

Beyond Boundaries: People's Solidarity for a Just, Equitable and Humane Southeast Asia

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Thank you for inviting me to join this plenary to speak on the theme of the 2017 ACSC/APF, as people-to-people solidarity indeed remains close to my heart.

As ASEAN is about to celebrate its 50th anniversary, I believe our gathering today gives us the perfect opportunity to reflect on our region's coming together. During its inception, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was merely a coming together of the governments. Over the last half a century, encompassing two generations, the aim was to deepen the integration of our nations. However, what are governments and their coming together without the peoples? Beyond the slogan of a caring and sharing community, where is ASEAN now in this project of integration? Are we now closer to this dream of a caring and sharing community of peoples that embrace their diversity, lending solidarity beyond citizenship, religion/belief, race, ethnicity, gender, and other socially and politically constructed categories? Where are we in the recognition of each individual's and people's human rights, the inalienable, indivisible and universal birthright of every human being outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)? Where are we in our collective vision of a Southeast Asia, a community of different but equal members of one humanity wherein we coexist in peace and with human security?

Today, permit me to recall an inspiring example of people-to-people solidarity movement in the last 20 years — the Free Burma movement.

During those years when Burma was under a ruthless military regime, we, the Burmese democracy and human rights/ethnic rights movement based along the country's borders, reached out to you and friends across the region and across the globe seeking for your solidarity to support and join our struggle. We asked you to undertake various campaigns, from the immediate and unconditional release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners to knowledge sharing and skill building on non-violence actions, from women's rights and community development to cross-border humanitarian aid for the conflict-affected

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ethnic communities, the IDPs and refugees, as they fled from the Burma Army's military offensives.

And you, the regional solidarity movement especially the one that was born right here in this university in 1994 in support of the struggle of our East Timorese friends, have generously responded to our call, and mobilized on various fronts, including in later years in this very platform, the ACSC/APF.

Friends of Burma in ASEAN and beyond - ten years in 2007, you took yourselves to the streets and took part in the demonstrations in front of Burmese embassies in your countries denouncing the military regime when they shot and killed Buddhist monks in Rangoon/Yangon during the Saffron Revolution. The international and regional solidarity movement for a Free Burma was perhaps one of the largest and well-organized global movements for freedom and for human rights that we have ever witnessed. Some of you even allowed yourselves to get arrested by the military in order to show your solidarity with the people of Burma. Quite a thrilling experience I have embraced and cherished in my almost-30 years activist life. Some of you are in deed here with us today in this hall. On behalf of our movement, thank you!

In 2009, when we organized a global campaign for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and more than 2,000 political prisoners, human rights communities from more than 65 countries across the globe joined us, in which nearly 700,000 signatures were collected in 3 months and delivered directly to the UN Secretary General—an instrumental worldwide collective action that led the international community to put the agenda of release of political prisoners a top policy priority in their engagement with Myanmar Government. Even ASEAN had to issue a statement calling for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi ahead of 2010 elections.

From those years of solidarity movement campaigning for a Free Burma, I have come to learn so well of how we as humans conscientized can come together for a common cause of our humanity beyond physical boundaries and socially and politically constructed categories. In short, through these acts of solidarity, people around the world campaigned for the freedom of other fellow human beings without even knowing who they personally are, but only out of empathy, and their belief in our interconnectedness as humanity.

When we see another human being's suffering, we also feel their pain. But only of course if we are able to see human beings as human beings as they are no matter where they are from and what their belief is – that they live, breathe, laugh, cry, feel pain, and dream like we do.

Unfortunately, empathy is also a double-edged sword. Proximity, in terms of physical closeness or cultural similarities, helps determine empathy. But how do we then perceive other individuals and peoples that are invisibilized? Not invisible, but invisibilized. Because their narratives are purposely repressed and silenced by governments and by structures and productions? Because their stories are not talked about or not allowed to get in mainstream media and in dominant discourses? Because we are socialized to believe and to see them as “other”, and even worse less or not human?

The ACSC/APF was born out of our desire for a genuine coming together of Southeast Asian peoples. We pose this platform as an alternative and critique to the so-called “integration” of our governments, a project which we argue does not have a space for the most invisibilized and silenced of us/communities in Southeast Asia. The ACSC/APF for us is our very own expression of coming together and of solidarity, where we provide space and voice for those who find no space and voice in the formal inter-governmental processes such as the ASEAN and other official regional mechanisms and platforms.

Hence, if indeed the ACSC/APF is such, then we should dare to talk about the issues of these marginalized, many of them unable to come even to this platform. This space, therefore, should be about and for them, those of the ‘least’ and at the same time the most of us—the migrants, the women and children, the LGBTIQ, the persons with disabilities, the peasants and fisherfolk, the rural and urban poor, the workers, the refugees, the IDPs, the indigenous peoples, the ethnic and religious minorities, and the stateless.

