

Social Democratic Parties in Southeast Asia - Chances and Limits

Norbert von Hofmann*, Consultant, Januar 2009

1. Introduction

The people of Southeast Asia, both masses and elites alike, looked for many years foremost up to the United States of America (US) as a role model state. However, the war on terrorism waged by the current US administration linked with cuts in civil liberties and human rights violations, especially the illegal detention and torture of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, has in the eyes of many Southeast Asians considerably discredited the US concept of liberal democracy. Furthermore, the US propagated classical economic liberalism has failed to deliver the most basic human necessities to the poor, and the current food and energy crisis as well as the latest bank crisis in the US prove that neo-liberalism is itself in trouble. The result of neo-liberalism, dominated by trade and financial liberalization, has been one of deepening inequality, also and especially in the emerging economies of Southeast Asia. Falling poverty in one community, or one country or region, is corresponding with deepening poverty elsewhere. The solution can therefore not be more liberalization, but rather more thought and more policy space for countries to pursue alternative options such as "Social Democracy".

The sudden call even from the most hard-core liberals for more regulations and interventions by the state in the financial markets and the disgust and anger of working people everywhere as their taxes being used to bail out those whose greed, irresponsibility and abuses have brought the world's financial markets to the brink of collapse, proof that the era of "turbo-capitalism" is over. After the Asian financial crisis of the late 90s, this new crisis will again threaten jobs, homes and futures of millions of human beings, also in Southeast Asia – those who never drew profit from the years of excess, whose work has been underpaid and degraded and who bear no responsibility for what is now happening.

Social democracy strives to secure the necessary social and economic conditions and to attain equal freedom for all. It is an ongoing task that can be fulfilled in a variety of ways and at different levels depending on given recourses and conditions. Social rights are based on the premise that all citizens assume responsibility for their own lives to the

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best of their abilities and can rely on the support of the community when their own efforts do not meet with success.¹

In its “Kathmandu Declaration” of February 2007 the “Socialist International”, a worldwide organization of socialist, social democratic and labour parties, formed in 1951, noted: “The people of this vast and dynamic Asia-Pacific region have reached a crucial point in their efforts to confront the challenges of advancing and consolidating democracy and securing peace and stability, both within and between nations. The Socialist International Asia-Pacific Committee underlines that there is ever greater urgency in the need to further those goals through sustained, determined and concerted political action by the social democratic forces, political parties and like minded organisations in the Asia-Pacific region so that the progress achieved in recent decades can be maintained and to ensure that all citizens of the region benefit from the gains that have been made.”²

At an International Conference on “The Relevance of Social Democratic Parties and Progressive Movements in East and Southeast Asia” organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in October 2004 in Manila, Philippines, the participants were of the view, that Social Democratic Parties and social democratic politics have definitely a chance in Southeast Asia, even if globalization has forced them temporarily into a more defensive position.

There was the common understanding, that the values and principles of social democracy remain identical, regardless if referring to local, national, regional or international levels. Solidarity means sharing with those who are less fortunate and this applies to individuals in local communities as well as to nation-states in a globalized world.

Since that Manila conference four years have passed. Several Social Democratic Parties in the region, like in the Philippines, in Timor-Leste and in Malaysia, faced democratic elections, with mixed results. Today, the collapse of neo-liberal policies provides new challenges but also new chances for the social democratic movement. It is a defining moment for setting priorities and alternatives at the centre of the political agenda. Therefore the Indonesian Office of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung considered it timely to take once again stock of developments in the field of social democracy in Southeast Asia and hence commissioned this study.

2. Social Democracy - A definition

Social democracy is a political ideology of the left or centre-left that emerged in the late 19th century from the socialist movement and continues to be influential in many countries worldwide.³

Social democracy is neither a system, nor a patent remedy for all the social and economic diseases, nor a ready made model that could be exported to other places in the world. It is a pragmatic approach to give equal value and importance to all five “basic rights”, namely civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, in the

¹ Thomas Meyer and Nicole Breyer, 2007

² <http://www.socialistinternational.org/viewArticle.cfm?ArticlePageID=823>

³ Tobias Gombert et al., 2008

framework of a liberal democracy. The respective social democratic institutions, however, have to be shaped in order to suit the concrete conditions of individual countries.⁴

3. The political climate and party politics in Southeast Asia

In this study Southeast Asia combines eleven states; ten of them are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations - ASEAN (Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam), the eleventh's is Timor-Leste (East-Timor). The total population counts more than 500 million people, one twelfth's of the world's population. All these countries have different cultures and histories as well as different forms of government, and therefore their political systems do not have much in common. Brunei is an absolute monarchy, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Timor-Leste are to some degrees democracies, Vietnam and Laos are single-party states and Burma is ruled by a military junta.

On the other side, the development of these eleven states over the last 50-60 years has shown a number of mutual characteristics such as the fight against colonial powers, experiences with dictatorships and military governments, the emergence of civil society and the struggle for more democracy. But democratization has proceeded at a mixed pace. In the past decade, the Philippines and Thailand have tried with different successes to consolidate their relatively young democracies, so has Timor-Leste in recent years. Indonesia, under authoritarian rule for thirty years, continues to make strides in its democratic transformation, so does Malaysia. In, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam societies have at least started to open up. But at the bitter end, Burma still lacks any progress at all towards democratic changes.

The newspaper *The Economist* pronounced in April 2004 the year 2004 as a year of elections in Southeast Asia, with elections taking place in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. It called this development towards more freedom and democratic maturity "that other miracle". It proclaimed a triumph for democracy in Asian voters' democratic sophistication and will to progress towards "real freedom", as manifested in the use of their vote to reflect their intolerance for corruption, incompetence, petty politics and national insecurity.⁵

Since then some form of election has taken place in all Southeast Asian countries with the exception of Brunei which does not have an electoral system, and Burma where the last elections took place in May 1990.

On May 14th 2007, Filipinos voted at congressional and local elections. Five days earlier, Timor-Leste's voters choose Jose Ramos-Horta, once a leading personality in the struggle against Indonesian occupation, as their president. On May 20th the Vietnamese elected a new National Assembly, an institution that has over the years shaken off its image as just a rubber-stamp for the ruling Communist Party. On June 30th people in Timor-Leste elected a constituent assembly and on 23rd December Thailand restored its parliamentary democracy. To complete the list, Malaysians have voted for new

⁴ Thomas Meyer in Bob S. Hadiwinata / Christoph Schuck (Eds.), 2007

⁵ The Economist April 24th 2004, page 12

national and state parliaments in March 2008 and Cambodians went to the polls in July of the same year.

However, almost exactly three years after the above mentioned article in *The Economist*, the same newspaper wrote in May 2007: "Very impressive. But alas, all this voting does not mean that the region's half-billion people enjoy liberty in its true sense, nor that the freedoms they have come to enjoy are irrevocable."⁶ The region continues to be the stage for ongoing political crises and unsolved ethnic and social conflicts and is still severely hobbled by institutional deficiencies, elite collusion, and subtle forms of societal repression.

In its latest ranking, "Freedom House" considers only two out of the eleven states in Southeast Asia as "Electoral Democracies" (Indonesia and Timor-Leste). The term "electoral democracy" meaning that the election of the ruling elite be based on the formal, universal right to vote and that such elections are general, free and fair. Also Singapore and Malaysia hold elections regularly which are considered free of fraud, cheating and violence but several *de jure* and *de facto* restrictions of the freedom of organisation, information, speech and assembly and skilful electoral management by and for the benefit of the dominant parties in both countries prevented so far any significant threat to the "Barisan Nasional" in Malaysia and the "People's Action Party" in Singapore.⁷

According to "Freedom House", Indonesia is the only "free" country in the region, whilst five countries are considered as "partly free" (Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Timor-Leste) and the rest (Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) as "not free". "Freedom House" promotes the concept of liberal democracy and it assesses countries on their current state of civil and political rights. Compared to 2003, five years ago, hardly anything has changed, only Indonesia switched its place with the Philippines.

