and movements at the regional level. Established in 2008, Socdem Asia is present in 12 countries with 16 active political parties. It also helped in the formation of the Progressive Alliance—the political international of more than 140 socialist and social democratic parties from across the globe. This close relationship between these two networks has enabled progressive Asian parties and movements to create bonds and forge fraternal ties with kindred formations from other continents.

Apart from its geographic spread, the Network also has the advantage of having its own publication called the *Socdem Asia Quarterly*. With its first issue appearing in July 2013, the *Quarterly* was envisioned as a space for expounding on the “policies, perspectives and lessons learned from social democratic political practice.” It did so by mirroring the activities of Socdem Asia. As a result, the themes of the conferences that the Network had organized also became the themes of the subsequent issues of the *Quarterly*.

Looking back, the model that Socdem Asia had followed was the most appropriate at a time when liberal democracy, as Fukuyama asserts, was still the “default form of government for much of the world, at least in aspiration if not in practice.” With Barack Obama in the White House and with center-left and center-right parties still dominating European politics, it seemed as if international politics followed a fixed set of rules that had been there since after the end of the Second World War. During that period, a political movement that sought relevance had to engage in policy issues, while exploring the nuts and bolts of practical governance.

But the rise of populism and the apparent failure of neoliberalism compels us to search for new ideas and to imagine the world anew. For this reason, Socdem Asia has to set a new editorial direction which, while acknowledging the need for policy, sees the overwhelming importance of ideology. Such a process involves a major rebranding of the Network's publication, wherein its new editorial direction is reflected, not only in its content, but also in its name. We are not abandoning the *Quarterly*. We are, instead, transforming our publication so that it can better deal with the fresh challenges of our world.

It is for this purpose that we are launching *PRAKSIS: The Journal of Asian Social Democracy*. The term *PRAKSIS* perfectly reflects the purpose of our publication—that of combining theory and practice by providing cogent analyses to inform our strategy for attaining power and the policy direction that should guide all Asian governments.

Our objective is simple yet ambitious: to build a regional platform for progressive thinking that would provide hope to the continent's 4.6 billion people. In doing so, we will also help shape the concept of Asian social democracy by identifying its constitutive principles, its distinguishing features, and its concrete application in the context of the region. Part of this task entails examining how ideas are translated into reality and how they mutually reinforce each other to promote democracy and social justice.

It is our hope that by bridging theory and practice, we can help forge needed multilateral cooperation so that we can adequately respond to the challenges of the time: inequality, creeping authoritarianism, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The appearance of our maiden edition coincides with International Workers' Day (May 1, 2021) in honor of the labor movement from which social democracy traces its origin. We offer this first issue of *PRAKSIS*, aware of the dangers of the present, while remaining firmly hopeful for the future. And hope, as Desmond Tutu once reminded us, is that which allows us to see the light despite the enveloping darkness. ♡

# Breathing Life and Meaning to Democracy

Interview with Cebu City Councilor Alvin Dizon of the Philippines

Editor's Note: Alvin Dizon is a three-term councilor from Cebu City, the oldest and fifth most populous city in the Philippines. In this interview with PRAKSIS, Councilor Dizon discusses his experience and the challenges he faced as a progressive politician.

**How does your position as a progressive politician within the Cebu City Council square with the reality that Philippine politics is still largely dominated by political dynasties? How significant was your journey and foray into electoral politics in bringing progressive politics and social democratic governance?**

Prior to my election as Cebu City Councilor, I had a long involvement in social development advocacies as NGO worker for almost 20 years, and our engagement extensively focused on key development and sectoral issues involving urban poor and housing rights, trade union rights, gender equality, active citizenship and participatory local governance. Essentially, we engaged both local and national governments in the arena of policy advocacy to push for measures that would recognize and protect the basic human rights of marginalized sectors.

Because of our development work with the poor, in 2009, around 500 urban poor groups and homeowners' associations in Cebu City were represented in a General Assembly convened for the purpose of arriving at an electoral agenda for the 2010 elections; and one of the decision points was to field local candidates to represent the interests of the urban poor to the Cebu City Council. I was one of the two candidates endorsed to run (the other one was a woman urban poor leader) to represent the city's civil society organizations (CSOs). We had coalesced with a local party, the *Bando Osmeña-Pundok Kauswagan* (BOPK, Team Osmeña-Progress Party), a local political movement that was formed in 1987 when former Mayor Tomas Osmeña first ran for mayor of Cebu City.

Guided by our profound appreciation for the ideals of

program-based politics, our campaign in 2010 was anchored on a clear and people-centered platform such as security of land tenure and decent housing for informal settlers, delivery of basic social services for the urban poor, citizens' participation in policymaking, right to livelihood of the informal sectors, environmental protection and youth access to education, among others.

Given the indispensability of financial resources in electoral campaigns, my candidacy was largely driven by funds raised by urban poor and civil society groups for us to be perceived as a serious candidate who was able to amplify the message to reach voters and to motivate them to take interest and vote for us given our track record and platform challenging a political culture and tradition dominated by personality, patronage and money.

For us, the elections of 2010 and 2013 were victories of the mass movement and civil society groups who backed our candidacy and made it as a political project in order to push for reforms in local governance in the City of Cebu. As City Councilor, we have remained steadfast in our ideals and committed to work even harder for a much broader constituency and with a greater sense of public accountability. At first glance, progressive or program-based politics may seem illogical within the traditional political economic framework, but our experience shows that people are receptive to our platforms when we actively engage with various sectors, keeping relevant our political alliances through the concrete results of our advocacies and programs.

**As City Councilor, what kind of policies and programs did you focus on and how did they serve to empower the city's poor and marginalized sectors? Did you encounter challenges or opposition in pushing for these policies? How were you able to eventually overcome them?**

We have passed progressive legislative measures that serve and empower the city's poor and marginalized sectors. Through collaborative legislation, we were able to craft these policies through the active participation of the various sectors such as the urban poor, elderly, women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), LGBTQ, and environmental advocates, among others, depending on the theme and whose sector our proposed ordinance will stand to benefit or address a specific concern or issue.

It has been my core belief as a local legislator that I cannot arrogate upon myself any task unless I have fully understood the complexities, needs and concerns of my



Image: [www.facebook.com/alvinmdizon](http://www.facebook.com/alvinmdizon)

**“The elections of 2010 and 2013 were victories of the mass movement and civil society groups who backed our candidacy and made it as a political project in order to push for reforms in local governance in the City of Cebu.**

constituents. Thus, the ethics which I have always adhered to in my eight years as City Councilor (and I attributed this to my discipline as a social development worker for almost two decades) is the fidelity to the ideals of people's participation in democratic processes especially in public policy formulation.

Our legislative office has institutionalized the practice of involving various stakeholders in policymaking on the premise that active citizens' participation and engagement in local legislative processes is an important

framework that breathes life and meaning to democracy and concretizes the cooperation between the government and the people. We also strongly believe that when policies and programs have been discussed, formulated and implemented with active participation of our constituents, the rate of compliance and success is high. And when it comes to local policy making, it is fundamental to engage the people down to the *sitio* (grassroots) level to properly ground us with their issues so that the policy that we will formulate will not exist in a vacuum.

The crux of participatory democracy will always be active citizens' participation in shaping and implementing public policies and local lawmaking. Our legislations are focused on the following themes:

1. Housing and Sustainable Livelihood for the Poor
2. Women, Elderly, Youth, PWDs, LGBTQ Rights and Welfare
3. Citizen's Participation in Local Governance
4. Access to Education and Health Care
5. Climate Action

In our first and second term (2010-2016), we have passed some of the following ordinances:

- Adopting the Cebu City Shelter Plan Framework that will serve as Guidelines for all Housing Programs and Projects
- Providing Transfer Tax Exemption to all Socialized Housing Beneficiaries
- Prohibiting Discrimination in Cebu City on the bases of Disability, Age, Health Status, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Ethnicity, and Religion
- Granting Free Parking Privilege for PWDs and Senior Citizens
- Adopting the Cebu City Barrier Free Tourism
- Creating the Cebu City College for Poor but Deserving Students
- Creating the Cebu City College Scholarship Program
- Providing Financial Assistance to all Cebu City Senior Citizens

- Providing Incentives to Cebu City Scholars Who Graduate with Honors

And in our third term (2019-present), we have authored some of the following ordinances:

- Creating a Dementia Screening and Intervention Program for Senior Citizens of the City of Cebu
- Prohibiting Foam Food Containers and Single-Use Plastics In all Public Events in the City of Cebu
- Providing Discounts and other Incentives to Solo Parents Pursuant to Republic Act No. 8972 also known as the “Solo Parents Welfare Act of 2000”
- Establishing the Cebu City Food Bank in Times of Public Health Emergencies and Disasters
- Reducing Food Waste Through Food Donation and Recycling
- Establishing the Cebu City United Nations Sustainable Goals (SDGs) Monitoring Council
- Defining Gender-Based Sexual Harassment and the Prohibited Acts in the Streets and Public Spaces of the City of Cebu as well as Adopting Penalties Pursuant to Republic Act No. 11313 or Safe Space Act
- Amending City Ordinance No. 2343 entitled “An Ordinance Regulating the Use of Plastic Shopping Bags within the Territorial Jurisdiction of the City of Cebu” (co-author)
- Establishing the Human Milk Bank in the Cebu City Medical Center and the Cebu City Health Department for the Support of Women and

Children in Need of Breast Milk, Providing Incentives to Milk Donors

- Establishing a Wellness and Healthy Lifestyle Program in All Barangays of the City of Cebu
- Institutionalizing the Cebu City Urban Food Gardening Program
- Establishing the Cebu City Air Quality Monitoring Council
- Prohibiting the Improper Disposal of Used Facemasks and other related COVID-19 Protective Gears and Products

Passing all these measures is only half of the victory that we have won since laws only become alive and relevant when fully and faithfully implemented by the executive department. Our ordinances on transfer tax exemption, college scholarship to public high school graduates, financial assistance to senior citizens, barrier-free tourism, and anti-discrimination were some of the policies that were able to bring concrete relief and help empower the sector they intend to benefit.

We were able to successfully pass these measures without encountering serious challenges or opposition from our colleagues in the City Council. This is mainly because of our participatory or collaborative approach in local legislation in which the sectors who initiated or helped us formulate the measures would themselves help in the lobbying for their passage. Also, we were never hostile nor confrontational in pushing for our agenda in the Cebu City Council, but we always conduct ourselves in a manner that is level-headed and welcoming of a healthy and principled debate and engagement from our colleagues.

### **What are the prospects for further progressive change in the City Council?**

Since 2010, we have established allies within the City Council from both the minority and majority bloc. This is primarily because of our good legislative track record and solid support from mass organizations and civil society groups. These allies are important elements who can help achieve our progressive legislative agenda in the City Council.

**“When we go to the communities, we become more grounded while our constituents are able to better understand the intricacies of our work.**

Secondly, we have organized CSOs that are actively engaging the local government in public policymaking processes. It is also noteworthy that the Cebu City government was chosen as a best practice case on government-NGO partnership for poverty alleviation by the United Nations. In Cebu City, citizens' participation (via NGOs and peoples' organizations) in local governance is a combined result of two streams—one is the ordinance from the local government, and the other is Republic Act No. 7160 or

the Local Government Code of 1991 which provides various institutionalized bodies for citizens' participation.

Lastly, we have supportive mass media allies who help us amplify our legislative and good governance agenda. We remain strategic in our dealings with them especially in giving updates of our accomplishments and presenting our stand on important issues. Apart from going directly to the communities, this is also where we anchor our accountability since the media is one of the most powerful agents of democratic accountability.

### **What necessary policies or changes can be created to promote greater citizens' participation in governance?**

We had authored an ordinance entitled “An Ordinance Institutionalizing the Conduct of Offsite Sessions of the Cebu City Council” with the intent of making the Council more accessible to its constituents, thus promoting greater transparency and accountability and strengthening people's participation in local governance. In passing this measure, it is my belief that when we go to the communities, we continue to be more grounded and our constituents could better understand the intricacies of our work. One of the features of the ordinance is the conduct of the “Citizen's Hour” to provide a venue for our constituents to articulate their concerns and issues to the Council so they can be acted upon.

Another important path is to elect more progressive leaders to local government positions who can create more spaces for citizen's participation. The presence of progressives in mainstream politics is fundamental to push for reforms and make government more efficient and responsive to citizens.

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**How can they elect more social democrats and progressives to local government office?**

An important electoral project is to train local mass leaders for the electoral arena and to start engaging in *barangay* (village) elections to secure public office and push for progressive and reform-

oriented policies. The *barangay*, as the smallest political unit would be a good training ground for those who want to hone themselves in public service, pursue a career in electoral politics or challenge well-entrenched political dynasties.

The coronavirus pandemic has put the spotlight on local government officials, particularly at the

*barangay* level, in bringing much-needed public welfare goods and vital services to the people. And if we want to push for reforms in our political system, we should start in our *barangays* and the challenge is to train, support and make progressives win seats in *barangay* elections as an important foundation for deepening grassroots democracy. 📍

“The coronavirus pandemic has put the spotlight on local government officials in bringing much-needed public welfare goods and vital services to the people.

Image: [www.facebook.com/alvinmdizon](http://www.facebook.com/alvinmdizon)



# On the Right Path Social Democracy in Indonesia

By: Mikhail Gorbachev Dom

## Conceptual Roots

**S**ocial democracy is not a novel idea in Indonesia. Some of the country's founding fathers discussed at length the practical forms of social democracy and that of the welfare state, particularly Mohammad Hatta and Sutan Sjahrir. The conceptual attraction of these founding fathers was embodied in the Pancasila, which eventually became the basic ideology of the Republic of Indonesia. Pancasila adopted social democracy as one of its principles, namely the fifth that stipulates, "Social justice for the whole of the people of Indonesia." Thus, the seed of social democracy had existed in Indonesia since the founding of the state, and it continues to influence state policies through the spirit of Pancasila, especially its fifth principle.



Image: unsplash.com

“The seed of social democracy had existed in Indonesia since the founding of the state, and it continues to influence state policies through the spirit of Pancasila.

Mohammad Hatta is a central figure in the founding of Indonesia. Together with Sukarno's, his name appears in the text of the Proclamation of Indonesian Independence. He then became the first Vice President of Indonesia. Hatta was highly interested in economic issues<sup>1</sup> and later became known as the Father of Indonesian Cooperatives. His thoughts on the cooperative economic system was strongly rooted in the Indonesian tradition of *gotong royong* (mutual assistance). This economic system was also known as the Pancasila Economy,<sup>2</sup> which was embedded in Article 33 of the 1945 Constitution. This provision mandates that the economy should be based on the principle of kinship; that sectors of production that affect the livelihood of the public should be controlled by the state; and that the land, water and the natural resources contained therein shall be controlled by the state and used for the greatest prosperity of the people.

