

Headline: A difficult challenge

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MAKASSAR—Peace and reconciliation, in a region rife with armed conflicts over sectarian, ideological and territorial differences, were the focus of the recent general assembly of the Centrist Asia-Pacific Democrats International (Capdi) in this coastal city in Southern Sulawesi, Indonesia.

The discussions also focused on fighting climate change, which speakers described as just as big a threat to the stability of the region as war and violence.

In their “Makassar Declaration,” the participants, including past and present national leaders of governments and civil society organizations, and academics, said they would draw on the lessons learned from “successful and unsuccessful stories in addressing conflicts through peacemaking efforts.” They resolved to harness the “power of public opinion and collective efforts” to “assure democratic accountability by peaceful resolutions of differences.”

Further, the Declaration underlined the group’s resolve to “learn from models of reconciliation” in Cambodia, East Timor, Aceh in Indonesia, and Mindanao in the Philippines, to address simmering tensions in the Korean Peninsula, South China Sea (also known as West Philippine Sea), East China Sea, and even the fighting in the Middle East, Southern Thailand, Malaysia-Philippines, India-Pakistan, Nepal and ethnic disputes in Burma (Myanmar).

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There were enough personalities among the participants to ensure that the resolutions outlined in the Declaration would not stay in the realm of rhetoric. The most prominent was Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia, who is chair emeritus of Capdi along with former President Fidel V. Ramos, who was also at the conference and remains a popular and respected figure among the delegates and even the local media.

Hun Sen offers a compelling example to Asian leaders, integrating Cambodia’s four warring armies in a united Cambodian Armed Forces, including the Khmer Rouge, even as he continues to pursue “reconciliation with justice” by prosecuting war crime in partnership with the UN Tribunal.

During his term, Ramos forged peace agreements with the Moro National Liberation Front and the military rebels who threatened the Cory Aquino administration with a series of coup attempts.

Former Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla, a prominent businessman turned politician who counts South Sulawesi as his bailiwick, hosted the conference. He is best known for brokering the Aceh peace agreement soon after the devastating tsunami that followed the earthquake whose epicenter lay near Aceh’s coast. That agreement has been hailed as a real breakthrough, and even former Acenese rebels say they found it fair and respectful of their aspirations. Perhaps that explains Kalla’s recent appointment as a special envoy to Burma’s Buddhist-Rohingya Muslim conflict.

It is believed that should former President Megawati Sukarnoputri decide to run again for the top office, Kalla will be her running mate, and that if she decides to sit out the elections, then Kalla will go head-to-head against President Bambang Yudhoyono.

Also taking part in the conference, indeed taking a prominent role in its organization, was former Speaker Jose de Venecia, a cofounder of Capdi and its current president. In his opening remarks on Monday, he called for Asean mediation in the “issue” between Malaysia and the Sultanate of Sulu. “There is no need to disturb Malaysia’s sovereignty over Sabah,” De Venecia declared, “but Malaysia should perhaps consider an economic settlement of the Sulu Sultanate’s historic proprietary claims to portions of North Borneo, for which up to now Malaysia is paying very little rent to the Sulu Sultanate.”

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Vice President Jojo Binay, a member of Capdi’s governing council, was represented by former Sen. Kit Tatad. In a speech read by Tatad, the Vice President called for a “new paradigm” in facing the twin challenges of peace (and conflict) and climate change: “Is it not time that peacemakers talk to parties in conflict in the most deeply human terms, in a language that allows them to see a distinct role for themselves in building a world in which human beings treat one another not only as brothers but above all as their brothers’ keepers?”

Binay also called on those living today to look toward the future, asking if it was not time to consider “the purely human needs of the future as something which the present has a duty to invest in, by denying itself some of its undue impositions on our environment.”

The other prominent personalities at the two-day conference included Madhav Kumar Nepal, former prime minister of Nepal; James Mancham, former president of the Seychelles; Sok An, Capdi senior vice president and deputy prime minister of Cambodia; Capdi secretary general Mushahid Hussain Sayed, a senator of Pakistan; Sheila Copps, former deputy prime minister of Canada; Malinee Taveesin, who represented Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra; and from the private sector, tycoon Ramon Ang of San Miguel Corp., Philippine Airlines and Petron.

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After years of building networks, common values and joint efforts through Capdi, the signatories said they “stand together” in their resolve to start implementing their “shared commitments.”

The challenges remain difficult, even as new skirmishes erupt in various spots in the region. Countries are also seemingly in a contest to see who is the “worst affected” among them by the consequences of climate change—from typhoons, floods and droughts, to landslides, erosion, and threats to food security including “desertification” and water shortages.

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Noteworthy is the resolve among the political leaders present to tread the “middle road,” refusing to be sidetracked into local or regional conflicts while emphasizing the need for dialogue, negotiations (official and back-channel), cooperation, and sharing for the good of all.