Another indicator for democratic development is the "Bertelsmann-Transformation-Index" (BTI). In its 2008 report it ranked 125 countries worldwide for its "Political Transformation". Contrary to "Freedom House" it obtains its ratings on a broader base, by calculating the mean value of several more criteria: Stateness; Political Participation; Rule of Law; Stability of Democratic Institutions and Political and Social Integration. On a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), Indonesia reached 6.45 (2003: 6.0); the Philippines 6.30 (6.0); Singapore 5.37 (5.6); Malaysia 5.33 (5.2); Thailand 5.10 (7.6); Cambodia 4.13 (4.0); Vietnam 3.15 (2.8); Laos 2.78 (2.8) and Burma 1.7 (2.0) points. None of these countries reached a status of "advanced" or "highly advanced". Again, comparing 2008 with the year 2003, only very small progresses in the countries' transformations to democracy can be observed - besides the heavy down fall of Thailand.

In all the so-called "partly free" countries or, to use another term, "defective democracies"⁸ the process of developing party-democracies is still ongoing. In most cases it is a second attempt, after the first trials with multi-party-systems failed soon after independence, when single-party-systems prevailed, often as results of coup d'états or civil wars.

⁶ The Economist May 19th 2007, page 52-53

⁷ Aurel Croissant, Beate Martin (Eds.), 2006

⁸ Merkel, 2003

Despite a remarkable growth and come-back of political parties all over Southeast Asia, parties are still generally held in very low regard by the public. In most countries they are the least respected and trusted of any public institutions.

The major deficits of political parties are found in the weak political representation and the lack of consolidation within the party systems. The high fragmentation (in Thailand 48 political parties participated in the last election) with little ideological and vague programmatic differences are another common short-coming as is the low institutionalisation and the lack of inner-party democracy, e.g. closed rules of party recruitments. Parties are considered as corrupt and self-interested organisations, not more than just mechanisms for the distribution of power and recourses. Frequently parties centre around charismatic leaders, e.g. from traditional families, religion, military or business. The decisive role of parties, namely aggregation, articulation and representation of the views and interests of their voters, is mostly neglected and parties are often only active around election time when they are looking for votes. Soon afterwards voters are forgotten and the elites concentrate on the setting up of government and the distribution of posts.

Furthermore, the process of party-based elections has in some countries uncovered long-lasting differences between various sectors of society. Political divides and conflict ridden politics mark elections and democratic processes, for example in Cambodia or Malaysia.

Therefore many critical civil society groups and social movements out-rightly dismiss political parties and politicians due to their inability and lack of qualifications - a scenario which can be found for example in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. But none of these groups has so far really made clear what kind of institutions or processes could replace political parties and fulfill their major democratic functions. Even the present proposal of the Thai People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to nominate 70 % of all members of parliament in order to weaken the electoral power of the rural poor is only supported by a rather small segment of Thailand's social movements.

Most major political parties of some relevance in Southeast Asia consider themselves as liberal, market economy oriented and more or less in the political centre or to the right of it.

Communism in Southeast Asia gained only some importance during the period immediately following World War II, the Japanese occupation and the attempted return by European colonial powers. During the period of the Cold War several communist insurgencies broke out in the region. However, only the communist movements in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were successful, but even they took thirty years to achieve their goal and paid for it with millions of lives and the devastation of their countries.

Today only small and insignificant Communist, Marxist or Maoist parties or groupings do exist in Southeast Asian countries outside Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, such as in Thailand (e.g. Peoples Coalition Party), Indonesia (e.g. Perhimpunan Rakyat Perkerya), the Philippines (e.g. Bayan Muna) and Malaysia (e.g. Parti Sosialis Malaysia). Interesting enough, on June 17th, 2008 the last mentioned Marxist "Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM)" obtained approval from the Home Ministry in Kuala Lumpur to register as a political party after a 10-year battle that included a protracted law suit against the government.

In the March 2008 election the PSM managed to win two seats — one in parliament and one in a state assembly, using the logo of the “People’s Justice Party (PKR)”.

The Marxist-Leninist/Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) became again legal in September 2007, when President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo signed an amnesty for members of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People’s Army, as well as other communist rebel groups and their umbrella organization, the National Democratic Front. The CPP itself did not participate in the last legislative elections in 2007, but three of its forefront organisations the Bayan Muna, Anak Pawis and the Gabriela Women’s Party were able to secure four seats through the party list procedure.⁹

The role of Social Democratic Parties in Southeast Asia is, compared to Communist Parties, only marginally bigger. However, social democracy is not unknown to that part of the world. It flourished especially in the years following the end of the World War II and with the growing number of independent states. For example, the Burmese Socialist Party (BSP) and the Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI) played an influential role in establishing an “Asian Socialist Movement” in the early 50s. This development found its peak in the “First Asian Socialist Conference” held in 1953 in Rangoon. It brought together Socialist Parties from nine countries (Burma, Indonesia, India, Israel, Japan, Lebanon, Malaya, Pakistan and Egypt) as well as fraternal delegates from the Socialist International, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, the International Union of Socialist Youth, the Congress of Peoples against Imperialism and several representatives from African freedom movements. This linkage between socialist parties from Asia and Africa played a fundamental role two years later in the development of the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement.

The PSI in Indonesia was banned by Suharto in 1960. The BSP in Burma lasted until March 1962 when General Ne Win seized power in a coup which inaugurated until today a military rule in Burma.

4. Social Democratic Parties in Southeast Asia

There are at present four Social Democrat Parties in Southeast Asia which are acknowledged as such by the Socialist International¹⁰ and are represented in national parliaments. These are:

- the Democratic Action Party of Malaysia;
- the Philippines Democratic Socialist Party;
- the AKBAYAN Citizen Party in the Philippines; and
- the Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor.

4.1. Democratic Action Party (DAP)

In Malaysia, first Social Democratic Parties came into existence in the 50s, for example the People’s Party and the Labour Party of Malaya, which formed in August 1958 the Malayan People’s Socialist Front. Later it was renamed into Malaysian Peoples Socialist

⁹ Interview: Mirko Herberg

¹⁰ For more information on the Socialist International, see Chapter 7

Party (Malay: Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia - PSRM). In 1990 the party stripped the word "socialist" from its name and constitution calling itself Malaysian Peoples Party (Malay: Parti Rakyat Malaysia - PRM). In August 2003 it officially merged with the more centrist National Justice Party of Anwar Ibrahim, becoming the Parti KeADILan Rakyat (English: People's Justice Party - PKR).

The **Democratic Action Party** (Malay: Parti Tindakan Demokratik) was founded in October 1965 just after Singapore seceded from Malaysia. The first Secretary General of DAP was Mr. Devan Nair, the later president of the Republic of Singapore. The DAP was formally registered in March 1966 as a democratic socialist party "irrevocably committed to the ideal of a free, democratic and socialist Malaysia, based on the principles of racial equality, social and economic justice, and founded on the institution of parliamentary democracy". (Setapak Declaration, made in the first DAP National Congress in Setapak, Kuala Lumpur on July 29, 1967). The 2006 party constitution changed the term "Democratic Socialism" into "Social Democracy".

In October 1967, the DAP joined the Socialist International and is until today the only full member from Southeast Asia in that organisation.

The DAP has a membership of more than 90,000, including a youth wing, (the DAP Socialist Youth - DAPSY) and a women's wing (the DAP Wanita). Local branches do exist all over the country.

The stronghold of the DAP lies in the urban areas of Malaysia, where the majority of voters are of Chinese decent (26% of the total population). But today's support comes not only from the Malaysian-Chinese community but also from Malaysian-Indians and from a growing segment of Malays.

One of the main concerns of the DAP is the social welfare of all Malaysian citizens. The DAP believes that the state has a big role to play to correct social imbalances. The party supports a free market economy but insists that the state must put certain mechanism in place to help the poor and the disadvantaged. Unfortunately, the political debate in Malaysia is presently dominated by issues of race and religion.¹¹

The DAP contested its first general election in 1969 and won 13 Parliamentary and 31 State Assembly seats, securing 11.9 % of the valid votes cast. Since then, the DAP experienced many ups and downs in the various general elections between 1969 and 2008, from winning only 9 Parliamentary and 11 State Assembly seats in 1995 to capturing 28 Parliamentary and 79 State Assembly seats in the 2008 general election. The party's National Chairperson is Mr. Karpal Singh; Secretary General is Mr. Lim Guan Eng who is also the Chief Minister of the State of Penang.

