Breathing Democracy А РLАЧВООК

Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats





Breathing Democracy

Α ΡΙΑΥΒΟΟΚ

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CONTENTS

5 FOREWORD

9

PART ONE What's the problem?

28 In the shadow of Beijing

30 East Asian Countries and Type of Regime

37

PART TWO Why should we care?

48 COVID-19: A Threat to Democracy



PART THREE What can we do?

56 Wise Words from Leaders

62 Pushing back in the time of the pandemic

66 Liberalism as inspired by literature

68 Stories of Political Parties

68 Liberal Party (Philippines)71 Democratic Alliance (South Africa)

74 Stories of a Special Area and Countries

75 Hong Kong 82 Taiwan 88 Singapore & Cambodia 98 Philippines

106 Women hold up half the sky but...

112 Malaysia: Breaking Stereotypes

116 Pounding the Rock

123 Voices from the CALD Youth

124 Let's Communicate

130 Weapon of Mass Distraction138 How do we fight 'fake news'?140 Philippines: Hot Spot

FOREWORD



by Francis 'Kiko' Pangilinan CALD Chairperson and Philippine Senator

Write what should not be forgotten, says author Isabel Allende.

A book, a set of manuscripts, a movie, a song, a social-media post – all chronicle what we want to remember and pass on.

This handbook published by the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats gives us a collection of stories and insights on the challenges faced by liberals in Southeast and East Asia democracies, and the solutions tried and tested in these trying times. The collection records the battles our people have been fighting for: our rights and our beliefs we share with over four billion other people living in nations with some form of democracy—even as democracy itself is fighting for its life.

The slide of democracy in recent years has been fanned by rising sentiments towards populism and its kin racism, fascism, and extremism. In desperation, people have turned to the old, familiar, and more tyrannical ways of political leadership, mistakenly thinking that this will save them from a dark future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this democratic recession as many people in the world have lost jobs and reduced incomes, and are threatened by the health crisis.

This handbook comes like a refreshing breeze of democracy at a time when breathing literally and figuratively has become difficult. It tells of how people have fought against the fog of uncertainty and the noxious smoke of authoritarianism. It reminds us, especially public servants "guided by the common good, attuned to the people's needs...to come together, unite with like-minded forces so we are stronger". The stories of political parties are both humbling and inspiring, aiming to be relevant to the people's daily struggles. The stories from community leaders, activists, and ordinary folks are a rich unveiling of fortitude to discern, speak out, defy perils, and act collectively to realize the change we deserve.

To quote a literary piece in the handbook: "Whenever we hear that the singularity is near, let us always remember, always keep in mind, that the plurality is here."

The journey towards liberalism for the people is long and hard. When doubt strikes and beliefs waver, the pages of this handbook can breathe new life to the soul.



PART ONE What's the problem?



What's the problem?

For most of Asia, the theory and practice of democracy flew in like a strong wind from the West. Paradoxically, it came in the era of colonization of centuries past, or turned out to be the outcome.

The cluster of Southeast Asian nations – long before they banded together as a political bloc – spent centuries under foreign rule, serving a 'master', so to speak. No wonder that the aftermath of the Second World War gave rise to movements of Independence, unravelling a fixed order of bondage and experimenting with the kind of freedom that suited each country's history. But tyranny was always not too far behind. The so-called 'Asian values' formed a symmetry with one-man rule, one-party rule, or martial rule – ways of defining the boundaries of building a nation. Still, democracy consistently exerted its demand for a greater good. The concept, after all, was born out of the Greek civilization that means 'power to the people'. It speaks of the majority, free and fair elections, the rights of individuals and minorities, guaranteed freedom of speech, and the rule of law.

The heyday of democracy reached its apex in Asia during what was called the "third wave of democratization" that came in the second half of the 1980s. The number of democracies tripled from three in 1980 to nine in 2005, and would rise to 11 by 2017.

In Southeast Asia, a tumultuous wave beginning in the mid-1980s eventually overturned the past and gave new meaning for liberal democracy—although not all countries in the region would enjoy it. The spirit of people power first reared up in the Philippines in 1986, breaking the 20-year iron grip of a strongman. Thailand, ensconced in a military junta, saw the sweeping tide of a protest movement in 1992. Indonesia ended three decades of dictatorship in 1998.

These momentous events drew attention from the world at large. More importantly, the glory of the democratic victory in the Philippines infected even peoples outside of Southeast Asia, such as those of South Korea, which had been under authoritarian rule since the fighting in the Korean War ended in 1953 (and which resulted in the division of Korea into North and South). South Korea's first free parliamentary elections were held in 1988; for decades, its economy would grow in strength, enabling it to be counted as one of the Asian Tigers, along with Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore.

South Korea, however, would not be free from unrest and would later force its first female president (the daughter of a late dictator) to step down over a scandal; it would install a human-rights lawyer in an election win in 2017.

Such

rumblings in reaction to heavy-handed authorities were echoed elsewhere in Asia. In the former British colony of Hong Kong, for instance, China's overbearing influence triggered massive demonstrations in 2014. Interestingly, that same year also had the Taiwanese in protest, trying to fight off China's manoeuvrings over Taipei's conservative party. Democracy's rise in Asia in the mid-80s saw a parallel in Europe, where communism was crumbling and destinies were being reshaped for a new world order. Freedom gave voice to the unheard.

Today though, that wave is being pushed back as the 21st century grapples with populism and autocracies. The trend in the declining quality of democracy has been labelled "democratic recessions" by political scientists Aurel Croissant and Larry Diamond. It is not a new phenomenon, they argue in a March 2020 article they wrote for the journal *Global Asia*. Compared to the previous waves of democratic reversals, the scholars say, the current losses are "still mild and the global levels of democracy remain high by historical standards".

But the warning signs are there. According to Croissant and Diamond, what we are seeing now is a move that "tends to unfold gradually and doesn't necessarily lead to full-fledged autocracy". The shift to what appears to be a breakdown, and slowly backsliding in incremental steps, is the "hallmark of democratic recession in the twenty-first century", they say. Ironically the culprits are not military adventurers, armed revolutionaries, or foreign governments, but those who are "elected to lead a democracy", say Croissant and Diamond. The fight to keep democracy alive has to be done in its own turf.

In Southeast Asia specifically, majority of its 11 countries can be classified as "enduring authoritarian regimes", while the rest are democracies, says Florencio 'Butch' Abad of the Philippines' Liberal Party. "Put together", he says, "the political diagnosis for the region is of democratic fragility".

By Abad's count, Southeast Asia has three one-party communist autocracies (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos); two military regimes (Myanmar, Thailand); one that is partly authoritarian, partly democratic (Singapore); one that is an absolute monarchy (Brunei); two faltering democracies (Philippines, Indonesia); one that is enmeshed in a leadership struggle after years of one-party rule (Malaysia); and lastly, a fledgling democracy (East Timor,

formerly under Indonesian rule).

These days, China, the giant of a country looming over the region, has been pointedly trying to sell its brand of authoritarianism to Southeast Asian politicians who might readily and conveniently embrace it for their own agenda. China has also been wooing Southeast Asian nations through a variety of ways — from offering financial packages and loans to sponsoring cultural and educational programmes. Other 'soft power' strategies include the proliferation of Confucius institutes, exposure trips for government and party officials, foreign student scholarships.

The enticement could be subtle as well; one politician remembers seeing a book about Xi Jinping on his bedside table upon arriving in his hotel room somewhere in China. To be more exact, the book was about Xi Jinping on what makes China a great nation.

17

Notable among the leaders who have been hospitable towards Beijing's overtures are Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen. In the meantime, while the likes of Singapore and Malaysia cannot be said to have similar attitudes towards China, they nevertheless tend to take moves similar to that of Beijing, the latest being the imposition of anti-fake news laws.

The democratic recession and the slide in democratic development in recent years have been fuelled by rising sentiments of nationalism and populism, which in turn were fed by fear, anger, and frustration in reaction to rising inequality and threats of terr Abhisit Vejjajiva, former prim Thailand. These were the resu



inequality and threats of terrorism, says Abhisit Vejjajiva, former prime minister of Thailand. These were the results of broken promises of democracy, he says. "The abuses of rights and threats to democracy are not only coming from old-style dictatorship, but from popularly elected leaders as well," says Abhisit, echoing Croissant and Diamond. As it stands, liberals and democrats also find themselves struggling to combat an **onslaught of 'fake news' and misinformation** unleashed by populist figures.

If the decline accelerates, political participation will be narrowed and civil liberties will be weakened. Liberals must go back to the "heart of the matter" – which is providing better quality of the life for **the people in significant segments of society that had felt alienated and disempowered by a political system** that was supposed to have protected them in the first place.

Liberals need to recognize factors that contributed to the decline of liberal democracy. Firstly, the concentration of economic power, often accompanied by corrupt political power, made ordinary people sceptical. The level of inequality, which they had assumed democracy would erase, was becoming unacceptable. Secondly, many have equated neo-liberalism with an excessive free market that, in their view, formed an elite establishment that is uncaring, irrelevant, and self-serving. Populism thus found its way into the game of overturning a system, laying bare its fangs to threaten liberal democracy – not only in Asia, but elsewhere in the world.