Sjahrir, an underclassman of Hatta during their studies in the Netherlands and a fellow exile in Banda Neira,<sup>3</sup> was another influential figure in Indonesia's struggle for independence. Starting out as a youth activist, he was eventually called *Bung Kecil* (the Little Man), while Sukarno was called *Bung Besar* (the Big Man). Sjahrir was the first Prime Minister of Indonesia, who was elected three times as prime minister, and served from November 14, 1945 to June

27, 1947.<sup>4</sup> His thoughts were mostly contained in his writings during his period of exile titled *Renungan Indonesia* (Out of Exile), which was classified as social democratic by scholars of Indonesian politics Herbert Feith and Lance Castles.<sup>5</sup> In another book titled *Perjuangan Kita* (Our Struggle), Sjahrir once again emphasized humanism and social justice as the ultimate goal of their struggle.<sup>6</sup>

In Indonesia, the welfare state is an idea that transcends ages. As one of the goals of social democracy, its implementation is too challenging for Indonesia with its young age of independence. Nonetheless, history records that during each administration, there have been efforts to expand the application of the idea of the welfare state. So far, Indonesia has undergone three periods or "orders" in state administration, namely Old Order (1945-1966), New Order (1966-1998) and lastly Reform Order (1998-present).

During the Old Order administration, Indonesia had a weak economy. However, the Sjahrir Cabinet I tried to improve people's welfare through food distribution, which the Sjahrir Cabinet II expanded to food and clothes distribution.<sup>7</sup> During the 1960s, the Old Order administration founded the national oil company Pertamina to manage the domestic oil commodity and regulate fuel prices.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the Old Order, the New Order administration focused on improving Indonesia's economy. During this era, the government provided universal subsidy (basic needs subsidy) to stabilize the prices of fuel and other commodities. Various infrastructure programs targeted rural areas, and provided block grants and credit facility to farmers. As a result, from the early 1970s to the 1990s, Indonesia succeeded in significantly reducing poverty through this broad-brush approach.<sup>9</sup> But the economic turmoil in 1997 brought people to the realization that Indonesia had yet to possess sufficient social security.

The Reform Order that has been ongoing for the last 20 years is an era where the welfare state policy has expanded, especially in the health and education sectors. One signal that marked the Reform Order was the decentralization of power, as initiated through Law No. 22 of 1999 that was amended through Law No. 23 of 2004 and lastly Law No. 32 of 2014. Decentralization provided opportunities for regions (at the levels of province and district/municipality) to improve the public service system. The idea of free education and free healthcare grew in areas with good regional revenues.

Based on these historical facts, it can be concluded that the idea of the welfare state has been gradually

<sup>1</sup> Kahin, George McTurnan (1980). "In Memoriam: Mohammad Hatta, (1902-1980)." *Indonesia*, 30; pp.112-119.

<sup>2</sup> Taubert, Armin (1991). "Liberalization, Co-operatives and Ekonomi Pancasila." *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 12 (4); pp. 347-359.

<sup>3</sup> Banda Neira is an island in the province of Maluku in eastern Indonesia. It was used by Dutch colonialists as a place of exile for independence activists—the editor.

<sup>4</sup> Kahin, George McTurnan (1952). *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia*. New York: Cornell University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Bijl, Paul. (2017). "Human Rights and Anticolonial Nationalism in Sjahrir's *Indonesian Contemplations*." *Law and Literature*, 29 (2); pp. 247-268.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, Benedict (1968). "Introduction," to Sutan Sjahrir's *Our Struggle*. New York: Cornell University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Prihartanti, Bernarda (2010). "Peranan Sutan Sjahrir Dalam Pemerintahan Indonesia (1945-1947)." *Jogyakarta: Universitas Sanata Dharma*.

<sup>8</sup> Prasetyo, Kuncoro Bayu dkk. (2008). "Efektifitas Dana Subsidi Langsung Tunai (SLT) Dalam Mengatasi Dampak Kenaikan Harga BBM Bagi Masyarakat Miskin." *Forum Ilmu Sosial*, 35 (1); pp. 60-74.

<sup>9</sup> Perdana, Ari A. (2014). *Masa Depan Program Kesejahteraan Sosial di Indonesia: Dari Subsidi Bahan Bakar Fosil hingga Perlindungan Sosial yang Lebih Baik*. Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development.



Image: www.sandiegouniontribune.com

**“Indonesia has yet to become a full welfare state like Sweden, Norway or Germany, but Indonesia is on the right track in achieving that dream.**

applied in Indonesia based on the financial power of the state. Whenever the state is financially strong, the goal of creating a welfare state has also been actualized in piecemeal fashion. For this reason, I believe that Indonesia is, to a certain extent, a welfare state. Indeed Indonesia has yet to become a full welfare state like Sweden, Norway or Germany, but Indonesia is on the right track in achieving that dream.

### **Free Healthcare**

The effort to provide free healthcare in Indonesia started 10 years ago through the ratification of Law No. 24 of 2011 regarding the *Badan Penyelenggara Jaminan*

*Sosial* (BPJS, Social Insurance Administration Organization) by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. But the expansion of its services consisting of healthcare protection and social security occurred in 2014 and 2015<sup>10</sup> under President Joko Widodo. On 1 March 2015, President Widodo replaced *Kartu BPJS Kesehatan* (BPJS Healthcare Card) with *Kartu Indonesia Sehat* (Indonesia Healthy Card) and expanded the services to enable the poor and underprivileged to get free healthcare services.

Even though BPJS Kesehatan does not provide free healthcare services for the whole population, its premium for the public is very low.

Participants are only required to pay Rp35,000 to Rp 150,000 (US\$2.40 to US\$10.50) for health insurance, which has broad coverages including administration, examination, treatment, medicine, in-patient care, medical rehabilitation, maternity care, ambulance service, etc. At the same time, BPJS Ketenagakerjaan exists to provide social security services for workers, including *Jaminan Hari Tua* (Old-Age Protection).

In addition to policy at the central level, some regions also provide free healthcare. The city of South Tangerang, for instance, through Regulation of the South Tangerang Mayor No. 7 of 2017, provides free healthcare services to Local Identity Cardholders at regional healthcare facilities and general hospitals within the city. Jakarta also provides free healthcare services for the *Kartu Jakarta Sehat* (Jakarta Healthy Card) holders and/or the Local Identity or Family Registration Cardholders at 73 hospitals and clinics in the Jakarta administration area, as well as three hospitals outside Jakarta.<sup>11</sup>

### **Free Education**

Free education in Indonesia was initiated through the 6-year compulsory education program on May 2, 1984, followed by the 9-year compulsory education program on May 2, 1996 by President Suharto. This commitment to education continued through the ratification of Law No. 20 of 2003 regarding the National Education System by President Megawati Sukarnoputri, in which Article 49, Clause 1 mandates the allocation of an education fund as much as 20% of the Regional and State Budget (APBD & APBN). In 2005,

<sup>10</sup>Habibie, Widya Leksmawati et al. (2017). “Health Reform in Indonesia towards Sustainable Development Growth (Case Study on BPJS Kesehatan, Health Insurance in Indonesia).” *Review of Integrative Business and Economics Research*, 6 (3); pp. 375-383.

<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from: <https://jakarta.go.id/artikel/konten/418/peserta-kartu-jakarta-sehat>.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono implemented free schooling at the elementary and junior high school levels by providing students with *Bantuan Operasional Sekolah* (BOS, School Operational Assistance) to pay school fees. For School Year 2012/2013, free schooling was expanded to the high school level.

In 2015, a 12-year compulsory education program was proclaimed under President Widodo. The Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 3 of 2019 expands the BOS provision, wherein each eligible student at the state and private elementary schools will receive Rp800,000 (US\$55) per year. However, decentralization has transferred the authority over elementary and junior high schools to regional (district/municipality level) governments, so that the implementation of free schooling depends on the regions' financial capacity. In 2019, for instance, the Province of East Java made the *Sumbangan Pembinaan Pendidikan* (SPP, Educational Development Contribution) free for all state high schools in the province.

### Indonesia's Future

The remaining challenges in realizing a welfare state in Indonesia are, firstly, the state's economic power to provide the best services to its people, and secondly, the regions' economic capacity following decentralization that led to polycentric governance. The hierarchy of non-aligned authorities between the central and regional governments hinders the implementation of policies, such as free healthcare or free schooling. However, democratic processes through the direct election of the president, governors, as well as regents and mayors, have opened a broad opportunity for the growth of ideas on free healthcare and free

schooling because people appreciate them. I think democracy in Indonesia will further push the welfare state concept.

Political processes have also opened up that encourage the active participation of the Indonesian youth. Thus, we can expect that this younger generation will also embrace the ideas of social democracy and the welfare state in the future. Progressive ideas related to the environment, for example, have been flourishing through political processes in the universities. Almost all student executive boards have a particular division that deal with environmental issues. At present, they discuss environmental issues from waste management to clean water supply. In every era, the ideas of the youth are eventually realized. Thus, I believe that in the next 20 years, the idea of environmentally-friendly and sustainable development will also be realized in Indonesia.

The women's equality movement has made great advances in Indonesia. Since the Reform Order, Indonesia has had a female president and many important ministerial positions have been entrusted to women. Sri Mulyani, for example, had taken on the role of Head of the National Development Board (2004-2005), Minister of Finance (2005-2010), acting Minister of Finance (2008-2009), and now Minister of Finance again (2016-present). She holds the record of being the longest serving finance minister of Indonesia during the Reform Order. In addition to the Minister of Finance, the positions of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Forestry and Environment have also been entrusted to women. And in 2019, for the first time, the House of Representatives elected a female speaker. Therefore, in my view, Indonesia is on the right path of providing social welfare for all its people. 📍

“Political processes have also opened up that encourage the active participation of the Indonesian youth.

Image: international.thenewsiens.com



# Social Democracy in India: Opportunities and Challenges

By: Prof. D.K.Giri

In a discussion, on the occasion of the release of the book *Social Democracy in Practice* by the former International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY) member, Pradeep Bose,<sup>1</sup> the veteran social democratic ideologue Surendra Mohan<sup>2</sup> said, “Social democracy is the best ideology for India, and it works better than others”. If that is so, it begs the questions: Why is social democracy not on the center stage of Indian politics? Why is a social democratic party not the biggest one in India? Before we answer these questions, let us critically examine the claim made by Surendra Mohan.

Perhaps, in an inadvertent endorsement of Surendra Mohan's assertion, a visiting French comrade asked his fellow delegates, “We should learn from India.” What did he really mean? What does India

“How could social democracy be the most preferred ideology for Indians? The obvious answer consists of India's culture of synthesis, politics of pluralism and multiculturalism, decentralized governance and the new liberal market-based democracy.

have to offer the world in terms of social democracy? And how could social democracy be the most preferred ideology for Indians? The obvious answer consists of India's culture of synthesis, politics of pluralism and multiculturalism, decentralized governance and the new liberal market-based democracy.

India started its political and economic journey on a typical socialist path. It was quite different then. Against the backdrop of anti-colonial struggle, India chose to

follow the policy of self-reliance, a mixed economy with the 'commanding heights of economy' in the state sector. The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, could not envisage that his kind of socialism—one of statism—would compromise the very freedom he had fought so hard to win. State domination was certain to suppress the innovative energies and entrepreneurship of the people. India got steeped in bureaucratic socialism, not of the Soviet type though, which was the ruthless extreme.

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<sup>1</sup> Pradip Bose's book, *Social Democracy in Practice*, was published in 2005—the editor.

<sup>2</sup> Surendra Mohan was a member of the upper house of the India parliament from 1978 to 1984. He is known as “the last Gandhian socialist”—the editor.

Since the 1990s, India has been moving away from state socialism. India began as a full-fledged democracy with adequate provisions in the constitution and setting up institutions. Since 1990, India began to create the material basis for social democracy by encouraging business, empowering

civil society and repositioning the state. The government came up with several innovative policies in order to create synergy between the three sectors—state, market and civil society. Many such policies were meant to alleviate poverty, enhance transparency and elicit responsiveness in governance. We may discuss a few of them.

The Right to Information Act of 2005 provides that any citizen of India may ask for information from a public authority, which is required to reply expeditiously or within 30 days. Since the law was passed, a daily average of 4,800 right to information (RTI) applications are being filed. In the first 10 years of the commencement of the Act, a whopping 17.5 million applications were received.

“Article 41 of the Indian Constitution provides that the state shall, within the limit of its economic power, make effective provision for securing the right to work. The idea behind this provision is that individuals have the right to work or to take part in productive employment.

Another flagship scheme that was meant to alleviate poverty and hunger is known as MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) enacted in 2005 under the Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government. It has two prominent aspects which could qualify it as a social democratic policy. It provides, as a social security measure, a guarantee to work and earn. It aims at enhancing livelihood in rural areas by providing at least a hundred days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members are available for unskilled manual work.

Third, Article 41 of the Indian Constitution provides that the state shall, within the limit of its economic power, make effective provision for securing the right to work. The idea behind this provision is that individuals have the right to work or to take part in productive employment. It should be noted that this was enacted in 1950 by the Congress government. In a short period of two and a half years, the first non-Congress government of Janata Party—led largely by Social Democrats—introduced the concept of *antyodaya* into their economic policies. *Antyodaya* literally means 'unto the last,' and is meant to touch the lives of the poorest of the poor.



Image: gulfnews.com

Fourth, another structural innovation by the UPA government was the constitution of the National Advisory Council (NAC), which worked as a bridge between Indian civil society and the government. Set up by the Indian National Congress on 4 June 2004, the NAC's role is to devise policies and advise the government on the betterment of India's poor. The NAC lent a social democratic touch to the UPA government by focusing on progressive social policies. A socialist cabinet minister in the UPA government characterized his government in a jest: "Our government is economic right and social left."

The current NDA (National Democratic Alliance),<sup>3</sup> which has been in power since 2014, has been devising a good number of welfare schemes relating to income, health and sanitation, and livelihood. But ironically, these are more rhetoric rather than real projects on the ground. However, there is no gainsaying that some of the schemes, populist as they are, have caught the imagination and aspiration of the people giving the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) electoral dividends. That poses a threat to social democrats who should be claiming the progressive platform.

A plethora of such welfare policies which continue to be announced every now and then cover cash transfers, insurance on health and education, livelihood security, pension schemes, protection of the elderly against a future fall in their incomes due to uncertain market conditions, and providing universal access to banking facilities with at least one bank account for every household. So far so good. But these policies, while benefitting the poor to some extent, do not qualify

to be the foundation of a social democratic politics as the current government is found wanting in other areas that constitute its principles. Both the Congress and BJP governments had a few welfare policies, but could not be said to be representing social democratic politics.

How does one build a robust, distinct and functioning social democratic politics in India? There are a few organizing and ideological principles that need to be sorted out before we begin to usher in social democracy in India. First is to create a distinct national political platform in the form of a party or a coalition which would call itself social democratic. There is one party in the state of Uttar Pradesh with a socialist moniker; it is called the Samajwadi Party (Socialist Party). But it is a state-based party

without much global outlook and engagement which is also a necessary element of social democracy, known as solidarity within and across countries.

Second is addressing the issue that creates confusion and dilution of social democracy's distinction. The preamble of the Indian Constitution says, "We the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic Republic." So many politicians and parties call themselves socialist; even the BJP which is now a far-right party once called itself "Gandhian Socialist." So, the challenge is to build a genuinely functioning social democratic party whose members understand and practice social democracy in their daily lives.

