



GLOBAL
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FORUM

FRIEDRICH
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**SOCDEM Asia & GPF Meeting
25-26 September 2015, Penang, Malaysia
“Democracy and Development”**

Background

In recent decades, Asia has emerged as a promising region, where rapid economic growth has gone hand in hand with the march of democracy. As the rising tide of prosperity lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, the clamor for greater political participation and democratic opening intensified. Not only the burgeoning middle classes, which still constitute a relatively small sector in most Asian countries, but also the larger and newly-mobilized urban poor population, farmers, and masses demanded for greater say in collective decision-making. With most Asian states staking their political legitimacy in providing basic services, expanding employment opportunities, and maintaining high economic growth, the concept of ‘accountable governance’ -- whereby the performance of the state is considered as a key barometer of authority -- has inevitably gained some ground in the public consciousness.

In some countries like the Philippines, accountability has taken the form of greater transparency in the operations of the state, reduction in corruption, and constant policy consultation with various societal sectors. In Indonesia, accountability has taken the form of breaking the monopoly of oligarchs, paving the way for the emergence of charismatic, local leaders such as Jokowi, who undertook a meteoric rise to presidency on the back of massive popular support, especially among the youth and the middle classes. In other Asian countries such as Malaysia, accountability took the form of ensuring anti-democratic legislations such as the long-dreaded Internal Security Act were abolished, albeit temporarily, in favor of due process and protection of basic civil liberties. All these democratization efforts took place on the back of encouraging economic growth across new rising stars and newly-industrializing states in Asia.

Nonetheless, recent years have seen significant democratic reversals across the region. Malaysia’s ruling coalition party (UMNO) has effectively extinguished earlier hopes for peaceful political transition in favor of the popular, resurgent opposition alliance, led by former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, which won the greatest share of votes in the last elections. The ruling government of Malaysia has reinstated draconian measures, which have significantly curtailed civil liberties, while quashing opposition by imprisoning opposition leaders on dubious grounds and fabricated charges. In Thailand, which made a fateful transition to democracy in the 1990s after decades of military intervention and countless coups, the generals have once again assumed political leadership, muzzling the opposition with utmost repression and leaving little democratic space for the civilian population to participate in political affairs.

In Myanmar, which embarked on landmark political reforms since 2009 that considerably liberalized a highly repressive order, there are growing concerns of democratic stagnation, as a growing number of people begin to doubt whether the ruling junta is really willing to relinquish greater power to the civilian leadership. More worryingly, the country has been engulfed by sectarian tensions, with the minority Rohingya population suffering from what many human rights describe as nothing short of state-sponsored ethnic cleansing of a minority group, which isn't even recognized as citizens by the authorities. As a result, tens of thousands of Rohingya children, women, and men have desperately escaped persecution by embarking on a perilous journey across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, sparking a humanitarian crisis of epic proportion.

Among Northeast Asian democracies such as Japan and South Korea, there are also growing concerns over shrinking space for democratic expression under the leadership of right-wing, conservative governments, which have squarely placed national security and chauvinistic discourse above civil liberties. Even in the bright spots such as the Philippines and Indonesia, chronic corruption and simmering inter-ethnic/religious tensions continue to undermine efforts at full-fledged democratization.

Worryingly, Autocratic nostalgia -- the delusional and despicable discourse over how Asia's past autocratic leaders were supposedly effective and accountable to their people -- has repeatedly resurfaced in recent elections in both the Philippines and Indonesia, while South Korea's current president, Park Geun-hye, hasn't been shy about her deliberate efforts at rehabilitating her father's reputation, the country's former strongman, General Park Chung Hee. Meanwhile, there are little signs of democratic opening in other longstanding autocratic regimes in the region, especially in single-party regimes, where the state has employed all forms of tactics, based on both repression and co-optation, to nip democracy in the bud.

For long, Asia looked up to Europe as a beacon of democracy, tolerance, and prosperity. But the Old World has also been rocked by massive economic dislocations, especially among peripheral countries, with stubborn austerity program devastating the economy of smaller countries. There are growing concerns that regional solidarity and democratic participation in Europe has given way to banks/creditors-led bureaucratic governance. Amid growing economic anxieties, Europe has also seen a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, further fueling tensions between 'nativists' on one hand, and the liber-cosmopolitan leaders as well as the immigrant population, on the other. Regrettably, the 'nativists' -- right-wing, racist elements, which evoke traditionalism as an ideology against migrant populations have managed to gain growing popularity across Europe. Far-right parties are no longer fringe elements, but have gradually come to dictate the mainstream policies of center-right parties.

Aside from the democratic reversals, the quality of growth in places like Asia has been far from satisfactory, while a stagnant Europe is still struggling to overcome the repercussions of the sovereign debt crisis. Despite a decade of sustained economic expansion, poverty and unemployment continue to afflict many Asian economies. In the age of reduced social welfare, aggressive economic liberalization, and relentless trade opening, the lack of inclusive growth has become a common concern among many rapidly-developing economies around the world. In countries such as the Philippines, largely touted as the next tiger economy of Asia, about half-a-decade of above-average GDP growth rates have hardly changed double-digit poverty and underemployment figures. Meanwhile, few family-dominated conglomerates continue to swallow a disproportionate chunk of the newly-created growth.