From the March 2008 general election, a new political scenario emerged with the unprecedented denial of the two-thirds parliamentary majority to the ruling Barisan Nasional and its loss of power in five states including Penang, where now the DAP provides the Chief Minister. This success led to the formation of "Pakatan Rakyat" (People's Alliance) by the three opposition parties: the DAP, the Parti KeADILan Rakyat (PKR) and the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS); together they are holding 82 of the 222 national parliamentary seats.

¹¹ Interview: Anthony Loke

Further to the Penang Chief Minister, DAP also provides 9 State Executive Councillors (ExcOs) in Penang, 3 in Selangor and 6 in Perak. In Selangor and Perak, additionally DAP's top state representatives are appointed to the position of Senior Exco, who is effectively the deputy chief minister. In the state of Perak the DAP actually forms the largest bloc of state elected representatives (18 out of 31 state government seats), but did not make it to the chief ministership due to a restriction in the state constitution which restrains non-Malays to hold that post.

After its election in 2008, the DAP-led State Government in Penang announced that its underlying rationale and approach is the "Malaysia Economic & National Unity Strategy" (MENU), which will be based on competence, accountability and transparency (CAT). This declaration marked the party's distinct departure from the current administration's New Economic Policy (NEP), where racial factors rather than merit and competence play the dominant role. The new strategy in contrast is a policy to bring about national integration through just and equitable economic policies where the poor, regardless of race, religion or creed, are given priority.

Aspects of social democracy are also seen in the proposed DAP 2009 Budget Brief, where the party declares the need of reengineering the social security system in order to ensure that the poor, less fortunate and under-privileged are not left behind. In line with this the DAP pursues the implementation of "FairWage", a policy which serves to improve the livelihood of low wage earners above the age of 35. At the same time the policy will offer incentives to employers to provide increased employment opportunities. This strategy is also in accordance to the call for the introduction of minimum wages by Malaysian trade unions.

Besides that, the DAP emphasizes that the wealth of natural resources on the shores must be shared equitably to make sure that everyone gets to benefit from the countries goods.

4.2. Philippines Democratic Socialist Party (PDSP)

The Philippines Democratic Socialist Party (Partido Demokratiko-Sosyalista ng Pilipinas - PDSP) is a nationwide political party drawn from all classes and sectors of the Philippine society, mainly from workers and small farmers, but also from progressive elements among professionals and persons in business. It embodies the interests and aspirations of the people of the Philippines and works for their empowerment, especially of the poor and disadvantaged who are marginalized by unjust societal structures.

The PDSP aims to put an end to widespread poverty, malnutrition, poor health, lack of housing, lack of quality education, and lack of gainful and decent employment that burden the majority of the people. These signs of a badly functioning society are caused by the neo-liberal economy, politics, and culture presently dominant in the Philippines.

According to the PDSP the form of "democracy" now prevailing in the Philippines is a liberal democracy which stresses equality of formal political rights but does not promote equality of social power for all Filipinos. The result of this is formal equal rights for all, but privileges for the few who are wealthy, and disadvantages for the majority who are poor. The societal model that guides the actions of the PDSP is therefore "Social Democracy".

Established on May 1st 1973, the PDSP has contributed to the difficult task of establishing and expanding a progressive and democratic alternative to the Marcos dictatorship and to Marxism-Leninism. The party actively participated in the mass campaigns which eventually led to the “people power” revolution in 1986. Furthermore, it helped to consolidate the newly restored democracy, especially through education and mobilization of its members in people’s and non-governmental organizations, and assisted in drafting socially progressive and pro-people laws and government regulations, in relation to issues and concerns of its constituency.

The PDSP is also active in supporting the current peace initiative of the government with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Earlier, the PDSP assisted in the establishment of the Bishops Ulama Conference as a forum of Christian and Muslim Leaders for interfaith dialogue.¹²

In its vision, the PDSP intends to help the people of the Philippines to build a society that cares equally for all Filipinos. The PDSP is convinced that each unique human being can develop only in a society which embodies the value of equality of all. If human beings are to develop their distinct identities and capacities they must be accorded equal respect and opportunities, but these are presently denied to them by the inequalities of the capitalist Philippine society.

The PDSP is a consultative member of the Socialist International. Its current membership is given at 26,000. The party actively cooperates with several progressive trade unions especially the Federation of Free Workers (FFW), but also with the Alliance of Progressive Labour (ALP), which is close to the second Philippine social democratic party: AKBAYAN.

The PDSP was in the May 14th 2007 House of Representatives Elections a member of the “TEAM Unity”. TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More) Unity was composed of several major political parties, mostly supporters of the current Philippine president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. In that election the PDSP won 4 seats. In addition, the party presently occupies one Governor and one Vice-Governor position, has two members on Provincial Boards, and fills 13 Mayor, 4 Vice-Mayor and 11 Councillor posts.¹³

The PDSP is a coalition partner in the present government of President Arroyo, who appointed the party chairperson, Norberto Gonzales, as her National Security Advisor. General Secretary of the PDSP is Atty. Ramel Muria.

4.3. AKBAYAN Citizens' Action Party (AKBAYAN)

Compared to the strategy of the PDSP to form alliances with traditional parties and politicians, including those presently in power, AKBAYAN attempts to implement a bottom-up approach. As mentioned before, after twenty years of dictatorship under the Marcos regime, formal democracy in the Philippines was restored in 1986 through a broad “people power” movement. The moving force behind the anti-dictatorship struggle - concerned citizens and progressive groups - has quickly been relegated to the periphery of decision-making and policy implementation. In response, social movements, trade union groups, and political organizations have emerged to challenge state policies through lobbying and pressure politics.

¹² Interview: Jose Sonny G. Matula

¹³ Ibid.

Despite the dynamism of Philippine movements, formal institutions of democracy remained in the hands of the few and the wealthy. It was within this context that the idea of building an alternative, a citizens' political party, first emerged. Social movement groups wanted to be part of the formal processes of government. AKBAYAN was thus conceived as an effort to institutionalize people power and thereby to deepen the Philippine democracy. Contrary to the strongly anti-communist PDSP, AKBAYAN was conceptualised to be a pluralistic party and was thus open to integrate also former members of the (Maoist) National Democrats and other Marxist groups.

Consultations on the party-building project began in 1994. Throughout the country, pro-democracy groups were invited to help in shaping the party's concept and strategy. Aspirations of various sectors - labour, peasants, youth, women, gay and lesbians, professionals, overseas Filipino workers, urban poor etc. - were discussed and consolidated into a program of governance. Ad hoc structures were formed in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, and four years later, in January 1998, AKBAYAN was formally established through its Founding National Congress. In May of the same year, the new party tested its strength by participating in the local and party-list elections and won seats in the House of Representatives, and several local government units.

In the 2004 Legislative Elections, the party gained through the party-list procedure 6.7 % or three seats in the House of Representatives, the maximum allowed of the national vote. Unfortunately, in the 2007 elections progressive parties like AKBAYAN were badly defeated and suffered a 47 percent decline in its vote. Due to the undermining of the party-list procedure by government-linked, clan-organised and religious groups, the share of mandates for grass-root and programme oriented parties dropped considerably. AKBAYAN could only maintain one seat. Mrs. Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel is currently representing AKBAYAN in Congress

AKBAYAN has a membership of about 45,000 who are organized in 2,000 chapters which are the basic building blocks of the party at the neighbourhood or Barangay levels, and is present in 64 out of 80 provinces.¹⁴ AKBAYAN also has international chapters made up of overseas Filipinos in countries like Italy, UAE, Greece and Germany. AKBAYAN obtains its funds from membership contributions.

