



Liberals and Democrats must fight back to reclaim their place in Asian politics

by Abhisit Vejjajiva

This article is the first in a monthly series written by the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD), an organization of liberal and democratic parties in Asia, to celebrate its upcoming 25th Anniversary in 2018, whose first chairman is the late Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, to whom this article is dedicated.

Almost 25 years ago, when leading Liberals and Democrats around the region decided to establish the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD), there was optimism about the prospects of democratization in Asia. People power in the Philippines and the events of May 1992 in Thailand led many to believe that these countries had seen the last of authoritarianism. Within a few years, liberal and democratic forces were gaining in countries like Indonesia and even in countries where one party rule had been the norm. Globally too, the end of the Cold War seemed to have vindicated liberalism and democracy.

In the ensuing quarter of a century, members of CALD worked together in solidarity, helping to advance liberal and democratic causes in the region. Through seminars, workshops, training programs, exchanges, field trips and public statements, members shared their experiences, best practices, and supported each other to meet the challenges posed by the often-volatile political situations around the region. These contributions, while often unnoticed, were not insignificant. That the organization continues to exist as the only one of its kind in Asia is in itself an achievement. It reflects the fact that liberalism and democracy belong to Asia as much as in other regions. That it now participates and contributes to global platforms, most recently in its contributions to the new Liberal International Manifesto this year, demonstrates its maturity and expanding influence.

Yet all is not well with liberal democracy in Asia, and indeed in many parts of the world. Recent trends and patterns in elections and governance suggest a clear recession, even a reversal in democratic development worldwide, with challenges in the form of authoritarianism and illiberalism fueled by rising sentiments of nationalism and populism, fed on by fear, anger and frustration in reaction to rising inequality and threats of terrorism. Brexit, the US presidential elections and the rise of extremist parties in Europe paint a completely different picture from the triumphs of the free world just over two decades ago.

Here in Asia, when CALD convened its Executive Committee meeting in Bangkok last month, we were extremely concerned about the continuing and intensifying dominance of populism, illiberalism and authoritarianism in many countries in the Asian region. The political situation in Cambodia continues to deteriorate, to the point that the majority of the officials of the main opposition party, now dissolved, had to flee the country, making free and fair elections in 2018 highly unlikely. In the Philippines, a democratically elected leader continues to subvert democratic principles and processes to consolidate political power in the Office of the President, not to mention the abuses of basic rights in the War on Drugs. Religious extremism and economic protectionism are on the rise in Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar, and this impinges on these countries' ability to foster good governance and democratic consolidation. The date of Thailand's elections remains unclear, and there are increasing concerns on the willingness of the military junta to transfer political power to a civilian government. All throughout Asia, human rights violations are still prevalent, and Liberals and Democrats are still struggling to combat fake news and misinformation as they try to address these issues. Moreover, the abuses of rights and threats to democracy are not only coming from old-style dictatorship, but from popularly elected leaders as well.

CALD is concerned that this growing trend would continue to create a space that constricts political participation and weaken civil and political liberties, thus, further damaging past democratic gains in the region. We stand against, and shall continue to fight, in a non-violent manner, the threats to democracy that continue to plague the political landscape.

Yet rather than lamenting the state of the world and placing blame on others, we recognize the need for liberals and democrats to re-assess and re-imagine their priorities in order to tackle the pressing issues of the world today, while retaining the fundamental liberal principles and values which ensure social peace and prosperity. Liberals must go back to the heart of the matter, which is to provide a better quality of life for the people. We believe that focusing on the essential needs of the people and efficiently responding to their pressing issues would pave the way to trust-worthy liberal democratic governments.

We believe that Liberals and Democrats must confront two key factors which have contributed to the decline of liberal democracy. The first is the global economic system. Concentration of wealth and economic power, often accompanied by corrupt political power, have made ordinary people skeptical, if not lose faith, in the democratic process. The unacceptable degree of inequality, an issue close to the hearts of people and one with no market solution, has led many to shun liberalism, especially when they identify liberals and democrats as standing for excessive free market neo-liberalism. The second is that liberals and democrats, once seen as a force for progress, have, in the eyes of the people, become part of an elite establishment, uncaring, irrelevant and sometimes even self-serving.

CALD has discussed these issues extensively and believe that we need show what liberalism and democracy can offer by getting back to basics. We need to demonstrate that we know what the concerns of people are and offer real solutions, not just abstract principles and ideology to problems that matter to people. Indeed, we should demonstrate that when applied effectively, liberalism and democracy actually offer the best chance of success at tackling people's problems through the process of participation and representation based on faith in the people. Doing so also means we have to truly practice what we preach. Public trust must be earned by being transparent and effective, as well as being liberal and democratic.

CALD stands by its fundamental belief that liberal and democratic values can provide sustainable, effective remedies to the most pressing issues and concerns that the world confronts today, and that the people would realize that populist policies and authoritarian solutions do not work and actually make social problems worse. But we need to get back to what we do best, being the force for change and progress. We have no doubt that history would vindicate us in the end, and that the principles of democracy, human rights, a well-managed market economy and the rule of law are the only pathways to peace, justice and prosperity.

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