



ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ ASEAN Peoples' Forum 2017

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ASEAN and EU Parliamentarians decry shrinking civic space; unite with CSOs in defending human rights and rule of law

ASEAN and European parliamentarians speaking at a Town Hall Meeting organized by the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples' Forum at the Commission on Human Rights grounds in UP Diliman decry the "democratic deficit" and worsening human rights situation in the Southeast Asian region.

MP Charles Santiago from Malaysia and Chair of the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights stressed that the shrinking of civic space today is "unprecedented as not only labor unions and civil society organizations are under attack, but also members of parliament and political parties". He said this current alarming situation is starkly different compared to a decade ago.

Rep. Tom Villarin of the Philippine Congress echoed Santiago's assertion as he noted the "attacks on the freedoms of the press, political parties and democratic institutions" in the region, which signify that the ASEAN merely pays "lip service to human rights."

"The ASEAN governments are definitely not committed to democracy, human rights and the rule of law," added Santiago. He pointed out that despite the atrocities committed against the 650,000 Rohingya in Myanmar, "not one ASEAN government stood up."

Both ASEAN lawmakers also criticized the ASEAN's policy of non-interference as being selective. "Non-interference merely applies to human rights, democracy and the rule of law and not to trade and investments", which they say greatly benefit big business while exploiting labor and people's livelihoods.

Member of European Parliament Enrique Guerrero from Spain is equally alarmed at the shrinking civic space "not only in developing countries but also in Europe." He noted governments curtail civil society through "taxation, the bureaucracy, criminalization and stigmatization."

"Civil society organizations push for open democracies and accountability – principles that governments are against," he said. For CSOs, these are the very principles that challenge and pose as threats to power.

Meanwhile, Member of European Parliament Norbert Neuser from Germany recognizes the importance of civil society to a progressive parliament. "We need CSOs but they



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also need support to effectively play their roles,” he said to hundreds of participants to the ACSC/APF.

MEP Neuser quipped that “there are no borders in human rights” in reaction to criticisms that the EU is “interfering” in another nation’s affairs when it raises human rights issues.

“Defending human rights is never an interference,” MEP Guerrero added. “We must fight for it in every part of the world, including in our own countries.”

Meanwhile Jelen Paclarin, ACSC/APF Regional Steering Committee Chair, expressed disgust at the ‘rise and normalization of misogyny.’

“The advances and gains of women, their rights and autonomy brought about by several decades of struggle are being reversed”, she said. “Progressive forces and CSOs must come together and collectively counter attacks and hatred against women and further push for their empowerment.”

The parliamentarians reinforced Paclarin’s call and expressed strong support for civil society in Southeast Asia in forging stronger alliances towards ending oppression and marginalization of people in the region.

Dr. Ed Tadem, co-convenor of the ACSC/APF Philippine National Organizing Committee, raised that after 50 years since ASEAN’s inception, the regional body is “still a work in progress” in terms of engaging with CSOs. “ASEAN has still to arrive at concrete mechanisms in involving CSOs in its processes, more so in partnering with them.”

Dr. Tadem gave this reaction in response to a statement by a representative of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community that although the ASEAN in its blueprint highlights engagement with CSOs, it still faces the challenge of actualizing what is stated on paper.

Dr. Tadem reiterated its call to the Philippine government as chair of the ASEAN to approve its Terms of Reference with it clearly defining the relationship between government and CSOs and their mutually beneficial engagements in relation to ASEAN concerns.

The civil society network has been asking the Philippines as Chair of the ASEAN to leave a significant legacy by institutionalizing peoples’ participation in the ASEAN through a TOR with ACSC/APF. However, the draft TOR, which has been submitted to the ASEAN in December 2016, has been idling away in its office without any action.