The party held its 3rd Regular Congress in October 2006. The Congress was attended by several international delegations, as from the Social Democratic Party of Sweden, the Australian Labor Party, the National League for Democracy of Burma, Young Labour of the New Zealand Labour Party, the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Norwegian Labour Party, the Perserikatan Rakyat Party of Indonesia and the Alternative Political Party Study Group of Thailand. AKBAYAN is a consultative member of the Socialist International and its leaders attended the XXIII Congress of the SI in Athens from 30th June to 2nd July 2008.

Party Chairperson is Dr. Joel Rocamora, Party President Mr. Ronald Llamas and Secretary General Mrs. Arlene Santos.

In addition to the already mentioned one seat in Congress, the party presently occupies two Vice-Governor positions, has six members on Provincial Boards, fills 15 Mayor, 17 Vice-Mayor and 53 Town Councillor positions. On the grass-root level, e.g. Village-

¹⁴ Interview: Joel Rocamora

Chiefs and Village-Councillors, it holds 65 respectively 131 post, in the more than 40.000 Barangays, which are the smallest administrative divisions of the Philippines.¹⁵

4.4. Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor - FRETILIN

The **Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor** (Portuguese: Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente - FRETILIN) was formed in Dili on 20 May 1974 following the "Carnation Revolution" in Portugal and the demands by the Lisbon-based "Armed Forces Movement" to grant independence to all of Portugal's colonies.

On May 20, 1974 East Timor's elite of intellectuals and civil servants formed a first social democratic party "Associação Social Democrática Timorense" (ASDT) which favoured immediate independence from Indonesia. On September 11, 1974 the party was renamed in FRETILIN. The party began as a resistance movement that fought for the independence of East Timor, first from Portugal and then from Indonesia, between 1974 and 1998. As much a social movement as a political party, it established itself nationally, undertook literacy and other development projects and built a strong grassroots base in rural communities which continues until today. After East Timor gained its independence from Indonesia, FRETILIN became one of several parties competing for power in a multi-party system. In that, FRETILIN turned out to be quite comparable to the earlier Social Democratic Parties born out of independent struggles in other parts of Southeast Asia.

FRETILIN holds consultative status with the Socialist International. Its representative attended the XXIII Congress of the Socialist International in Athens from 30th June to 2nd July 2008. FRETILIN claims that it had about 230,000 card carrying members in 2001 and estimates that its current membership is around 120,000.¹⁶

In the first elections, held in 2001, the year before independence, FRETILIN polled 57.4 % of the vote and took 55 seats in the 88-seat Assembly and formed the government in East Timor right from independence in 2002 until 2007.

In 2006 Timor-Leste was shaken by a political crisis, which FRETILIN considers as a consequence of a well orchestrated and intensive political campaign to overthrow the legitimate FRETILIN Government and to discredit the party.

In June 2006 the then President Xanana Gusmão demanded FRETILIN Prime Minister Mr. Mari Alkatiri's resignation. The demand was based on allegations that Alkatiri gave instructions to the Minister of Interior to distribute weapons to civilians for the purpose of killing opposition members. Upon the resignation of Alkatiri as Prime Minister, FRETILIN leaders were able to negotiate a compromise solution with President Gusmão and an agreement was reached to appoint the independent Mr. Jose Ramos Horta as Prime Minister.¹⁷

During the first round of the Presidential Elections of April 2007, the FRETILIN President Francisco Guterres had among the six candidates the highest support with 27.9 % of

¹⁵ Interview: Mirko Herberg

¹⁶ Interview: José Manuel Da Silva Fernandes

¹⁷ Interview: José Fernandes Teixeira

the votes, but he lost in the second round on 9 May 2007 against the then Prime Minister José Ramos Horta, who won with 69 %.

In the following Constituent Assembly Election of 30 June 2007 FRETILIN turned out again as strongest party with 120,592 votes or 29.0 %, resulting in 21 Seats out of 65 in the constituent assembly. However the party could not find sufficient coalition partners to form a government and is therefore presently in opposition.

After the Elections in 2007, FRETILIN elected Arsénio Bano as vice-president. The 33 year old will represent the new generation in the party. Party-President is Francisco Guterres and Party-Secretary General is Mari Alkatiri.

On May 1st 2008, FRETILIN signed an agreement with the 2001, by former FRETILIN members, re-founded and now rather conservative **Timorese Social Democratic Association** (Associação Social-Democrata de Timor - ASDT) to build a coalition government after the next election, which both parties demand for 2009.

5. Movements and parties which might be interested to join the Southeast Asian family of Social Democratic Parties

5.1. Indonesia

As mentioned before, Social Democracy has a long tradition in Indonesia.

The **Partai Sosialis Indonesia (PSI)** was founded already in the middle of the 40ths, well before independence of Indonesia in 1949. After the banning of the party in 1960 many of its members suffered from political harassment, jail or exile. Despite the fact that the presidential decree of 1960 is still in power, the party never dissolved itself completely. It is today a loose network of former members (including their children) or sympathisers, who often hold influential positions in today's Indonesia, even as advisors to the President, or in universities and in the media.

In the 2004 elected parliament are no parties left to the centre. The question of possible leftist wings within some of the major political parties applies at best to the PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia–Perjuangan - Indonesian Democratic Party–Struggle). There are several leading personalities in the PDI-P who fancy the idea of Social Democracy. Even the possibility of an observer-status in the "Socialist International" has been discussed. However, at present, the party is still dominated by Megawati Soekarnoputri and other Soekarnoists and the question remains open, to what extent it would be possible to reform such an established and most likely also corrupted political party.

Outside parliament, there are several small social democracy oriented parties or groups in Indonesia, the more relevant ones are:

- the Partai Buruh - PB
- the Partai Perserikatan Rakyat – PPR
- PAPERNAS (Partai Persatuan Pembebasan Nasional)
- Partai Rakyat Aceh – PRA (a local social democratic party in the province of Aceh)
- Pergerakan Indonesia - PI
- Uni Sosdem (Union Sosial Demokratis)

- Pergerakan
- as well as the Indonesian Metalworkers Federation - FSPMI

Most of these parties or groups cooperate with each other, but still prefer to remain independent.

The Partai Buruh was the only one running in the 2004 election, then under the name Partai Buruh Sosial Demokratik (PDSP). It came last of the 24 participating parties and gained only about 700.000 votes or 0.46 % - not enough to get a seat. (To run again in 2009, the Party Law of Indonesia required the PDSP to change its name.) The PBSI was founded in May 2001. It emerged out of the trade-union SBSI (Serikat Buruh Seluruh Indonesia), which is considered as one of the most progressive Union Federations in Indonesia. The SBSI claims one and a half million members. The low election result of the PBSI, which itself declared a membership of about 450.000, is therefore a bit astonishing. The party will have a second attempt in the forthcoming elections and its present membership is given at 2.8 million.¹⁸

The party is interested in becoming a member of the Socialist International; however no decision has been taken so far.

At present, the **Partai Perserikatan Rakyat (PPR)** which was founded on August 17, 2005 in Bandung looks quite promising. The party integrates farmers and fishermen-groups, trade unions, women organisations, environmental groups and the rural and urban poor in general.

In comparison to most other social democratic groups in Indonesia it is a grass root initiative and not so much an intellectual circle. More than 50 farmer- and worker-organisations are cooperating. The party is represented in 233 districts and 18 provinces and its membership is given at 230,000. Party President is Mr. Syaiful Bahari.

The PPR sees one of the main problems of the Indonesian party system in the lack of political education for the masses, especially in the rural areas. The five major issues in the party-programme of the PPR are the land reform, the rights of fishermen and farmers, the equal treatment of women as well as the free access to education and health-service for all.

