

# Opening Speech at the Asian Conference on Participatory Democracy and Alternative Forms of Popular Power

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Dear friends and comrades,

It is a great pleasure to be here on this Asian Conference on Participatory Democracy and Alternative forms of Popular Power. And we, the delegation from the Swedish Left Party and our Left International Forum are very grateful to *Laban ng Masa* and Transform Asia for organising it and to Focus on Global South for its support.

It is all about democracy, that is, translated to English, people's power. We need to save the concept from the capitalist defiguration, fill it with the content that the neoliberal globalisation has stripped it of. So much oppression, terror and war have been launched in the name of democracy that it faces the risk to become an ugly word.

We know that the liberal democracy is in deep crisis. Various forms of liberal, representative democracy have been tried out around the world during the past century. But when it proves unable to create durable conditions for a dignified life, and when it leads to every day growing inequalities and misery, then we must change the structures and the hegemony that maintains and widens the brutal gap between the metropolis of power and the deprived majorities of the peripheries.

Its obvious for many of us that the democracy model that has been installed in countries under imperialist domination has failed. But also in the rich, imperialist countries, where we live, in the self-proclaimed first world, the distance and the lack of confidence is growing between the representatives of the system, and the represented.

This happens even in Sweden, during many years considered the outstanding example of the possibilities of the welfare state and so called mixed economy.

Democracy in Sweden was built during the first half of the 20s century by a strong workers movement in alliance with other social movements, with a great degree of mobilisation and participation. They created the social democratic party as a tool to conquer the power and build a socialist society. The social democratic ideology became predominant and set the agenda for decades. The financial powers accepted this, fearful of a Bolshevik revolution, and formed a pact with the workers movement. It allowed the building of the welfare state as long as it did not touch the capitalist power over production. That stayed in the hands of a small group of rich families, oligarchs in modern language.

The Swedish model reached its limit in the 60s and 70s, and on the way the political leadership lost contact with its base in the social movement and the popular participation. That is a long story that I will talk about in the afternoon. But as a result, in the 80s, with the internationally emerging neoliberal globalisation, the Swedish capitalists reclaimed the initiative. And in the 90s, with the Soviet Union gone to ashes, they managed to introduce the neoliberal only way with privatisations, deregularisations, free capital movements, cut backs in the public sector, and so on, you all know too well the ways of the model. The difference

from here is that Sweden still is a rich country, part of the imperialist European Union, and the working classes still have a comparatively high material standard.

The formal civil rights and liberties, contradicted by the lack of real opportunities to exercise them, are inherent in the liberal democracy, designed and defined for the perseverance of the capitalist system. Democracy as people's power based on popular participation and equality of opportunity, encompassing society as a whole, by everybody, for everybody, is incompatible with the logic of capitalism.

Those condemned to poverty know from the experience of generations how feeble their real possibilities are to take advantage of the civil rights and formal freedoms within liberal democracy. They also know too well that half of the lifetime – the workday – is excluded even from the liberal habitat, where the control over production is reserved for an exclusive minority.

The popular struggle for true democracy has always been limited, hindered or crushed by capitalism that kidnapped democracy right after the first attempts during the French revolution. The liberal democracy was advancement from feudalism; it allowed workers in the industrialist countries to organise, and in some countries like Sweden to gain the political power. But basically it only offered a pact through which the subordinated classes by renouncing revolution was allowed to negotiate the conditions for their own exploitation, with more or less success.

Whenever the working classes got strong enough to challenge the capitalist order the price to be paid have been pre-emptive terror by the ruling class or reactionary terror by the counterrevolution, especially in the peripheries. The examples are far too many in Latin America where the state terrorism organised by the USA have harvested hundreds of thousands of lives during the second half of last century. There are also many examples in this region and one of the worst ever in Indonesia in 1965. And now here in the Philippines we must beware of a dangerous tendency of pre-emptive terror that reminds us of Colombia, where the word politicide was reinvented after the killing of thousands of left leaders and activists in the 80s.

But at the same time as the imperialist metropolis proclaimed the end of history, after the collapse of the soviet system, a new counterpower started to build in the peripheries. A new movement emerged around the world, a massive resistance to the neoliberal globalisation, to old dictatorships and new plutocracies: people had had enough of betrayal and enough of hypocritical talk of democracy, a talk that became more and more frequent in the propaganda from the dictatorial centers of world economy at the same time as its real content became more and more diluted.

Now new forms and constellations once again take up the words that many of the old left had ceased to pronounce, and they resist the transformation of the earth, its water, human labour and all human life into merchandise. They proclaim that it is not enough with representation decided in election every four or five years, politics must involve mobilisation, organisation and participation, all the time.

The need is obvious and urgent. Only the active people's participation can save the world, build societies that celebrate the human dignity and brake away from foreign domination.

We in the left international forum wanted to bring in the emerging practices and theories of participative democracy to the broad left in Sweden, by bringing together people and organisations from the south. We wanted to know about their experiences and together find ways to regain true democracy as a tool to change the world for the better. We started with an international conference in Stockholm 2004 and then a plan to continue with regional conferences, the first in Latin America, in Caracas, and now this second one in South East Asia. We also developed a website, [participamos.org](http://participamos.org), that I invite you to look up. And we translated the book about participative democracy that is published for the first time in English here in Philippines to be launched here at this conference.

The left parties, socialist and communist, in Europe have to a big extent become electoral parties, often reduced to make the best of the system, try to stop the worst solutions, but not to challenge the system. They have lost their mass basis and become locked into the parliamentary work. So we have to connect and again strengthen the labour and social movements and together find a strategy that goes beyond the electoral mechanics. We can not pretend to transform an unjust and exploitative social and economic structure only with the instruments available in the electoral scene offered by the capitalist society.

This is how we have to reinvent the democracy, people's power, democratise democracy, give it back its real content. We need to promote participation, admit, welcome and support the multiple forms that people's power historically has taken, and are taking, as we see it also here in the Philippines, forms where different groups can participate as subjects, ethnic groups, gender groups, cultural, groups, urban poors, poor farmers and fishermen, etc., take part in the social struggles against the multiple forms of capitalist oppression, the exploitation, the patriarchy, the discrimination, the sexism, the racism, the ecocide.

We are looking out for experiences that succeed to break the limits that capitalism inevitably puts to any democratic process, and to any form of people's sovereignty. We are looking for forms of high intensity democracy, a participative and protagonistic democracy, the self-government of the producers.

We think that it can be found in the emancipatory practice of the peoples, the subjects that create themselves on the road. It still is a class struggle but the old industrial proletariat is not alone.

We also need to find ways to articulate and combine the local and global. With the offensive of neoliberal globalisation, almost every effort to stop the expansion of capital leads to direct confrontation with international capital. That is why, more than ever in the era of globalisation, social movements and parties must be internationalist.

That's why we are here, for solidarity, for interchange, for learning, to discuss and develop the theory that we also need to develop the practice.

So once again I want to thank you all for making this conference happen, and for your contribution to its richness of experience, debate and learning on the way of making democracy a reality.

Thank you all!