**“The challenge is to build a genuinely functioning social democratic party whose members understand and practice social democracy in their daily lives.**

Image: gulfnews.com



<sup>3</sup>The National Democratic Alliance is a coalition of center-right and rightwing political parties led by the Bharatiya Janata Party—the editor.

Third, social democrats are often confused with the Communists who were a part of the ruling alliance led by Congress. They talk of socialism in their brand. In the 1990s, they had torpedoed the non-Congress and non-BJP alternative led by the social democrats through their tactic of entry-ism and deliberate destabilization of the center. Even now, some socialist comrades consider the Communists as progressive for their “pro-poor appeal” and do not hesitate to associate with them. As I write this, Congress is in formal alliance with the Communists in the ongoing West Bengal state elections. Such comrades do not realize that while they are democratic socialists, the Communists are democratic Stalinists, as Lord Meghnad Desai<sup>4</sup> characterized them. The viable alternative is the social democrats with a center-left progressive platform without the Communists, the left communalists, and the right.

Fourth, early socialists in India were educated people with deep convictions and commitment. But they were too strong personalities to remain together. Socialist factions and parties got identified with them, and whenever they clashed, parties split or defections took place, so much so that splits and factions became the second nature of the socialists. A comrade who became a minister at the Center, despaired, “Socialist leaders are good people but lack organizational discipline causing socialism to be seen as anarchism.” Madhu Dandavate,<sup>5</sup> an ideologue and an unblemished socialist leader, recorded in his autobiography a conversation with the visiting former social democratic Prime Minister of Britain, Jim Callaghan, who said to his Indian comrades, “We too fight a lot in our party (the British Labor Party), but we do not

break the instrument of our struggle and campaign, that is the party.” Social democrats in India must heed such advice.

Fifth, the ideology must be redefined and recast in the current context in order to include local cultural attributes. So far, social democracy is known in the world by four of its cardinal principles: liberty, equality, social justice and solidarity. Three more are to be added to capture the Eastern realities including those in India. They are dignity, identity and pluralism. Of course, such values have to be embraced universally as the hitherto mono-cultural societies in the West are becoming diverse

**“It is now time for practical socialism in India and Asia that combines democracy and socialism while creating a new political culture with high standards.**

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



under the process of globalization marked by the movement of people and services, and the influx of refugees.

Sixth, India has a huge youth population, more than 50 percent of the total population, and by far the most in the world. They are both ideational and aspirational in nature. It will be strategic to inspire them with idealism as well as provide them with material scope for the fullest growth of their potential. So, growth and justice will have to go together, so should production and distribution. The institutions of market and politics have to interact, whereas civil society rises to tame both the rapacity of the market, and the authoritarianism and populism of the state. In India, civil society is vocal and vibrant. It has slowed down a bit under the disruptive impact of the pandemic. Yet, there have been protest movements of high intensity by students, women and farmers. In fact, the farmers' protest that began in November last year is still continuing against the apparent privatization of the agriculture sector with three new laws passed in Parliament.

Finally, in order to win power and implement social democracy, social democrats should stand out as the “party with a difference.” They have to combine ideas and action, idealism and pragmatism. They have to initiate reforms while reflecting social realities. We have had varieties of socialism: the scientific socialism of Karl Marx, the evolutionary socialism of the Fabians, the democratic socialism of the Europeans, the revolutionary socialism in America. Now it is time for practical socialism in India and Asia that combines democracy and socialism while creating a new political culture with high standards.📍

<sup>4</sup> Lord Meghnad Desai is a British economist and a former member of the Labour Party—the editor.

<sup>5</sup> Madhu Dandavate was a trained physicist who became a member of parliament from 1971 to 1990—the editor.

# Thailand's Springtime of the People

By: Pita Limjaroenrat

## The Dissolution of the Future Forward Party

Thailand had undergone two military coups within just eight years. The 2014 coup, led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, then Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army and now the Prime Minister of Thailand, overthrew the democratically elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra. It has been a lost decade, a time of despair for the Thai people who dream of a democratic society.

Before 2019, after five years of military rule, most Thais lost interest in civic participation and only a few trusted the existing political parties. None of our leaders dared to offer any hopeful alternative based on transparent politics or pledged to rebuild political consensus and restore democracy. The situation began to change with the formation of the Future Forward Party, which later on became the Move Forward Party.



Image: [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)

“Move Forward Party has given back hope and has inspired the people that democracy is the solution and that an 'alternative' political model is possible in Thailand.

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



It reassured the Thai people that they are entitled to greater well-being and deserve to live in a more equitable society. Move Forward has given back hope and has inspired the people that democracy is the solution and that an “alternative” political model is possible in Thailand.

The Party never fails to emphasize this statement: “We must break free from our country's lost decade and restore hope and prosperity for the next decade. It is now or never.”

Future Forward's main agenda was to transform Thailand's political landscape. We wanted to encourage public participation in our brainstorming sessions, decision-making processes, fundraising, and operations through an inclusive bottom-up model.

6.3 million voters made the Future Forward Party win 81 seats in our first election in March 2019. Our voters saw the Future Forward Party as the change agent to push Thailand towards full-fledged democracy. Nonetheless, our party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court by what an international observer called “a flawed legal process premised on spurious charges.”<sup>1</sup> The incident aroused protests all over Thailand. Spring had finally begun.

Earlier last year, initially, the protests were led by university students and high-schoolers, who resolved to make Thailand a country where they can again dream for the future. As time went by, citizens of all backgrounds, ages, and occupations, came together to demand the end of political monopoly, the reform of the monarchy, universal pensions, expansion of labor rights and maternity leave, an LGBTQ rights bill, and an end to the military coup cycle, among other things. This movement has sparked a new path in Thailand's democracy.

<sup>1</sup> From the US Senate's draft resolution on Thailand. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/DAV20G50%20-%20Thailan.pdf>.

## Carrying on the Future Forward Spirit: Move Forward Party's Vision and Actions

As the successor of the dissolved Future Forward Party, the Move Forward Party aspires to take Thailand towards meaningful democracy and create a fair economic system. We resolve to untangle the protracted problems that have plagued our country for generations. We strive to make all Thai people equal and bring the country together to face the challenges that define our generation: the retreat of democracy, the rise of extreme inequality, and the hopelessness young people face when they look at the dwindling opportunities to have a better life.

To combat the rise of authoritarianism, address extreme inequality and bring hope back to the lives of our fellow Thais, we believe that social democracy and progressive economic policies are the way forward. Based on this vision, we have codified more than a dozen policy agenda including but not limited to: (1) advancing human rights and civil liberties, (2) introducing universal welfare, (3) expanding labor rights, (4) expanding social safety nets, and (5) breaking down monopolies, etc.

The values of our Party are defined, not only by words, but also by actions. As an opposition party, we have submitted — on the issue of civil and political rights — a set of five landmark bills to reform the lèse-majesté laws and expand freedom of expression, and we have pushed for constitutional amendments that will erase the legal legacies of the junta. On welfare and social democracy, we have submitted bills to create universal pensions, expand labor rights and maternity leaves, and continuously raise the minimum wage along with the consumer price

index. On economic opportunities, we have submitted a bill to break down regulatory barriers-to-entry for local liquor and craft beer producers. The bill, if enacted, would undermine the monopoly over the Thai alcoholic beverage industry. On social progressivism, we have submitted bills to legalize abortion and gender-neutral marriages.

Although official legislative processes have been blocked by the Prayuth government, Thailand's social movements continuously move forward. Our Party works closely with several social welfare networks, in developing and advocating for progressive policy programs. The Move Forward Party has recently set up a team called Think Forward Center to take care of social democratic policy

development and advocacy, both through the existing parliamentary process and the next general election.

We fight for the common people and for common sense. Our Party continues to be the voice for the voiceless and the hope for the hopeless. We are driven, not only by a social democratic vision for Thailand, but also by common sense. It is common sense that a minimum wage should earn enough to make a decent living. It is common sense that the wealthiest corporations should compete in fairer competition with small farmers and enterprises. We believe that our country should return to these common sense ideas in order to make our people equal and bring the country together to face the challenges of this generation.

**“As the successor of the dissolved Future Forward Party, the Move Forward Party aspires to take Thailand towards meaningful democracy and create a fair economic system.**

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





Image: www.bangkokpost.com

“Planting the seeds of New Politics means that the way we engage in politics is as important as the ends that we are fighting for.”

Fighting for the common people and for common sense has evoked considerable resistance. Our spirit has been hindered at every turn. The Prime Minister terminated our bills to end military conscription, expand labor rights and maternity leave, and introduce universal pension, without providing any reason. The Constitutional Court took away our subpoena power in October 2020. Even if we can get anything through the lower house, the 250 junta-appointed senators would step in to block all the meaningful change.

Worse, the Prayuth government has been waging an information operation (IO) perpetrating blatant falsehoods against our Party. Because the government cannot challenge our policy-based

progressivism on either moral or rational ground, it resorts to falsely accusing our Party of trying to overthrow the monarchy and pitting two generations of Thais against each other in order to maintain its power. That is why our fight cannot be waged on the floor of the parliament alone. It has to be done in the hearts and minds of our people as well.

### **Winning Hearts and Minds: The Long Game for the Future of Thailand**

When we started this journey, as members of the Future Forward Party, we knew that changing Thailand was going to be a generational endeavor. Wherever we look, authoritarian culture lurks in every corner of our country. The

patron-client system seeps into every fabric of our society. That is why our Party aims to seed Thailand with “New Politics,” a transformational politics based on policy facts and philosophical ideals, as we face an uphill battle against “Old Politics”—i.e., transactional politics based on corruption and patron-client relationships, which is the current *modus operandi* of Thai politics.

Planting the seeds of “New Politics” means that the way we engage in politics is as important as the ends that we are fighting for. At first glance, fighting political battles with facts and ideals seems unforgivably naive against opponents who are loaded with massive war chests and networks of vote-buying election canvassers. However, if we are led astray from our ideals with shortsightedness, we may secure more power with transactional politics in the short term, but we will never be able to transform our country. If we take power with “Old Politics,” we will become an embodiment of the problem we are fighting against right now and the vicious cycle of corruption and military coups goes on.

“New Politics” requires us to win hearts and minds in a war of ideas. We believe that our values of advancing political rights, elevating economic equality, and embracing human diversity are what most hearts and minds already agree to as common decency. However, the war of ideas is never just about facts and philosophies. It is also a war against falsehood and smear campaigns conducted by those in power who have depleted all moral and rational justifications for legitimacy. Yet, it is such depletion of legitimacy that makes us believe that the momentum is on our side in this long game for the future of Thailand.

## The March of History and the Coming of Spring

The outlook of Thai politics, as of now, is undeniably bleak. All the institutions and machinations that the junta placed to retain its power in civilian clothing, remain strong. Everywhere we look on the streets of Thailand, people cannot express their minds freely, there is no opportunity for a better life, and there is no hope to be found.

Nevertheless, the parliament, weakened and kneecapped, and the protest movement, bloodied and battered, are still a beacon of hope that can lead this country out of despair. As the parliamentary opposition, we believe that parliament can be a safe space where an inconvenient truth can be debated with maturity, and meaningful changes can be realized through legislation.

Still, looking back at the start of our journey more than two years ago, we knew that we would face an uphill battle. We knew that this would be a long-term struggle. Yet, if someone were to tell us, back then, where Thai society would be today in terms of societal discourse, we would all be surprised. Voices from the new generation are demanding to be heard. The new wave of change is coming, and it will sweep those who stand on the wrong side into the dustbin of history.

That is why we dare to hope in the face of great adversities. We know progress is not a straight line, that is why we have to move forward, despite all the odds. We know that the arc of the moral universe is long and that it will never bend toward justice on its own. That is why we need to reach up and bend it. We know hope and history only rhyme once in a lifetime, that is why we have to rise up and make it so, now.

Heeding to a historic calling, young protesters have risen up and suffered persecution. As Pablo



Image: [www.thetimes.co.uk](http://www.thetimes.co.uk)

**“Voices from the new generation are demanding to be heard. The new wave of change is coming, and it will sweep those who stand on the wrong side into the dustbin of history.**

Neruda, a Chilean Nobel Prize winner once said, “you can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep spring from coming.” The Prayuth regime cannot halt the march of history and keep spring from blooming.

We will never stop fighting for what is right in this era of despair. We believe that the new dawn will eventually arrive, whereupon Thailand will be democratic and the Thai people will have equitable lives.📍

# Fighting Patriarchy! Feminism, Gender Equality and Social Democracy

By: Sharmistha Mukherjee

Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1947, India has seen major socio-economic transformations that impact the lives of its 1.3 billion people. The Constitution of India—which became effective on January 26, 1950—is a magnificent charter for positive change, which aims to ensure equality and justice for every citizen, irrespective of class, caste, gender, as well as the social, economic and political empowerment of all citizens. However, the lofty ideal of equality enshrined in our Constitution often clashes with the harsh realities that are embedded in the structures, value systems and practices of a conservative patriarchal society.

In modern India, the formal process of empowerment of women and the removal of highly discriminatory practices against women through legislation started during the colonial period. Early reformers during the 19th century advocated and succeeded in

“The lofty ideal of equality enshrined in our Constitution often clashes with the harsh realities that are embedded in the structures, value systems and practices of a conservative patriarchal society.

Image: [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org)



bringing about major reforms through legislation like Abolition of Sati, 1829 (abolishing the custom of burning a widow in the funeral pyre of her husband), and Widow Remarriage Act, 1856.<sup>1</sup>

Savitribai Phule<sup>2</sup> started the first school for women in India in 1848. The Indian National Congress (INC), a political party that led the struggle for independence, encouraged the formation of the Women's Indian Association (WIA), which sought voting rights for women as well as their right to hold legislative office. The presence of a large number of women in the independence movement, especially during the phase led by Mahatma Gandhi, ensured that the question of empowerment of women and gender equality was never relegated to the background. Post-independence, the right to vote, the right to contest in elections and hold legislative offices were granted to women by the Indian Constitution.

Out of the 74 years of independence, INC—a party with secular, progressive and democratic principles—ruled India for 54 years. While India has a federal structure of government (with the states having their own elected governments), the fact that Congress controlled the central government and most state governments during the formative years of nation-building in the post-independence era helped create a conducive atmosphere for passing various landmark legislations. It was also pivotal in building government mechanisms, and in aiding and encouraging nongovernment organizations towards the goal of gender equality and opportunities, as well as facilitating easier access to

education, health, nutrition, employment opportunities and economic empowerment for women.

Various national legislations and Supreme Court rulings have provided the legislative and judicial framework to remove discrimination against women and attain gender parity and empowerment. Notwithstanding some inherent contradictions in many of these laws which are typically at conflict with traditional values and customs, the mere existence of these laws provides relief and mechanisms for redress.