The party planned to participate in the 2009 election; however, its first attempt to register for this election failed due to the extremely complicated registration procedures in Indonesia. There is a clear attempt by the ruling elites to limit the number of political parties in parliament, including a 2.5% threshold. This forces the small progressive parties to look for alternatives, at least for the 2009 election. About 150 PPR members and 300 other social democratic activists plan therefore to run as independent candidates or on the lists of other political parties. Furthermore, the leaders of PAPERNAS intend to merge and stand for election on the list of the Partai Bulan Reformasi (PBR), a party which allegedly propagates some form of "Islamic socialism".¹⁹

Several of the parties and groups mentioned above, started in 2008 together with the Jakarta-Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung the foundation "**Yayasan Kita**" which publishes about three times a year a political journal called "**Jurnal Demokrasi Sosial**".

¹⁸ Interview: Marcus W. Tiwow

¹⁹ Interview: Syaiful Bahari

The journal provides the Social Democratic Parties and groups with an open platform to voice their positions opposite the government and the ruling parties of Indonesia.

5.2. Burma

The **National League for Democracy (NLD)** is a Burmese political party founded on 27 September 1988. It is led by Daw (Lady) Aung San Suu Kyi, who acts as General Secretary and who has been in jail or placed under house arrest for about 14 of the past 19 years. In the 1990 parliamentary elections, the party won 392 out of 492 seats, but the ruling military junta (formerly known as SLORC, now known as the State Peace and Development Council - SPDC) did not permit the party to form a government. Soon after the election, the party was repressed, but a number of elected representatives escaped arrest, went into exile and formed the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB).

Even though the NLD has never claimed an ideological platform and/or had not yet got a chance to establish an official relation with any international coalition of political parties, it seems to be inclined to social democracy as can be seen from the policy statements of the NLD on workers affairs, peasant affairs, health and education.²⁰

But in this context, one should not forget that the Burmese people have still to recover from the nightmare and ills of the former Burma Socialist Programme Party – BSPP, Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism". The memories are so bitter that the people still have problems with the words socialist or socialism.²¹

At present it is not quite clear if the NLD will or is eligible to participate in the SPDC controlled parliamentary elections, scheduled for 2010. It depends on the party registration law which has not yet been published by the Military Government.²²

The Socialist International has for many years supported the people of Burma, the NLD and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi as well as the NCGUB in their struggle for freedom and democracy. It regularly invites the NLD as guest-party to its congresses and regional committee meetings. Members of the NLD/LA (Liberated Areas), the NCGUB or the MPU (Members of Parliament Union) have frequently accepted such invitations. However non of them could and did claim that he or she were sent by the NLD leadership in Rangoon, which is not in a position, at least publicly, to deal with international interests and supports or to talk about activities of the exile movement.²³

At the last Socialist International Asia-Pacific Committee meeting in May 2008 in Islamabad, the participants unanimously nominated the then Co-Chairperson of the Pakistan Peoples' Party, Mr. Asif Ali Zardari, to visit Burma on behalf of the SI to act in favour of the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, whose house arrest had been extended once again.

The XXIII Congress of the Socialist International in Athens from 30th June to 2nd July 2008 was attended by two NLD representatives: Dr. Tint Swe, NLD-MP elect and Dr. Myint Choo, Coordinator for Parliamentary Affairs (MPU). At this conference, Daw Aung

²⁰ Interview: Thaung Htun

²¹ Interview: Tint Swe

²² Interview: Paul Pasch

²³ Interview: Tint Swe

San Suu Kyi was elected unanimously as a Special Honorary President of the Socialist International. Dr. Tint Swe commented, that “this was not because of lobbying or petitioning by the Burmese delegation. However it is right to congratulate the SI for doing so because the world political scenario witnesses rising democracies with social essence and the pro-democracy struggle desperately needs support from all possible sources”.²⁴

Of some political delicacy is the fact that NLD/LA and MPU are both members of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB). The NCUB sees itself as a liberal resistance organisation and is a member of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats. (Other members in the NCUB are the Democratic Alliance of Burma and the National Democratic Front).

Despite these overlapping interests, the SI, its member parties and fraternal organisations are well advised to maintain the close contact and cooperation with the NLD, until the party’s leadership in Rangoon is free enough to make its own decisions on any Party International affiliation.

5.3. Thailand

As in most Southeast Asian countries there existed a **Socialist Party of Thailand (SPT)**. It was especially active during the early 1970s. The SPT was led by one of its founders and general secretary Boonsanong Punyodyana. The party did quite well in the 1975 elections when it managed to get 15 out of 269 seats in the House of Representatives. Most party members were students or recent graduates.

Punyodyana was murdered on February 28, 1976. More than 10,000 people attended the memorial orations held at Thammasat University a few days after his death. His death was recognized by many as a final blow to democracy in Thailand.

After the October 6 massacre in the same year, many SPT cadres went into exile or joined the guerrillas in the northern parts of the country. In May 1977 the SPT declared that it would cooperate in the armed struggle with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and form a united front. However in early 1981 the SPT broke its relationship with the CPT, claiming it became more and more Maoist and controlled by China. This shift in ideology and the offered amnesty by the Thai government triggered a mass defection especially of those students and intellectuals that joined the armed struggle after the 1976 massacre.

Since then, no attempt to revive a Social Democratic Party in Thailand showed at least some noteworthy results. However, Thailand has a rich history of social movement struggles that have considerably contributed to the democratization of the country. Unfortunately, successive waves of such struggles for social transformation processes frequently encountered obstacles, resulting in repeated lapses into military rule and a general prevalence of what some have called “low quality democracy”²⁵. The question remains why, compared with Indonesia or the Philippines, the social movements were not able to take the necessary steps to start an effective political party.

²⁴ Interview: Tint Swe

²⁵ Jim Glassman 2007

In November 2007 a new attempt was made and the **Sangkomdhibataya Party (SDB)** was founded. Driving force and first President is Mr. Chockchai Suttawet. The party is based on the cooperation of five organizations: the Club of Scholars for Social Democracy which is also headed by Chockchai Suttawet; the State Enterprise Relations Confederation (SERC) which is the umbrella organisation of state-enterprise unions; the Committee for Thai Labour Solidarity; the Paisal Thawatchainun Foundation (PTF) which is interested in labour politics and cooperatives and works to fulfil the vision of the former labour-leader, Paisal Thawatchainun; and the Federation of Workers' Saving Cooperatives which is working closely with the PTF. The SDB participated in the December 2007 general election with a party list in Zone 6 which covered Bangkok and surrounding provinces where there are a large number of factories and workers. However, the party gained only about 1,300 votes, far behind the last winner elected. The low result is certainly also due to the fact that most workers are registered at their homes in the rural provinces and not at their workplace.

The SDB had in October 2008 about 400 members. In order to keep its registration as a political party it must increase this membership to at least 5,000 within one year. As this seems rather impossible, the SDB will most likely dissolve, but has challenged this ruling of the Political Party Act of 2007 by submitting a petition to the constitutional court on October 2nd, 2008.²⁶

The **Alternative Political Party Study Group (APPSG)** is another new group of political interest, made up of union leaders of the State Railway Authority, the Port Authority of Thailand and some leaders of private sector unions in the eastern coastal exporting zone as well as NGO-activists working in slum and consumer organizations. Its original values include all five basic human rights, but they tend to be interpreted in a classically socialist way. In the current (2008) political crisis, the APPSG has become a member of the Thai People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). The PAD is, to a great extent, a movement of the Bangkok middle and upper classes against former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, supported by the conservative elites; one of its main aims is to force the elected government and parliament, which are considered to be pro-Thaksin, to step down, while openly demanding that the military and traditional elite should play a more prominent role in Thai politics. Currently, it is not clear to which extent the APPSG is committed to a political framework of liberal democracy, since they are actively supporting the PAD and its demands.

There exists also a **Confederation of the Thai Political Parties for People and Democracy**, again with Chockchai Suttawet as President, which embraces about 15 political parties including the SDB. This confederation is active since the beginning of 2008 and plans to participate in the next general election as an alliance of small people parties promoting social democracy.²⁷

The earlier mentioned international conference on "The Relevance of Social Democratic Parties and Progressive Movements in East and Southeast Asia" organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in October 2004 in Manila was attended by the Mahachon Party of Thailand, a party of concerned intellectuals and the middle-class which attempted to move from the more centrist Democrat Party to a more social democratic left, as can be seen from the following statement made before the 2005 general election:

²⁶ Interview: Chockchai Suttawet

²⁷ Ibid.