To which side, then, does Asia belong? To which side *should* Asia belong?

These questions have been among those raised by Khun Abhisit, who is also a former chairperson of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats, which was formed to sustain the innumerable gains of democracy in this part of the East.

He has raised these questions to remind us that, not too long ago — around two decades back, in fact — some leaders in the region had been stuck with the term 'Asian values' that had no clear definition but was apparently meant to make Asia an exception to the whole idea of liberal democracy because, the argument went, of cultural and traditional facets that were different from 'Western' thought. The 1997 financial crisis that befell Asia erased that line of argument, as the meltdown also destroyed the notion that authoritarianism guaranteed permanent stability and order. It showed a degree of variations in the region that can learn from global trends. As Abhisit observes: "There are often more similarities and parallels than we think."

> But what now, in light of the Populist Age opening the forces of illiberalism, 'fake news', racism, and the revival of Hitler's dangerous legacy that led to the Second World War? Where is Southeast Asia in the scheme of things?

Democracy had ripened, but it now seems to be receding from the landscape. Clearly populism is a threat to pluralist democracy. It is a response, almost like a vengeance, to democracy's shortcomings. Says Abhisit: "Liberalism has won the talk, but it hasn't won the walk."

Liberal and democratic values have been taken for granted over the years. Ordinary voters are more concerned about the future, not the past, and neither the present. "If they feel that their future needs are not being met, all the things we have achieved would be meaningless to them," Abhisit says.

The people do not want to listen to rational policies despite solid arguments. Their emotions are carried away by **fears and changes brought about by globalization** (**as well as terrorism**). In their eyes, the world has narrowed. Their prism puts the blame on liberalism, which has become overwhelming for them to handle.

Older generations now feel insecure. The younger ones, even those who have found wealth, are impatient for results; they want the kind of speed they have seen in information technology and the new social media. "They don't care about the process and the means", explains Abhisit, "but they think these (populist) leaders will deliver results and deliver them quickly".

People questioned **democracy's deficit**, **its elitism, and inability to resolve social problems.** Populism has managed to tap people's self-interests, cultural traits, fear of the future, and spontaneous feelings. It sought to disregard checks and balances, a disregard exploited and promoted by charismatic and populist leaders who have, says Selyna Peiris of CALD Youth in Sri Lanka, "little patience with liberalism's emphasis on procedural niceties and protections for individual rights". But the truth is that populists have never offered policies that have led to lasting success. Their current rise is a redux from the past, returning to a new wave, a new skin exploiting unknown fears caused by the unfamiliar face of globalization that was intended to economically harmonize the world, on the one hand; and the religious schism in the Arab world that spawned terrorism reaching the shores of Southeast Asia, on the other.

In 2016, the Philippines elected a self-styled populist president whose foul language took the world by storm. Rodrigo Duterte's first policy as Philippine president was to replicate the drug war in the southern city of Davao, where he used to be mayor, in the entire country, triggering extrajudicial killings.

> Thailand had a similar drug war during the term of Prime

Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, also a popular businessman who had served in the Thai police force. Thaksin and his sister, Yingluck, who also became prime minister in 2011, were both ousted in coup d'etats in 2006 and 2014, respectively, by army generals who allowed elections to be held again only in 2019, and which left the country still divided.

Indonesia's Joko Widodo, first elected president in 2014, is that country's first leader who is neither from the elite nor the military. Jokowi – as he is more widely known – is popular in his own right. He, however, holds the bastion of democracy. Jokowi was re-elected president in the 2019 polls, during which religious extremism was a major issue.

Malaysia's 2018 elections meanwhile yielded a surprising and historical result, with the opposition defeating the long-time ruling party. But that victory has not freed the country from political tumult, leaving the people still waiting for the fulfilment of promises made during the campaign.

For sure, not all is well in the Southeast Asian front– Cambodia has dissolved the opposition party, Vietnam has remained authoritarian in nature despite a show of economic revival, and the Philippine opposition lost seats in the Senate in the most recent elections. Indeed, neo-democracies in Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines and Thailand, continue to face harsh challenges or have been, as Croissant and Diamond put it, "careening back and forth between democracy and authoritarianism".

Today, democracy is being imperilled both by populist leaders and old-style dictatorship. At the centre of it in Asia is Hong Kong, where popular protests went on for months in 2019, when China tried to amend an extradition bill, an issue that broadened calls for civil liberty. But China tried to overpower the fighting spirit of Hong Kong protestors when it imposed its draconian national security law in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

And yet, there is hope for democracy to rise once more despite the setbacks. Democracy has an embedded principle in free and fair elections, and these were seen in Indonesia and, outside Southeast Asia, in Taiwan. Together with South Korea, Taiwan has often been cited as being among the bright examples of the third wave of democratization (Croissant and Diamond) that embody the strength of democracy due to the cry of their people for freedom.

These are among the inspiring developments in the region that may put democracy back on its track. The question now is: At which point can democracy stamp out illiberalism?



In the shadow of Beijing

"Drawing from the Chinese model, the Cambodian government continued the arbitrary arrest, detention, intimidation, and harassment of the members of the opposition party two years after the party's dissolution. The attempt of Sam Rainsy and other opposition party officials to return to Cambodia in late 2019 was met by harassment and detention of supporters, intimidation of airline companies, and deployment of massive troops at the border.

Singapore, another country presumably inspired by China, passed the widely criticized anti-fake news law last year - the Protection from Online Falsehood and Manipulation Act (POFMA). Critics suggest that the law may be used to target the political opposition, especially since the city-state is now gearing for general elections. In neighbouring Malaysia, its own version of anti-fake news law was repealed in 2018, and this could have contributed to the country's better democracy ranking last year, despite the rise of religious extremism and persistence of gutter politics.

China also loomed large in Taiwanese politics in 2018 with general elections just around the corner. Fake news or influence operations had become the primary weapon against incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen, who survived a difficult primary election, and subsequently faced a formidable opponent backed by China."

Bi-Khim Hsiao, 2019 CALD Annual Report

East Asian Countries ...

South Korea FREE

Elections were held in 1988 after years of authoritarian rule and the rise of family-owned conglomerates that spurred the economy. Current president is a former human- rights lawyer who wants a softer approach in dealing with the totalitarian state of North Korea, from which it broke off after The Korean War in 1953 without a peace agreement.

Hong Kong PARTLY FREE

A former British colony with the same democratic processes turned over to China in 1997 for a 'one country, two systems' agreement that is now under threat as street protests rock the tiny territory.

Taiwan FREE

Established as a breakaway country by Chinese nationalists who left the mainland when the communists took over in 1949. Resistance to the Kuomintang party's overtures to China brought back to power the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party in 2016.

... and Type of Regime

Myanmar NOT FREE

Military-backed government that was considered a pariah state under a junta from 1962 to 2011. Free elections installed the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi but with the military still in control.

Malaysia PARTLY FREE

Recovering democracy, once led by a Malaynationalist party headed by Mahathir Mohamad for decades. Recently overturned by an opposition coalition but now under a political crisis.

Laos NOT FREE

One-party communist autocracy in a landlocked former French colony. It opened up after the fall of communism in the mid-1990s but remains poor and dependent on foreign aid.

Thailand PARTLY FREE

Military-backed government under a monarchy. Military coups are common with some spells of democratically-elected civilian leaders. Elections were held in 2019, with a military-backed coalition still in place.

Vietnam NOT FREE

One-party communist autocracy since 1975, after a bloody war against colonial France and American military control. Seen today as one of the fastest growing economies in the region.

Cambodia NOT FREE

One-party communist autocracy since the genocide in the mid-1970s, led by a holdover from the Khmer regime. Once a monarchy; today stifling the rise of a strong democratic opposition.

Brunei NOT FREE

Absolute monarchy in this oil-rich tiny state. Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, crowned in 1968 and who has imposed strict Islamic laws, is one of the world's longest-reigning monarchs.

Singapore PARTLY FREE

One-party authoritarian rule, led by the People's Action Party under Lee Kuan Yew for half a century. The only country in Southeast Asia considered advanced in economic status.

Indonesia PAR

A faltering democracy, with three decades of military rule by General Suharto who stepped down in 1998. Democratic elections ensued under a presidential system.

• Philippines PARTLY FREE

Faltering democracy currently in the hands of a populist, after 30 years of democracy patterned after the United States, its former colonial master. It was previously under 20 years of martial rule.

Timor-Leste FREE

Fledgling government that was under Indonesian rule for more than 20 years. Free elections were held after independence in 1999.



PART TWO Why should we care?

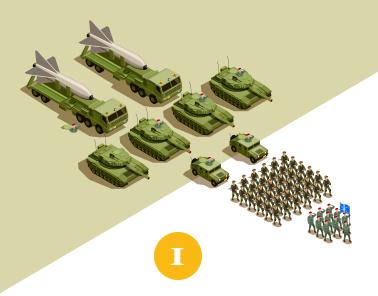


Why should we care?

