

## Opening Remarks of Franklin Drilon

Good morning to everyone. It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to the 14th General Assembly of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats or CALD. Welcome to my home city, the city of Iloilo. And let me extend my special greetings and welcome to our Retired Senior Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Antonio Carpio, let's give him a warm hand.

As you may be aware, CALD is a regional network of liberal and democratic political institutions in Asia founded in 1993. The Liberal Party of the Philippines is one of the founding members.

For this General Assembly, CALD has chosen the theme, "Building a Democratic Coalition Against Disinformation", which, I must say, could not be more relevant for the Philippines. The Philippines has been described as "patient zero" in the global war against disinformation way back in 2018, and tragically, the results of our recent elections show that we have not yet recovered from the onslaught of trolls, influencers and other peddlers of lies and deception in our digital landscape.

While the Philippines is one of the most affected countries in this disinformation epidemic, we also recognize that the problem is a global one. Disinformation has significant implications for the future of democracy, and the observance of human rights and the rule of law. The scale, scope and reach of the global infodemic can be gleaned from the fact that in a 2021 global survey done by Oliver Wyman Forum, more than 80% of over 125,000 people surveyed said disinformation is a problem, and almost a third said they have been victims of fake news.

Recently, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that "Disinformation comes in different forms. And this includes targeted operations by states, state officials, conspiracy fed theories about health policies, and vaccines, smear campaigns to undermine specific groups and persons and by the others." The report stated that a key challenge of the digital age in navigating the modern media landscape is to ensure that it advances rather than undermines human rights, international peace and security. Media reports that in a high level panel discussion held at the UN Human Rights Council in New York City earlier this year, participants stressed that the spread of disinformation can have negative impact on societies - undermining a broad range of human rights. They noted that when disinformation threatens human rights, states have a duty to take appropriate steps to address these harmful impacts. This susceptibility to disinformation can have significant impact on politics as well. Please allow me to cite some recent political developments that show the pervasiveness and repercussions of disinformation:

- In the run-up to the recently concluded US midterm elections, an investigation by Global Witness and the Cybersecurity for Democracy (C4D) shows that Facebook and TikTok largely failed to detect and remove election disinformation. YouTube apparently did better, although this was in glaring contrast to the platform's record in Brazil, where problematic election ads were approved.

- In the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Kremlin-pushed false narratives such as the Ukrainian President committing suicide, Ukrainian ‘Nazis’ being the aggressors and committing war crimes, and Western sanctions not making a huge impact on Russia, are being used to demoralize Ukrainian troops, alienate its allies and bolster Russian citizens’ support for the occupation.
- In the upcoming nine-in-one local elections in Taiwan this 26 November, an uptick in Chinese-perpetuated disinformation is being observed, as expected. It is said that Taiwan’s local elections have gradually become China’s testing ground for techniques to disrupt the democratic process through internet disinformation.

These are just some recent examples of how disinformation can shape political processes and outcomes. It must be said, however, that disinformation not only affects politics but the society at large. Because of false information, the shared norms, values and understandings, which are necessary for the effective functioning of every society, have been put into question, even discarded. The societal institutions that used to safeguard moral standards and professional integrity, such as established religions and traditional media, have now become subjects of distrust and hate. In a world of digital disinformation, everyone has become vulnerable – to being a target and unwitting purveyor of disinformation/misinformation, to data hacking and harvesting, to cyber-attacks and cyber-bullying, even surveillance and censorship. Given the wide-ranging scope of the problem, the possible solutions should also mobilize all stakeholders – the international community, government institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, the media, tech and social media companies, educational institutions, among others.

It is in this light that we are all gathered here in Iloilo for the next two days. We recognize that democratic forces from all sectors must come together to learn from each other and formulate concrete and effective solutions to the issue of disinformation. If the autocrats and populists can unite and support each other, we too can build and sustain coalitions that defend democracy and our fundamental freedoms.

The call of our times is clear. We are not only fighting against disinformation. We are fighting to preserve our democratic way of life – our freedoms, our rights, our dignity as human beings.

My wish is that this democratic gathering in Iloilo can provide us with the necessary knowledge, skills and strategies to win this fight for democracy. Thank you very much.