Friends, after past two decades of your solidarity to our Free Burma movement, another peoples in Burma/Myanmar, need your solidarity now more than ever before: They are ethnic and religious minorities – the Kachin, the Shan, the Ta’ang and, especially and particularly the Rohingya.

After all these years in the solidarity movement for Free Burma, and for other countries and communities, I am deeply hurt and sad to see that there is very little sympathy and empathy, if there is any at all, being shown towards the Rohingya people by other communities. They are denied their identity but also denied of their humanity, even called animals and insects - ‘dogs’ and ‘worms’.

We should be able to call the name ‘Rohingya’ because that is the name they wish to be called. And because that is the name that gives face to their suffering and their aspirations to

live in this world like us as equal human beings as we are. It is by recognizing that name that we are first able to see them as human beings – able to live, breathe, laugh, cry, feel the pain and dream like we do.

This, however, is neither the first time that this structural and systematic discrimination and persecution against the Rohingya has happened in Burma/Myanmar. Neither is this only happening against the Rohingya.

We must situate the recent violence and abuses in Rakhine and against the Rohingya people within the overall and long-standing patterns of human rights violations against ethnic civilians, and the attendant impunity, by the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw), within the history of its use of militarization and of divide-and-rule and of violence as a state-building strategy especially in the ethnic states. Back in 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Karen, Karenni and Shan, and Mon ethnic civilians had to flee from their ancestral land and became IDPs and refugees, as Myanmar Army launched military offensives against various ethnic armed resistance movement and committed human rights violations and crimes including rape, extrajudicial killing and forced labor. If there were social media and technology like today back in the 1990s, the world would have learned more about these ethnic communities.

In the past two decades, we campaigned together for a Free Burma. However, today, Burma is still not technically free. Even as the country has slowly opened up to the world in the last years and even when there have a civilian government, the military control remains entrenched until today.

If there is a lesson to learn from Burma/Myanmar's experience, it is this: change cannot and does not emanate from single person. Change can only come from a collective desire galvanizing collective action from the ground/bottom up, from the people themselves.

The rise of ultra-nationalism and racism inside Burma/Myanmar is both a product of the military-political elite's propaganda, and an indication of people's lack of deeper understanding of and value for human rights and their communities, and their disempowerment to stand up and fight for the protection and realization of their rights, and that of others.

I argue that human rights is relevant to the discussion of people-to-people solidarity and empowerment. Today more than ever, in this age of so much hate, we need to empower people to further realize and fight for their own rights, as well as realize how their rights and

their struggles are linked and are indivisible to that of others; thus, it is of grave importance that we stand in solidarity for the rights of the others.

It is however unrealistic to expect that in a society, that has been deprived of its rights under military oppression for decades and has been isolated and individualized through a regime of insecurity, fear will subside and empathy will suddenly take its place. It takes a process of empowerment as well as emancipation for the Myanmar society to open up their heart to its own invisibilized and marginalized minorities. In such societies that currently experience repressive regimes and shrinking civic space, community organizing is most crucial—something I believe we are largely missing in many of our social movements today.

People will come to mobilize and join as active participants and contributors in a process only when their day-to-day interests are involved, when they are also materially empowered to do so. Building up knowledge and skills in community organizing will help people analyze their community's shared concerns, and find common ways to act. Addressing relevant political, social and economic issues that directly affect their daily lives, knowing what needs to be changed, and identifying what can be achieved within the given circumstances, in participatory and inclusive manner, is the way to empower people. This way we provide them with the sense of meaning and ownership, and the exercise of autonomy over circumstances that surround them.

For this purpose, human rights is instrumental. Human rights allow and nurture communities that are founded on the principle that while we may all be different as to citizenship, language, race, gender, religion/beliefs, and socio-economic backgrounds, we are all equal and we all share the same set of rights that will ensure that we live in peace, security and thus in dignity.

Sustainable people-to-people solidarity does not end with being outraged and mobilizing on injustices that do not seemingly affect you. Rather it starts with understanding and recognizing the undeniable interconnectedness, the singularity of our struggles for human rights and dignified life. After all, we all come from somewhere and the mother earth would be at peace if we embrace each other and value our diversity – beyond boundaries and build the people to people solidarity – not for spreading hate but for a just, equitable and humane society – beyond boundaries.

Dreaming the impossible can become possible if we have a will and commitment and I hope you all join in this ACSC/APF platform and take the stand for humanity - for those

vulnerable, marginalised, oppressed, and persecuted - not only in Burma/Myanmar but in Cambodia, Vietnam and elsewhere across ASEAN and beyond!

Thank you and my solidarity to you all!