Democracy is the oxygen of our public lives. It is valuable to many peoples of the world and remains popular globally. A 34-nation Pew Research Centre survey in February 2020 showed that support for democratic rights is widespread. But here's its worrisome finding: "Commitment to democratic ideals is not always strong and many are unhappy with how democracy is working."

This is a red flag—and the consequences are dire. When democracy declines, civil liberties and freedoms are curtailed and leaders are not held accountable; nations become deeply polarized that intolerance prevails; and the rule of law is broken. Governments give short shrift to the rights of citizens.

Let us count the ways democracy is strangled.



Where autocracies and authoritarian rule have supplanted democracies, power is concentrated in the heads of state, the 2019 Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit showed. The influence of unelected, unaccountable institutions grows. These types of government imperil freedom of speech and expression, freedom of the press, and freedom to assemble. Cho Jung-Tai, former chairperson of the Democratic Progressive Party of Taiwan, has pointed to the use of censorship and surveillance to restrict citizens from gaining correct information and to express themselves freely.



Political persecution becomes part of the arsenal of the state. "Persecutors want their victims to be silenced and for others to take heed and obey," Senator Leila de Lima, the Philippines' most prominent political detainee, has observed. De Lima, a former head of the Philippines' Commission on Human Rights, was arrested in 2017 on trumped-up drug charges. She remains in detention.



and state agencies are used to go against critics, including political rivals and the media.

With a judiciary that is not independent—as politicians pack them with loyalists—avenues for redress are closed down.

Authoritarian rulers weaken the legitimacy of our democratic institutions. This is done through policies created by politicians who support the regime. Furthermore, presidents and their allies co-opt the branches of government by having friends and loyal followers appointed to the highest offices. 5

Public dissatisfaction with political parties rises, leading to a decline in political-party membership. "Patronage and corruption cause voters to be disgusted with the traditional parties and fuels the rise of divisive populist figures," say Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, editors of the book *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization.*

The reality is, even in democracies, popular disenchantment with political parties is worldwide, a Pew survey showed in 2018. Negative views of democracy are more widespread in countries with low political affiliation. In countries where more people are unaffiliated with any political party, popular support for representative democracy is also lower. This softens the ground for people to embrace undemocratic alternatives.



Voter turnout around the world has declined despite increase in the number of voters and number of countries with elections, according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. The New Yorker, in an article on global protests in 2019, has also noted that there is less confidence that elections make much difference such that "citizens are instead voting with their feet, on the streets".



Another important driver of dissatisfaction with democracy is the frustration with political elites, as the 2020 Pew survey showed. The gap between political elites and parties on one side and national electorates on the other has been widening. Many, across countries, believe that elected officials do not care what people like them think. In nearly every nation surveyed, those who think politicians don't care about average citizens are more likely to be dissatisfied with the way democracy is functioning in their country.

Dangers of polarization

A phenomenon related to democratic backsliding is the intense polarization of a country, creating harsh divides between opposing political camps, reducing common ground. This is a dangerous situation to be in as it damages institutions and, in the process, emaciates democracy.

Scholars Carothers and O'Donohue point out why:

Polarizing leaders have inflamed divisions and entrenched them throughout society, demonizing opponents and thereby aggravating tensions. Polarization doesn't necessarily galvanize a government to respond because the politicians who play the most significant role in exacerbating

polarization mostly benefit from it.

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Basic legislative processes are corroded. Legislatures are caught either in gridlock or are reduced to rubberstamps. This leads to the abuse of executive powers and promotes the toxic view that the president represents only his or her supporters, rather than the country as a whole.

- Intolerance and discrimination are exacerbated as severe polarization shatters moderation, diminishes trust in society, and increases violence.
 - The ground for disinformation, hate speech, and propaganda becomes fertile as social media and technology amplify the rhetoric of divisive figures. Social media's echo chamber intensifies this even more.

COVID-19: a threat to democracy

Democracy was already in peril not only in Southeast Asia but in other parts of the world even before the pandemic began in early 2020. But COVID-19 appears to have accelerated the decline of democracy as some governments took draconian steps to contain the virus.

In Southeast Asia, where majority of the countries are enduring authoritarian regimes, the few democracies that remain are fragile, a weakness the pandemic has preyed on.

Several of the region's autocratic leaders "amassed emergency powers" to respond to the crisis but abused these to curtail civil liberties, Butch Abad, a founding member of CALD, observed in an online forum in June 2020. COVID-19 accelerated authoritarianism in Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Thailand. These countries handed down executive orders and passed sweeping emergency legislation that curtailed civil liberties, as well as stifled dissent

"The pandemic is a political crisis that threatens the future of liberal democracy."

A Call to Defend Democracy, open letter, June 25, 2020 signed by more than 500 political and civil leaders and the political opposition. They also authorized censorship in traditional media, and even personal communication.

In Indonesia and the Philippines, security forces took a greater role in a public-health crisis.

Seeing the issue from the lens of law enforcement, Philippine President Duterte tasked retired generals to run a national task force to respond to the pandemic.

In some countries, the weight of the government's already heavy hand increased. "In times of crisis, the lines between legitimate emergency measures and opportunistic abuse of public

authority can get blurred," notes Peter Biro, founder of Section 1, a Canadian civics-education initiative, in an April 2020 article.

49

Abhisit Vejjajiva also said in a June 2020 online forum that the pandemic has "reinforced threats to liberal democracy in the form of nationalism and extremism as people became more wary of globalization with the fear of imported cases".

"The Great Depression not only produced fascism but also reinvigorated liberal democracy."

Francis Fukuyama, "The Pandemic and Political Order"

The unprecedented global crisis has thus sparked discussions on whether a democracy or an authoritarian government is better equipped to contain the virus. The successes of Vietnam Thailand, and Singapore gave the impression that an iron hand was much more capable of dealing with it than a soft glove. And yet there was evidence as well that democracies successfully overcame the crisis without having to resort to heavyhanded measures. Outside Southeast Asia, democracies like Taiwan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand had equally been successful in the fight against COVID-19. At the 2020 forum, Abhisit and Abad, leading liberals in the region, dismissed the idea that success in battling the virus was "an issue of democracy versus authoritarianism". Rather, they argued, it was the presence of key factors such as trust of citizens on their government, leaders who responded early and decisively, and effective management and good governance.

Liberal democrats faced serious challenges in the time of the pandemic as economies took a downturn. Abhisit, who was a minister to the prime minister's office during the 1997 financial crisis, pointed out at the forum: "One of the main factors where liberal democracy in Thailand began to recede was the disillusionment, frustration with the IMF [International Monetary Fund] programme that was used to deal with the financial crisis of 1997, which laid the ground for a more populist and authoritarian style of politics. Widespread economic suffering and hardship...provide fertile ground for populist and extremist leaders who will play into the disillusionment and disappointment of the population."

Will the pandemic, an unprecedented crisis, lead to a renewal of liberal democracy, which has proved resilient in past crises?





PART THREE What can we do?



What can we do?

Wise Words from Leaders

There are many ways we can dispel the dark clouds of populism and fight the heavy hand of authoritarianism. We can act as citizens, armed with our civic duties, and as members of organizations and political parties.

But first, we have to come together, unite with like-minded forces so that we are stronger. We can protest together. We can speak with one voice and hold the powerful to account. We can win elections. We can be better public servants, guided by the common good, attuned to the people's needs.

We cannot afford to be disparate. Otherwise, we will be scattered to the winds—and the side that is against democracy will prey on us and our countries.



Build a strong community among democratic nations and create spaces for collaboration. Help other democracies thrive by supporting institutions and those campaigning for civil rights, rallying for fair and free elections, and fighting for freedom of the press and free speech in an age of disinformation and 'fake news'.

Fight for the rights of those in the fringes of society, from social to economic to gender rights.

Ma. Leonor 'Leni' Robredo

57

"Keeping the Freedom Agenda Alive" 2018

Innovation should become a culture.

Work should no longer be process-oriented but rather oriented towards tangible results. Our work is to ensure that the public enjoy public services and development, that they feel the results.

Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo

"Dreaming the Possible Dream", October 2019 inaugural address

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Go back to the basics. Demonstrate that we know what the concerns of the people are, offer real solutions, and respond to their needs so that they will feel we are relevant.

Be transparent and effective to earn public trust.

Reimagine priorities. Reinvigorate liberal values and principles. Relate them to needs of the general public in order for liberals and democrats to Reclaim their place as champions of the people.

Abhisit Vejjajiva

"Liberals and Democrats must fight back to reclaim their place in Asian politics", 2018; "Reversing the Great Leap Backward", 2017 Overhaul mindsets, methods, and structures to adapt to a new world. Put the health of local communities front and centre for these communities are pillars of prosperity.

Political parties should unify large portions of the electorate and transform their preferences into public policies—to reduce inequality and promote social inclusion.

Parties should actively recruit and train future government officials and political leaders.

Political parties in power should not ignore middle-class concerns about day-to-day problems that hinder their livelihood, such as worsening traffic problems and slow Internet connection.

The opposition should monitor those in power and hold them accountable.

Florencio 'Butch' Abad

"Getting Political Parties Restarted", 2018

In every battle, no side goes unscathed. But that is the beauty of democracy. Democracy provides all of us the opportunity to be a better version of ourselves, to learn from our mistakes, and to fight again another day.