“Mahachon party does not have a policy for privatization. Our party thinks that most social problems come from debts. Firstly, we have to decrease debt burden and then develop learning processes. If we are elected as a ruling party, we will provide free education for children until undergraduate level. Every old age person will be paid 1,200 baht per month, and nurseries will be provided to decrease the childcare burden of families. Our policy is to create equality so we think of solving the corruption problem as a priority. For the unprotected informal workers, we will formalize them. State enterprises workers will receive more education. We will certainly use the principle of ‘consideration not calculation’.”²⁸

Unfortunately the expected positive election results did not materialise. The party reached only 4.4 % and failed the five per cent threshold and this in spite of an open and programmatic election campaign. Notwithstanding the defeat, the progressive party leadership planned to continue its social policy approach, but soon internal rivalry strengthened more traditional and conservative leaders and before the December 2007 election, key members of the Mahachon Party decided to join the conservative Chat Thai Party.

6. The situation in some of the remaining Southeast Asian countries Singapore, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam

6.1. Singapore

The ruling **People's Action Party (PAP)**, founded in 1954, was originally a broad-based political movement espousing a socialist program with backing from the mass of largely Chinese-speaking unionized labour in Singapore, but also from the English-educated Singapore Chinese intelligentsia.

In 1961, the left-wing of the People's Action Party broke away and established the **Barisan Sosialis** (Socialist Front). The PAP repeatedly alleged that those who broke away were pro-communism.

In May 1976 the Government announced that 50 alleged communist suspects had been arrested. The announcement was made only days before the Socialist International were to meet in London to discuss a motion by the Dutch Labour Party that the People's Action Party should be expelled. When the Dutch Social Democrats refused to withdraw their motion, the PAP announced its departure from the Socialist International:

“We cannot belong to an organisation some of whose social democratic members allow themselves to be made use of by communist elements in our society who are out to destroy democratic institutions. For if the friends of the Dutch Labour Party in Singapore ever obtain control, they will certainly not seek affiliation with the SI. On the contrary, we might well witness a repetition of Cambodia. Practically the whole intelligentsia of Cambodia has been wiped out, and the whole population of Phnom Penh been violently uprooted. But one sees no reference to these appalling tragedies in Malcolm Caldwell’s Journal of Contemporary Asia. Nor do sensitive social democratic consciences in Western Europe appear to have been unduly agitated over happenings in that unhappy land. I have therefore come

²⁸ <http://www.thailabour.org/wnews/050115SERC.html>

here, Mr. Chairman, not to show cause why the PAP should not be expelled from the S.I. I have come here rather to ask the S.I. to show cause why we should regard some of the member parties of the International as being desirable company for us to keep."²⁹

Still, even today, some people label Singapore a social democracy, although the PAP consistently rejects the notion of being socialist, claiming that the PAP-government uses public opinion and feedback when deciding policies. According to the PAP, "it is the people who should decide if they want a democracy or not, it is not up to the state. One has always to consider, that more evil than good will be achieved if one forces a country into a democratic system. ... For us (in Singapore) the priority is set on a responsible governing. All states have to be governed responsible, especially developing countries. If this is done in an authoritarian or democratic way is not so important ... There are no slums in Singapore because we have an effective social system. The people are satisfied with the total package. And they know that restrictions are part of such a package. They have voted for it themselves, nobody forced it upon them."³⁰

However, as mentioned above, some of PAP's policies do contain certain aspects of social democracy, which includes government-owned public housing constituting the majority of real estate, and the dominance of government controlled companies in the local economy. Singapore has a rigorous compulsory public education system, and basic health services are available for all citizens.

Ever since the PAP took office in 1959, it has systematically promoted elitism and put in control a highly paid political class with hardly any accountability to the people. The **Workers' Party** of Singapore believes that this must change. The party was set up by David Marshall in 1957. In 1971 the lawyer J. B. Jeyaretnam became Secretary-General. He contested every election, increasing his vote each time until the 50 % mark was breached in 1981, thus becoming the first opposition Member of Parliament since 1965. He was duly re-elected in 1981 and 1984, after which he was disqualified from contesting further elections.

In May 2001 the Party's Secretary-General position was transferred from J. B. Jeyaretnam to Mrs. Low Thia Kiang. The General Elections in May 2006 saw the Workers' Party filing a total of 20 candidates with two of them winning a seat in parliament, whilst others gained a respectable number of votes in their contested constituencies.

In terms of its conceptualization under David Marshall and under J. B. Jeyaretnam the party held a social democratic approach to its politics. Later in the 80s, when the already mentioned Barisan Sosialis merged with the Workers' Party there was a good number of older members who also held this view.

Since Low Thia Kiang took over the party, there has been a conscious attempt to move away from this social democratic ethos as a stated guiding philosophy for Workers' Party politics. Even though some older members and even younger ones may be inclined to keep this tradition, it is argued against by the present leadership. The party is not guided by a set of political values that binds its members, but is rather a vehicle for electoral politics.³¹

²⁹ Statement on behalf of the People's Action Party of Singapore made at the meeting of the Bureau of the Socialist International held in London on 28-29 May 1976 by C.V. Devan Nair

³⁰ Kishore Mahbuhani (Spiegel 21/2008 S. 61-62)

³¹ Interview: James Gomez

In its Manifesto it reads: "As a political party, the long-term goal of the Workers' Party (WP) is to be an alternative government. While in opposition, we will play an active role as a check and balance on the ruling party. WP is Pro-Singapore and believes national interest should precede party interest."

The veteran opposition politician J. B. Jeyaretnam announced in June 2008 the official registration of a new political party, the "**Reform Party**", a party which some observers consider a closer candidate for social democratic linkages and internationalization.³² Unfortunately, J. B. Jeyaretnam died on 30 September 2008 in a Singapore hospital, aged 82.

6.2. Vietnam

The politics of Vietnam still take place in a framework of a single-party socialist republic. Article 4 of the 1992 State Constitution reaffirms the central role of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in politics and society and reads: "The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of the Vietnamese working class, the faithful representative of the rights and interests of the working class, the toiling people, and the whole nation, acting upon the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Ho Chi Minh's thought, is the force leading the State and society."³³

Vietnam's leaders are well aware that a party which follows a liberal market economy and faces a society which rapidly differentiates itself will most likely get difficulties to integrate all these ideological, programmatic social tensions and diverse interests under one party roof. But despite all pragmatism, to change the name and to re-orient itself is until today unthinkable. Still, Vietnam's leaders talk about social democracy and are interested in international experiences and are prepared for dialogue with Social Democratic Parties, especially the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD).³⁴

So it is hardly surprising that the SPD openly congratulated the CPV for its 10th National Congress in April 2006: "Viet Nam has yielded major triumphs since it initiated the renewal policy, significantly improving the people's living conditions. However, new impediments on the way forward always appear, that Viet Nam, and even Germany, have to surmount. To achieve justice in the societies of each country as well as all over the world, it is necessary to promote citizens' right to democracy alongside the work on boosting economic development. Only when all strata of society get involved, can we have a proper answer for those challenges triggered by globalisation."³⁵

6.3. Cambodia

Of the 11 political parties running for the last National Assembly Election in Cambodia in 2008 none claims to be social democratic. However the Socialist International Asia-Pacific Committee met in Phnom Penh in April 2004 as guest of the **Cambodian People's Party (CPP)**.

³² Interview: James Gomez

³³ http://www.vietnamembassy-usa.org/learn_about_vietnam/politics/constitution/

³⁴ Interview: Joerg Bergstermann

³⁵ <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn>

The CPP is or was neither a member nor an observer to the SI. The reasons behind the acceptance of the CPP as the host-party for a Socialist International Asia-Pacific Committee meeting are hard to understand, as the ruling clique around Prime Minister and ex-Khmer Rouge leader Hun Sen was and is frequently linked with the harassment and even murder of opposition and trade union leaders.

