

**CALD 25th Anniversary Conference
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Opening Plenary Session

Keynote Address

Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo

Vice President

Republic of the Philippines

Thank you very much to the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats for inviting me to be with you here today, as we come together to celebrate the things that bind us: freedom, peace, and democracy.

For 25 years now, CALD has fought for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Asia, intensifying its work during these times when all three are under attack from all sides. And what better way to commemorate this than by holding this year’s summit here in Bangkok, Thailand, where CALD first held its general assembly.

As one of the cradles of democracy in Asia, the Philippines knows this fight for freedom all too well. History has seen Filipinos bleed for their struggles and lose their lives because of it — whether from Spanish rule hundreds of years ago to the People Power Revolution in 1986.

It was Corazon Aquino, one of Asia’s most prominent icons of democracy in recent memory, who rallied the Filipino people to the streets in protest of the tyrannical rule of then-president Ferdinand Marcos. They dismissed her as merely “the housewife” of exiled opposition leader Ninoy Aquino, but she fought for her countrymen who could no longer take the abuses of the administration.

This fight was a personal one for me, since in my youth, I stood with countless others in a bloodless revolution where the world witnessed the Filipinos in their greatest hour. For days, people filled the streets with their cries. It was impossible to ignore the sea of protesters with their streamers and banners. What transpired was fuelled by people’s courage and thirst for freedom — one where guns and tanks were stopped by flowers and rosaries, where women, the youth and the faithful met the military forces with nothing but interlocked arms and prayers.

It was, and is today, one of the hallmarks of people empowerment. Real power had been wielded by the people, in the face of an authoritarian regime bent on retaining their grip on the reins of power.

Months after these events unfolded, President Corazon Aquino told the U.S. Congress: *“Today, we face the aspirations of a people who had known so much poverty and massive unemployment for the past 14 years and yet offered their lives for the abstraction of democracy. Wherever I went in the campaign, slum area or impoverished*

village, they came to me with one cry: Democracy! Not food, although they clearly needed it, but democracy; not work, although they surely wanted it, but democracy.”

The Filipino experience of fighting for freedom and restoring its democracy is a story worth telling, because it offers a story of hope that democracies are worth fighting for. And because we strongly believe that if we listen and give power back to the people we govern, we will finally eradicate suffering among our poor who work hard and long hours and yet end up with nothing. We will finally feed the hungry. We will finally claim the progress our people so deserve.

Today, I address you with the same resolve and with the same determination, that we never falter in our commitment to democracy, rule of law, and human rights, no matter how the rest of the world may dismiss them now. In fact, we must forge stronger bonds so that we can be better liberals and democrats than ever before, as we confront the many forces that trample on the very freedoms we hold dear.

According to a Freedom House report, democracy faced serious threats, as free and fair elections, minority rights, press freedom and rule of law — the most basic foundations of a free society — were at risk the world over. This year also marked the 12th consecutive year of decline in global freedom, with 71 countries falling back in terms of political rights and civil liberties.¹

Ultimately, the challenge for us today is this: How do we safeguard our democratic institutions at a time when its legitimacy is undermined? How do we keep the freedom agenda alive?

Here in Asia, populist movements and strongmen leadership are expanding. Repressive regimes are taking over, causing marginalized communities to suffer the consequences. When more countries are autocratic this way, alliances between nations and among people collapse, and, in the long run, shrink economies rather than expand them.

But a threat to democracy anywhere is a threat to democracy everywhere. People's freedoms are threatened by authoritative powers in many parts of the world. We must have a unified response to the challenges that we face, if we are to protect our world from a scorched-earth existence, where freedom has no value.

Today's summit is a perfect example of this, as CALD and ALDE, which is from the other side of the globe, are putting their heads together for the most efficacious responses to world problems.

Now more than ever, nations must find solutions together and create spaces for collaboration to face the enemy. Through these avenues, we build a sense of community and camaraderie among nations.

We have to help other democracies thrive by supporting institutions in our midst: those campaigning for civil rights, crowds rallying for fair and free elections, groups fighting for freedom of the press and free speech in an age of disinformation and fake news. At this

point and time, it is critical that those of us who aim to preserve these tenets of liberalism should restore people's trust in them. To do that, we must accept its shortcomings; how it has led to a world that has forgotten the sufferings of those who have been left behind by progress. And by accepting these shortfalls, we can finally shift our focus towards the last, the least, and the lost—and make sure that democracy and freedom work for them in equal measure.

Because is it not true that ultimately, freedom from tyranny or political oppression are not ends in themselves, but a way to provide our people with a life they choose? The freedom to choose where they will live, not be forced to live in places danger zones; or the freedom to choose what food to eat, not be forced to choose which meal to forego because food is too expensive; or the freedom to decide how they will earn a living; not be killed without due process, just because they live in the wrong side of town.

This is at the heart of what the Office of the Vice President does in the Philippines: to fight for the rights of those in the fringes of society—from social to economic to gender rights, among others. We have rejected the notion that the Vice President should sit idle as an alternate leader to the President. Rather, we have embraced the idea of being a working office for all of the days in our six-year term.

We all know the way the world thinks these days. That democracy is too unwieldy. That a lot of voices in the room become too difficult to manage and when everybody is talking, it takes too long to arrive at a solution. It is true — the voices can be overwhelming, but isn't this the beauty of democracy, of our freedom to express our thoughts? Shouldn't we all have a say in how we ought to be governed? Hence, we must stand alongside freedom fighters, instead of shutting them down or silencing them.

Back home in the Philippines, not even incarceration can silence our freedom fighters. One of them, Liberal Party Senator Leila de Lima, is currently behind bars for unfounded charges alleging that she is involved in the drug trade. For her dedication and work, a few months ago she received Liberal International's Prize for Freedom, unanimously selected by 100 liberals from 32 countries who participated in the LI's 99th Executive Committee meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa. This is proof that even in confinement, the voice of truth and justice will prevail. CALD's Women Caucus had a hand in that, having nominated Senator de Lima this year. Thank you.

The fight for democracy, peace, and freedom is long and arduous and demanding—but this complexity is what makes the fight worth fighting. We are called to be the leaders who will stand in the forefront of these ideals; leaders who will inspire the next generation of leaders to do the same. Leaders who draw strength through acts of empathy and respect.

We cannot simply utter the core of our beliefs and expect the ordinary citizen to understand where we stand. We must use their language, we must see where they are coming from, and we must speak with one voice.

In a speech during the after-years of her presidency, Corazon Aquino said that democracy, in the end, is the best system for ordinary people. “It is the only one that exalts them and unites them in peace across all the countries of the world. One can believe in a dictatorship; a few in an oligarchy; but only to democracy can the many, in reason, adhere.”

To keep the freedom agenda alive, we have to understand what is at stake: the institutions that ensure a bright future of our people. To speak truth to power, we must first listen with empathy and speak to each one of our people from the heart — responding to their pain, their dreams, their hopes. And in turn, making their pain, their dreams, their hopes, ours.

May we all be inspired to continue fighting the good fight and standing for the fundamental freedoms of our people, in our firm belief that we are never alone in this dream of making this world a better, freer place.

Thank you very much, and I wish you a fruitful summit. Mabuhay po kayong lahat!