

Proceedings of the Asia Democracy Forum on the State of Democracy in Asia – Challenges and Opportunities for Civil Society

Regional Workshop, 8th World Movement for Democracy Assembly

2 November 2015 (Monday), Seoul, South Korea

On November 2, 2015, the Asia Democracy Network (ADN) held its first Asia Democracy Forum (ADF) during the 8th Global Assembly of the World Movement for Democracy that took place from November 1 to 4, 2015 in Seoul, South Korea. Approximately 100 participants representing a wide variety of organizations as well as regions attended it.

The main purpose of the Asia Democracy Forum was to discuss the state of democracy and assess the challenges and opportunities for civil society and the pro-democracy movement in Asia. Furthermore, the Forum was intended for the ADN, as a regional coalition body, to develop its strategic plan for the next term (2016-2017) in order to better respond to the democratic recession.

The current situation for civil society seems dauntingly similar in many countries across Asia. With the rise of democratic assault in the region of Asia, the importance for civil society actors to brainstorm feasible collective actions and share ideas and experiences to ensure the space for the civil society in the region was realized.

The Forum opened with welcoming remarks of Mr. Hyungsik Shin, first Secretary General of the ADN. He underlined the significance of holding this Forum in Seoul as the ADN was

established in 2013 in Seoul, Korea. By witnessing the challenges to the democratic movement in various countries, he suggested the participants to take advantage of the Forum as a platform to discuss problems and find ways to overcome challenges.



Session 1: Assessing the State of Democracy in Asia (SODA) – Challenges and Opportunities for Civil Society

The first session began with the presentation by Ms. Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and ADN Steering Committee member, to present the outcomes from a series of workshops jointly held by the ADN and FORUM-ASIA on the Future of Human Rights and Democracy in Asia. The main emerging challenges identified from the workshops were the following: shrinking civic space, crackdowns on human rights defenders; migration, human trafficking, refugees; inequality and poverty; rise of ethnic and religious intolerance; business and human rights; climate change; impunity; militarization and armed conflicts. Her presentation is available [here](#).

Along with the challenges, the opportunities in overcoming these challenges were identified such as the increase in people's initiatives and use of social media, establishment of human rights mechanisms, more inclusive participation of youth, women, SOGIE group, indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups. The opportunities identified, were an indication for the ADN to start expanding in these areas to gain more momentum in the movement.



Following the presentation on the Future of Human Rights and Democracy, the results of a peer review survey conducted by the ADN Secretariat was presented. As a tool to assess the actions of the ADN as well as to help in the preparation of the future of ADN the survey was widely released to those that have come across ADN. The survey asked questions that honestly assessed the dire challenges to Asia viewed from the ground. The result identified the four major challenges to the region in terms of democracy: lack of governance and transparency and accountability; crackdowns and restrictive laws against civil society; social exclusion and marginalization of vulnerable groups; gender-based violence and

discrimination against women and sexual minorities, as well as religious and ideological fundamentalism and extremism (in rank order; the full result is available here). As a presenter, Mr. Anselmo Lee, the second Secretary-General of the ADN, stressed that as democracy is a cross-cutting issue, the ADN needs to continue working through solidarity beyond the sectors and themes in order to realize the democratic stability and sustainability in the region.

A diverse group of panelists from across Asia were invited to respond and discuss ways to tackle the emerging challenges, and brainstorm ways to work together to move forward. In particular, the cases of Mongolia, India, Nepal, Japan, Korea and ASEAN were shared.



Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay of the Participatory Research in India (PRIA) described that civil society in India is facing multiple crossroads with the changing political, social, and economic contexts, and the civil society's engagement with the government tends to create the same type of repercussion. He further underlined the importance of the role of a regional network like the ADN to effectively engage with various stakeholders and influence global governance.

Sushil Pyakurel from Nepal agreed that civil society in Nepal has played a vital role and yet civil society was very much divided by failing to provide overarching views during the process of making the constitution.

Reflecting some of the key issues that the ASEAN movement on migrant rights has faced, Sinapan Samyodorai of the Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers commented that one of the biggest challenges for the movement is to find resources within the region.

Jose Luis Chito Gascon of Human Rights Commission of the Philippines observed that there has been a rise in militarization, armed conflicts and violence in the region due to the lack of rule of law and justice. He also stressed that it is of great significance for democracy advocates in difficult contexts to consider security and intelligence by the state authority as a tool to control democracy-related activities and movement, as the government constantly changes its tactics.



Rafendi Djamin, Representative of Indonesia to the ASEAN Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights, related that democracy in many ASEAN countries are under threat, even in so-called democratic countries. According to him, it is important to bring as many stakeholders as possible in making the movement more synergetic in such new set of environments.

Tur-Od Lkhagvajav of the Mongolia Democracy Network shared the experiences of the Mongolian civil society in engaging with the government of Mongolia and its best practices through ensuring space for civil society and dialogue among the stakeholders.

Katsuji Imata of Japan NPO center and CSO Network Japan updated the participants with the citizen-led movements against the US military base in Okinawa and the Security Bills passed by the current administration.



The common challenges in the region were further addressed from each country's experience:

- ♦ Divided civil society and civil society at multiple crossroads.
- ♦ Resources and financing the civil society in danger.
- ♦ Continuing lack of the rule of law and lack of ensuring justice (impunity); political and social change; religious fundamentalism.
- ♦ Lack of broad vision to deal with the cross-cutting issues and collaboration with the other marginalized groups.

