

Vietnam at the World Movement for Democracy's Sixth Assembly in Jakarta, Indonesia

JAKARTA, 18 April 2010 (QUE ME) - Under the theme of *"Solidarity Across Cultures: Working Together for Democracy"*, 633 democracy activists and practitioners from 110 countries in Asia, Europe, the Americas, Africa and Australia gathered in Jakarta, Indonesia for the 6th Assembly of the **World Movement for Democracy** from 11 to 14 April 2010. One of the focal points of the Assembly was a global project to develop strategies aimed at **"Defending Civil Society"**.

The World Movement for Democracy (WMD), founded in New Delhi, India, in February 1999, is a network of democracy activists, policy makers, scholars, donors and practitioners working to support and strengthen civil society, and promote the development of democracy worldwide by ***"strengthening democracy where it is weak, invigorating democracy where it is long-standing and enhancing the capacity of pro-democracy groups in countries that have not yet entered into a process of democratic transition"*** (Founding Statement). Since its founding Assembly in New Delhi, the World Movement for Democracy has held biennial assemblies in Sao Paulo (Brazil), Durban (South Africa), Istanbul (Turkey) and Kyiv (Ukraine).

In his keynote address to the Assembly, Indonesian President Dr. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono welcomed WMD members from all over the world and expressed his conviction that *“the 21st Century will be the century of democracy”*. In particular, he shared Indonesia’s experiences of its democratic transition and of consolidating democracy – experiences that could be extremely precious to Hanoi’s leaders in preventing the country’s ruin and the massive wastage of the people’s talents and resources:

“For decades, when we experienced high economic growth in the 1970’s and 1980’s, Indonesians found convenient cover in our authoritarian system that sought stability, development and national unity at all costs.

“We believed then that Indonesians were not ready for democracy - that democracy was not suitable for Indonesia’s cultural and historical conditions. It was widely held that democracy would lead to national regress, rather than progress. What many of us find surprising is how fast Indonesians ditched that notion. 10 years after we held our first “reformasi” free elections in 1999, democracy in Indonesia is irreversible and a daily fact of life. Our people not only freely but enthusiastically accept democracy as a given, as their right. And in that process, they increasingly feel ownership of the political system.

“Indonesia’s democratic experience is also relevant in another way. For many decades, we lived in an intellectual and political environment which argued that we had to choose between democracy and economic growth. “You could not have both. It’s one or the other”, they said. And for many years, for our own good, we believed that – and chose economic growth over democracy.

“I can tell you that such is no longer the case of today’s Indonesia. Today, our democracy is growing strong, while at the same time, Indonesia is registering the third highest economic growth among G-20 countries, after China and India. In others words, we do not have to chose between democracy and development – we can achieve both! And we can achieve both at the same time!”

The World Movement for Democracy’s 6th Assembly was funded by 21 donors and governments from several countries, including the UN Development Programme, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Germany), the Arab Foundation for Democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy (USA), the US State Department and the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Alongside the plenary sessions on subjects such as Defending Civil Society and Assessing Democracy Assistance, 37 regional and functional workshops were held to exchange information and experiences, and build capacity among participants on a

broad range of issues concerning culture, religion, youth, women, the media, the role of Internet in democratic development, as well as several training workshops. Burning issues included : *Indonesia's experience in democracy; Embracing and instilling democratic values among youth; Liberation technology: it's impact on the struggle for democracy; Inclusive democracy: women and men working together to ensure the promises of democracy; How can business foster civic leadership? ; Addressing attacks on human rights defenders and independent media: how can cross-border solidarity help? ; Making democracy work: how to ensure citizen engagement in policy making? ; How can civil society help meet the challenges of Constitutional reform? ; Promoting democratic rights in the informal economy: the case of domestic workers; Strategies for Effecting change in closed societies; The role of journalists in democratic development; Building strategies for civil society in implementing transitional justice; International Women's Democracy Network - Towards 2020: Strategies for realizing democracy; Actors in Democracy Assistance: what have we learned from the Asian and European Experiences; Preparing for Transitions: what to keep, what to change, and what to expect?; How can civil society help ensure the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts?; Addressing Dictatorship and radicalism: the role of political parties; Pluralism and diversity: strategies for developing strong Interfaith coalitions to support religious freedom and human rights; Building solidarity with internally displaced persons: how to ensure their inclusion in democratic processes? etc...*

A salient feature of the World Movement for Democracy's 6th Assembly was the strong presence of young people and Muslim participants from the Middle East and Indonesia, which is a Muslim country. Indonesia is the world's fourth largest nation, and it is also the world's third largest democracy, after the USA and India. As the Indonesian President said in his opening speech: *"Islam, democracy and modernity can grow together"*.

Mr. **Vo Van Ai**, President of **Quê Me: Action for Democracy in Vietnam** represented Vietnam at the WMD Assembly. In an interview for Radio Free Asia's reporter in Jakarta, he resumed his contribution to the Assembly: *"I took part in several workshops to speak about Vietnam's suppression of democratic initiatives, such as the recent sentencing of 14 democracy activists to up to 16 years in prison simply for their peaceful appeals for democracy, or for protesting China's violation of Vietnamese territorial integrity by its encroachment on the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos and settlement in strategic defence zones such as the Central Highlands on the pretext of Bauxite mining.*

"I drew particular attention to the Government's stifling of free expression on the Internet with its arrests and harassment of bloggers, cyber-attacks, closures of web-sites and internet forums which criticize the government's consent to Chinese aggression. Or the recent revelation by Google and McAfee that Hanoi is using

malicious software to infect hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese-language computers inside and outside the country.

“I was invited to make a presentation on **“Strategies for effecting change in closed societies”**. I stressed the importance of international support, and shared my Committee’s own experiences of campaigning in international forums such as the United Nations, ASEAN, the Parliaments of Europe, Australia or the US Congress. I mentioned the crucial role of radio stations such as Radio Free Asia which are providing a unique source of independent information on democratic issues, and breaking the wall of censorship around closed societies such as Vietnam. I also pointed out the lack of interest, if not downright indifference of the international press and media to the situation of human rights and democracy, and proposed strategies to counter this. In the case of Vietnam, the international media do not see Vietnam as a country longing for democracy and freedom. Before 1975, they looked on Vietnam as a **War**. Now they see Vietnam as an **economy**. No more, no less”.