In the so called Cambodian Declaration, "the (Socialist International Asia-Pacific) Committee expressed its satisfaction at having had the opportunity to meet in Cambodia, hosted by the Cambodian People's Party, a political force with whom the International has been cooperating for a number of years and to carry through them a message of support and solidarity to the people of Cambodia who endured the horrors of one of the world's most brutal regimes and who have managed to move forward with hope and in democracy in the search for a better future."³⁶

The CPP is the successor-party of the 1979 by pro-Vietnam forces within the Communist Party of Kampuchea founded Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party. In 1991, during the UN-sponsored peace and reconciliation process, the party renamed itself in Cambodian People's Party. The CPP dominates Cambodian politics since 1979. Most CPP leaders are former communists. Party Chairperson is the President of the Senate, Mr. Chea Sim, and Prime Minister Hun Sen is Vice-Chairperson. The CPP is still closely linked to the Communist Party of Vietnam. Prime Minister Hun Sen and the CPP dominate national and local politics through their control of the security forces, officials at all levels of government, including 90 % of all village chiefs and the state-owned media. Systematic human-rights violations serve especially for the economic enrichment of the present political elites and for an effective suppression of the opposition.

The only noteworthy opposition party in Cambodia is the **Sam Rainsy Party (SRP)**. The SRP sees itself as a liberal party and largely depends on the charisma of its leader Mr. Sam Rainsy. It is affiliated to the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats. Interesting is the SRP's close partnership with the most progressive trade union in Cambodia, the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia – FTUWKC.

In the latest July 2008 elections which, according to monitors from the European Union fell again short of international standards, the CPP claimed once more a landslide victory bestowing another five years of power on Hun Sen, Cambodia's Prime Minister for the past 23 years.

6.4. Laos

Like Vietnam the Lao People's Democratic Republic is a single party socialist state. The only legal political party is the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) which is closely linked and to some extent depending on the Communist Party of Vietnam. However discontent is more open than in Vietnam or, what is most likely, the power grip of the LPRP is not as tight and strong compared to the CPV.

In late 1990 the Laos Government arrested three leaders of a so called **Social Democratic Party of Lao** because of their calls for political and economic change in the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic. They were brought to trial in November 1992 and sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment for criticising the Lao Government and

³⁶ <http://www.socialistinternational.org/viewArticle.cfm?ArticlePageID=1056>

advocating political and economic reforms in Laos. All three were former high ranking government officials (and not, compared to similar attempts in Vietnam, representatives of exile groups) and were considered as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. One of them, a former Vice-Minister, died in February 1998 after being seriously ill for several months without being given access to medical care, the other two were released from prison and left for France at the end of their sentences in October 2004.³⁷

7. The role of foreign parties and international organisations promoting Social Democracy in Southeast Asia

Only lately is there a certain amount of international response to the growing number of social democratic parties and movements in Southeast Asia. The **Socialist International (SI)**, as one of the four Party Internationals, and some of its member parties and/or their political foundations carry out programmes to support the development of social democracy in the Asia-Pacific.

However all Party Internationals have a weak presence in Asia, with together only 51 affiliates: six with the "International Democrat Union", five with the "Centrist Democrat International", six with the "Liberal International" (including the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats as a cooperating organisation), 14 with the "Global Greens" and 20 with the "**Socialist International**".

The Socialist International is an association of independent parties with common principles whose representatives want to learn from one another, jointly promote socialist ideas and work towards this objective at international level.

The purpose of the International is to facilitate this work of solidarity and cooperation, while being aware of the fact that there are different ways of promoting the basic values of a pluralist democratic socialism in different societies. Each member party is itself responsible for the manner in which it puts the decisions of the Socialist International into effect in its own country.

In Asia, SI parties are large only in Mongolia, Nepal, Japan and Pakistan – none of them in Southeast Asia. In addition, SI parties govern in both Australia and New Zealand.

As mentioned before, there are presently only four Social Democrat Parties in Southeast Asia which are either full members such as the **Democratic Action Party** of Malaysia or consultative members such as **AKBAYAN Citizen Party** in the Philippines; the **Philippines Democratic Socialist Party**; and the **Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor**.

Last time the SI met in Southeast Asia was in October 2004 in Phnom Penh, where some 20 parties and organisations from the Asia-Pacific region and beyond gathered for a meeting of the Socialist International Asia-Pacific Committee. It was the first SI gathering in Cambodia and it was hosted by the Cambodian People's Party (see also Chapter 6.2.).

³⁷ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/asiaandpacific/southeastasia/laos?page=1>

Traditionally the SI plays only an indirect role in party strengthening and leaves the direct support to organisationally and financially better-off members especially from within the region. Most active in the Asia-Pacific is therefore the **Australian Labor Party (ALP)**.

Since November 2007 Australia has again a Labor Government. Comprehensive international engagement and building relationships across the Asia-Pacific and around the globe is one of its core businesses. Strategic interest is a prime focus but there are other priorities too, particularly the advancement of the human condition at home and abroad.

Already in 2006, the Australian Labor Party created an International Unit to establish a dialogue with political parties around the world and to encourage the spread of robust democracies in Asia and the Pacific. The dialogue with counterpart political parties is based on key issues facing the region and should promote the aims of the ALP. One of the major responsibilities of the Unit is the administration of the "Australian Political Parties for Democracy Program" (APPDP), which funds the democracy promotion activities of the ALP.

To promote social democratic values in the Asia-Pacific region, including transparent governments and a fair go for all, the ALP seeks to strengthen political systems by providing support to political parties in their work. The programmes are open to parties from all persuasions and areas. When determining potential partner-parties for programmes, the ALP takes into consideration elements of ideology but not as the only criteria. The ALP has chosen not to support only formal fraternal parties, but has opened its programmes to all parties in recipient countries, as long as they seek to promote peaceful reconciliation of political differences and do not support organised violence or coups. The programmes focus on the fundamentally democratic processes of campaigning (party-building, constant campaigning and parties in election cycles) and governing (parties in parliament).³⁸

Under this strategy, the ALP has and is still continuing to run a series of programmes, in the Philippines, Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. In Indonesia the ALP cooperates with the US-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI).

For example: In October 2006, ALP representatives visited Manila to develop options for greater engagement between the Australian Labor Party and the Philippines. They conducted a series of meetings with prominent political parties including AKBAYAN, the Lakas Christian Muslim Democrats and the Philippine Liberal Party. Additionally, the team met with key civil society organisations such as the Philippine Council of Young Political Leaders.

The ALP opened its doors to reformers from Indonesia's main political parties for the Victorian State Election campaign in November 2006. The targeted study mission exposed the delegates to the strategies, technologies and values used in Australian political campaigns. Eight representatives from Indonesia's most prominent political parties were selected for the tour.

In May 2007, an ALP team delivered targeted training on political campaigning strategies to representatives of Timor-Leste's major political parties. The program

³⁸ Interview: Michael Morgan

continued Labor's record of practical support to Timor Leste's political parties in the lead up to the June 2007 legislative elections.

In February 2008 sixteen senior advisors to political parties from Indonesia, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Pakistan, Mongolia and Malaysia took part in a staff training course organised in partnership with the University of Sydney's Graduate School of Government.

New Zealand

The foreign policy of the **New Zealand Labour Party (NZLP)** is based on the values of peace, harmony, democracy, human rights, security and economic prosperity. In this context Labour believes that the Pacific region must be a priority for New Zealand. New Zealand needs to support the development and security of its neighbours in the region. It also needs to reach out to Asia to develop its relationships within a region which is important to New Zealand's future security and prosperity. However, there is no information available regarding any concrete activities of the New Zealand Labour Party in Southeast Asia.