The first session collected observations and recommendations for moving forward despite the threats to civic space:

- ♦ Coalition-building and networking of the actors from the grass root level to the national and to the international level.
- ♦ More effective campaigns and advocacy from the broader perspective to magnify the

power of the people.

- ♦ Work on the cross-cutting issues with inclusive approaches to the marginalized groups of women, the disabled, the youth, the SOGIE, the ethnic and religious minorities.

During the Q&A session, the lack of comprehensive representation in the democracy movement at the regional and national level were highlighted by different representative groups such as women's rights organizations, Dalit people's right organization, and indigenous people's organization. Given that most national level democracy movements fail to connect different interest groups, it was highly suggested that a regional network like the ADN should ensure space and address the needs of the marginalized groups such as women, ethnic minorities, socially excluded groups like Dalits and sexual minorities more in their advocacy of promoting democracy in Asia.



It was also suggested that there needs to be concrete measures for the assessment of democracy. One participant argued that the indices of the ADN survey should be developed to help the local agencies who are more in touch with the peoples' lives on the ground.

Another participant criticized the discussion, indicating that it was missing the exact point that may be the opportunity for the regional civil society coalition. Describing democracy as the empowerment of people and their participation, she reasoned that regional networks working on democracy and human rights tend to look away from the real issues on the ground that in fact have a lot to do with democracy. There needs to be contextualization of

democracies in different areas, while advocating democracy through regional solidarity.

Session 2: Testimonies from “Democratic Hotspots” in Asia – Civil Response to Challenges and Threats and for International Solidarity for Inclusive Democracy for All



The second session of the Forum was to highlight the people’s struggles and movement for democracy across Asia. Speakers from Thailand, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Maldives, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma) and Malaysia shared the most up to date and tangible observations of the movement and their involvement in the field. The presentations by the speakers are available [here](#).

The first speaker from Maldives highlighted the country’s contradiction, being a most popular touristic island but with much continuing political turmoil. After the dictator was overthrown in 2008, the people of Maldives struggled to stabilize a long aspiring democracy. Enforced disappearances of prominent journalists and the detention of a former president democratically elected are few of the examples where Maldivian society lacks justice and transparency.

In Burma, impunity in ethnic and conflict areas continue to be perpetuated up to date, and the authorities have failed to address these human rights violations. Soe Aung from the Burma Partnership pointed out that the legislations in Myanmar have failed to hold the state accountable for the infringement of human rights. As for the upcoming elections in the country, he was concerned that there is an inherently flawed and limited system, and it is

difficult to give credibility to the upcoming results.

The case of Thailand was presented by the young activist, Phuthita Chaianun who has extensively engaged with the human rights and pro-democracy movement in Thailand. Her presentation focused on the student led democracy movement since the latest coup in May, 2014 and highlighted the excessive violence of the police and army, against the student protesters, which she highly criticized.

Sar Mora of the Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation introduced the key issues threatening civic space in Cambodia. Over the course of the time, the Cambodian civil society has struggled to withdraw the state proposed Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO), and ensure the protection of civil society in the country of which the young generations have played a key role.

Cynthia Gabriel from Malaysia condemned the dynamics of money politics and family clan that influence her country's political system. As a founder of an organization working against corruption and cronyism, she assessed the democracy in Malaysia as being dead and highlighted the need for the protection of whistle blowers and human rights defenders, as well as the strengthening of monitoring institutions.



The speaker from Vietnam addressed the difficulties for civil society in the single party state. One of the interesting aspects for the youth movement in Vietnam is to train bloggers in digital security and share with netizens the tools to overcome firewalls.

The General Secretary of the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) Nathan Law

summarized the 79-day Umbrella movement where the HKFS helped mobilize ten thousand students to boycott their classes by joining the rally. He further highlighted the student-led HKFS's engagement of dialogue with the government on policy reforms. Law concluded that although the movement failed to change the political system dictated by the central government, it changed the culture of political landscape of Hong Kong, and the people of Hong Kong became more aware of the importance of democracy, which he finds to be an important political legacy.



After the young activists' presentations, few participants from the audience expressed their support toward their fight for democracy in such difficult situations and encouraged them to keep their momentum and continue to fight for democracy.

One of the participants from the Southeast Asian region suggested the speaker from Hong Kong to share his successful practices with the young activist groups in other countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. In response, Nathan related that the mobilization of the people at the Umbrella movement took a long period of discussions and preparation by the organizations who had advocated for democracy, and further introduced the concept of civil obedience to the public.

Other participants also commented that it will be significant for these young movements to be connected. The speakers also agreed to have a network, to provide a space where they can all be connected. The importance of networking in many environments where democracy is threatened was also reiterated.

Another suggestion by Allan Alegre of Foundation for Media Alternatives to ADN was to address the impact of the internet on democracy in Asia in many aspects – how the information and communications technology (ICT), internet and social media has helped democratic movements, how states and corporations uses the internet as a tool of constricting democracy. He further suggested to use the different outlets such as art works, pictures, posters and internet and to develop an online repository for sharing useful information and networking for campaigns as a way to engage the online in fight for democracy and human rights in Asia.

From session two, it was found that it is vital for regional networks and movements to engage the young people as much as to protect the young democracy activists and human rights defenders.



In closing the Forum, Anselmo Lee thanked the participants and speakers alike for their contribution, and further stated that the ADN will try to incorporate the comments and suggestions made during the Forum and strive to play the necessary role as a regional network to support their fight for democracy.