In one aspect, India has failed in raising the number of women representatives in the national parliament and in state legislative assemblies. Though two landmark constitutional amendments in 1993 initiated by the Congress government gave 33% reservation (later raised to 50% in most of the states by individual acts of state legislations) at the local urban municipal bodies and village *panchayats* (local unit of governance in rural areas), the presence of women in the national parliament is currently a mere 14% in the *Lok Sabha* (the lower house) and less than 10% in *Rajya Sabha* (the upper house).

For decades, women activists in India have been fighting for the Women's Reservation Bill that would ensure 33% representation of women in parliament and in state assemblies. So far, their efforts have met little success. The story of the Women's Reservation Bill brings into the forefront the underlying misogyny of many members of parliament. The Bill was first introduced in 1996. As it was being tabled and amid much uproar, the

Bill was physically snatched by a member of the house and torn to pieces. Many successive governments tried to table and pass the Bill but without any success. The last attempt was made in 2010 when it was passed in the upper house but could not be passed in the lower house. The bill lapsed with the dissolution of the lower house in 2014. Since then, the current government, though in its second term, has not made any attempt to reintroduce the Bill.

The underlying misogyny in the legislature that prevented the Women's Reservation Bill to become a reality can also be seen in the judiciary, especially in the lower and family courts. Malavika Rajakotia, a famous lawyer specializing in family law, wrote in her book *Intimacy Undone* several instances of patriarchal thinking and behavior. The unsolicited advice often given by judges to women seeking divorce is not to “break” the family and to learn to “adjust” etc., reinforces gender stereotypical roles that boxes women within the traditional definition of a family. At the same time, the bias against women in maintenance and property settlement underscores the values of a patriarchal society that refuses to see women outside the protection of the family and beyond their traditional roles as homemakers and caregivers.

For the past seven years, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—a hyper-nationalist rightwing political party—has dominated the central government and several state governments. Rightwing conservatism is no friend of the feminist movement. The BJP-led government has cracked down heavily, not just on political

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<sup>1</sup> Act XV, 1856 or the Widow Remarriage Act, 1856 is a British colonial law that legalizes the remarriage of Hindu widows—the editor.

<sup>2</sup> Savitribai Phule was a 19th century poet who fought against caste- and gender-based discrimination—the editor.

opponents but on social activists and students. NGO activities are also curbed and closely monitored.

At the same time, the budgetary allotments for women's welfare programs are either cut or not fully utilized. The current budget for the financial year 2021-22 shows a decline of 26% in the gender budget and the budget of the Ministry of Women and Child Development was reduced by 18% compared to the last fiscal year. This was done despite having a female finance minister.

And in the context of COVID-19, it cannot be denied that the economic and social impact of the pandemic has been far more severe for women than men. Women suffered disproportionate job losses, lack of access and training to digital media, and restricted access to online education and health services, even domestic violence increased several folds. Despite this condition, the government did not take adequate measures to address the suffering of millions of women across India.

Though the number of women representatives are miserably less both in terms of numbers and percentage, women's political awareness and participation in voting has been increasing steadily over the years. Every political party and government realize that women are a substantial vote bank.

The much-flouted *Ujjwala* scheme of the BJP-led central government, wherein free LPG cylinders are given to women from poor households, merely reinforce gender stereotypes that confine women in the kitchen. For another flagship program of this government *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (Save a Girl Child, Educate a Girl Child),<sup>3</sup> 55% of the funds remain unutilized. In other words, the central government has neglected a program that could have addressed

glaring gender disparity and empower women in the long run. Instead, populist schemes of immediate hand-outs to buy votes remain the current government's priority.

Across the world, the emergence of rightwing politics and governments heavily undermine the cause of feminist women. 'Feminism' has become a dirty word and its advocates are trolled heavily, and even threatened, in social media by supporters of rightwing ideology. But in India, we remain hopeful. The women of India, especially the younger generation and the student community, are becoming more politically conscious and active. Prestigious institutions of higher education, especially those under the central government, are becoming protest hubs against various draconian measures that curb the autonomy of these institutions and allow political interference in academic matters. Massive protests against rape and crimes against women have occurred across the country in recent years. Just last year, India

saw spontaneous demonstrations against the highly controversial and discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act that was passed by the central government.<sup>4</sup> All these demonstrations had large numbers of women and student protesters; and in many places, the face of the protest were women.

The idea of gender parity is often in conflict with India's traditional patriarchal norms. While the government and the political class have a guiding role to play in bringing about positive transformation within society, it must be acknowledged that laws and government programs are essential but not sufficient. The fact is that many of our lawmakers, as well members of the bureaucracy and the judiciary who are responsible for implementing programs and interpreting the law, are also products of the same all-pervading patriarchal mindset. The presence of a conservative rightwing government with a popular mandate makes the task even more difficult.

“The idea of gender parity is often in conflict with India's traditional patriarchal norms.

Image: <http://nolaworkers.org>



<sup>3</sup> Launched in 2015, the *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (BBBP) program aims to eradicate female feticide and improve India's child sex ratio—the editor.

<sup>4</sup> Signed on December 12, 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act grants Indian citizenship to illegal migrants who are categorized as Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi and Christian. The same privileges are not extended to Muslim migrants—the editor.

“Only a political system that is inclusive and progressive can fulfil the dreams of India's founding fathers of building a nation where equality, fraternity, justice and a life of dignity for all is the norm, not an exception.

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



However, one may take inspiration from ordinary people, especially women themselves. The 'Gulabi Gang,'<sup>5</sup> founded by Sampat Pal Devi from a poor remote village in Uttar Pradesh (a state in India), was established due to lack of police support in cases of rampant domestic violence against women. It started as a vigilante group watching over and giving support to victims, forcing police to take actions against the accused, and in some instances, publicly shaming the accused. It has now spread over several districts of Uttar Pradesh and has also become involved in other community services.

Similarly, in Delhi, a group of women students and female activists started the *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage) movement that question unreasonable curfews imposed on girl students staying in hostels. Girl students were refused permission to stay out after 8:00pm in a central university in Delhi, whereas boys do not have such restrictions. There are several instances like this wherein citizens' groups are being proactive in asserting their rights. But the difference is that while liberal governments support and even facilitate activism, rightwing governments detest and suppress activism and dissent.

India is a country of contradictions. We have had a woman Prime Minister, a woman President, several outstanding women leaders, entrepreneurs, professionals, academicians, and artists! But we also have blatant gender disparity, evil social practices like dowry, child marriage, feticide and infanticide based on gender. Only a political system that is inclusive and progressive can bridge the gap and fulfil the dreams of India's founding fathers of building a nation where equality, fraternity, justice and a life of dignity for all is the norm, not an exception.♥

<sup>5</sup> *Gulabi* is the Hindi word for 'pink.'

# Confronting the Present Challenges to Social Democracy

By: Conny Reuter

This article was written for the journal PRAKSIS. It is a product of my personal reflections and are not the result of a specific political process within the Progressive Alliance. These reflections have been nourished by my own observations and political experience working at both the European and global levels over the last several years. I have deliberately avoided giving any concrete example and have instead chosen to offer general ideas and analysis.

## 1. What are the main challenges to social democracy today? How do we persevere under political and social landscapes that are often restrictive, conservative, and authoritarian?

The list of challenges at the global level is long and has to do with the changing political and natural environment. The main threat remains the growing inequality worldwide although some progress has partially been made. The pandemic is mirroring what is wrong within our societies. The neoliberal mantra that the market would develop the solutions has become even more absurd in this time of chronic underfinancing of social (including healthcare) investment which, for too long a time, has been considered only as a cost factor. The reduced role of the state (upon which the rule of

democratic law is based) and the privatization of public goods are the main reasons for the difficult pandemic period we are in.

Social democracy has its origins in the Second Industrial Revolution, and we are now in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, with the ongoing integration of the digital and physical worlds. The classical basis of industrial workers is shrinking, whereas an increasing part of employment is becoming more and more precarious. The informal economy is not only

“Social democracy has its origins in the Second Industrial Revolution, and we are now in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, with the ongoing integration of the digital and physical worlds.

growing in the Global South, but also in the North and this does not only concern click- and platform workers! The growth of autonomous technology<sup>2</sup> and its emphasis on technical solutions is depriving mankind of its ability to shape processes more and more. This is the ethical question associated with artificial intelligence. The loss of human autonomy and of our capacity to shape our world responsibly is lost against the domination of algorithms and self-controlling systems.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'platform economy' refers to economic and social activity facilitated by online platforms. A Related concept is 'click economy' wherein businesses compete for a buyer's "click" on a computer to make a sale—the editor.

<sup>2</sup> Autonomous technology is any technology that can execute tasks without human control—the editor.

Democracy, social progress, and social well-being have been our goals in the last 150 years, with their promise to overcome inequality, build free and fair societies, and ensure peace. As one former SPD leader once said, “We need democracy to shape the market, and not the market to shape democracy.” However, the progress of globalization did not bring about a new wave of democratization. China has growth rates that make many countries nervous and jealous, but the political price is high in terms of the lack of democracy, oppression, and environmental destruction.

However, the social-democratic values of freedom, equality and solidarity do not need to be reinvented. They are timeless, but they need to be translated into transformative action under new circumstances and conditions. When citizenship is replaced by “consumerism,” then we need to build greater solidarity. And in times of societal polarization, of aggressive and dirty campaigning, of fake news and existential pressure on individuals, this process of solidarity-building would need new narratives. This is about establishing connections within societies and not merely about developing the messaging during election campaigns.

We have to regain cultural hegemony by developing a vision and a plan for the future that can capture the imagination, and not merely a rejection of existing inequality, discrimination, exploitation and the destruction of the planet. Societal and technological progress for the people at the global level are possible and necessary.

As a political movement that aims for responsible governance, the standing challenge remains that we are always between political ambition and necessary



Image: twww.philstar.com

**“We have to regain cultural hegemony by developing a vision and a plan for the future that can capture the imagination, and not merely a rejection of existing inequality, discrimination, exploitation and the destruction of the planet.**

compromises, the *yes buts*, who risk disappointing our supporters who embrace the political promises we made during election campaigns. The moral hazard for social democracy is much higher than for reactionary or conservative forces, and our political family is judged based on our credibility!

Credibility also starts internally: gender equality and diversity need to be part of our internal party democracy. Many times, party debates are about access to power and about competition of individuals rather than competition of ideas, concepts, and vision. When parties become a kind of *apparat*, they lose their capacity to design societal projects and find lasting solutions. The conservative right is always divided, but they are

united in their desire to gain and exercise power.; whereas in our case, we seem to preserve our divisions.

And finally, in my understanding, our work on international cooperation has to become more consolidated, so that we can overcome national egoism and tactical calculations. I am confident that a new generation of leaders who have considerable experience in the work of international cooperation and have a good understanding of the challenges being faced by our partners in the Progressive Alliance will eventually emerge. They will help develop new forms of international cooperation and solidarity, as well as new forms of multilateralism which goes beyond the reform of UN institutions.

## 2. What are existing landmark policies of the global political family of progressives instituted thus far in the face of these challenges? How are social democratic ideas translated into transformational acts?

The main landmark policy against global inequality is the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These are the result of a global progressive consensus concerning the major challenges of today and tomorrow. Progressives should exert more ownership over the SDGs to avoid a scenario similar to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) whose targets were not met. In comparisons, the SDGs are more inclusive and holistic. These Goals are also being supported by a large group of governmental and non-governmental actors, which can

pave the way in building a global movement.

In terms of climate change, the Paris Agreement was the landmark set under a socialist French presidency, and it opened the door for what is now known as the Green Deal.<sup>3</sup> Both the SDGs and the Green Deal can potentially pave the way for combining economic growth and sustainable development. The perspective should not be degrowth—like what some leftist movements are aiming for. We should aim for an ambitious compromise, instead of seeking the lowest common denominator.

In the Progressive Alliance, we have issued a statement calling for a renewed and inclusive multilateralism. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres will present a reform plan for the UN this year at the next UN General

Assembly. Based on what we have seen and read, our contribution has been inspiring and is on the right track.

The pandemic reminds us of the need for social investment in healthcare and education, and has forced us to abandon the mantra of debt and deficit criteria. This is a significant breakthrough, and we must use this opportunity to promote global vaccine solidarity.

Another progressive touchstone is to stand against any form of inequality and discrimination. Defending the democratic rule of law and promoting a rights-based approach is in our DNA. However, the pandemic has highlighted the fact that we are far from reaching gender equality, as women are particularly suffering from the triple burden of work, household, and education.

For progressives, international solidarity means standing shoulder-to-shoulder with leaders and activists from member-parties like the Philippines, Thailand, Belarus, Turkey, Nicaragua and many more, who are being persecuted.

Finally, debt eradication will again be on our agenda, coupled with progressive tax policies such as imposing a financial tax transaction (FTT). If there shall be a new normal, recovery programs have to be adequately financed. We also need to ensure that the burden will not only fall on the shoulders of the poor and weak in our societies.

And even though it is difficult, there is no alternative to conflict resolution. In this time of global competition between the United States, Russia and China, regional conflicts (like the one happening in Syria) are becoming regional battlefields. A new armaments race is possible and has already started in hybrid form.

“The pandemic reminds us of the need for social investment in healthcare and education, and has forced us to abandon the mantra of debt and deficit criteria.

Image: medium.com



<sup>3</sup> The Green Deal is a plan to reduce the European Union's greenhouse gas emissions to at least 50% by 2030 and make the region climate neutral by 2050—the editor.

### 3. What are lessons that can be drawn from the different parties and governments of social democrats over the years?

The experiences of social democrats in government are multi-folded and vary from country to country, and from continent to continent.

One obvious lesson is that successful progressive governance does not prevent social democrats from potentially losing the next election. With social media, followed by traditional media as accelerator, the pedagogical side of explaining and not justifying decisions has become more and more difficult. And we also have to recognize the difficulty of opinion-building in times of information capitalism, artificial intelligence and troll armies.

As I pointed out earlier, the public expect more from progressives in terms of the credibility of their governmental action. The divide between campaign promises and actual governance has cost many progressive governments a high price. It is not about corruption in general, but a single case in our political family negatively affects the entire image of our family. For progressive parties that finally gain power after transitioning from a dictatorship, the main challenge lies in cultivating a culture of democracy, which is more complex than building institutional democracy.

With the *Third Way*, the social democratic family has gained power, but it also lost its credibility because of the compromises it made to unleash the market potential upon society, which led to greater inequality and the loss of

security and confidence in the future. The classical promises of social democracy were broken, and the energy needed to rebuild trust is now higher compared to the short-term gain of the economy.

In many countries, social democrats learned that exercising hegemony over the progressive and center-left is not given forever. For many parties, entering a coalition where there is no two-party system has sometimes been a painful process and does not pay off, particularly when progressives are the junior partner.

In any case, alliance-building is more than building a government coalition. It starts by connecting with citizens, understanding their aspirations and expectations, and it continues by reaching out to the labor movement and the unions, as well as to other progressive social and civic movements.

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Image: [www.thetimes.co.uk](http://www.thetimes.co.uk)



#### 4. How can political momentum be built? What is the outlook and program for the future of the Progressive Alliance?

For a long time, we have been calling for “putting people first”—this is exactly what is happening now, as the emergency response to the virus is about saving lives. The approaches may differ from country to country or from continent to continent, but responsible governance means saving lives and progressives are at the forefront.