No wonder, rising inequality is a huge concern across Asia and emerging markets around the world. In this sense, both Europe and Asia continue to struggle with structural and cyclical unemployment, especially

among the youth, as well as rising inequality, as decades of neo-liberal reforms allowed major corporations to extract maximum profit at the expense of labour. Given the centrality of meaningful employment to human dignity and egalitarianism to social cohesion, the existing economic paradigm presents significant challenges to both established democracies in Europe as well as budding democracies in Asia, Middle East and Africa, and Latin America.

Historically, the middle classes have generally served as an anchor of democratic politics, advocating basic civil liberties and political rights as well as equitable distribution of wealth -- elements that are pivotal to any functioning democracy. But the retrenchment of the welfare/developmental state in recent decades has led to the emergence of highly unequal, polarized societies, which has, in turn, precipitated a marked deterioration in the quality of democratic discourse and contestation across the world. In this sense, both Europe and Asia share serious challenges to sustaining their democratic gains and traditions.

The conference aims to provide a platform for progressives from Asia and Europe to explore and discuss much-needed reforms to existing economic and political institutions in order to (a) ensure more inclusive growth, (b) secure human rights and democratic gains, and (c) undertake appropriate policy initiatives that assert the progressive development paradigm.

Objectives

1. Provide a platform for social democrats to discuss, assess, and analyse issues relevant to Asia and Europe in order to facilitate a common stance and/or strategic responses to existent and emerging challenges;
2. Share reflections, and develop comparative assessments on practices, among parties and policy makers on issues of inclusive growth, sustainable development, and democracy;
3. Come up with a consensus agenda and direction on outstanding issues of common concern for progressives from both regions.

Program Schedule

Thursday, 24 September 2015

PM - Arrivals

19:00 - Welcome Dinner at Bintang II Function Room, Rasa Sayang Resort

Sergio Grassi
Resident Representative
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jakarta Office

Friday, 25 September 2015

9:00 – 18:00 - **Global Network Meeting at The Ballroom, Rasa Sayang Resort**

See separate program.

20:00 - **Reception**

Saturday, 26 September 2015

09:00 – 9:15 - Registration

09:15 – 9:45 - **Opening Remarks**

Jurgen Stetten
Head of Asia Department
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Jens Orback
Secretary General
Olof Palme International Center

Marie Chris Cabrerros
Coordinator
Network of Social Democracy in Asia

Norbert Neuser
Coordinator of Development Committee
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament

9:45 – 11:15 - **Panel Discussion:**

“Overcoming Challenges to Democracy and Development in Asia and Europe”

This discussion analyzes the most pressing issues that commonly concern Europe and Asia. It looks into shared challenges such as rising economic inequality, unemployment and threats to democracy that hampers social cohesion both societies. The speakers present their assessment of growing social, political, and economic challenges in Asia and Europe. Lastly, the discussion focuses on the future direction of the two regions/continents, and

how progressive groups should forge partnerships in bringing about much-needed reforms and identify areas for policy intervention and political action that should be engaged by progressives in the said platform.

Key Questions:

1. What are the pressing issues and challenges in Europe and Asia? What are the areas of convergence? What are the areas of divergence?
2. What are the roots of the current crisis in Europe, and democratic deficit and concentrated growth in Asia?
3. What are the necessary policy interventions and reforms? Which agenda can social democrats collectively push for, which are results-driven and have consequential strategic impact?
4. How concern should we be about the phenomenon of “autocratic nostalgia” in some parts of Asia? How troubling is the rise of right-wing parties in Europe?
5. How do we shape the alternative to overcome the challenges on democracy and development? What could be our common agenda and strategy?

N.N.

Indonesia

Neena Gill

Member of European Parliament

Labour Party, United Kingdom

Risa Hontiveros

Chairperson

Akbayan Citizens Action Party, Philippines

TBC

Member of European Parliament

11:15 – 11:30 - Coffee/Tea Break

11:30 – 12:15 - **Open Forum**

12:15 – 12:30 - **Approval of Joint Declaration and Closing**

Doriano Dragoni
Secretary General
Global Progressive Forum

Liew Chin Tong
Member of Parliament
Democratic Action Party

12:30 – 13:30 - Lunch

13:30 – 14:00 - **Preparation to Depart to Areas**

Kindly note that for the area visits casual wear is recommended.

14:00 – 17.00 - **Parallel Area Visits and Dialogue**

Area Visit 1: Penang Women Development Corporation

A showcase of how Social Democratic Values have played a pivotal role, in its creation of PWDC as the key State Government agency working towards the mainstreaming of gender equality, social inclusion and good governance across all sectors in Penang.

Area Visit 2: Penang Green Council

The manifestation of how progressive values have transformed Penang into a green state that is clean, safe and harnesses green technology. In doing so, Penang thrives to enable, empower and enrich all stakeholders to practice sustainable development that protects the environment and quality of life.

Area Visit 3: George Town Festival

GTF has slowly but surely become the one the region's most prized festivals. An initiative fully backed by the Penang Government that has social democracy as its driving force, GTF is a great example of socio-cultural democratization through the Arts, is an invaluable form of people empowerment.

17:00 - **End of the Seminar**

19:00 -

Solidarity Night / Reception