We should not lose sight of our goal as liberals and democrats—to make our respective countries more democratic, free, liberal, constitutional, competitive, accountable, inclusive, and participatory. Democracy, after all, is a work in progress. It rises and falls over time, across countries and regions.

Bi-Khim Hsiao

"Yes, Democracy is Rising", 2019

Pushing back in the time of the pandemic

Some leaders are using the pandemic, the worst global crisis since World War II, to clamp down on people's rights and freedoms. China foisted a national security law on Hong Kong in June 2020, killing 'one country, two systems', the principle that guided the relationship between China and its Special Administrative Region for more than two decades.

In Southeast Asia, Myanmar blocked more than 200 news and other websites in March 2020, setting back democratic gains. In Cambodia,



Prime Minister Hun Sen in April 2020 amassed sweeping powers through a law that gave him control of information dissemination and surveillance. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in July 2020 signed into law an antiterror act that threatened free speech. Just two months earlier, he had Congress, which his allies dominate, shutter ABS-CBN, a leading TV network — a blow to media freedom.

Amidst this push towards more control, more are asked of democracy-loving

citizens. In the June 2020 online forum addressing the impact of COVID-19 on the future of democracy, Butch Abad called for "heightened awareness and vigilance, [and] readiness to push back against attempts by autocrats to exploit the crisis".

Abad stressed the "need for innovation and enterprise... [to] highlight

the advantages of democratic reforms". What is vital, he said, is the "persistence in addressing deeper historical and structural roots – inequality, political exclusion—that drive those left behind to embrace extreme options".

Abhisit Vejjajiva, for his part, urged the public to "be alert and monitor the management of the pandemic in relation to the use of state



power and its impact on rights, freedom, and democracy". He pointed out that liberals and democrats should "make sure that democratic governments respond to the economic and social needs that follow from the pandemic..[and] must be careful not to be seen as opposing the role of the state if it confines itself to providing economic and social security to the population".

Karl-Heinz Paqué, chairman of the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, also had this reminder: "Let's stick to our principles...develop recipes for this reality within the framework of individual and human rights". Pragmatically, he said, it is best to "think new about the role of government and safe globalization".

Looking at the big picture, Abhisit cited the importance of fostering multilateral cooperation in fighting the pandemic and gaining access to vaccines to "make sure that not all countries will slip into protectionism and nationalism". Paqué posed the challenge to liberals and democrats to "fix multilateralism".

Liberalism inspired by literature

Let's see this in terms of literature, with Abhisit Vejjajiva citing one of the greatest novels of all time, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, by the Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The novel began with this sentence: "It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love."



The book's first line should teach liberals how to approach their electorate with the same emotional appeal, similar to how populists use it. That is the reality in a post-truth world in which populists bend facts and realities to suit their message by exploiting people's personal beliefs. 'Fake news' have been shown to be the symptom of the problem. In the novel, love triumphed over all odds. And so, too, should liberals take this into account.

Liberalism has been painted as a societal disease, like cholera. How can this be turned around when politeness and correctness are seen as signs of weakness? It is time to "talk the talk" and "walk the walk".

New liberal leaders should be the agents of change. It is not enough that liberal parties should communicate liberal values and beliefs; they should also be able to offer liberal solutions to the problems at hand, problems such as poverty and inequality. Voters care only about solutions. It may not be the right recipe, Abhisit says, but "without relevant solutions, we would not stand a chance".

STORIES OF POLITICAL PARTIES



Liberal Party

The Liberal Party (LP) in the Philippines, as part of its endeavour to expand membership, has opened its doors not only to politicians but also to students, academics, civic leaders, professionals, vendors, employees, various sectors, and the general liberal-democratic public. As of 2019, the LP roster had 62 newly organized chapters added to it. Just as in many parts of Asia and elsewhere in the world, the people of the Philippines are constantly confronted by calamities, both manmade and natural, high prices, unemployment, hunger, lack of opportunities, killings, and disrespect for rights. As a political party, among the difficult questions that LP has grappled with are: How can it be relevant to the lives of the people in the midst of all these challenges? How can LP do things differently?

And so during the lead up to the May 2019 elections, where LP fielded senatorial candidates, the party implemented Project Makinig (Listen), a nationwide, technology-driven, door-to-door campaign to listen to the people. Launched in October 2018, the project saw an increase in the number of volunteers who literally knocked on doors of households to engage fellow citizens in face-to-face conversations. In a hundred areas across the country, tens of thousands of volunteers held

more than a million conversations with Filipinos.

Faced with the overwhelming resources and power of the





ruling coalition, however, the effort was unable to help clinch a win for any of the LP candidates. Still, the project has provided the genesis for deeper, more empathy-driven campaigns in the future. More than ever, LP is determined to transform itself into a people's party with volunteer-driven campaigns among the grassroots.

STORIES OF POLITICAL PARTIES



Democratic Alliance

"The birthplace of innovation is vulnerability."

Warwick Chapman, former executive director, Democratic Alliance The Democratic Alliance (DA), the official opposition party in South Africa, invested on setting up its research infrastructure, as well as on organization and people development, to win elections. As of 2020, DA held 84 out of the 400 seats in parliament, a vast improvement over the 22 seats it garnered in the 2014 elections, and a considerable bounceback from its performance in the 2019 polls, where it lost five seats.

Apart from its tight organization, DA's success so far can be attributed to its effective communication strategy and messaging. The party has an in-house team of professionals that conducts focus group discussions, surveys, and quick calls. The team also crafts messages for micro-targets.

"The party has a strong messaging component based on message discipline, emotional connection and micro-targeting," says former DA chief strategist and campaigns director Jonathan Moakes. "We also believe in the principle of repetition and delivering the message over and over again to a target audience."

Associating DA with good governance has been another key strategy. When DA first won in Western Cape in 2009, the objective was to make the province "a springboard for what the DA can do", says James Selfe, DA chairperson of the Federal Executive. The party also emphasized the role that it plays as an opposition in ensuring government accountability and its work with other institutions, the academe, and NGOs that participate in DA's programmes.



DA is professionally run. It does nationwide polling,

door-to-door campaign, and robocalls—and puts a premium on science, data, and information. Its call centre, staffed by 200 people, makes phone calls about 10 hours a day for a year and a half in the lead up to elections. Among those who answer calls, about five percent continue the conversation and the average length of conversation has been 40 minutes. The call centre operates even without elections.

> DA has a polling department that interacts with the general public to hear what issues they care about. The capacity and focus of the department are heightened during local and national election campaign season.

> > Innovation and an effective organization have helped propel DA to where it is today.



Mainland China, rising in global power, wants to wield its might over Hong Kong, an anomalous offspring, and over Taiwan, a runaway from the communists, just outside its southern borders. Both tiny, Hong Kong and Taiwan are facing autocratic wraths from the Chinese Communist Party that wants to change order not only in the region, but also in the world.





Hong Kong was a shining example of democracy and capitalism going hand-in-hand. Located on the Pearl River Delta in the South China Sea, it used to be the trophy territory of the United Kingdom. But in 1997, U.K.'s lease on Hong Kong expired and it was handed over back to China — marking the beginning of Hong Kong's slide amidst the political force that China began to employ against widespread resistance.

China had promised Hong Kong a framework of 'one country, two systems', with a high degree of autonomy whereby Hong Kong could maintain the status quo for 50 years despite the differences. This was part of the condition in the handover, although many had felt even then that Hong Kong would never be the same again. "Hong Kong is different to (sic) mainland China. We protect our freedoms. We ask for free elections to elect the leader of our city. It's not the final battle. It's not the endgame, because the Hong Kong government and Beijing have turned a whole generation of students from citizens to dissidents."

Joshua Wong (interview with Time magazine, June 2019)



In time, it became evident that China was not going to fulfil that condition; it claimed "comprehensive jurisdiction" over the tiny territory – provoking a widespread protest called the 'Umbrella Movement' in 2014.

The umbrellas were symbols for passive resistance against police dispersal. Those who were at the forefront were of the younger generation. They weren't challenging pro-Beijing's party for independence; they simply wanted their rights to vote in democratic elections. Martin Lee, the founding chairperson of the Democratic Party of Hong Kong, likened China to a "man playing the seesaw game with his little son, who can only participate in the game if his much heavier father would move towards the centre of the plank until an equilibrium is struck".

China was unwilling to do that. The demonstrations raged for almost three months, until it dwindled with no substantial change from the pro-China officials of the Hong Kong government. The protests, however, returned by the second half of 2019, filling the streets of millions of Hong Kong citizens braving against police brutality, surpassing the Umbrella Movement of 2014 in terms of rage and size.

The protesters demanded the scrapping of an extradition law they considered "legalized



kidnapping" on the behest of China, with this issue paving the way for a greater demand for civil liberty, government accountability, and universal suffrage.



That was the year *The Economist* described Hong Kong as one of the "democratic setbacks" in Asia, but the passion shown by the protesters became an electrifying source of inspiration. They were showing other beleaguered peoples that this was the way to fight for freedom.