In the last few decades, we heard the message “It’s the economy, stupid,” and the focus of thought and action was on unleashing market potential and growth rates. But it neglected the taming of the financial market. This led to “remedies” for fighting the effects of the 2008 Financial Crisis using the same policies that had led to it in the first place. Only the Sustainable Development Goals raised awareness that much more is needed to save the planet and our people.

Now, we see that an economy-centered approach is not enough and even dangerous since healthcare policies and services are subjected to a strict efficiency and rentability criteria.

The pandemic has increased inequality at all levels: between and within the countries, between the rich and the poor, gender inequality, and discrimination of minorities. The unequal distribution and access to vaccines is only the tip of the iceberg.

The classical concept of maintaining the welfare state with social contributions and offering social protection is now being

“The classical concept of maintaining the welfare state with social contributions and offering social protection is now being rehabilitated. Today, the “modern” version is about *wellbeing for all* which is a much larger concept that also includes access to education and culture.

rehabilitated. Today, the “modern” version is about *wellbeing for all* which is a much larger concept that also includes access to education and culture.

The campaign of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) for a new social contract<sup>4</sup> underlines this rehabilitation with its five demands:

1. Creation of climate-friendly jobs with Just Transition. Job-creating industrial transformation to achieve net-zero carbon emissions, along with jobs in health, education and other quality public services.
2. Rights for all workers, regardless of their employment arrangements, to fulfill the promise of the ILO Centenary Declaration<sup>5</sup> with its labor protection floor including rights, maximum working hours, living minimum wages and health and safety at work.
3. Universal social protection, with the establishment of a Social Protection Fund<sup>6</sup> for the least wealthy countries.
4. Equality. Ending all discrimination, such as by race or gender, to ensure that all people can share in prosperity and that the appalling concentration of wealth in the hands of a few at the expense of the many is undone.

5. Inclusion. To combat the growing power of monopolies and oligarchs, ensure that developing countries can actually develop their economies and guarantee tax systems that provide the income vital for governments to meet the needs of people and the planet. An inclusive approach to tackling the COVID-19 pandemic is paramount, both in terms of economic support as well as universal access to testing, treatment and vaccines.

When democracy comes under threat in many countries around the world, it is high time to understand that this is a global fight and not a simply a singular one at national level. International solidarity is in our DNA and the Progressive Alliance shall be the place to be for mutual learning and building a common global agenda. It shall be more than a series of conferences and seminars; it shall be the momentum for social democrats, socialists and progressives to strengthen the alliance with the trade union movement and progressive civil society actors and networks. It is also about ownership and the commitment of our member parties. We are more and we shall show it. We can do more and will do it. 📍

<sup>4</sup> International Trade Union Confederation (2021). “New Social Contract: Five Workers’ Demands for Recovery and Resilience.” Retrieved from: <https://www.ituc-csi.org/new-social-contract-five-demands>.

<sup>5</sup> International Trade Union Confederation (2019). “ILO Renews Social Contract with Centenary Declaration, Adopts Anti-Violence Convention and Holds Governments to Account for Violations.” Retrieved from: <https://www.ituc-csi.org/ILO-100-Declaration>.

<sup>6</sup> International Trade Union Confederation (2020). *ITUC Campaign Brief – A Global Social Protection Fund is Possible*. Brussels.

# A Glimpse of the Future Social Democratic Policies in Selangor

By: Rajiv Rishyakaran

In 2008, the Malaysian state of Selangor voted out the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (BN, National Front) coalition for the first time since independence in 1957. After the elections, the three main opposition parties—Democratic Action Party (DAP), *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR, People's Justice Party) and *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS, Malaysian Islamic Party)—got together to form a coalition government, known at the time as *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR, People's Coalition). In 2016, the alliance was subsequently transformed into *Pakatan Harapan* (PH, Coalition of Hope), which remains till today.

Selangor has approximately 6 million residents and surrounds the federal capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Selangor contributes approximately a quarter of Malaysia's gross domestic product and is the international gateway to

Malaysia via the Kuala Lumpur International Airport and Port Klang.

The change of government brought along both improvements in good governance and a slew of new policies and programs for the people of Selangor. While only the DAP has identified itself as a social democratic party, the coalition was largely progressive in many areas, especially on economic questions.

One of the areas that this new coalition worked on was access to healthcare. Healthcare is now one of the most pressing challenges for any society, and Malaysia is no different. While healthcare falls

“The change of government brought along both improvements in good governance and a slew of new policies and programs for the people of Selangor.

under the jurisdiction of the federal government and not the state governments, we identified a major shortcoming in public primary healthcare in the Greater Kuala Lumpur area, where the bulk of Selangor residents live.<sup>1</sup>

Primary healthcare is available through both public and private healthcare providers. Public clinics are normally more accessible in smaller towns, but in the Greater Kuala Lumpur area, it is often located in areas that have poor public transport access and requires up to half-an-hour travel to reach by private car. Access by public transport could take over an hour.

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<sup>1</sup> Greater Kuala Lumpur covers 2,793 square kilometers that encompasses the city of Kuala Lumpur and the 10 local districts surrounding the capital—the editor.

For this reason, a lot of poorer residents still have to turn to private clinics, which could cost anywhere from US\$10 to US\$25 per visit, which would be nearly the same as accessing public clinics via taxi. The Selangor government decided to fill this gap by introducing a scheme called *Peduli Sihat*. This scheme gives poor families (defined as those earning US\$750 a month) a medical card for them to get treatment at participating private clinics up to US\$125 a year per family. This was a game changer to give access to healthcare for poorer families in the state, who either had to travel for medical care or self-medicate if they could not afford private clinics.

A study in Southern Italy discovered that 31.5% of hospitalizations were preventable if patients had access to primary healthcare.<sup>2</sup> The access provided by *Peduli Sihat* is not only helping ease the financial burdens of lower income families in Selangor, but it also helps protect their health and wellbeing in the long run.

The study found that of the preventable hospitalizations, 40% were for congestive heart failure, 23.2% for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, 13.5% for angina without procedure, 8.4% for hypertension, and 7.1% for bacterial pneumonia. Any of these will not only be bad for the health and wellbeing of the patient; but they could also be financially catastrophic for lower income families, if the only breadwinner of the family is put out of work, even temporarily, by these conditions.

Another area where Selangor has implemented several progressive policies is in the area of transportation. Our first major



Image: www.nst.com.my

## “Selangor has implemented several progressive policies in the area of transportation.

policy has been to provide allocation to implement free bus services to connect poorer areas of the state to public transport nodes, namely LRT and MRT stations. The federal government, which also has legal jurisdiction over public transportation, operates a system wherein private operators apply for licenses to operate routes that they wish to. This leaves a lot of gap in the Greater KL area which has no public transportation service. Starting with one bus route in 2014, the Selangor bus service currently has 43 routes, that otherwise would not exist.

Apart from ferrying general passengers, the free bus service has also created impact in ferrying children to school, especially secondary schools. Not all students

go to schools that are near their homes, near as defined by walking or cycling distance. For those who need to go further, the option is often a parent who can drop them off, or to rely on private transport providers.

School bus fares can cost between US\$25 to US\$40 a month per student, which is a heavy burden for lower income families. Upper income families normally drop off their children at school. Some lower income families also compromise their income/jobs to send their three to five children to school because private school buses are simply too expensive. Having this free bus service gives huge financial relief to these families, besides freeing up parents to have more flexibility in their respective

<sup>2</sup>Rizza, Paolo et al. (2007). “Preventable Hospitalization and Access to Primary Health Care in an Area of Southern Italy.” *BMC Health Services Research*, 7 (134).

job options. One case that I personally got to know was a man who used to drive a taxi earning around US\$250 a month in net income, but was able to take up a lorry-driving job at US\$400 a month now that he didn't have to ferry his kids to and from school daily.

And for the first time in history, Selangor has developed a public transportation masterplan. This is our second progressive policy. Neither the federal government, which is responsible for public transportation, nor the previous state governments invested in producing a transportation masterplan. While financial constraints mean that it will take time to implement in full all the 12 railway lines and bus routes, it is a very crucial step to guide public spending and government decisions in the years to come. This masterplan will also affect land use planning, which is under the local authority's jurisdiction.

Our third progressive policy integrates transportation with housing, by putting in place the Transit-Oriented Development Policy. In 2016, the Selangor government formally recognized the role zoning played in encouraging the use of public transport. We then doubled the allowable plot ratio (gross floor area) in areas within a 400m radius from any train (MRT, LRT, KTM) station.

Considering that the public transportation network is weak to non-existent in many parts of Greater KL, this policy encourages development to focus in these areas where there is already rail infrastructure. The policy however is not a "free gift" for landowners and property developers. Among the conditions imposed on them is that they must contribute financially to the construction of pedestrian connectivity in the area to enable

and encourage walking within all buildings and from the buildings to the train stations. This is a costly exercise for the state government and local authorities, but with the increased land value windfall for property developers, it is only fair that they play this role.

Property developers must also contribute a portion of the increased land value to the local authority as development charges. At the moment, the rate is 30% of the land value increase after the zoning (gross floor area) increase was granted. This contribution is earmarked to be spent on capital expenditure projects to benefit the residents in the area. It cannot be used for operating expenditures.

The final progressive policy that I would like to share is our food stamp program called *Kasih Ibu Smart Selangor* (KISS). The state has taken a bold step to give RM200 (US\$50) a month to families of low-income households earning less than RM2000 a month (US\$500). This amount is sufficient for all basic food requirements for a

family, ensuring that no family in Selangor should ever go hungry. This RM200 is given through a smart card (not cash) and can only be used to buy certain categories of product from our partner shops. By doing so, we avoid the possibility that the money is used to buy alcohol or cigarettes. Another unique aspect of this non-transferrable smart card is that it is given to the mother of the household, thus empowering her to make the spending decision for the family.

While these progressive policies are something that the DAP can be proud of, we still have a long road ahead in the state of Selangor to further narrow inequality and build better homes for all our 6 million residents. It is a work in progress, and we must always look for areas that we can improve on. But at this point, 13 years after taking over the administration from the previous government, we have definitely shown that progressive policies are welcomed and accepted by people of all races and backgrounds.♥

**“13 years after taking over the administration from the previous government, we have definitely shown that progressive policies are welcomed and accepted by people of all races and backgrounds.**

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



# A Century of Struggle Brief History of Thailand's Social Democratic Movement, 1932-2020

By: Sustarum Thammaboosadee

*“Socialism without democracy is pseudo-socialism, just as  
democracy without socialism is pseudo-democracy.”*

Wilhelm Liebknecht

## Introduction

This article investigates the development of social democracy in Thailand from the 1932 Revolution (that gave birth to democracy)<sup>1</sup> up the youth movement of 2020-2021. It is divided into four sections. The first part will explore how social democracy formed in Thailand and how it has shaped power relations at different periods in history. The second part will show how social democratic policy affects people's lives and how its major elements differ from liberal and conservative policies. The third part will exhibit the contesting policies from various

groups in Thailand. And the fourth part will examine the recent conflict between the neoliberal authoritarian regime and the social democratic youth movement.

## 1. Social Democracy and Thai Politics

The roots of Thailand's social democratic movement can be traced to the second half of the 19th century when capitalism first entered the Asian region, which brought along industrialization and the massive immigration of Chinese laborers. These sweeping economic changes led to sporadic conflicts, which later became more definite and organized. Thai feudal elites

assimilated capitalism by adjusting their political role and by using the tax system to manage class conflict.

At that time, ideas concerning equality and national reform were all under the umbrella concept of republicanism, which was most strongly articulated by Tienwan who was later jailed for 17 years. Although his ideology was considered progressive during his time, Tienwan did not call for the establishment of a strong mass movement.<sup>2</sup> Reforms during the late 19th century enabled the monarchy to gain complete power. In 1902, a new generation of bureaucrats launched a national reform movement, but it failed. Similarly,

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<sup>1</sup>The 1932 Revolution occurred on June 24, 1932 when the People's Party overthrew the government of King Prachathipok (Rama VII). Though the King was able to retain his throne, the Revolution successfully ended absolutist rule and paved the way for Thailand's transition to constitutional monarchy—the editor.

<sup>2</sup>Sivaraksa, Sulak (1986). *A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society: Collected Articles by a Concerned Thai Intellectual*. Bangkok: Tienwan Publishing House.

local rebellions that resisted the country's centralized authority based on Buddhist cosmological explanations of social change were also suppressed by King Chulalongkorn's absolutist state.<sup>3</sup>

It was the 1932 Revolution that introduced the idea of democratic socialism to Thailand. Though modernization began half a century earlier, this process merely centralized the power of the Chakri dynasty<sup>4</sup> instead of developing the rights of Thai citizens.

As the Revolution was under way, its leaders known as the “promoters” issued the People's Party Manifesto, which declared their intent to pursue social reform. The Manifesto adopted the Buddhist term *sriaryana*, which refers to an idealistic egalitarian society. However, the radical faction within the People's Party which advocated for welfare rights reform was practically sidelined from the first day of the Revolution. Instead, the monarchy and the Party's conservative wing agreed on a system of mutual accommodation, with the promulgation of a new constitution on December 10, 1932. This gave the king some of the powers that he had lost in the immediate aftermath of the 1932 Revolution.

At the same time, Pridi Phanomyong, who headed the civilian branch of the People's Party, proposed a Draft Economic Plan (called the 'Yellow Book') which called for welfare rights through a comprehensive social security scheme and the nationalization of all land. Pridi's Draft Plan, however, was vigorously rejected, both by royalist forces and by conservative elements within the People's Party. The backlash also resulted in the first military coup in June 1933,

forcing Pridi into self-imposed exile. However, he returned to Thailand a year later and quickly regained power with his appointment as interior minister.

King Prachthipok, on the other hand, finally announced his abdication on March 2, 1935. But before leaving the throne, the monarch issued a lengthy commentary called the 'White Book,' which criticized Pridi's Draft Economic Plan and denied the necessity of reform. The contrasting ideas of Pridi Phanomyong and King Prachathipok are shown in Table 1 below.

Most Thai historians describe these conflicts as 'elite conflicts.' However, upon closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that these conflicts reflect the struggle for social rights which seeks to end the privileges of the upper class.<sup>5</sup>

The conflict between radicals and conservatives lasted for over two decades. But during the first decade after the Second World War, Pridi decided to ally himself with the country's conservative forces in order to limit the growing power of the military. This was a major miscalculation on the part of Pridi.

**Table 1. Contrasting economic visions of Pridi Phanomyong and King Prachathipok.**

Themes	Pridi's Draft Economic Plan (Yellow Book, 1933)	King Prachthipok's Counter-Statement (White Book, 1933)
<b>Political Discipline</b>	Welfare rights reform is required as a basic condition for democratic consolidation.	Ensuring the nation's independence does not require welfare rights reform.
<b>Poverty</b>	Majority of Thais are low-income earners working in the agricultural sector. Collective industrialization is needed.	The quality of life in Thailand is better than most Asian countries, and even better than some of the industrialized countries.
<b>Role of the State</b>	Nationalization of major industries and enterprises.	Promote a non-interventionist state so that the state will not be a burden during economic crisis.
<b>Taxation</b>	Promote progressive taxation and land reform.	A progressive tax system will lead to conflict within Thai society.

