

**Dr. James Gomez**  
**Welcome Remarks**  
**24 August 2023**

Distinguished guests – Ms. Leena Leena Rikkilä Tamang, Director for Asia and the Pacific, International IDEA; Ms. Caroline Ford, International Development Research Centre; Mr. Markham Erickson, Vice President, Google; Associate Prof. Dr. Pailin Phujsenaphan, Dean of the Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University; speakers, participants, friends, ladies and gentlemen – a very warm welcome to Asia Centre’s 8th International Conference on Elections and Democracy in Asia.

2022 and 2023 have been marked by a series of elections across Asia held at national, provincial and municipal levels, some of which are forthcoming, such as the Indonesian presidential election in February 2024. Hence, it’s timely that we gather here this week to examine the dynamics of democracy and elections in Asia, even as things continue to unfold in Thailand following their general election on 14 May 2023.

Starting in 2016, Asia Centre has held seven conferences to date, this one being our eighth. Our international conferences are Asia Centre’s premier annual event, where international NGOs come together with their civil society partners to discuss key regional issues and trends, network with one another, and forge collaborations to build resilient democratic societies.

As a testament to the annual conference’s unique convening value, the number of participants and panels has grown from 30 participants and 8 panels in 2016 to 90 participants and 16 panels in 2022. The conference partners include civil society organisations, development aid agencies, diplomatic missions, international NGOs, parliamentarians and parliamentary research units, technology companies, and universities.

At this year’s conference, “Democracy and Elections in Asia”, we have 20 partner organisations and nearly 140 participants, including 90 speakers and moderators and nearly 50 participants. They represent more than 20 countries whose issues and concerns are articulated across 21 panels.

Over the next two days, we will explore a wide variety of issues that intersect between democracy and elections. This includes the participation of actors such as youth, women, migrants, and social movements in elections. Next, how laws, money, technology and social media impact voter behaviours. We will also learn how research helps increase our understanding of elections and the context of countries in which they take place. Finally, we get to delve into how institutions, competition, and the absence or presence of accountability mechanisms affect democracy.

It will be clear by the end of the conference that a free civic environment is an essential feature of how democratic societies operate. Hence, how we resist and defend efforts to shrink such spaces is important.

I am therefore pleased to announce the theme of our 9th Annual International Conference next year: “*Shrinking Civic Space in Asia: Stories of Resistance and Pushback*”. The event will examine how civil society actors have stood up to threats and challenges to freely express themselves, assemble peacefully, join associations, and access information.

But before I get into next year, let me recognise and thank all our partners who came together to co-convene this year’s conference.

Firstly, our title partners:

1. Chiang Mai University
2. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)
3. The International Development Research Center (IDRC)
4. Google
5. The Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD)

Secondly, our panel partners:

6. Badan Keahlian DPR RI, Expertise Agency of The Indonesian House of Representatives (BKD)
7. The Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD)
8. Destination Justice
9. Eugene Thuraisinggam LLP
10. Hashtag Generation
11. The International Republican Institute (IRI)
12. The Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB)
13. Graduate School of Letters, Osaka University
14. Pacifica G.K.
15. The Asia Foundation
16. Media Studies and Journalism Department, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB)
17. Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD)
18. The National Democratic Institute (NDI)

Thirdly, our Participant Partners:

19. Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC)
20. Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law

We look forward to the presentations and discussions that will evoke much analysis and debate in this important period of time, where hybrid authoritarian governments and anti-democratic social movements across the region have used the law, social media disinformation, and other forms of influence and coercion to suppress democratic expression.

On behalf of Asia Centre and all our partners, I wish you a good conference.