Linking Asia-Europe civil societies

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The Nation
Asia News Network/Bangkok

At La Pedrera, one of Barcelona’s landmarks, conventional ideas must be cast aside for good. As such, the magnificent, fairy-tale-inspired building created by Antoni Gaudi (1852-1926) was a fitting venue for two days of discussions held by almost 200 representatives from 24 Asian and European countries.

Selected from civil-society groups of all orientations and missions, the participants’ aim was to come up with recommendations to be given to their leaders, who are scheduled to meet in Hanoi in October at the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM).

The participants discussed a gamut of issues related to civil society in Asia and Europe. These included governance, human rights, gender issues, labor relations, environment and urbanization, dialogue of civilization, trade, development cooperation, social issues and migration, as well as international relations, regionalization processes and security issues.

In more ways than one, it is not easy for people from various countries and cultures to bridge views and forge common ground, especially when they come from proactive civil societies that have been dealing with problems at the grassroots level in various environments. Somehow, they want more action and more commitment from the ASEM leaders.

This time around, the European representatives wanted more input from their Asian partners. They felt that they could then advance their causes better to the ASEM leaders. Civil-society representatives from Asia also wanted their voices to be heard and did not shy away from debate. They have done that on the front, but without much success.

For the past few years, civil-society organizations in Southeast Asia have met several times and come up with practical steps to strengthen civil society, but their input has not been given priority by the bureaucrats. For instance, the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA) has held meetings and come up with a series of recommendations.

But ASEAN leaders have not paid much attention to its eagerness and vision. Ideas that were discussed at the APA — such as a mechanism for civil societies to take part in decision-making at the top — also came up again.

Visibly, there were frustrations. Some participants urged the ASEM Foundation to evaluate all the past proposals and recommendations approved by ASEM leaders. Many also called for more transparency and accountability in the ASEM process.

It is an open secret that not all of the ASEM projects that have been carried out with equal rigor. Certain projects have encountered unforeseen obstacles, and sometimes the initial priority was no longer there.

For example, at the first ASEM summit in 1996, Thailand’s proposal to establish the Asia-Europe Environmental Technology Center was approved. After a trial run of three years, the plan was shelved. It was an embarrassing faux pas that no one wanted to talk about, except for one or two advisers to the project.

Discussion on political and security issues by civil societies led by two dozen think-tanks and academics touched on the political impasse in Burma (Myanmar), strategic conditions in Asia and the role of Europe. Burma was high on the agenda simply because the pariah state remains an issue, or rather an obstacle, to strengthening the ASEM process. ASEAN members must have the courage to tackle this situation.

China’s influence in the overall scheme of things in Asia was explored, with calls made for it to play a positive role to help end the political crisis in Burma. There were also calls for Europe to be more proactive to counterbalance U.S. unilateralism.

While most of the representatives spoke on behalf of their organizations, quite a few came to Barcelona with their own inspiration and plans. Alvin Tan, founder and artistic director of The Necessary Stage in Singapore, was one of them. He wants to translate the plight of Thai and Philippine sex workers in Japan and Singapore, respectively, onto the stage.

He thinks if their experiences can be juxtaposed with that of Asian sex workers in Europe, it would make for a powerful stage presentation — something, he believes, that would bring Asia and Europe closer together.

Pattaya Ruenkaew, chairperson of Thai Articulate Their Rights Abroad, works hard to get support for forgotten Thai women who live in Europe under a range of conditions and status. She estimates that at least 200,000 Thai women are living in Europe, with the majority in Germany and Scandinavia.

Every day, she told the meeting, her Bielefeld-based organization in Germany has to cope with discrimination of all sorts against these women and their offspring.

Following the two days of discussion, participants believed they should continue to exchange views and take on the common approaches or best practices they identified. They are realistic enough to accept that ASEM leaders might not heed their advice, but they do hope the Barcelona consultation will serve as a building block that will eventually lead to bottom-up decision-making.