“It was the 1932 Revolution that introduced the idea of democratic socialism to Thailand.

<sup>3</sup> Mead, Kullada Kesboonchoo (2004). *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> The Chakri dynasty is the ruling house of the Kingdom of Thailand, which has reigned over the country since 1782—the editor.

<sup>5</sup> Wyatt, David (2003). *Thailand: A Short History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Encouraged by the United States government, the Palace eventually forged a political alliance with the military. This led to a protracted period of repression as leftwing activists and politicians were either jailed or exiled, and even killed. Cabinet ministers and members of parliament (MPs) from the Isaan region<sup>6</sup> who supported the Pridi government<sup>7</sup> and advocated for social reforms and political decentralization were also hunted down and eliminated.

In September 1957, the army, led by General Sarit Thanarat, staged a coup that overthrew the government of Luang Phibunsongkram. For the next 16 years, Thailand was under martial law without any working parliament or constitution. Under Sarit's rule, massive infrastructure projects—such as roads, hospitals and universities—were launched. These mega-projects were meant to showcase the state's “development” efforts and buttress its campaign of anti-communism.

Because of these ambitious “development” initiatives, the state apparatus soon began to expand, prompting demands for more civil servants.<sup>8</sup> To attract recruits, Sarit's military-led regime introduced ‘welfare privileges’ for state personnel. But at the same time, 90% of the Thai population had no access to welfare services. As a result, many of the country's rural poor decided to migrate to Bangkok during the 1970s, while others joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Some also joined informal rightwing civil society organizations to gain access to state patronage.



Image: www.nytimes.com

“We must wait for the new generation of activists who are now part of the 2020-2021 youth movement to bring back class analysis into the struggle.”

With the end of the Cold War, socialism and Marxism became less attractive in Thailand. Instead, mainstream liberalism became the favored ideological framework for political reform during the last decade of the 20th century, with bourgeoisie-democracy replacing leftwing ideology. For example, former leftist scholar Kasian Tejapira wrote an article in 1997, which expressed admiration for the Thai-Sino middle class for improving the economy and for

participating in the 1992 pro-democracy movement.<sup>9</sup>

During the 2010s, the Red Shirt movement captured and gave voice to the anger of the lower class.<sup>10</sup> That sense of urgency and frustration was later channeled to the Phua Thai Party, but it quickly toned down its rhetoric after winning the 2011 general elections. We must wait for the new generation of activists who are now part of the 2020-2021 youth movement to bring back class analysis into the struggle.

<sup>6</sup> The Isaan region consists of 20 provinces in northeast Thailand. It is largely inhabited by the Isaan people who are ethnically related to the Lao—the editor.

<sup>7</sup> Pridi Phanomyong served as prime minister from March 24 to August 23, 1946—the editor.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Benedict (1977). “Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup.” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 9 (3); pp. 13-30.

<sup>9</sup> Black May or the 1992 pro-democracy movement refers to the popular protest in Bangkok from May 17 to 20, following the military coup headed by General Suchinda Kraprayoon three months earlier—the editor.

<sup>10</sup> De Jong, Edwin et al. (2012). “Red-Shirt Heartland: Village Level Socioeconomic Change in Northeast Thailand Between 1999 and 2008.” *Asian Politics and Policy*, 4 (2); pp. 213-231.

## 2. The People and Social Democracy: Impact of Social Democratic Policies

Though the idea of social democracy emerged on the Thai scene on first day of the 1932 Revolution, it did not become a compelling political vision until 40 years later. During the short period of democracy from 1973 to 1976, the Socialist Party of Thailand (SPT) played a significant role in electoral politics, gaining several seats in parliament. The minimum wage was also increased and workers were provided significant protection with the enactment of the Labor Relations Act in 1975.

However, Thailand's democratic experiment came to a bloody end with the October 1976 Massacre, when government troops and rightwing paramilitaries opened fire on unarmed student protesters inside Bangkok's Thammasat University, killing at least 46 people

and wounding 167 others.<sup>11</sup> The bloodbath was followed by intense government repression, as hundreds of trade unionists were thrown into jail while student organizations were systematically destroyed. The military also launched a massive anti-insurgency campaign against the Communist Party of Thailand, which lasted for four years.

The Thai economy benefitted from the transformation of the global economy in the 1980s, as industrial production shifted to Japan. This new economic dynamic also changed the character of labor and the middle class. There was a sudden increase in the number of female workers employed in factories, even as more members of the middle class began working in transnational companies or in the financial sector.<sup>12</sup> Welfare rights remained extremely limited, but Thai society was able to set aside class conflict as long as the

economy went well. This artificial sense of social harmony ended with the 1997 Financial Crisis, when economic vulnerability became the common experience of all classes.

The Black May Incident of 1992 ushered the longest period in Thailand without any military coup. Lasting until 2006, this moment in Thai history saw the development of the country's democratic forces. Certain gains in welfare rights reform were also achieved during this period, especially from 1992 to 1997. One major breakthrough was the enactment of the Social Security Act, which became the most comprehensive welfare measure for regular workers who comprise approximately 20% of the population.

But overall, the gains remained limited, since the state gave little allocation for healthcare. Existing pensions are also not enough to cover one's living expenses. The wage ceiling used to calculate the benefit a person receives is pegged at ฿15,000 or US\$450 a month. This formula remains in place in 2021.

In February 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister after his Thai Rak Thai Party won a sweeping victory in the parliamentary elections. The Party was a combination of various groups that included business tycoons, former leftist activists, local politicians, and new middle class celebrities.<sup>13</sup> Thaksin, on the other hand, projected the image of a hardworking businessman who only gained success after suffering a series of business failures, and has made it his political mission to promote economic development for the whole of Thailand.

In 2002, the Thaksin government introduced a number of welfare reform measures, including an ambitious program of universal healthcare that gave all Thais

“The Thai economy benefitted from the transformation of the global economy in the 1980s. This new economic dynamic also changed the character of labor and the middle class.



Image: www.bangkokpost.com

<sup>11</sup> Activists continue to dispute the official figures, putting the death toll to more than 100. The massacred students were protesting the return of former dictator Thanom Kittikachorn who had been living in exile for three years—the editor.

<sup>12</sup> Suehiro Akira (1996). *Capital Accumulation in Thailand, 1855-1985*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

<sup>13</sup> Pongsudhirak, Thitinan (2005). “The Thaksinization of Thailand.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. 27 (2); pp. 327-330.

access to basic medical services. This was done through the 30-Baht Scheme, wherein a patient is only required to pay ฿30.00 (US\$1.00) per visit to a clinic or hospital.

Surprisingly, the business community and other factions of the elite did not initially oppose Thaksin's welfare rights reforms.<sup>14</sup> Here are some of the reasons:

1. Thaksin's policy did not start from nothing. He stated in 2001 that 70% of the Thai population was already covered by some kinds of insurance— including state-granted insurance for civil servants and their family members, community welfare services, and private insurance. The government, therefore, targeted the remaining 30% or approximately 18 million Thais. Though this number is small in proportion, the Thaksin government reckoned that championing welfare needs will significantly reduce national poverty and improve economic growth.
2. This policy had little impact on the tax structure. The government simply made technical adjustments to transform the means test welfare to “universal welfare” without any corresponding budget increase.
3. To fully recover from Asian Financial Crisis, Thailand needed skilled laborers who enjoy a certain degree of economic security. Prior to Thaksin's universal healthcare reform, most Thai households incurred huge expenditures for their healthcare needs. In short, this policy had low risks in terms of policy administration but offered huge political and economic gains at the macro-level.

The introduction of universal healthcare transformed power relations in Thailand by changing the logic of that dynamic. Consider the following:

1. Welfare is now considered as a right and not a mere privilege that is bestowed by the elites to themselves and to their loyal clients.
2. By equating welfare with social security, most Thais now believe that people from low-income households are also entitled to basic welfare rights.
3. The concept of universal healthcare challenges the idea of 'welfare privileges,' but it does not take away the welfare benefits that are already being enjoyed by civil servants and does not impinge upon inter-class economic interests.

Yet, at the same time, the idea of universal welfare also rattled the insecurity of the Thai middle class, which had been traumatized by the Asian Financial Crisis less than a decade ago. This was one of the major factors that led to the anti-Thaksin protests in 2005 to 2006 and the military coup of 2006. For this reason, it must be emphasized that not all welfare rights that were introduced after 1992 became successful.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that the development of social democracy is directly related to the advancement of democracy. At the same time, social democratic policies are significantly different from those of liberalism and conservatism. Table 2 below shows the historical development of the social democratic program in Thailand and compares it with the liberal and conservative program.

**Table II. Comparing the development of the liberal, conservative and social democratic agenda.**

Year	Social Democratic Agenda	Liberal Agenda	Conservative Agenda
1932	Draft Economic Plan (Welfare State and Land Reform)	Undermine domestic business	Land reform considered as unnecessary /appeal to morality and rely on charity
1973-1976	Labor protection (right to unionize)	Obstruct SMEs to run business	Red scare / anti-communism
1990	Social Security Act	Undermine the profits of small entrepreneurs / increase price of commodities	Charity and self-help are better than state welfare
2001	Universal healthcare	Moral hazard	Only state officials and civil servants should receive healthcare benefits
2020-2021	Youth movement for social democracy	Tone down liberal democracy	Too distant for Thai politics

<sup>14</sup>Jones, William (2013). “Conversations with Thaksin – From Exile to Deliverance: Thailand's Populist Tycoon Tells His Story.” *Austrian Journal of South - East Asian Studies*, 6 (2); pp. 395-397.

<sup>15</sup>Bundhamcharoen, Kanitta et al. (2011). “Burden of Disease in Thailand: Changes in Health Gap Between 1999 and 2004.” *BMC Public Health*, 11 (53).

#### 4. Social Groups and Social Democratic Policies: Contesting Paradigms

There are four major political groupings in Thailand, and each of them have their distinct view on social democracy. These are discussed in greater detail below.

##### 4.1. *The Military*

After the decline of the People's Party, a new generation of military leaders led by Sarit Thanarat allied themselves with Thai conservatives and with the US government under the banner of anti-communism. They developed 'welfare privileges' for civil servants and state officials that became an important buttress of the corrupt military regime that ruled Thailand from 1957 to 1973. That system of 'welfare privileges' remains in place up to the present time.

##### 4.2. *The Conservatives*

Conservatives in Thailand are powerful but are largely inchoate. Various conservative groups appeared at different times in Thai history.<sup>16</sup> During the period of 1930 to 1940, conservatives largely referred to the proponents of absolute monarchy. But from 1950 to 1960, there was a change in the composition of the conservative movement, which now included the military and the Democrat Party, with King Bhumibol Adulyadej acting as their ideological linchpin.

While the military utilized repressive violence in its campaign to eradicate communism, civilian conservatives, led by the monarch, introduced a Thai-style residual welfare program for poor people in the countryside. This scheme established a hierarchical system with the elites as the provider and the poor as the recipients of



Image: focusmalaysia.my

**“While the military utilized repressive violence in its campaign to eradicate communism, civilian conservatives, led by the monarch, introduced a Thai-style residual welfare program for poor people in the countryside.**

welfare. At the same time, the October 1976 Massacre clearly showed that the monarch and his conservative allies would never support any kind of social reform.

From the period of 1980 to 1990, this conservative alliance began to expand by including business groups and those in the financial sector, and it did so in order to benefit from the global economy. After the Black May Incident of 1992, King Bhumibol attained political hegemony through the vast fortune that had been generated by his numerous properties and investments, and by gaining control over both the military and civil society.<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, during this period, Thailand's welfare program

was largely limited to civil servants, even as the state encouraged the rich to provide charity to the poor. Though the Social Security Act was introduced in 1991, its coverage remains very limited.

At the height of the 1997 Financial Crisis, King Bhumibol's doctrine of “sufficiency economy” was heavily promoted and offered as a major solution to the crisis. Its central tenet is to encourage people to cultivate self-reliance and not wait for any assistance from the state. This doctrine was later used by conservatives as a guide for leading a moral life, for being a good Buddhist, for rejecting Western materialism, and for showing one's loyalty to the monarch.

<sup>16</sup> Case, William (1994). “Elites and Regimes in Comparative Perspective: Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia.” *Governance*, 7 (4); pp. 431-460.

<sup>17</sup> McCargo, Duncan (2005). “Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand.” *The Pacific Review*, 18 (4); pp. 499-519.

The concept of “sufficiency economy” was later challenged by the populist wave of 2001, which introduced the idea of universal welfare. Up until now, conservatives insist on merely providing residual welfare while rejecting any attempt to establish a system based on universal welfare.

#### 4.3. Business Tycoons

The attitude of the business sector on welfare rights is greatly shaped by two contrasting perspectives. On the one hand, investors want to lower welfare costs since it could potentially harm their profits if they shoulder part of the costs of workers' welfare. Yet, on the other hand, they also need skilled workers who are healthy and have enough security to increase their productivity.

In advanced economies / consolidated democracies, these two perspectives are easily resolved through a bargaining process between employers and the labor unions. But in Thailand, such negotiations hardly occur. Because of widespread rent-seeking practices, businessmen gain profit, not by increasing their productivity and by properly investing their resources, but by establishing connections and gaining access to state patronage. In most cases, businesses are able to force their employees to work despite terrible conditions. This is conditioned by traditional Thai culture, which encourages the working class to persevere and remain in the same condition.

However, the expansion of the global economy during the 1980s transformed Thailand's business sector. There are now new players who survived the Financial Crisis and are now benefitting from the global economy. These new players need a highly skilled labor force that enjoy a certain degree of life security.

When Thaksin—a former telecommunications tycoon—became prime minister, he introduced a comprehensive welfare program that was supposed to benefit the majority of the Thai people. But why did a segment of the business sector champion welfare rights reform? There are two major reasons:

1. The reforms did not affect the social structure of Thailand. For example, the 30-Baht Scheme did not mean additional budget for the health sector. This policy only altered the technical allocation of the budget of the Ministry of Health, turning it into an insurance-based scheme funded by the state.
2. Welfare reforms that are imposed from above by capital can only be short-term

solutions, unless there is continuous pressure from civil society. For example, in 2011 the daily minimum wage was raised to ฿300. However, plans to increase the salary of workers have been postponed in the last five years, due to opposition from business groups who believe that the current minimum wage is already enough and that they do not want to pay more.

#### 4.4. Political Parties

Political parties have played an important role in Thai politics since the 1932 Revolution. However, the parties' legal route to power is often hindered by other powerful players. Since the Revolution, there have been 14 military coups and several prime ministers who were appointed by the king.