The youths were student activists whose names stood out in the name of democracy: Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, Alex Chow. Wong was only "Hong Kong is at the forefront of the clash between authoritarian and democratic values ... If you care about democracy, if you care about freedom and human rights, you

should join hands with us."

Nathan Law (interview with the Washington Post, October 2019)



21 when he led Demosisto, a new political party founded after the Umbrella Movement. Law was 24 and elected legislator, the youngest in the history of Hong Kong's Legislative Council. Chow was 27, one of the main organizers of the Occupy Central movement. All three were arrested for unlawful assembly and sent to prison for months, released on bail in 2017, and banned from public office for five years.

Just as the resistance was again gathering storm, the COVID-19 pandemic that originated in China's Wuhan province brought Hong Kong to a standstill, as did other parts of the world. In June 2020, China took a major step in passing a wide-ranging new security law for Hong Kong, which critics said was "the end" for the territory. Such a law had always been unpopular for many of Hong Kong's seven million people. It criminalized any acts of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with external forces – conditions it deemed as serious challenges against Beijing's authority. It would make Hong Kong a virtual police state, with Beijing establishing a new security office with its own law-enforcement personnel.

> Alex Chow is currently a PhD student in Geography at the University of California in Berkeley. From his Twitter account he said:



"Praising a regime's colonial governance is anti-human by any standard. Let's be clear: CCP is the colonizer. And HK is its colonial subject. No room for any debate. To break away from the CCP's nonsense is a decolonial move. We the HK ppl aren't CCP's obedient subject."

(July 2020 – after the passing of the new security law).

The flame for democracy has been shrouded. How much further can resistance endure? The pro-democracy advocates say they will continue to fight but Cherie Wong of the Canada Hong Kong Alliance says that they also know that Chinese authorities are not planning to stop their "plans to re-write the global order in favour of their imperialist agenda".

Hong Kongers went back to the streets in a show of support for pro-democracy primaries ahead of the September 2020 elections to the legislative council. But the government heightened the tension with the arrest in early August of businessman Jimmy Lai, owner of the *Apple Daily* newspaper, on charges stemming from the new security law. This turn of events prompted condemnation domestically and internationally.

Taiwan

Despite the overwhelming presence of China and the pressure it exerts on the world to treat its breakaway nation as an outlaw, Taiwan has come out resilient and resisting any downward trend from democracy. A potent combination of public protest, civil-society mobilization, and free and fair elections was crucial in Taiwan's ability in containing democratic erosions that were seen in other Asian countries.

There were mild signs of backsliding in the mid-2000s over the results of a presidential election, and the threat of violence was in the air. But the press, along with civil society and a strong, independent judiciary, saved the day. Taiwan's values for independence and liberty were the major steps for keeping the flames of democracy alive.

The current party in power, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), has done more of walking the talk. President Tsai Ing-wen, since taking office in 2016, has taken huge strides in strategizing economic policies for development and political inclusiveness for a wider section of the country of 23 million people, while at the same time keeping Beijing's toxic manoeuvrings at arm's length.

> Her government is into free trade, green projects, reforming the civil service, introducing better wages for the young.

> > Change cannot wait and our efforts are a race against time.

We steady our pace, but we cannot slow down.

Tsai Ing-wen

Her new year's address in 2019 spoke of a country that is "Brave and Confident" and "One with the World".

Taiwan does not seem too frazzled by the rise of populism, or by the power of China's Communist Party. In fact it challenges China to face the reality that Taiwan stands for freedom and democracy, so, Tsai says, "it must handle cross-strait differences peacefully, on a basis of equality". Freedom for the Taiwanese comes very naturally; it is like breathing air.

China must have seen to what extent the Taiwanese are willing to safeguard democratic principles and take action. In 2008, for example, there was the 'Wild Strawberry Movement' that drew student protests against an Assembly and Parade Law proposed by the conservative Kuomintang party. Six years later, the youths of the 'Sunflower Movement' once again turned to occupying the parliament for almost a month to stop the same government from signing a service trade agreement with the mainland – a move that they feared would curtail their political rights. Clearly a majority did not budge in favour of China.

The country gets its strength from the presence of well-institutionalized political parties. If

there was inclination for authoritarianism, it came from a party, in this case the Kuomintang, forcing opposition forces to organize, first as a popular movement before becoming a party. Thus, the DPP came to be: to push back undemocratic tendencies.

For the Taiwanese, what is at stake is their national identity and future status, and whether leaders would be conciliatory towards China. So far, it's a no. They call this the 'new Taiwanese' identity, based on commitment to democratic values and institutions, and not so much on their ethnicity. The names given to their movements – Wild Strawberry, Sunflower – have a ring of authenticity. This shows less power put in personalities, and backing up the system is an equally strong and independent judiciary.

Democracy was viewed as involving a competition between two opposing values, President Tsai Ing-wen says. But now, she says, democracy must become a conversation among many different values – hence, the "values of Taiwan" defining a paradigm that is pluralistic. Audrey Tang is Taiwan's Digital Minister and the world's first transgender minister. She was a junior high school dropout who started her own company at the age of 16. But she has made an even bigger leap from her geeky start-up days. Tang is currently running a Social Innovation Lab in Taipei where people from all walks of life come to talk to her, their conversations published on the Internet.

To her, technology has given way to a platform of "radical transparency", one that strengthens cooperation between the government and civil society. It was from the Internet that Tang learned political processes allowing people to participate democratically in various ways through collaboration, experiments, and demonstrations, the kind that give solutions for the common good. It is, says Tang, a government model that needs to be reinvented from the old.

The Lab has resolved cases just by having people talk directly; this, in a country where broadband is a human right. Tang wants people to reflect on their feelings, and encourage them to discover what they have in common with their neighbours, instead of repeating divisive statements seen in social media. If people want answers or try new regulations, the government uses technology's innovations for a very thriving democratic country.



Singapore & Cambodia

Singapore and Cambodia are the Janus face of autocracy: one has drawn the praise and awe of the world; the other has spawned the horrific history of genocide that still haunts its people. The opposition in both countries are experiencing great hurdles to find their place in a more robust democracy.



The death of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew in March 2015 brought condolences from major leaders throughout the West, sending inspiring words about a man who led an island-nation to prosperity with a single vision. In that sense, Singapore has stood out among countries of Southeast Asia. There was once the story of a tiny country banished from the Malaya Federation, with Lee Kuan Yew founding and leading his People's Action Party (PAP) for more than 50 years.

PAP's rigid laws tempered outbreaks of multi-racial tensions and stuck to Lee Kuan Yew's Confucian ideology. But the party's name might be a misnomer in that it had suppressed freedoms for the sake of economic progress, and human rights for the conformity of all.

There was little space for opposition in the political arena. Elections came and went with foregone conclusions. The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) attempted to put a foot in the door during a by-election in May 2016 for a parliamentary seat. It didn't make it but it showed good performance among voters. In 2017, the ruling party elevated without a contest the speaker of parliament to the post of president, which has minimal power. The move left a seat open that the opposition would like to fill if elections were to be held. SDP's assistant treasurer Wong Souk Yee, who held the constituency of the vacant seat, has filed a suit calling for by-elections, asserting that citizens have the fundamental right to be represented by an elected member. But the court has favoured the government's changes in legislation.

Lee Kuan Yew's son, Lee Hsien Loong, was seen as having a hand in the manoeuvrings. The younger Lee has been prime minister under PAP even before his father's death, in the aftermath of which scandals erupted over squabbles with siblings and alleged nepotism.

In 2018, the government tightened its grip over definitions of free speech and expression. It gave more powers to the Media Development Authority to seize any evidence of what it might perceive as "party political film" without any warrant. It also launched rules over what it deemed as "fake news" in a parliamentary committee where dissenting views apparently weren't welcomed. One historian, for instance, was grilled for hours when he came forward with his university research work showing that governments can be the source of 'fake news'.

In October 2019, the Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act came into effect, with the opposition as its first victim. In a nutshell, online news sites, bloggers, Facebook users, and other media activists in cyberspace could be sued for libel.

Even prior to the passage of this Act, new contempt of court laws enacted in 2017 were already being used to crackdown on the



opposition. SDP Vice Chairman John Tan was one of the first to be charged, over a single Facebook post related to an activist from a nongovernment organization who had said that Malaysia's judges were more independent than Singapore's in cases with political implications. Tan's Facebook post was a simple comment that the attorney general charging the activist for "scandalizing the judiciary" showed that what the latter had said was true. Both Tan and the activist. Jolovan Wham, were found guilty in October 2018 and were later fined SGD5.000 (USD3,700) each or jail time of seven days. Wham chose jail instead of

LIAM

SINGAPORE

92

paying the fine. The court also said that the conviction meant Tan would not be eligible to run in the next general polls.

SDP was gearing up for general elections scheduled sometime in 2020, but then the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The government stepped up on lockdown measures that are now considered one of the best practices in the region.

PAP still calls the shots when it comes to the political future of the Lion City, as Singapore is known for. But for the first time since Singapore's independence, the opposition won 10 seats in the parliamentary elections held in July 2020. Though it was still short of the one-third needed to break PAP's supermajority, it was a big, unprecedented step having the Workers' Party officially recognized as the opposition, with the prime minister granting its leader, Pritam Singh, as the 'Official Leader of the Opposition'. Singh has said that the party has no ambitions to govern, but would like to provide a check and balance to the ruling party.



