



## **SHRINKING DEMOCRATIC SPACE IN SOUTH EAST ASIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND CALL FOR SOLIDARITY**

**Regional & Laureates Workshops, 19-21 October 2016, Kuala Lumpur**

### **Solidarity Statement from Gwangju Prize for Human Rights Laureates**

We gathered in Kuala Lumpur over three days – 19-21 October 2016 – at the invitation of the May 18 Memorial Foundation, Bersih 2.0 and Suaram. Eleven countries were represented: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor Leste.

We listened to reports from representatives of civil society organizations from these countries and discussed them. We focused on the shrinking democratic space in South East Asia: A Critical Analysis and Call for Solidarity.

We learned of the threats on Maria Chin Abdullah, Chairperson of Bersih 2.0, Laureate of Gwangju Prize 2016. We learned also of the smearing of paint on her son's car and other attempts to intimidate her, her family and her associates.

Bersih 2.0 is an organization which is engaged, like us, in a legitimate struggle to establish free and fair elections, clean government and the right to dissent. We call upon the authorities in Malaysia to protect the freedom to dissent and to protect the life and person of Maria Chin Abdullah and others. We also call for an inquiry into the threats and attempts at intimidation.

Amongst us was the wife of Sombath Somphone, a well-respected Human Rights Defender and a Gwangju Prize Laureate from Laos. Sombath disappeared four years ago and his whereabouts remain unknown. We call upon the government of Laos to conduct an urgent inquiry into this matter and take all steps for his safe return.

Bersih 2.0's co-laureate for 2016, Dr Nguyen Dan Que from Vietnam was unable to attend our gathering because he remains under house arrest. We call upon the Vietnamese authorities to release him and to restore to him all rights and freedoms in keeping with his dignity as a human being.

We wish also to recognize the struggle of Laureate Irom Sharmila Chanu who continues to struggle for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act imposed in the state of Manipur in India. We are

gravely concerned that many authorities are using the pretext of protecting national security to arrogate to themselves vast powers to restrict the freedoms and civil liberties of ordinary citizens.

We are alarmed by reports of torture, enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings taking place on a large scale in several countries in the region. It is the duty of all authorities to do their utmost to immediately bring to an end these heinous crimes.

There is a widespread practice of suppression of dissenting voices and curtailment of freedom of expression. There are recurrent reports of land grabs in pursuit of development goals which result in displacement of persons.

All the above are serious threats to human rights. As laureates of the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights, we renew our commitment to the May 18 spirit which is committed to peace, human rights, and justice. We call upon everyone to actively engage in the quest for these enduring values and thus promote a better future for all people.

Kuala Lumpur, 21 October 2016.

#### **Gwangju Prize Laureates**

**Adilur Rahman Khan, Bangladesh. Bersih 2.0, Malaysia. Basil Fernando, Sri Lanka/Hong Kong. Dandeniya Gamage Jayanthi, Sri Lanka. Irom Sharmila Chanu, Manipur, India. Latifah Anum Siregar, Papua, Indonesia. Ng Shui Meng (for Sombath Somphone), Laos Sushil Pyakurel, Nepal. Tempo Weekly Magazine, Indonesia.**

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