**“Up until now, conservatives insist on merely providing residual welfare while rejecting any attempt to establish a system based on universal welfare.”**

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



The People's Party was the first major political party which adopted a program of welfare rights. This is embodied in Pridi's Draft Economic Plan, which also emphasized the necessity of land reform, a progressive tax system and the establishment of a strong welfare state. The Plan later inspired the labor movement, student activists and the CPT in the decades that followed. During the brief democratic period of 1973-1976, several political parties also embraced the ideas of socialism and the welfare state. Even Thaksin's universal welfare reforms were developed by former leftwing student-activists from the 1970s who became part of his government.

The oldest political party in Thailand is the conservative Democrat Party. It emerged in 1946 as a split from the People's Party and has since become a firm supporter of the monarchy. It also backed the military in its more than a decade of harsh rule during the 1950s and 60s. Though this party is seen as an ally of the elite and the military, its program has often reflected the people's demands at different time periods. In fact, in 2010s, the Democrat Party adopted the populist welfare policies of their main rivals—Thaksin and his supporters—in order to better compete in the elections.

Another prominent yet relatively new political party is the Pheu Thai Party. It was originally known as Thai Rak Thai Party, and was later succeeded by Phak Phalang Prachachon, before finally regrouping in its present form. Though its original ideology was close to the semi-business party of the Shinawatra group, the combination of various factions (local politicians, former leftwing student activists, and notable business tycoons) shaped the Party's unusual character. Thaksin's pragmatism was a product of the dual-nomics of Keynesian neoliberalism. He stated that, "Socialism have a goal but without any means, while capitalism have means without any goal." His party is popular among the poor majority because of its emphasis on welfare rights reform. However, the Party's neoliberal side led to authoritarianism, environmental degradation, attacks on civil society, and monopolization of business.

**“In the 2019 general elections, Future Forward Party campaigned for the establishment of a Thai 'welfare state' and turned it as one of its major programs.**

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



During Thaksin's second term in office, the urban middle class began a series of protest demonstrations, culminating in the military coup of 2006. In the 2008 Senate elections, the people defied expectations by voting based on policy rather than on the personality of the candidates. After the military crackdown on Red Shirt protesters in 2010,<sup>18</sup> Pheu Thai Party won the 2011 elections by promising to enact several pro-poor policies, including a pledge to raise the minimum wage by 50%. But many of these pro-poor proposals led to renewed conflict with the middle class, which led to another military coup in 2014.

In the 2019 general elections, Future Forward Party campaigned for the establishment of a Thai 'welfare state' and turned it as one of its major programs.

<sup>18</sup>The crackdown occurred on April-May 2010, after months of protests by pro-Thaksin demonstrators known as the Red Shirts. It led to 79 civilian deaths and injured more than 2,000 people—the editor.

## 5. Concluding Remarks: The Youth Strike Backs

### 5.1. Decline of Social Democracy Under a Neoliberal Military Regime, 2016-2020

The military government who came to power in 2014 attempted to incorporate some of elements of universal welfare rights into their policies, using various methods such as co-payment and means test welfare. This is clearly reflected in the 2017 Constitution, which also legitimizes the current direction of the state that combines neoliberalism in economic policy with conservatism in social policy.

Because the Constitution was drafted under undemocratic conditions, it inevitably contains several undemocratic provisions. Some of the major provisions that hinder the development of welfare rights are the following:

“Section 42. A person shall enjoy the liberty to unite and form an association, co-operative, union, organisation, community, or any other group. The restriction of such liberty under paragraph one shall not be imposed except *by virtue of a provision of law enacted for the purpose of protecting public interest, for maintaining public order or good morals, or for preventing or eliminating barriers or monopoly.*”

“Section 47. A person shall have the right to receive public health services provided by the State. *An indigent person shall have the right to receive public health services provided by the State free of charge as provided by law.*”

“Section 54. The State shall ensure that every child receives quality education for twelve years from

pre-school to the completion of compulsory education free of charge...In undertaking to provide young children to receive care and development under paragraph two or to provide people the education under paragraph three, the State shall undertake to provide *persons with insufficient means with financial support* for educational expenses in accordance with their aptitudes.”<sup>19</sup>

Based on the three sections mentioned above, the Constitution clearly obstructs the movement of the working class. In terms of health and education, the Constitution echoes the embedded belief that the 'rich should extend charity to the poor,' while undermining the idea of universal welfare.

The limitations imposed on welfare rights reveal the two parallel conditions that have characterized the Thai military regime since it

came to power in 2014. The first is its neoliberal character, which reflects Thailand's integration into the global economy. Privatizing responsibility to individuals promotes commercialized public service, which will benefit insurance companies while decreasing state expenditures for public services.

The second condition is that the further development of welfare rights will result in a strong spirit of citizenship that will clamor for a more democratic society. To prevent this from happening, the military regime is now attempting to limit the 'rising spirit of relative deprivation'. By destroying the people's sense of welfare rights and ownership, the military can potentially enhance their power in the long-term. Nevertheless, it is not easy for the military to eliminate the rising sense of solidarity despite authoritarian conditions.

“The further development of welfare rights will result in a strong spirit of citizenship that will clamor for a more democratic society.”

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



<sup>19</sup> Translation by the Legal Opinion and Translation Section, Foreign Law Division, Constitution Court Thailand. All italics are by the author.

## 5.2. Youth Movement, 2020-2021

The second half of 2020 was a significant moment for Thailand. It was at this time when a new protest movement was born, composed of a new generation of activists who are now questioning the lack of democracy and widespread economic inequality in Thailand. The average age of these protesters is much lower than those who joined previous protests, whether it was the NCPO 2013-2014 movement, the 2009-2010 Red Shirt movement, or the PAD movement.<sup>20</sup> Some of these young people also took on roles as protest leaders.

The current protest movement share a few similarities with the 1973 pro-democracy movement, since students constituted the main force that ousted the military dictatorship, which ruled the country for more than 16 years. However, in 1973, the students were supported by the middle class and certain factions of the elite. This time, the youth are now protesting against an authoritarian regime that is being backed by the monarchy, the military and the business sector. It is obvious that winning the social democratic agenda at this time is an impossible dream, but the movement continues to spread.

The formation of Future Forward Party (FWD) in 2018 gave the youth hope and a real alternative in the elections, for the first time in eight years. The program of FWP centered on universal welfare, decentralization, and education reform. Thai youth, especially those between 18 to 25 years old, flocked to FWP because of the government's repression under



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

“The COVID-19 crisis has magnified the problem of inequality in Thai society.

General Prayut Chan-o-cha. By voting in the 2019 general elections, the youth saw an opportunity to have a peaceful restoration of democracy in Thailand.

However, the restrictions in the 2017 Constitution enabled the conservatives in parliament to form a new government. A year after the elections, the Constitution Court ordered the dissolution of the Future Forward Party. Therefore, the new generation of Thais who were born in 2000 onward, witnessed an injustice that cannot be concealed.

Thailand, moreover, has become one of the world's most unequal countries. While Thai billionaires are among the wealthiest in the region, the minimum wage has not yet been adjusted to meet living standards. The median income of an average Thai household (with three persons) is approximately ฿26,000 (US\$866) per month, while the cost of living is approximately ฿27,000 baht (US\$900) per month (฿9,000 per person). Most Thais have a low quality of life. Their life needs are hierarchically divided—healthcare,

education, public transport, housing, quality food, retirement, green spaces. Even people's dreams are hierarchically divided based on their income. We take it for granted that a rich child can dream of becoming a senator or a minister. But the most diligent child in the slums may end up working at a convenience store for the rest of his life.

This is confirmed by the World Bank's 2018 data on intergenerational social mobility. In its report, the World Bank revealed that those born in the lower half of Thai society are only 15% likely to go to the top 25%, while those born at the top 25% of society have only a 19% chance of ending up in the lower half of society.<sup>21</sup> The country's authoritarian government is trying to hide this disparity by telling people that they can succeed in life as long as they remain diligent, prudent, honest and patient.

These stories have been going on in Thailand for many years, until we began to accept that inequality is normal and that equality is unusual. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis has magnified the problem of inequality in Thai society.

<sup>20</sup> The PAD movement or the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) was an anti-Thaksin protest movement. The NCPO movement, on the other hand, refers to the series of protest actions against Thaksin's sister, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. This paved the way for the 2014 coup and the formation of a military junta called the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—*the editor*.

<sup>21</sup> World Bank (2018). *Global Database on Intergenerational Mobility*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

By the middle of 2020, the student movement began calling for “universal welfare.” This call is reflected in the famous hashtag #IfThaiPoliticsWereGood (#ถ้าการเมืองดี). By doing so, young people wrestled with the problem of how politics shape their lives. Unsurprisingly, the 2020 protest rallies did not merely advance liberal democratic ideas, but they also articulated the principles of economic egalitarianism and social democracy.

One example is Thanaporn Prompat—a high school student from Maha Sarakham Province in northeast Thailand. During a protest gathering in her campus, Thanaporn delivered a speech wherein she described Thailand as a failed state for its repeated failure to establish a welfare state.

She is only one among many young Thai political activists who are championing the cause of social democracy. Chanin Wongso, a student from Thammasat University, was arrested and is now under trial after he delivered a speech suggesting that the budget for the royal family and the military should instead be used for the welfare of ordinary people.

During one of the rallies in early 2021, the youth political group REDEM issued a statement containing their three-point aim: reform of the monarchy, demilitarization, and establishment of a welfare state.

Opposition parties, on the other hand, are toning down the protests as a movement for liberal democracy and by focusing on their demand for the resignation of the prime minister. Opposition MPs, in other words, are reluctant to fight for a more progressive agenda of economic egalitarianism compared to the youth movement.



High school student Thanaporn Prompat addressing the crowd during a July 2020 flash mob in Maha Sarakham Province. (Photo provided by the author.)



Chanin Wongso (ชานินทร์ วงศ์ศรี) during a protest in Bangkok. (Photo provided by the author.)

No one can predict what the future will bring to the student protest movement. But one thing is certain: the present movement for social democracy is the culmination of almost a century of protest actions by the people. The welfare state and social democracy are no longer alien concepts for the new generation of activists.

Time is on our side. We have nothing to lose but our chains. We have a world to win. ♡



Statement released by the Free Youth on its Facebook page before the February 26, 2021 Protest. The last point states, “Fight poverty through the welfare state.” (Photo provided by the author.)

# Setting the Standard Social Democracy and the Healthcare System in New Zealand

By: Peter Davis

The New Zealand Labour Party (NZLP) was formed in 1916 by a coming together of various socialist parties and trade unions. It did not achieve power until 1935, and held office for its longest term at that time through to the late 1940s. It has always been strongest in the urban areas and its early leaders were of migrant stock (Australian, Scottish, English).

While the Party had its roots in the labor movement and even to this day has affiliated blue-collar unions, it forged an alliance with the indigenous Maori people of New Zealand in 1936 (an alliance that has mostly lasted the test of time), and it has increasingly become a social democratic rather than a specifically “labor” or “democratic socialist” party as it came to rely on women, the young, liberal urban professionals, and public sector workers for electoral success.

This trend was reinforced by the introduction of proportional representation in 1996 modelled on

“While the New Zealand Labour Party had its roots in the labor movement and even to this day has affiliated blue-collar unions, it forged an alliance with the indigenous Maori people in 1936 that has mostly lasted the test of time.

Image: [www.facebook.com/NZLabourParty](https://www.facebook.com/NZLabourParty)



the German system of Mixed-Member Proportional (the biggest electoral change since universal suffrage was provided to women in 1893 and seats set aside for Maori in 1867). This electoral innovation completed the movement of the NZLP from a broad-spectrum left-of-center party to one closer to the center with the Greens to its left and the conservative National Party mirroring it to the right-of-center.

The First Labour Government entered office in 1935 headed by Michael Joseph Savage, a miner, laborer and trade unionist of Australian stock. He and his colleagues are seen as architects of the foundations of the modern welfare state, including the healthcare system. The party campaigned for the introduction of the Social Security Act in 1938 which provided, for the first time in New Zealand and possibly the world, comprehensive social security support, including unemployment, pensions, child benefits—along with university healthcare which provided free hospital care, doctors' visits, medications, and other health benefits. This was paid for by an increase in income tax.

The key features of the New Zealand healthcare system are free care in public hospitals, subsidized care for access to family doctors who deal with 90% of medical encounters and control referral to hospitals, and subsidized care for access to specialists. There is also a universal school dental service staffed by non-graduate dental therapists founded in the 1920s, and a comprehensive injury care, rehabilitation and compensation system that grew out of workers' compensation in the 1970s and is funded by a levy on workers and employers. Finally, New Zealand established a drug subsidy agency in 1993 that negotiates with pharmaceutical companies and has

managed to reduce prices to half their normal market level. Most New Zealanders pay a nominal sum for medications dispensed by pharmacists.

It should be noted that many of these innovations were introduced “across party lines.” Thus, the school dental service was introduced in the 1920s by conservative parties, but has stood the test of time under different partisan governments. The injury system—called Accident Compensation—was founded following a commission of inquiry under a conservative government, but founded in 1974 under the Third Labour Government, led by Norman Kirk (the first New Zealand-born NZLP leader).

Finally, the drug subsidy agency (PHARMAC) was introduced under a conservative government, but maintains support from “both sides” of politics, in part because of the enormous savings it makes.

There are two areas where a social democratic government makes a real difference—maintaining the funding base for the healthcare system so that it remains universal in coverage rather than being privatized by degrees, and instituting preventive, public health initiatives that are opposed by the relevant industries that produce harmful outcomes and products (tobacco, alcohol, food, beverage, and also environmental effects, for example from farming and other activities).

“There are two areas where a social democratic government makes a real difference—maintaining the funding base for the healthcare system so that it remains universal in coverage rather than being privatized by degrees, and instituting preventive, public health initiatives that are opposed by the relevant industries that produce harmful outcomes and products.

Image: www.who.int





Image: borgenproject.org

**“In New Zealand, healthcare has proved to be part of the menu of policies that the public expects of a social democratic government, along with education, jobs, and other public services.**

For example, in 1999 the National Government opened up the injury system to private insurers, a move that was reversed when the Fifth Labour Government came to power that year. While superficially an attractive prospect, private insurance was going to cost much more and the criteria they applied to avoid payments was going to lead to a steady decline in benefits. Similarly, the National Government of 2008-2017 steadily, but subtly, ran down the health system such that the incoming Labour/New Zealand First coalition government in 2017 had to inject large amounts of funds into the system to prevent its erosion. The NZLP has also opposed tax write-offs for private insurance cover. Again, a superficially attractive initiative, however it benefits the more affluent and requires subsidization from the taxpayer to maintain its viability (this has been the Australian experience).

The picture on preventive, public health policy is more mixed. In 1990, the last year of the Fourth Labour Government, the Minister of Health, Helen Clark, introduced the Smoke-free Environment Act which protected employees and public spaces from smoking. This was not repealed or weakened by

the incoming conservative government. All tobacco sponsorship was also bought out and banned. The Fifth Labour Government led by Helen Clark introduced nutrition and other initiatives in schools, but not much has been done to tackle the issue of obesity, against industry opposition and possibly a lack of public support. Similarly, with environmental hazards and climate change, the current NZLP government led by Jacinda Ardern, has moved slowly as it tries to bring public opinion with it against opposition from industrial interests and the National Party.

