

An open letter to the 2016 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)



On the occasion of the eleventh Asia-Europe People's Forum in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, we are reminded of the ninth AEPF held in Vientiane, the capital of the Lao PDR, in 2012.

As the first international civil society forum held in the country, and building on widespread public consultations in every province, AEPF9 was hailed as a milestone in for Lao civil society.

But there have been no more such events in the Lao PDR in the subsequent four years.

Soon after AEPF9, Sombath Somphone, the forum's co-chairperson, was following up on intimidation of participants by authorities both during and after the forum. On December 15, he was stopped at a police check post and then taken away in full view of CCTV cameras.

Despite unprecedented appeals from governments, organisations and individuals across the globe, and continuing claims of an ongoing and thorough investigation by government authorities, there have been no subsequent indications of his whereabouts or fate.

While the reasons behind his disappearance are not known, the message has been very clear: if a peaceful, internationally-acclaimed Magsaysay Award winner can be taken, no one is safe.

Since that time, constraints on non-profit and development organisations (human rights groups are simply not allowed to work in the country) have steadily grown. From new decrees on internet usage to cumbersome and inconsistent project approval and reporting requirements, the space for a vibrant and autonomous civil society continues to shrink.

At the same time, international aid continues to rise. Despite record economic growth for nearly a decade, many social sector programs and services still depend largely on donor support.

Yet constraints on this assistance, particularly that aimed at enriching civil society or human rights, are also increasing. As exemplified by efforts to follow-up on the 2015 Universal Periodic Review, such support is largely limited to training workshops in Vientiane, with monitoring or reporting of actual field conditions strictly forbidden. More recent indications are that substantive collaboration between international organisations and local non-profit associations will also be severely restricted, or perhaps banned entirely.

This year, the Lao PDR serves as the Chair of ASEAN. Yet for the first time in its history, the parallel people's forum, the ACSC/APF, must be held in another country. During the 2015 forum in Kuala Lumpur and subsequent planning activities, it became increasingly clear that the tolerance and security necessary to hold an open and dynamic forum in Laos was simply not possible.

As noted in a statement to the 2015 UPR "...the disappearance of Sombath Somphone is not an isolated case in an otherwise acceptable human rights landscape, but perhaps the most visible manifestation of a broader and deeper malaise."

Likewise, the growing constraints faced by civil society actors in Laos parallel broader trends towards intolerance and the shrinking of civic space in Asia, Europe and across the globe.

The theme of AEPF11 is *Building New Solidarities: Working for Inclusive, Just, and Equal Alternatives in Asia and Europe*. We strongly advocate that such solidarity depends on a strong foundation of inclusive dialogue, respect for diversity, and authentic justice, rather than a facade of harmony rooted in suppression and silence.

In closing, we repeat a call from the 2014 AEPF held in Milan:

We remind all ASEM member states of their human rights obligations, both domestically and internationally. We sincerely demand that the Lao Government complete their investigation of Sombath's disappearance, make public the investigation report, and take forward legal process against the perpetrators of the crime. We urge ASEM member states to monitor the fulfilment of these demands and ensure that Sombath and his family receive the justice that is surely their right.

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