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International Day of Democracy: Asian leaders should redouble efforts in democratic governance to achieve 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

(Seoul, 15 September 2016) On this important occasion of the International Day of Democracy on September 15, Asia Democracy Network (ADN) calls on the peoples in Asia to remain steadfast in defending democracy in the region. ADN urges all Asian leaders to redouble their efforts in institutionalising democratic governance as part of the national action plan on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as adopted globally.

ADN believes the 2030 agenda of achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals cannot be attained unless the process of democratization is integrated into the national action plan of each country, especially the 16th goal of the SDGs – promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

The theme of this year's International Day of Democracy is "Democracy and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development".

Sustainable development should be made for the people and its benefits should be enjoyed by the largest population of the peoples, not by the selected few of the elites. The only way to achieve the SDGs is to have the full support of the people and to ensure the benefits are going to the people. This can only be done with a healthy and functioning democracy.

There have been some positive developments in the region on democracy, in particularly, the historic adoption of the constitution by the Constituent Assembly in Nepal in 2015 after years of negotiations between the political parties since 2007, the defeat of the authoritarian Rajapaksa regime in the general election in Sri Lanka and the landslide victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi in the general election in Myanmar in 2015. Democracy in Taiwan is further strengthened with the change of government in a smooth manner. Recently, the election results in Hong Kong also reflected the growing demands for democracy led by the Umbrella Revolution with many of its young leaders elected into the Legislative Council.

ADN is however gravely concerned with the deterioration of democracy, shrinking civic space and undermining of the rule of law in Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines. There has been no general election held in Thailand since the military coup in 2014. Civic space in Cambodia shrunk dramatically after the opposition made huge inroads in the last election in 2013 amidst widening gap between the rich and the poor. Billions of public funds that were supposed to be used for development were diverted into the personal bank accounts of the prime minister of Malaysia in the 1MDB corruption scandal. Dissents are severely clamped down in the one-party ruled Vietnam with many bloggers and dissidents sent to jail for merely exercising their freedom of expression. In the Philippines, the intention of president

Duterte's to wage war against drugs is commendable, however, the manner it was conducted in the form of extra-judicial killings is undermining the rule of law – the very foundation of a democracy.

Situations in South Asia also call for urgent attention of the international community. In Maldives, opposition parties are clamped down with the opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed sentenced to 13 years jail term in 2015 and is currently living in exile in the United Kingdom. Democracy in Pakistan remains vulnerable with the military heavily having a tight grip on the political development of the country. In Bangladesh, the country is increasingly sliding towards authoritarian rule under prime minister Sheikh Hasina, who dismantled the caretaker government system of elections, a pillar of Bangladesh's democracy and silenced her critics after the backlash, ranging from attacks on popular media outlets to accusations of terrorism targeting the political opposition. In India, the enabling environment of civil society is now severely challenged with the introduction of the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act 2010 that restricts civil society's access to resources to conduct their work.

The failure of strengthening democracy in South Asia – a home for over 1.7 billion people, led to distorted development in the region. Despite rapid economic growth in recent years, South Asia accounts for only 3 percent of world's gross domestic product, with nearly 40 percent of its inhabitants living on less than \$1.25 per day.

In Northeast Asia, Kim Jong-un continues to rule North Korea in absolute dictatorship with the possession of destructive nuclear weapons. While China has made significant progress in economic development, there is a no sign that civic space is growing with many dissidents such as human rights lawyers and defenders continuously being harassed, persecuted and imprisoned.

Asian leaders must take democracy seriously as this is the only legitimate platform for any government to rule and ensuring democracy is a prerequisite to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

ADN calls on the democratic countries in Asia such as South Korea, Japan, Mongolia and Indonesia to play a bigger part in assisting other Asian countries to build democracy and make democracy a core value of the political system in Asia. Their experiences and successes will be important inspirations for other countries in the region.

ADN urges all Asian countries to extend their collaboration with the United Nations mechanisms related to human rights and democracy, especially the three country-mandate UN special rapporteurs for Cambodia, Myanmar and North Korea. While the former two have invited UN special rapporteur to visit their country, North Korea has yet to do the same. ADN calls on the North Korean government to start to collaborate with the UN and invite the UN special rapporteur on North Korea for a historic country visit.

ADN further calls on all Asian leaders to codify and enforce democracy in their national constitution and the charter of regional intergovernmental institutions, in particularly the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The Asia Democracy Network

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- Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), Manila, the Philippines
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