

Conference Reports

6. Asientag “Asia First” – Populism, Authoritarianism, Civil Society

COLOGNE, 21 APRIL 2018

The sixth Asientag, organised by the Stiftung Asienhaus, the Philippinenbüro and the Southeast Asia Information Centre, took place on 21 April 2018 in the Alte Feuerwache in Cologne. Director of the Stiftung Asienhaus, Monika Schlicher, gave the opening remarks, in which she introduced this year’s thematic focus. Democratic governance is experiencing a worldwide decline, while authoritarianism and populism are increasing on a global scale. It is concerning that only a fraction of all countries have a free civil society, while discrimination, repression, violence, censorship and immunity for perpetrators are becoming increasingly common. Thus, it is crucial to analyse and discuss the various aspects of populism and authoritarianism from different angles, especially with guests from the affected countries. Moreover, discussions should take into account the possibilities for civil society organisations to take action.

Due to Islamic populism and political opportunism, Indonesia’s political environment is becoming more conservative, with a clear reference to Indonesian nationalism, as described by Hendra Pasuhuk (Deutsche Welle). Although political Islam has not yet completely permeated the political system – after the “Reformasi” (Suharto’s resignation in May 1998) it gained in momentum but was unable to win any elections – it is strengthening its influence over politics by means of extra-parliamentary movements with strong political mobilisation. In this way, political Islam can exert more pressure on political parties and the government than it could through participation in elections. Mobilisation for those movements is accomplished through media appearances, the Internet and social media. Because secular political parties lack strong ideological foundations, they act opportunistically: many politicians associate with political Islam and its activists to increase their mobilisation power.

Similarly, Cambodia’s political situation has significantly worsened in recent months, according to Ali Al-Nasani (Heinrich Böll Stiftung Cambodia). Despite being a signee of various international human rights contracts, the country denies human rights to its own people. A *rule by law* governance (as opposed to *rule of law*) allows for the issuance of antidemocratic laws, which

in turn are readily implemented by the politically influenced judiciary. The so-called “elastic clause”, which condemns anyone infringing upon national security or national values, significantly constrains actions by the opposition and by civil society. Kept ambiguous on purpose, the clause can easily be used to silence all critical voices. A subsequent workshop discussed Cambodia’s avenues for post-election development: either the status quo will continue, new small spaces for an emerging civil society will be opened, or we will see additional repression and restrictions. The panellists all agreed that civil society is increasingly afraid of publicly voicing political opinions and that any post-election opposition is quite unlikely. What is certain, however, is that Germany’s solidarity towards Cambodia must be strengthened.

Myanmar and the Philippines both face challenges in developing their federalist systems away from the consolidation of power and towards social justice. Panellists Christina Grein (Burma-Initiative of the Stiftung Asienhaus) and Kaloy Manlupig (Balay Mindanaw Foundation) discussed the requirements for a strengthened and socially just federalist system. Despite the countries’ differing contexts, both are lacking in open debate and active participation by civil society, two important conditions for a functioning federalism.

According to panellists Praphakorn Wongratanawin (Stiftung Asienhaus), Nick Nostitz (freelance photojournalist and author) and Nicola Glass (freelance journalist and former Southeast-Asian correspondent), Thailand is facing increasing repression by the Junta, which came to power through a coup in 2014. The new ban on assembly and the harsh law against insulting the king particularly exemplify this development. Mass demonstrations have not yet occurred, but small protests are taking place. Further, the trauma from the army crackdown on the “red” protests in 2010 is still keeping the “Red Shirts” movement (who are mostly followers of former Prime Minister Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra) rather quiet. Nonetheless, even while the Junta continues to delay the originally promised elections, new parties that strive towards democratic principles, justice and national reconciliation have formed. When and how they will appeal to the electorate, however, will become visible only if the military’s promised elections are in fact implemented. As of now, Thailand remains far from democratic, considering that the new constitution serves to keep the military in power permanently.

In India, too, a substantial portion of the population is suffering under the political situation. In the workshop “Clean India” Bezwada Wilson and Michael Gottlob discussed “manual scavenging” to illustrate India’s lingering racism. Despite the practice being legally banned, around 340,000 Dalits (the unofficial figure is estimated to be 1.3 million) still dispose of human excrement and clear sewage drains with their bare hands. These degrading working conditions are able to persist because of the current Indian government, which makes no effort to close existing social and cultural gaps.