What are the lessons? Some factors are specific to the New Zealand experience. For example, the Great Depression of the 1930s provided the radical fuel for a major initiative such as the Social Security Act of 1938. That said, many of these features of the welfare state are now advocated by technocratic organizations such as the World Bank. No country can now do without a version of unemployment insurance and pension schemes, and the concept of universal health coverage is accepted around the world. Thus, initiatives that were seen as radical in the 1930s have

become basic building blocks of modern, well-governed societies, although they can still meet major opposition. More important is establishing the long-term sustainability of these systems, with funding that has wide public support and that is seen to be efficient, fair, and sufficient. The fundamental fairness of the universal principle in healthcare can be accepted by almost all social groups, regardless of cultural background. However, maintaining these systems against tax-cutting conservative governments is harder. For example, the incoming NZLP/New Zealand First government of 2017 had to commit to reversing the tax cuts promised by the previous National Government in order to protect basic public services.

In New Zealand, healthcare has proved to be part of the menu of policies that the public expects of a social democratic government, along with education, jobs, and other public services. Conservative governments also pay lip service to these features of a modern, civilized society, but actually work to erode and undermine them in subtle ways. Harder to advance has been the public health agenda, since here one can come up against public opinion as well as major industrial vested interests.

It has been estimated that 80% of health status advance comes, not from healthcare, but from the broader policy mix one expects of a social democratic government; namely, good education, a higher standard of living, urban sanitation, housing access, and public health. So, yes, progressives should advance the cause of universal healthcare, but they should also see it as part of a broader social democratic agenda that one comes to expect of a modern, civilized and caring society. 📍

# The Inextricable Link of Socialism and Democracy

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

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

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

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

“Social welfare is necessary if citizens are to enjoy the highest quality of life.

Image: [www.shethepeople.tv](http://www.shethepeople.tv)





Image: www.malaymail.com

“Neoliberalism's ultimate aim is to extend the logic of the market to all areas of social life, through stringent austerity measures and the massive downsizing of the public sector.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“If we are to realize human dignity, then citizens should not only enjoy the widest latitude of freedom, but they should also have the means to enjoy those freedoms.

Image: nglsh.alarabiya.net



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**“Social democracy is the most successful attempt to fuse the essential elements of democracy and socialism.**

Image: [www.nirbhayfoundation.org](http://www.nirbhayfoundation.org)



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Image: www.aljazeera.com

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

**Is there really an inextricable link?**

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

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

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

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

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

Image: news.sky.com



# To Be a Progressive in the Most Malevolent of Times

An Interview with Philippine Senator Risa Hontiveros

*Risa Hontiveros is a senator in the Philippines, and the chairperson of Akbayan Citizens' Action Party. She recently talked with Veronica Alporha, a historian at the University of the Philippines, Los Baños, to discuss her thoughts on social democracy and the challenge of being a progressive politician under the Duterte presidency.*

**Veronica Alporha:** Social democracy has been in the Philippines for decades already? How would you characterize its existence here? How do you think did social democracy affect the way that politics is being done?

**Risa Hontiveros:** I would say that social democracy has been here, albeit in inchoate form, at least since the earliest labor movement and the first socialist and communist parties. In its potentials at least, social democracy has been existing since the turn of the twentieth century. But the explicit identification as social democratic and the later democratic socialist tradition in the Philippines started, at least, during the Martial Law period and the anti-dictatorship struggle.

Today, social democracy exists through the various political parties, civil society organizations, activists, and private individuals who promote social justice and democracy. It persists now, like

“Social democracy exists through the various political parties, civil society organizations, activists, and private individuals who promote social justice and democracy. It persists now, like other progressive schools of thought, despite vicious attack from national and global trends of neoliberal globalization and the new wave of authoritarianism, populism, and strongman rule.

other progressive schools of thought, despite vicious attack from national and global trends of neoliberal globalization and the new wave of authoritarianism, populism, and strongman rule. In the strong authoritarian praxis of the present administration, many social democratic organizations and individuals are constrained to fight for a just and more equitable society. And many, despite the threats and dangers, still speak up against actions that constrict democratic spaces. That is why Nathan Quimpo's description of our

democracy as a “contested democracy” resonates with me.<sup>1</sup> This is not just a descriptive term but also a prescriptive one. It is a beautiful call to action for all democrats, and especially for social democrats, because of our understanding of the underpinnings of our underdeveloped democracy.

During the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, the proponents of social democracy continued to develop frameworks and strategies that could push back against the repression. This was also done to

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<sup>1</sup>Nathan Quimpo teaches political science at the University of Tsukuba in Japan. He is the author of the book *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines After Marcos*, published by Yale University Southeast Asia Studies in 2008—the editor.

widen and deepen the democratic spaces where social democrats and other civic-minded Filipinos, even those who did not share our ideology, could address the roots of poverty and underdevelopment. Social democratic movements along with other anti-dictatorship forces have been able to defend democracy and were in fact victorious in ousting the dictator in a singular, first instance of People Power in the Philippines. I would say that these movements changed political culture by making us aware the dangers of one-man rule and by reminding us that after that unforgettable experience, it is an unfinished democratic project. We saw that we still have to widen the struggle for political democracy and, most importantly, we have to advance economic democracy.

Social democracy was also able to contribute to governance by improving the country's relative inclusivity in terms of political participation and empowerment. Social democracy also inspired the strengthening of local governance by pushing for the empowerment of citizens through active citizenship mechanisms.

**VA:** You have been talking about the character of democracy in the country and we know that you have participated in elections multiple times. Can you tell us about your experience as a progressive leader who did not have the machinery of traditional politicians and as someone who only has a movement behind her? How would you describe your campaigns and how did you frame such campaigns along social democratic lines in an electoral politics dominated by the elite?

**RH:** I was really lucky that my own political community, Akbayan, went through the same changes in worldview that I had to go through in order to undertake my various political tasks. Our reflex regarding elections used to be to reject and even boycott it. Even in my own original political bloc, we were



**“It has been very clear to Akbayan and to me that we did not have the same political machinery as the traditional politicians. But what we had was precisely the party, and the social movement of which it is a part and from which it originated.**

always focused on extra parliamentary work and cultural work. Parliamentary work was a poor third sphere of engagement. But Akbayan eventually started to think about the possibility of bringing our agenda for change into the parliamentary arena, as well. I guess a turning point also for Akbayan was being part of the movement that successfully passed the party-list law, which introduced proportional representation in Congress as commanded by the Constitution.

So, framing my own electoral work as a party-list nominee and now working in the Senate, has always been in terms of the Akbayan agenda, particularly its platform of governance. We admit new elements into that agenda through my legislative work, by working with new partners along the lines that I

learned in Akbayan. And yes, ever since Akbayan ran in the party-list election, and then even when I ran for the Senate and won on my third and last try, it has been very clear to Akbayan and to me that we did not have the same political machinery as the traditional politicians—not a fraction of the resources that they already have, or that they can mobilize with their private sector partners, or more shadily from corruption in government. But what we had was precisely the party, and the social movement of which it is a part and from which it originated. That is something that cannot be reduced to monetary terms. It is a renewable resource that is so precious for an activist and a politician like me. It informs my legislative work and it is also a key muscle that I rely on in my electoral struggle and parliamentary work.

**VA:** You have been working with politicians who can be characterized as conservatives, or at best centrists. I imagine that to be really challenging. How do you navigate working with them given your progressive positions and identified non-negotiables as a social democrat? How does a progressive work in a den full of conservatives?

**RH:** Akbayan already had to start making calculations even when we were first building the party and first gearing it up for the electoral contest, political, and legislative contest. We did the same when we were in coalition with the Liberal Party in terms of governance. So, as one of the comrades who represented the party in the House of the Representatives, and now in the Senate, I brought those calculations along as part of my luggage.<sup>2</sup> There are certain rules in the way that politics happens now.

So, the party and I have had to learn those rules in order to navigate them. But the point of being a social democrat is to change those rules. That is why we have our electoral and political reform agenda as the first beachhead that we want to make so we can create spaces for our economic and other social reform agenda. We are trying to bring in another set of rules. We want to change them. That is why even in our party constitution, we have the aspiration to shift our country to a parliamentary form of government appropriate to the Philippines.

We battle within the rules of the current system, we have won some victories, we swallowed more defeats, but we also have this strategic goal of changing the rules of the game, to open up more spaces for more ideological parties and for the more organized citizens. Working in the Senate now for half

a decade, Akbayan and I, with other new partners, have not wasted our time and space. We were able to pass a dozen of laws that serve the agenda of our organized sectors. We have also had many “kill bill” moments. We laid ourselves on the tracks and tried to stop an oncoming train from getting through. More often than not, we failed. There have been times that I had to vote alone against a law that was identified by one or two Akbayan sectors as unacceptable, and other bills as well that really impacted our already contested democracy. But I think the way Akbayan sized up the situation and made calculations about how to navigate spaces for compromise, given the current rules and our non-negotiables, prepared me in large part. There are still unexpected moments, but Akbayan never sent me empty-handed, even in a comparatively newer space like the Senate. And the party affirms that we are first and always, both a parliamentary party and a mass movement party. The ways that we work outside and inside an institution have been well-established in the past two decades.

“Akbayan affirms that we are first and always, both a parliamentary party and a mass movement party.”



**VA:** Can you give us an example of a landmark legislation championed by the progressive movement or by your office in the Senate that you think really changed the lives of Filipinos for the better?

**RH:** The first thing that comes to mind whenever I am asked that question is the Expanded Maternity Leave Law. Until now, women and even men, send us messages, asking us questions about their rights under the law. Or once in a while, people will message us and tell us about how this law benefitted them. This law brought us into the international standards set by the International Labour Organization. It provides the optimal environment both for maternal and child health. It supports exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life.

<sup>2</sup>The Philippines has a bicameral legislature composed of the Senate (upper chamber) and the House of Representatives (lower chamber)—*the editor*.

It allows ample recuperation for the mother and when the mother and baby are healthier and less sickly, eventually we reduce the financial burden on health-related social services. By providing opportunities to the fathers to share in child-rearing, not only do we nurture the bonds between the fathers and the babies, we also help create more gender equal households and families.

**VA:** The Expanded Maternity Leave Law is a good example of a progressive legislation because it addresses intersecting rights and interests like women's rights, worker's rights, and the rights of the child. But how did you build coalitions when you were pushing for this law and where did the challenges come from?

**RH:** As in all the bills and laws related to women, the true heroes were we women ourselves. There were women in civil society, primarily labor, and women in government institutions. Many of the government agencies at the hearing up to the plenary were represented by women. And then from the private sector, we also had more women speaking up for each other beyond the objections of the business community. And the organizations that were most active were, of course, the unions, and the care workers—obstetricians, gynecologists, pediatricians, and psychologists. There were successful lobbying efforts, and I remember that there were a few ringers being thrown into the process, so we really had to negotiate on the side. One of the last issues was about computation and compensation benefits due to the lack of funds. These are the usual problems cited by the Department of Finance and the Social Security System. But in the end, the lobbying efforts were successful, both in the Senate and in the Lower House.



**“Social democrats in opposition, especially with this kind of administration that is so malevolent to the point that what it cannot buy it tries to intimidate, what it cannot intimidate, it tries to buy, can be very tough.**

**VA:** The Expanded Maternity Leave Law was obviously a feminist legislation. It exhibited women's solidarity across sectors, and I think it can be considered a feminist victory in national politics. How is it like to be a feminist in the Philippine Senate?

**RH:** Being a social democrat who is a feminist and vice versa, is an advantage for me in terms of giving me the tools to maximize what could be the gains in terms of the people's agenda in any particular bill. The committee hearings are an opportunity for me to expand the original draft of any bill, not just the ones I filed, but also the ones filed by my colleagues that I had the chance to interpellate. If a bill begins as an economic bill, I will try to insert social democratic characteristics in it and blunt those that are anti-social democratic and overly neoliberal. In women's bills and in LGBTQIA bills, I also make it a point to look for the social democratic implications or requirements. Nothing is solely economic or solely sociocultural or

solely political, we want to flesh it out in all its aspects. It has been an amazing learning experience given by Akbayan and our movement for me to use, to validate, to improve and to bring back to the body of knowledge and praxis of the party in terms of our parliamentary work.

**VA:** What do you think are the lessons that we can learn in your struggle as a social democrat in policy making and legislation? Based on your experience, is there a potential for the younger generation to gravitate towards social democracy?

**RH:** Yes. As a social democrat and I guess this is also true for any ideological group, it is easier to push for legislative agenda if you have an allied executive, if you have a balanced judiciary, and if you have bailiwicks and centers of power on the ground. But social democrats in opposition, especially with this kind of administration that is so malevolent to the point that what it cannot buy it tries to intimidate, what it cannot intimidate, it tries to buy, can be very tough.

But we do the best we can and we also gain lessons for when we get back into power or forge coalition governments, or eventually lead them. We have to remember that there is power in numbers. Always try to cobble together a majority. Keep on engaging with stakeholders, especially at the grassroots. And this is true, not just for legislative work, but also for political work. Mass media's role in information dissemination is of utmost importance, especially in times of crisis and especially that mass media itself has been assaulted as an institution. Then there's social media, an original democratic space that has been subjected to the lascivious eyes of the administration but was also instrumentalized now by the same. Lastly, we should never waiver in our belief for a more just and equitable country.

This is why we can always draw more young people into the social democratic movement. There is a huge potential still untapped. We have to be a pole around which young people will gravitate. Information is so easy to obtain nowadays. Learning about singular injustice or patterns of injustices on the internet compels young people to do something rather than do nothing. Young people care and this has been true for every generation. A decade ago, it was fashionable for observers to say that young people did not care, did not know and did not understand. I disagree. I think each generation has a different way, idiom, and language. As social democrats, we need to reconnect, to have that dialogue so we can also have, not just a multiclass, not just a multisectoral, not just a multi-identity, but also a

multigenerational social democratic movement. If social democratic parties and movements like us can encourage and hone that natural impulse of caring among young people rather than dismiss them, then there is more chance for young people to engage. Why should they want to be with us if we don't value them as equals?

**VA:** If you have a message for the youth of today whose energy you think we can tap for social democracy and the progressive movement, what would it be? How would you call on to them at this time?

**RH:** I would have wanted to call on to them the way Arundhati Roy called on all of us at the beginning of this pandemic. By telling them that the pandemic is a portal. Since we are in this space and time, and the pandemic has become a “super context” for everything, she asked us, are we going to drag the carcasses of our old lifeways heavily across the threshold or will we travel light and bravely? And step across that threshold and build a new world?

“I am confident that when young people design what democracy will look like in the new time and space, social democracy will contribute so much, that it will have a pride of place there.



People are talking about a new normal, but in designing that future, I would like to hear from the youth. What do you think should the new and better normal look like? I think it should be informed by young people's ideas and inspirations. How should health be like for every human being on the planet in that new time and space? How should the economy be like? And what should democracy look like when we step across the threshold? I am confident that when young people design what democracy will look like in the new time and space, social democracy will contribute so much, that it will have a pride of place there. So, I know that our struggles now are worth it. ♡

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