No leader in Cambodia has perhaps shown vindictiveness towards the opposition as much as Hun Sen, product of the 1975-1979 genocide that saw the harrowing deaths of about two million people, roughly a quarter of the country's population during a civil war that pushed Cambodia to the brink of communism. It took more than two decades before the country could rise once more to its feet, obtaining help from the international community to restore a semblance of a fairly healthy economy and acceptable facets of democracy.

But the strong performance of the main opposition, the Cambodia

National Rescue Party

(CNRP), was evidently too much of a threat for Prime Minister Hun Sen. His Cambodia People's Party (CPP) was having the run of things until the opposition scored nearly 50 percent of the votes in the 2017 local commune elections.

Khem Sokha

In anticipation of the national elections for July 2018, Hun Sen saw "the writing on the wall", says opposition leader Sam Rainsy. "If he wanted to retain power, it had to be through the judiciary, rather than the ballot box."

Sam Rainsy is a co-founder of the CNRP. He was its first head until he resigned in February 2017. His successor, CNRP co-founder Kem Sokha, was arrested months later in his home in the middle of the night, charged with alleged treason over calling for U.S. support years earlier. This blatant move was seen as an excuse for Hun Sen to decimate the opposition and hold on to his power before handing it over to his son Hun Manet.

A crackdown followed Kem Sokha's arrest, forcing opposition members to flee, or to defect. The government dissolved CNRP in November 2017 and redistributed its assembly seats to other minor parties. It banned the party's 118 members from taking part in politics for the next five years. With this sweeping iron-fisted action, the country was thrown back to what it was before the Paris accords in 1991, in which countries guaranteed a process of democratization for Cambodia. The European Union and the United States have threatened to withdraw Cambodia's trade privileges because of the move by Phnom Penh.

The ideals of liberalism and pluralism were swiped away. Today Cambodia is back to its authoritarian, one-party system. CNRP continues to fight, with 90 percent of its 5,000 commune officials unwilling to join the ruling party. Likewise, the opposition's 118 top officials (save two) have refused to be "rehabilitated" under Hun Sen's command.

Sam Rainsy, who was CALD chairperson from 2012 to 2014, has restored his leadership of the CNRP. He attempted to return from Paris (where he had been in exile, first from 2005 to 2013, and then from 2015 to the present) to Phnom Penh in November 2019, to coincide with Cambodia's Day of Independence. He was stopped by Thai Airways on Hun Sen's political prodding. The land borders were also closed. Sam Rainsy's return and possible arrest would have forced Hun Sen to face international consequences.

How far is Hun Sen willing to raise the stakes before the eyes of the world? And how much more is Cambodia ready to sacrifice again after what had taken place in the past? The country had barely come to terms with its nightmare and had slowly taken the inroads to a potential liberal space. But now China has also come into the picture, with Hun Sen courting the mainland for financial advantages and political backing. "Cambodian dictator Hun Sen has no right to sell our country to the Chinese," Sam Rainsy says. Instead, the 1991 treaty should compel Hun Sen to follow a foreign policy based on neutrality – this one in reference to China's use of the Ream Naval Base on Cambodia's southern coast.

I am prepared to sacrifice my freedom and even my life to give democracy a chance to help ensure freedom for my unfortunate people.

Sam Rainsy

Philippines

Working Towards a Better Normal Ma. Leonor G. Robredo

The Philippines is among the countries across the globe with governments responding to the COVID-19 pandemic with widespread quarantines and restrictions on liberty and movement. Manila has even ended up with one of the strictest and longest running lockdowns in the world, one that began in mid-March 2020, and is still dragging on seven months later, as this book goes to press. Yet, despite tough and extended measures, the number of COVID-19 infections in the country has continued to rise, with over 300,000 cases as of end of September.

Many factors led to this surge, which has made the Philippines having the worst COVID-19 outbreak in Southeast Asia. But it comes as no surprise. After all, the government seems to have been preoccupied with many other things, instead of focusing all its efforts in improving pandemic response and suppressing the virus. While COVID-19 spread stealthily across communities, a controversial Anti-Terrorism Law was passed, and the country's largest broadcast network was shut down. And even now, as our communities struggle to cope with new infections and the economic



impact of a months long quarantine, Congress has become embroiled in a very public, very messy leadership battle. We also heard stories of activists and critics illegally arrested, and a prominent journalist criminally charged. More than 100,400 alleged quarantine violators have also been arrested since March, and more than a thousand remain detained in police stations as of this writing.



This is the situation in which the Philippines finds itself today: Citizens heavily policed; arrests made on a large scale; voices of dissent forcibly silenced— all in the middle of the world's gravest health crisis.

These are difficult times for democracy. But these difficulties only make it even more

essential that we do everything we can to protect and uphold human rights and dignity, to stand up for crucial democratic values such as free speech and a free press, and to continue to insist on transparency and accountability in government.

These principles are, in fact, our most important tools in dealing with the current crisis. They ensure that facts and data, which serve as the bedrock of sound decision-making, flow freely. They allow for an environment where inclusive pandemic response policies can be formulated, benefiting not just the few with power or resources, but all citizens, especially those on the margins. They encourage us to come together, mobilize, and cooperate to craft solutions to our most pressing problems.

As we continue to face the challenges of COVID-19, it has become even clearer that upholding these essential freedoms is an integral part of the solution that will lead us to a better normal. They pave the pathway to a proper, strategic, humane response to the crisis we face today, and to similar crises in the future.

From where I sit, there is no better way to do this than to be present in the lives of our people; to listen to their apprehensions, as well as their hopes; to empathize with their pain and their struggles. People have already begun to notice: Those who defend human rights and democracy are also the ones who are always ready to help; those who value the dignity of every person and respect the rule of law are also the people who have concrete plans and a course of action to the present crisis.

Our insistence on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law must be seen as more than mere adherence to paper principles – more than a fascination with flowery words that mean little to the lives of ordinary people struggling to survive a pandemic. We must give these principles life, by showing, through the work we do, how important they are in enabling all of us to come up with real, immediate, and better responses.

The task now for all of us is to go beyond mere rhetoric; to go beyond merely seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, and actually taking steps to get there—listening, learning, organizing, rolling up our



sleeves to work with the communities we serve. Our message has been constant:



Show empathy. Strive to be truthful and compassionate. Fight for the hopes and dreams of the people around you. Forge new paths when old ones seem to be blocked. Orient yourself towards service, and always empower, nurture, and listen. Include rather than divide. Expand our networks and harmonize with the people around you to craft the best, most effective solutions. This is the only way forward—together, with everyone moving in lockstep with each other towards a single horizon. This is the idea that has driven the action we have taken at the Office of the Vice President since the start of the pandemic. From our free shuttle services and dormitories for frontline health workers to the local production of personal protective equipment; from our app-based Community Marts to our continuing



assistance to hospitals and communities; from our support for distance-learning initiatives under Bayanihan e-Skwela to our efforts to provide the recently unemployed jobs and livelihood under Bayanihanapbuhay — we go where we are needed the most, to find the gaps and fill them, always striving to become a centre of gravity for those who share our values and principles. We forge on despite the threats, the lies, the disinformation. We show up every single day and we do the work that matters, knowing that the true measure of leadership is how we respond to the best and worst of times. We are bound not only by this crisis, but by the collective aspiration that we can always do better, and that we will overcome and rise together.

Much work remains, and more of us are needed to do this work—more of us to uphold democracy; more of us to translate our ideas and principles to actionable steps that have real impact on the ground. To deepen collaboration, constellate our efforts, and find even more ways to move forward.

It is indeed a difficult time for democracy. And it is precisely in difficult times when we are called to muster our commitment, stand up, and prevail.

Ma. Leonor G. Robredo is the Vice President of the Philippines.

Women in Politics

Women hold up half the sky but...

"When one woman is a leader, it changes her. When more women are leaders, it changes politics and policies."

> Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights



Women make up about half the population in many countries in Asia, but they have scant presence in government and politics. Discrimination and societal restrictions hamper their participation not just in politics, but in corporations and other organizations as well. According to UN Women, the average percentage of women parliamentarians in Asia as of February 2019 was 19.8 percent.

Moreover, since 1995—25 years after the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing—Asia has recorded the slowest growth rate of women's participation in politics in any region. The Inter-Parliamentary Union reported that as of 2020, only three countries in the region —Timor Leste, Nepal, and Uzbekistan—have surpassed the 30-percent mark for women's representation. Data from the IPU cited by the Taiwanese Cabinet's Gender Equality Committee also show that women account for 41.59 percent of lawmakers in Taiwan, the most among all the countries in Asia.

Worldwide, the UN Women says, as of January 2019, only 20.7 percent of government ministers were women. But there appears to be a typecasting of the positions women are appointed to. Says former Taiwan Vice President Annette Lu:

"Female ministers in the cabinet usually are in charge of social issues, health, or education. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not just a question of justice or democracy but is a necessary precondition to make sure women's interests are taken into account."