Several workshops also dealt with the conference topics on a transnational level. As described by Benedikt Frank, the situation for workers and labour unions in Cambodia is becoming challenging. Various developments, amongst others the 2016 implemented Trade Union Law, leads to repression of trade-union labour. In Indonesia, the Kendeng Campaign (against a cement project in Java by the German company HeidelbergCement) has sparked opposition and protests from the population. In both countries, solidarity and engagement are increasingly difficult, and the media plays an important role not only in local and international campaigns, but also in influencing the debate in the national context. Generally, it was agreed that safer and more stable structures needed to be created, in order to improve transnational solidarity.

Another workshop discussed how the EU could influence other countries to comply with human rights standards through its Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP+), through which it binds trade deals with poorer countries to their adherence to such standards. Taking the Philippines and Sri Lanka as examples, it was controversially argued whether this GSP+ mechanism presents a useful instrument for European human rights politics. Weaknesses in the mechanism were revealed, given that the EU uses GSP+ to expand trade relations, and thus is often unwilling to demand consequences for trading partners' human rights violations, as can be witnessed in the Philippines. On the other hand, the mechanism's strength lies in its usefulness to civilians, who can use it to bring the human rights situation to the attention of the EU, which would otherwise not take notice of it.

In a workshop concerning China, participants discussed the potential effects that the new law regulating foreign NGOs in China could have on foreign civil society organisations. Anna Caspari (Ruhr University Bochum) clarified how the reassignment of foreign NGO issues from the Ministry of Civil Affairs to the Ministry of National Security has led to a clear differentiation between domestic and foreign NGOs, thus defining "civil society with Chinese characteristics". Bertram Lang emphasised that the new law affects different European countries differently. German NGOs are said to have the most cause for concern, whereas Eastern European NGOs face few problems. Relations with Eastern European countries are also more informal. On the other hand, talks by Renée Rentke (MISEREOR) and Li Lina (adelphi) revealed that the new law is not solely problematic, but also creates a clearer, more unified and more transparent workflow. Additionally, Chinese civil society is bound to become increasingly independent of foreign monetary aid, leading it to become more active globally.

Three presentations discussed "Gender Trouble" in Asia. Timo Duile (University of Bonn) discussed the current societal developments in Indonesia, particularly the attitudes towards LGBTs. In recent years, conservative religious values have come to be more and more important in the country. In 2016

politicians and clergy initiated a hate campaign against LGBTs, even though many indigenous traditional cultures recognise more than just male and female gender identities, and homosexuality thus far has not been criminalised. However, conservative groups are now strengthening their efforts to create legal groundwork to permit the prosecution of homosexuals.

Ever since Duterte became president of the Philippines, violence has become widespread, according to Marilou Hardillo (Babaylan). It starts with social media: whoever criticises the president is immediately bombarded with online attacks in the form of curses and hacking, and even physical threats such as rape or murder. These attacks and threats, also of a sexist nature, have been able to proliferate and even become trendy because government officials who publicly ridicule women earn laughs and approval, resembling a strange kind of entertainment industry. There is an urgent need for civil society forces to voice a clear “NO” against the return to despotism and tyranny in Indonesia.

Timor-Leste, Asia’s youngest nation, presents a glimmer of hope for a region where LGBT rights are often strongly questioned. Monika Schlicher (Stiftung Asienhaus) explained that although LGBTs in Timor-Leste are to date experiencing an alarmingly high level of violence in their everyday lives, they are supported by premier de Araujo. De Araujo has called upon the populace to create an integrative society that accepts people with different sexual orientations and gender identities. On the national level, the country has already won the right of self-determination, but there remains an ongoing struggle to apply this concept to the societal level. For activists, the country’s first LGBT Pride Parade in June 2017 was a milestone in their struggle for recognition.

The final session discussed the developing role of social media and the Internet in the political realm. The view that the Internet is a guarantor of democratisation has been put into perspective. Both in Europe and Asia, online hate attacks and violent threats against opponents as well as a brutalisation of language are on the rise; in authoritarian regimes, the Internet is often a sphere of national and social supervision. Against this background, Joanna Klabisch (China-Programm of Stiftung Asienhaus), Emmalyn Liwag Kotte (PhilNetz), Praphakorn Wongratanawin (Stiftung Asienhaus) and Nataly Jung-Hwa Han (Korea-Verband) examined the situation in China, the Philippines, Thailand and Korea. It became apparent that in most countries the Internet is in fact a strongly contested sphere, which plays a central role in the spread of the new authoritarianism. Still, in these countries one can also find examples of successful progressive political campaigns that have managed to successfully fight corruption, human rights violations and other grievances.