

**Speech of  
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Thank you very much Congressman Blue Abaya. Thank you very much to the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats for having me today. All of us who stand for democracy in the region are thankful for your commitment as you push through with this webinar, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Today's event poses a very straightforward question: Will the 2020 US Presidential Elections matter for democracy and human rights in Asia? The short answer is, Yes, and very much so.

COVID-19 has affirmed: We are all interconnected; our

destinies are intertwined. When a person becomes infected, his entire community is put at risk. As more people get sick, entire healthcare systems experience the strain. Businesses are forced to fold, jobs are lost, people grow hungry; the national economy plummets, and governments are left with few resources to address problems that begin to stack one on top of the other.

And while this reality has only become starker due to the global health crisis, its philosophical underpinnings hold true for so many other aspects of our lives. Nowhere is this more evident than in the discourse on rights and freedoms.

When rights and dignities are violated somewhere, we inch closer to rights and dignities being violated elsewhere. Tyrants become even more emboldened;

voices of dissent become a little shakier, a bit less resolved. When lies are spoken from pulpits of power; when children seeking refuge are caged; when knees are pressed unto the necks of innocents, and those in power respond by stoking further fear and division—when all of these happen in what was long considered the brightest beacon of democracy and the mightiest nation on earth—then an ominous message is sent: It can happen there; it has happened there. It can certainly happen in places where democracy is much more fragile.

There is no doubt that the right-wing rise to power is a global phenomenon: Fueled by disinformation, populists tap into long-simmering fears and anxieties, and paint the specter of the malevolent other—immigrants, for example, or so-called oligarchs, or drug addicts. They

maintain the architecture of disinformation, further normalize aggression, and dismantle structures for truth-telling and civic discourse. They harass, jail, or even kill dissenters to stoke fear in the ranks of the opposition. They surround themselves with sycophants and weaken public institutions, further entrenching themselves in power.

Populist leaders are winning elections, paving the way for others like them to rise elsewhere. Scholars have a name for it: We are going through a democracy recession as developing countries lean towards authoritarian rule. According to the 2019 Democracy Index, the average global score for democracy has been on a downward trend in the last few years, with 2019 being the worst on record since the index was first produced in 2006. Democracy has lost its footing in

different parts of the globe—in some countries, the gap and distrust between government and its people continues to widen, and civil liberties, such as media freedom and freedom of speech, are on a steep decline.

Liberals and democrats the world over, evidently, face an uphill battle. And so, when rights-based democracy triumphs over populist authoritarians somewhere, then the pathways become clearer for everyone else.

Whenever an effort to push back against populist authoritarianism is mounted, whenever one gains success, a pocket of hope is formed.

The task now is to go beyond mere hoping, beyond mere rhetoric; we must look for such instances and parse them into concrete steps and strategies. What are the best practices? How did they campaign? How did

they engage the people? What messages were articulated, in which tone, through which channels, and by whom? When they fell short, what went wrong, and how can we avoid making the same mistakes?

In Turkey, for example, the democratic opposition had a better than expected showing in their 2019 local elections, winning important mayoral and gubernatorial races. How did they achieve this? By aligning along a “Radical Love” strategy: eschewing high-minded politics for local concerns, avoiding the trap of angry and divisive discourse, and always speaking from a space of commonality, with humor and humility. In the United States, the Democrats have avoided fragmentation and factionalism, and have spoken directly to sensible moderates who understand what is at stake. The verdict is still out, but the momentum seems very real.

Our own party, the Liberal Party, and those allied with us, know that we have reoriented ourselves towards the grassroots—opening up membership to more people from all walks of life, listening to their anxieties, aligning with their dreams, and empowering them so they can empower others as well. The process is still ongoing, but we continue to move forward. The results from the elections last May of 2019 and the challenges we continue to face only deepens our resolve to strive harder, engage deeper, and aim higher in doing the work that we do: To go beyond merely seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, and actually taking steps to get there—listening, learning, organizing, putting on our slippers and our sneakers and rolling up our sleeves to be with our communities. Much work remains, and more of us are needed to do this work. But like it is elsewhere,

the momentum is real. And we are determined to sustain it.

CALD, along with its sister organization FNF, have been among our staunchest allies in our efforts. Even in the time of the pandemic, I know that our partnership has become even stronger—you have been helping us reach out to and build communities, devise modules for online media literacy, and create spaces for truth-telling and civic discourse. This webinar is just one such space, and once again, I thank CALD and FNF for putting it up, and for being among our most trusted allies.

May we remain bound by the same courage and resolve as we move ever forward in the coming years. Thank you very much, mabuhay kayong lahat!