Jayanthi Devi Balaguru, chair of the CALD's Women Caucus, has said that for democracy to thrive,

"we should empower women and include them in decision-making and leadership positions...Democracy and women empowerment are mutually reinforcing—you cannot have one without the other". The CALD's Women Caucus has been pushing for women's rights, gender equality, and inclusivity, creating avenues to discuss women's issues. Beyond these, Balaguru points out that more women need to run for public office and that they should eye areas where they are more likely to win. But the aim, she says, is for women to be voted for their credibility, not for their gender.

"In this sense, women politicians shouldn't have to restrict [themselves] to just women's rights issues," says Balaguru.

109

When women's rights cease to be an issue of women exclusively and become ingrained in society, that is the time when we can say that gender equality is achieved.

In Asia, CALD and Liberal International (LI), a global organization of liberal democratic political parties, aim to work with individual political parties and lobby for meaningful female representation in the legislatures and cabinets. This is because women's empowerment requires policy and legislative reform. Ensuring the passage of gender-equality law in countries that still don't have one is a priority.

The Taiwan legislature, under President **Tsai Ing-wen**, the country's first female president, has passed measures to support working women and entrepreneurs, requiring companies with more than 100 employees to provide childcare and nursing facilities. The President says:

> "To create a gender-friendly society, we have taken steps to establish better longterm care systems that will reduce caregiving burdens on women... and help women who are starting their own businesses by relaxing restrictions on entrepreneurship loans"

Women in politics. government, and civil society continue to forge international networks to push for their causes. Balaguru says that top in the CALD Women's Caucus's agenda is to "strengthen relations with fellow women leaders and work together despite differences, forge wider partnerships and go back to the basics". In the field, this means being grounded in the issues and problems that affect women, doing more immersion programmes, exposure trips, and partnerships with grassroots women organizations.

To be able to effectively do all these, it would help to elevate the communication skills of current and upcoming female liberal leaders from CALD member-parties and partners. One way is through communication workshops that draw heavily from introspection and self-reflection, and enrich the participants' self-awareness, a vital element in leadership. Malaysia: Breaking stereotypes

Women frontrunners in Malaysia's political arena are few. The biggest problem is that women do not feel empowered. They don't have the confidence to say "I am qualified!" and "I can do it!" even though they are eminently qualified. It's because many obstacles are thrown their way.



Malaysian society has trapped women into certain expectations. They are not supposed to be perceived as being loud. They are not supposed to threaten men and make them feel that they are stronger than men. "These are the kinds of stereotype that women leaders should try to break," **Jayanthi Devi Balaguru**, member of the Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, says.

Balaguru has consistently advocated organizing gatherings for women to tell their stories and be listened to, as well as training programmes to promote gender-based inclusivity in political parties. She explains, "These will give them the opportunities to interact, raise their awareness



and hold continuous discussions. We need to promote women's participation in public life and decision-making and [enable them to] fight for freedom and democracy."

Since political parties are training grounds for future leaders, members, both male and female, need to be oriented properly on gender equality and women empowerment. This will help ensure that they can embody these principles and values once they enter the corridors of power.

I am qualified!

I can do it!

Outside political parties, a campaign to educate the electorate about the significance of women's participation in politics is critical. Voters can then question the position of political parties on this issue.

As of 2019, Malaysia had 33 women in federal parliament, five female ministers, four female deputy ministers, and nine women in the Cabinet. Despite these, Malaysia ranked poorly in global indexes for women's political representation and gender equality.

The under-representation of women in elected office is not unique to Malaysia. It is a challenge many countries face.

Malaysia is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which obliges the country to set up temporary and special measures to accelerate and increase the participation of women in decision-making positions. Overall, this contributes to the public good as evidence suggests that empowering women leads to a more efficient use of a nation's human capital and that reducing the gender gap enhances economic growth and development.

Youth in Politics

Pounding the Rock

"When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split into two, and I know it was not that blow that did it, but all that had gone before."

> Jacob Riis, Danish-American social reformer

> > 116

Young people, ages 18 to 30, make up more than half of the population in many countries. They are a rich source of advocates, activists and community to national leaders. They are the future.

The challenge for liberals and democrats is to tap into this gold mine. As Chih-wei Chen of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party asks: **How do we strengthen youth participation in politics?**

It is vital to develop young talents, DPP Secretary General Hung Yao-fu says, as well as to empower youth members and the younger

the younger generation. The importance of investing resources to help them grow and be stronger cannot be overemphasized. For Jose Luis Martin 'Chito' Gascon, chairperson of the Philippines' Commission on Human Rights, inspiring the youth to take action matters. Years before he joined government, Gascon was an eloquent youth leader, eventually becoming director general of the Liberal Party.

He addressed these words to the youth wing of CALD in July 2019:

"The importance of doing what you can, where you are, with what you have, in making a difference by standing up and pushing back—where you see the values of freedom, democracy and human rights being challenged. The moment for the youth is so important: your generation has been presented this unique challenge of providing the necessary leadership to push back." Use your imagination, insight...innovate, inspire and ignite hope. Your efforts taken separately may not mean much but taken together they create a totality far bigger than each of your individual contribution...Hold on to the idea that each of us can contribute and make a difference.

He talked about pounding the rock, despite not knowing when one will succeed.

For Selyna Peiris, former chairperson of CALD Youth, the use of social media platforms for social mobilization remains a potent tool. To advance causes, building networks and working with like-minded organizations and people is a core strategy propelled by what she calls the "power of human relationships".

But there had been some disheartening development. A UNDP survey done in 2014 showed that the youth's psychological involvement in politics was low, indicating a fragile connection with public affairs and government. This came just a few years after the world had witnessed the Arab Spring, in which a lot of young people played a central role in sparking the protest movement in the Middle East.

Reflecting on the survey in 2019, **Abhisit** Vejjajiva expressed surprise. He said that the Arab Spring's impact was global, giving rise to more youth involvement in various protests around the world.

> Moreover, he cited two young liberal-democratic leaders who are now at the helm of their respective nations: Justin Trudeau in Canada and Emmanuel Macron in France. Said Abhisit:

> > "Both capitalized on their youth and presented themselves as new alternatives. They managed to break through."

He continued with examples of heads of state who have "put on the table issues and perspectives that the world can think aboutin terms of gender, role of motherhood. and balancing that with work". One of them was the former prime minister of Ireland, Leo Varadkar, the first openly gay political

leader in a predominantly Catholic country. The prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, gave birth while in office (2018).

Historically, Abhisit said, each generation grows up with different priorities about what it wants to get involved in: "The basic concept of rights...are factors that drive youth movements. The platform for participation now has different channels, different methods—for different causes...[with] an unprecedented set of tools to get the youth involved in the political process." Using a broad brush, Abhisit explained that major changes that happen in society are often driven by young people. He pointed out three reasons why the power of youth has become the force for change and progress around the world:

The youth have ambition and energy.

They offer fresh perspective, starting up like a blank sheet of paper.

They are uncorrupted—not trapped in vested interests—and are more willing to try and push what is good for the country, inevitably trying to change the course of things.

> The challenge, Abhisit stressed, is how to make use of the energy that the youth have while at the same time "not to be too removed from the importance of ideology and principles".

The critical areas that require the attention of the youth are advocacy, climate change, public speaking, and organization skills. We need to build smart and strategic partnerships.

> Ivanpal Singh Grewal "Standing Up to Challenges", 2017

VOICES FROM THE CALD YOUTH

The youth need to be heard, to speak up in a more constructive environment to address issues of justice.

We need to mainstream our region's issues to the greater international youth arena, deepen ties with the International Federation of Liberal Youth and beyond to build smarter and more strategic partnerships and be an asset to these networks.

Siripa Nan Intavichein *"Keeping up with Change", 2018*

Let's communicate

.........

"If you're not telling your story, then who is?"

This is an all-important question, close to existential, for political parties and activists. It was actually posed by leadership development expert Marike Groenewald at

a CALD workshop on political branding in June 2018.



Across Asia, many parties have struggled to make their party brand familiar, appealing, and understandable to the public. Parties these days have to rethink the way they communicate, establish,



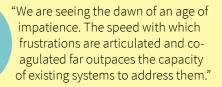


and adhere to their identity to make themselves distinct in the mass market. This entails, among others, engaging a target audience, constructing "structured and accessible tactical media responses", and developing a "reputation for effective message delivery", says William Townsend, a communications adviser of the Liberal International.

Groenewald also points out: "Remember that if you *are not* telling a story, you *are* still telling a story."

Reaching out to citizens, communities, constituencies, and the general public is not a simple and easy task. It is not something that should be taken for granted, especially with the fast-paced changes across the world. The prevalence of new technology and popular and speedy access to various modes of communication have made things more nuanced and require more science.

Communications expert Jan Mikael Co notes,





One of the biggest lessons the Liberal Party in the Philippines learned from its devastating loss in the 2016 presidential elections was the failure to communicate the gains during the six-year administration of President Benigno Aquino III (2010-2016). The government was too engrossed in making reforms work and LP wrongly assumed that the public knew and felt the results.