Japan

Until the 1990s, the **Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ)** was Japan's largest opposition party. It enjoyed a short period of government participation in 1993-94 and formed a coalition government under an SDPJ Prime Minister from 1994 to 1996. After the electoral defeat of 1996 it lost many of its members to the Democratic Party of Japan. Since then the SDPJ is considered a relatively small party. It therefore is unable to maintain a systematic cooperation with socialist or social democratic parties in Southeast Asia. But there are sporadic exchanges of information and occasional meetings among parliamentarians.³⁹

Europe

Besides fraternal political parties in the Asia-Pacific also European political institutions are active in Social Democratic Party building in Southeast Asia. By far the largest institution is the German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), but also the Olof Palme International Center (OPIC) from Sweden and occasionally others like the Foundation Jean-Jaurès from France or the Renner Institute from Austria get involved.

The **Olof Palme International Centre** was established in 1992 by the Swedish Social Democratic Party, the Trade Union Confederation (LO) and the Cooperative Union (KF). Today the Palme Centre has 28 member organizations within the labour movement. In Southeast Asia it is active in the Philippines, Burma and Vietnam. Its support projects range from civic education and organisational structure development, to human rights and reconciliation programmes.

The **Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung** was founded in 1925 as a political legacy of Germany's first democratically elected president, Friedrich Ebert. As a private cultural non-profit

³⁹ Interview: Takuya Kawai

institution, it is committed to the ideas and basic values of social democracy. In its on the ground activities, the FES's promotion of democracy goes well beyond the minimalistic understandings of formal democracy and rule of law, as they are defined for example by Freedom House or Bertelsmann (see Chapter 3). Foremost "social justice" is an additional key criteria.

For example: The strengthening of groups working for democracy in Burma, both within the country and in exile is an issue for several FES-offices in the region as well as in Europe. In Indonesia, the FES-office participates in the promotion of social democracy and supports civil society and social movements in their process of forming permanent political structures. The PPR, Uni Sosdem and PI are major partners in this undertaking. In Malaysia, FES cooperates with the DAP, the Malaysian Trade Union Congress and social pressure groups through its regional office in Singapore. In the Philippines, the FES-office supports civil society and social movements to further influence the ongoing national political reform debates for more democracy and a broader participation in development and local governance. In these activities FES integrates different political parties including AKBAYAN and the PDSP. In Thailand, the FES-office contributes to the integration of participative and pluralistic democratic elements into the political reform process. Partners are political active NGOs, informal networks of political activists etc. In Vietnam, the FES-office provides the Communist Party with all relevant information on German, European and international social democracy and invites regularly members of the leadership to conferences, congresses and topical study tours in Germany and Europe. FES hopes that this will contribute to the ongoing political debate within Vietnam on "political renewal".

8. Conclusions

Social democracy played a decisive role in the history of Southeast Asia following World War II and the struggle for independence. The Asian Socialist Conference in Rangoon in 1953 is a clear indicator for this presumption.

Due to the Cold War and the growing US-interference in the region, social democracy and democratic socialism were often seen by those US-allies in power as synonymously with communism. Social democratic movements were regarded as close to the communist insurgents and therefore forbidden in most countries. Liberal democracy, US-style, became the model for most Southeast Asian states. As a result of this policy, words like social democracy, or socialism, or the general term "left" were in many countries highly discredited, a fact that is still relevant today.

However, the idea of a more just form of government has not diminished completely and today Social Democratic Parties are represented in the parliaments of three Southeast Asian states: Malaysia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste. Furthermore, following the example of the AKBAYAN Citizen's Action Party in the Philippines, social and labour movements within civil society of several Southeast Asian countries strive to develop Social Democratic Parties.

Civil society and social movements are flourishing in many Southeast Asian states and can play a key role in developing social democracy. Unfortunately many of those show the tendency to put the "pure" ideology ahead of the strive for power, forgetting that in order to change society at some stage, "doing" is more important than "talking". Potential voters have to feel that changes are possible. The keyword has to be

“achievable”. People do not respond anymore to “pie in the sky” idealism.⁴⁰ Attempts by intellectual and middle class initiatives alone proved not to be sufficient. Most social democratic parties in Southeast Asia have their mass base mainly among the urban population and since trade unions are widely considered as the most consistent pro-democracy forces they are of course important partners. But as the majority of the people in Southeast Asia live in rural areas it is necessary to find ways to connect or even reconcile urban social democrats with the rural population, who in many cases follow popular nationalistic “pied pipers”.

To achieve this, it is necessary to focus more on local organizing, for example by relating actively with local political issues and by cooperating closely with farmer groups and associations. This could enable party members to get involved in the politics of his or her community, and would already be a clear contrast to mainstream politics limited to elite circles.

Among those committed to social and political change within civil society, three general strategies for action are being debated. The first is to work within the existing system and to press for changes in law, law enforcement institutions, and mindsets, through various forms of social action and political lobbying. The second alternative is to form a political party to provide a more direct channel for change. The third alternative is the so called New Anarchism - people just ignore the state, pursue their preferred way of life, and seek strength within the community and through networking between communities.⁴¹

Most civil society movements adopt the first option. The option of establishing a new political party is however actively debated, but often activists fear that the result could be infighting, disunity, and distraction from the goals of direct social action.

Other reasons for hesitancy are:

- Low regard for political parties.
- Party and election laws do not support the establishment of new parties.
- The social and labour movements are not strong and united enough to form the base for an alternative political party.
- The Southeast Asian political culture is to a large extent still opposing democracy. The old traditional patron and client approach is often still persisting.

As seen from the ranking of Freedom House or Bertelsmann, the pace of the transformation processes towards freer and more democratic states is still rather slow. As promising and encouraging the developments in Indonesia are, so alarming and frightening are those in Thailand.

From the experiences in the Philippines after Marcos, and Indonesia after Suharto, one could draw the conclusion that it needs an atmosphere of change to develop alternative political parties. Unfortunately such an atmosphere hardly exists at present in most other Southeast Asian states, with Malaysia, may be, being the one exception.

⁴⁰ Joel Rocamora 2007

⁴¹ Pasuk Phongpaichit 2002

In addition, social democratic values are hardly known and understood after the long period of US influenced liberal policy and dictatorships. Intensive political adult education has therefore to be part and parcel of reviving social democracy in Southeast Asia.

As stated before, the main goal of social democracy is the equal realisation of all basic rights. These rights are universally applicable and know no cultural boundaries. While basic rights and values define the parameters for social democracy, there is considerable room to manoeuvre and align the options according to the ethics, problems and experiences specific to an individual society. The same applies to social democratic institutions which have to be shaped in order to suit the concrete conditions of a country. Experiences made in Social Democratic Parties of Europe, Australia, New Zealand or Japan are only applicable to a certain extent for the situation in Southeast Asia. Networking among the Social Democratic Parties and movements within the region itself is therefore of greatest importance. That such networking is possible can clearly be seen from the mentioned AKBAYAN Party-Congress in 2006 or from the repeated efforts of the FES to provide a platform and forum for members of Social Democratic Parties and progressive movements in East and Southeast Asia to exchange their views on the need for political party development, the challenges to Social Democratic Parties and progressive movements in advancing democracies, and on the imperatives of cooperation among them, both on national and international levels.

It would however be advisable to meet more frequently and regularly, may be even with the target to agree on a "Charter of Southeast Asian Social Democratic Parties". Also the edition of a jointly edited "Journal on Social Democracy in Southeast Asia" could be an option for further promoting the common idea.

Programmes to support the development of Social Democratic Parties or movements from outside, such as the Asia-Pacific region, the US or Europe had started rather lately, but have expanded rapidly in the last decade. All foreign institutions active in this field seem however not to concentrate on individual parties, but seek to foster changes in all democratic and progressive forces within one country. This applies to the political foundations like the FES or the Palme Centre in the same way as it does to the Australian Labor Party. Common topics of such an indirect party aid are: Electoral and party laws, party financing, inner party democracy, gender and youth representation in political parties etc. Direct party aid, especially in a material sense, like support during election campaigns or the development of the overall organisational capacity of a party, is seen by most foreign supporters as counterproductive to the overall aim to promote democracy and dialogue.

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* Interviews were conducted by e-mail, as well as personally with participants of the National and Regional Conference on "Perspectives for change: Social democratic policy and social democratic parties in Southeast Asia", organised by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 14 – 15 October 2008.

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