

Press Release

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2019 Asia Young Leaders for Democracy (AYLD) program in Taipei

The 2019 Asia Young Leaders for Democracy (AYLD), an annual program organized by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy for young democracy practitioners advocating for democracy and human rights across Asia to gather together and exchange ideas and experiences in Taipei, commenced today. This year's participants hailed from more than 10 different countries, including Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand, representing a variety of cultural, religious and political backgrounds.

In his opening remarks, Taiwan Foundation for Democracy President Ford Fu-Te Liao said that as democracy activists, we are all well aware of the democratic backsliding around the world in the recent years. "While we're reflecting on what made the democratic institutions falter and how to improve them, there is no way we could avoid discussing the influence of the authoritarian regimes in this democratic recession," he pointed out.

Dr. Liao referred to the recent fierce protests against the encroachment on the city's autonomous freedom in Hong Kong and the danger faced by the Uyghur people of their cultural and religious identity being systematically eradicated.

"The trends of authoritarian regimes tightening up their control domestically and promoting their governing model as an alternative to democracy around the globe may seem worrisome and frightening. But at this critical juncture of democratic survival, we must work together to maintain and improve our democratic system and uphold democratic values, so that authoritarian regimes cannot take advantage of our democratic environment for their own political agenda," the TFD president asserted.

With this in view, this year's AYLD program is to invite all of the participants to exchange ideas and experiences and debate in order to come up with innovative and creative action plans for strengthening the democracy work in their relative countries and countering democratic regression. This year's program has also designed sessions for the participants to

meet up and interact with the local Taiwanese groups, which hopefully will be the platform for building a network among Asian young activists.

The TFD has invited speakers from Taiwan, Indonesia and the Philippines to share their experiences in participatory democracy, fighting for indigenous people's rights, combating disinformation, and building civil tech community.

Pastor Lazarus Chen, the keynote speaker of AYLD's opening today, is one of the few outspoken religious leaders in Taiwan who has publicly voiced support for marriage equality. In his presentation, Pastor Chen said many Christians in Taiwan conflated the idea of opposing homosexuality – “which they say is what the Bible says” – and the idea of opposing same-sex marriage. “You have the right to dislike homosexuality, but that does not mean same-sex couples do not have the right to marry in our society,” Pastor Chen said.

TFD President Liao and Vice President Ketty Chen joined the discussion by explaining how Taiwan has come to achieve legalizing same-sex marriage and what the remaining challenges are. The participants were encouraged and also keen on sharing the development on LGBTI rights and gender equality in their respective countries. LGBTI community in Singapore and Malaysia, for example, face great obstacles as same-sex sexual activity is still illegal; in Thailand, which is sometimes considered “a heaven for LGBTI groups,” still has few legal protections for the groups; in Japan, where religion-based opposition is rare, there is a higher possibility to legalize same-sex marriage in the near future, but people hesitate to come to the fore to voice their support.

During the 7-day program, the participants will have plenty of opportunities to explore Taiwan's history, sights and people. The TFD is taking the 17-people group to Dadaocheng, National Human Rights Museum – Jing-Mei White Terror Memorial Park, the Nylon Cheng Liberty Foundation, and the Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association.

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