Looking back just months after LP's defeat in the 2016 polls, party stalwart Butch Abad, who was Aquino's budget secretary, had this advice:

"Engage, sit down, and talk about how they feel about these changes every step of the way. Be mindful of pushback from ideological, partisan, and vested interest groups affected by reforms, as those who are disgruntled. can join forces against you." Reflecting on where they failed during the campaign,

Abad was struck by the strong feeling of many who felt they were left out.

We need to grasp the depth of the fear, uncertainty and insecurity that people feel about the rapid changes as consequence of globalization, Internet, and social media.

We should influence discourse and ensure that every citizen [knows he or she] has a stake.

To counter the negativity and toxicity in social media, fueled by polarization, Abad urged making "spaces for spirited and positive action", an innovation that could make a difference. In the end, he said, "hope will outlive fear".

For Philippine Vice President Leni Robredo, meanwhile, it is vital that candidates and government



officials "use the language of ordinary citizens, see where they are coming from and speak with one voice...and from the heart". What is equally important, she says, is to "listen with empathy".

Former Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has said that it is key that liberals and democrats point out that authoritarians and populists have never offered policies that have led to lasting success. He

muses in a message as CALD's chairperson in the Council's 2018 Annual Report:

"We must share our experiences and change the perception that we are elitist, ineffective, detached from the bread-andbutter issues...and convey our messages well so that they resonate...."



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NEWS	1





Abhisit also explains elsewhere:

In the age of social media, especially among the younger generation, they want to see quick results. In their eyes, liberalism is about process, not results. We do things properly, respecting rights, allowing popular participation. But they see this as indecision, delays, slow or inefficient management.

In the same way that the populists have succeeded, Abhisit's advice has been to "appeal emotionally to the electorate…make the connection to them that we do care" and respect them because they are not misguided as some tend to think. How? The veteran politician says,

By explaining ourselves better, recognizing their grievances, and relate to them what we can do for them...We have to prove we are different. Otherwise, we become irrelevant.



Weapon of mass distraction

"The ideal subject of authoritarian rule is the person who can no longer distinguish between fact and fiction."

Hannah Arendt

First, the definitions. Disinformation is a deliberate, often orchestrated, attempt to confuse or manipulate people through dishonest information. Misinformation, meanwhile, is misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent.

It is disinformation, therefore, that we have to guard against. As Filipino journalist John Nery has said, the objective of disinformation is to sow confusion. A confused public is most vulnerable to propaganda and manipulation by anti-democratic forces.

HOAX

ΠΑΧ

While disinformation happens all the time, it is during elections and crises that we see a surge. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was common to come across 'fake news', mostly on cures for coronavirus.

Disinformation during election campaigns has become increasingly well-funded, sophisticated, and harder to detect. In the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, and India, disinformation figured prominently in recent elections, resulting in decline of civil discourse, absence of substantive political debate, and a highly polarized society.

HOAX

In Hong Kong, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Singapore, disinformation has been weaponized to target political opponents or dampen political support for the opposition. Worse, in countries

DAN like Myanmar, India, and Sri Lanka, disinformation and hate speech are reported to have contributed to the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities. Bambang Harymurti, former chief editor of *Tempo* magazine, says that during the April 2019 presidential elections in Indonesia, both ruling and opposition parties weaponized social media to propagate 'fake news' and disinformation.

> "When government and police have their own 'fake news' production teams, it creates a trap question: Whom can you trust in this society? The problem of government distrust arises."

In the Philippines, a study by Tsek.ph, a multi-sectoral fact-checking group spearheaded by universities and media organizations, showed that the main source of disinformation and misinformation during and after the midterm elections was social media. Tsek.ph was active in the 2019 senatorial and congressional elections. Quoting the Tsek. ph study, Sarah Elago, a party-list member representing the youth in the Philippine Congress,

134 H Q A X

said that following social media as the top source of disinformation and misinformation were candidates and other public figures. Targeted the most by the Duterte administration during the 2019 elections was the opposition senatorial slate made up of Liberal Party candidates and allies.

A recent development has been the proliferation of disinformation in chat groups. Rosalind Liu of Cofacts, a fact-checking group in Taiwan, says that the most dangerous part of the 'fake news' phenomenon is messaging

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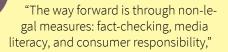
applications where private and group conversations happen. "Through these apps, rumors, misinformation, disinformation and hate speeches spread quickly," she says.

Cofacts in Taiwan does a crowd-sourced instant message fact-check system. Liu explains that when people receive a suspicious message in their chat room, they can forward it to Cofacts's chat box and it will respond with a fact-checked content written by Cofacts editors. If the user is satisfied with the response, he/ she can forward it back to the original chatroom so that others can get the accurate information.

In the Philippines, two news organizations have partnered with Facebook to conduct vigorous fact-checks and flag 'fake news'. A citizens' fact-checking group is also active on social media.

> Will legislating against disinformation curb 'fake news'? Apparently not.

Incumbent regimes have used legislation to stifle free speech. Robin Ramcharan, executive director of the Asia Centre in Thailand, says that most of the current laws are vaguely worded and are highly punitive and coercive, criminalizing free expression. He says:



Zachary Lampell, legal advisor at the International Centre for Non-Profit Law in the United States, says that before creating new legislation, it is best to look at what tools already exist that can be used to combat disinformation. The next step would be to train civil-society organizations, law enforcement, and judges on these tools.

> Reducing spread of disinformation relies on a holistic approach: legal reform, training for law enforcement, media literacy, critical thinking, fact-checking, and privacy laws.



Fact-check. Work with media, academe, and citizens' and professional groups.





Conduct digital and media literacy campaigns for the public, from students to policy-makers politicians to government officials, among whom are some likely sources of disinformation. Spread the word on how to identify disinformation and stop it.

Know the facts. Read.





6

In messaging apps, beware of fake logos, questionable videos, and messages that entice you to pass on the disinformation.





Report websites and other sources of false or hateful content to site administrators and authorities so they can take action.



In the online world, the Philippines is tops in many ways. Filipinos have the highest daily Internet usage globally. The January 2020 We are Social and Hootsuite digital report showed that Filipinos spend an average of nine hours, 45 minutes online per day. In Southeast Asia, Thailand followed with nine hours, one minute; Indonesia, seven hours, 59 minutes; and Malaysia seven hours, 57 minutes.

Social-media users in the Philippines are the most active in the region, averaging three hours, 53 minutes a day. Close behind is Indonesia at three hours 26 minutes.
These are way above the global average of two hours, 44 minutes. These figures increased globally during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This backdrop of connectedness makes the Philippines a fertile place for disinformation. One other factor that makes the country a hot spot for 'fake news' is the poor quality of education of young Filipino students. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found in a 2018 triennial survey of 15-year old students around the world that those in the Philippines scored lower in reading, mathematics, and science than those in most of the countries and economies that participated in the poll. The Philippines' average score in reading was 340 points, the lowest, at par with the Dominican Republic.

Over 80 percent of students in the Philippines did not reach a minimum level of proficiency in reading, one of the largest shares of low performers among PISAparticipating countries.

The PISA survey assesses the extent to which students have acquired key knowledge and skills "essential for fully participating in society" and focuses on the core school subjects of reading, mathematics, and science.

Sara Elago, a member of Congress representing the youth, says that the educational system needs to be improved. She also points out that the Internet and social media trends in the Philippines make the youth vulnerable to disinformation:

> "Users only read the headlines and not the full article, which contributes to disinformation."

The 2019 mid-term elections saw the heightened—and dangerous—use of social media. A study, "Tracking Digital Disinformation in the 2019 Philippine Midterm Election", released in August 2019, found the following:

> Social media and disinformation have become more central and entrenched in the conduct of Philippine political campaigns. For the first time, digital operations have been fully integrated in the overall campaign strategy, becoming more prevalent and influential in shaping political conversations.

Social media do not singularly determine electoral outcomes. They make a difference in transforming the character of political conversations.

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Digital campaigning was increasingly multi-platform, extending beyond Facebook and Twitter to cover YouTube and Instagram. Candidates have opportunities to speak on a broader range of issues using vernaculars that reach out to communities in diverse platforms.



The study called attention to the dark side of the emergence of hyper-partisan platforms such as closed Facebook groups and impostor news channels on YouTube. These exploit citizens' mistrust against the political establishment in exchange for clicks that can be monetized through advertisements.

These new strategies of "micro-media manipulation", the study said, were aimed to seed political messages to discreet groups



of unsuspecting voters, showing a more prolific use of Facebook closed groups in spreading election-related disinformation.



One noticeable change was that disinformation producers have become more insidious and evasive, camouflaging "toxic incivilities" in 2019. The study found that the work environment enabled political strategists and creatives usually from public relations and advertising agencies—because of weak regulatory infrastructure around election-campaign consultancies and industry self-regulatory mechanisms.



"Our liberty will not be secured at the sword's point... We must secure it by making ourselves worthy of it. And when the people reach that height, God will provide a weapon, the idols will be shattered, tyranny will crumble like a house of cards, and liberty will shine out like the first dawn."

Jose Rizal

{ Want to read more? Here are our sources. }

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Images

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