

Introduction of the Conference Agenda

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Welcome to the international guests, the local delegates and all of you here who have come and made this Conference a big success.

Allow me to make a short introduction of how the conference came about. This conference is organized by Laban ng Masa, Transform Asia, and our friends from Sweden who represent the VIF or the Left International Forum. This is also sponsored by the Focus on the Global South.

This conference is a continuation of the international left forums that had been held in Stockholm, Sweden in 2004, and in Caracas, Venezuela in 2005. They were all conferences around the theme participatory democracy.

Our Swedish friends from VIF contacted us if we could host an Asian conference on the theme participatory democracy. We from Transform Asia readily agreed and proposed that the theme be broadened to include alternative forms of popular power, as we are also interested in the unfolding and concrete forms of socialist struggles and participatory democracy in many parts of the world.

This conference was adopted afterwards by Laban ng Masa and Focus on the Global South. This has now become a collective effort, and I give our gratitude to the Laban ng Masa Central Council leadership, the Organizing Committee composed of representatives from the various groups that comprise Laban ng Masa, the Left International Forum, Focus on Global South, and all those who have come together to assist this effort in various ways.

In this conference, we also welcome the international guests who came from as far away as Sweden, India, Nepal, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, Vietnam, Spain, and Venezuela.

We have some guests who could not make it and send their apologies like our friends from the Workers' Democracy in Thailand. The ambassador of the Embajada de Cuba in Manila sends his apology for not being able to come. He has just arrived from Havana and is still recuperating from a major surgery that he had undergone while there. Walden Bello sends his

apology for not being able to come today, but he will be with us on the 31st. He will be speaking in the closing plenary entitled Building the New Anti-Capitalist Global Movement.

First time

For me this conference is a “first” in many ways.

One. This is the first time that we have a conference that directly tackles left and revolutionary issues and concerns. This is unlike the usual NGO conferences that have to carefully craft the discourse to fit a liberal language.

I remember the first reaction against this type of conference. There are those who think that a Left conference will not be broad enough to permit a discussion of a number of issues. There are those who believe that a Left conference will limit the discourse to the narrow concerns of the Left movement.

We beg to disagree, and this conference proves that a Left discussion covers a range of topics and issues that are relevant both to the local community and to the world.

Second. This is the first time that a broad array of Left forces has joined hands to organize a conference for their international network and local forces. This effort showcases the extent of Laban ng Masa collaboration. This is our own version of participatory democracy within the left movement. It's difficult because you have to work with people and groups of different sensibilities and sensitivities. But it's also rewarding because the efforts and impact generated are multiplied many times over.

Aims

What are the aims of this conference?

Our conference aims to connect various experiences of various movements. It aims to exchange knowledge about the theories and practices of the different forms of participatory democracy and alternative forms of popular power that have emerged in Asia and other regions.

We aim to bring together a number of national political leaders, local mass leaders, community and social movement activists and intellectuals from different countries to engage in a dialogue, to discuss and exchange their experiences and ideas.

This means that this is basically an educational conference. The official delegates (those on the list) are chosen by each of the political blocs and groups within Laban ng Masa on the basis of their leadership capability in their respective organizations.

While the conference will deal with lessons and experiences of movements from other countries, special focus will be given to the unique developments and experiences in the Philippines. The conference aims to reflect and draw out the lessons of our experiences in developing the movements involving labor, peasants, fishers, urban poor, women, the Bangsa Moro people, and others.

We also aim to reflect on the lessons and experiences of mass upsurges which have been key to breaking elite rule in particular periods in the country. This includes a reflection on the people's power uprisings in Asia. In addition to this, we also reflect on the Left's participation in the electoral arena in the region, and its impact and relevance to the people's struggle for democracy and freedom.

This explains why in most sessions, we have international speakers and a number of Philippine panelists or reactors.

Two days' program

The conference is going to run for two days. We have a total of four plenary sessions, two per day. Then a total of 9 workshops, four simultaneous workshops during the first day and the five simultaneous workshops during the second day – these include those we call main sessions which will be held at the main session hall by virtue of their big number of participants.

I know we are not used to simultaneous workshops but each one should plan on which workshop to attend. Each workshop has a lead organization that takes care of the agenda and the discussion. The trade union workshop for instance is directed by Sulong, the solidarity of unions and labor organizations for a new government, which is the labor arm of Laban ng

Masa. The urban poor workshop is organized by the National Urban Poor Coalition (NUPCO); the fisherfolks' workshop by the Kilusang Mangingisda, etc. These organizations are also asked to build their workshops also by inviting and mobilizing their own participants. We expect the conference participants to increase in during workshop hours.

I know this looks like a dizzying pace of activities for you.

I have only one advise for each and everyone of you – relax and partake of this sumptuous feast of discussions and deliberations.

Thank you very much. Muchas gracias. Maraming salamat. #