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Exporting Taiwan's Model of good governance

Southeast Asian anti-corruption activists share their views on what role Taiwan can play to both promote transparency in the region and shore up transparency at home

By Liam Gibson / Contributing reporter



Cynthia Gabriel speaks at Supervision over the Congress, an international conference held in October of last year at Soochow University. Gabriel will be in Taipei for another conference later this month.

Photo courtesy of Citizens congress watch

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Donal Fariz says collaborative engagement between Taiwanese society and its government underpins the nation's good governance model.

"This is what we need to implement in Southeast Asia," says the program manager at Indonesia Corruption Watch.

While the region continues impressive economic growth, corruption remains one of its greatest challenges with only two of ASEAN's 10-member states scoring above 50 out of 100 (where 100 is very clean and 0 highly corrupt) in Transparency International's 2016 Corruption

Perceptions Index.

Fariz says the nation should promote its good governance practices through its New Southbound Policy projects and take the anti-corruption movement from a national to a regional playing field.

REGIONAL PROBLEM

Fariz says Indonesia struggles to contain vote buying in elections, a widespread phenomenon in developing countries. He adds that bringing cases against corrupt officials is often difficult due to police inaction.

"Establishing legal frameworks that reliably deliver on justice is very important for developing countries," Fariz says.

Cynthia Gabriel, founder of Malaysia's Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism, says that though her country has enjoyed strong economic growth for many years, the recent depreciation of the ringgit has caused her fellow citizens to feel the pinch of embezzled public funds.

"They are the ones paying for the crimes of those in power," Gabriel says.

Gabriel, whose organization has linked up with similar groups in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia, says that NGOs in the region must work together because ASEAN still

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has a way to go in creating the shared legal frameworks needed to counter cross-border corruption, which is endemic to many Southeast Asian countries.

She adds that enforcement across different jurisdictions is impractical, which allows corrupt individuals hiding in safe havens to often go unpunished.

"There is now a real need to tackle corruption at a regional scale," she says.

Fariz says that forming such networks is possible because civic groups across the region have a common purpose in fighting corruption. This, Fariz adds, stands in stark contrast to Southeast Asia's governments, whose interests regarding financial regulation often diverge or even conflict — for example the repatriation of profits.

"Civil society should ... lead the effort to combat cross-border corruption across the region," he says.

THE TAIWAN MODEL

Gabriel says Taiwan has built strong check-and-balance mechanisms as well as platforms for transparency that have resulted in high levels of institutional independence, something many Southeast Asian countries lack.

"It is very thought-provoking to consider Taiwan as a model of good governance," Gabriel says, "especially now that the nation is increasing its presence in our region."

She says Taiwanese companies established in Southeast Asia should not only adhere to local laws, but also bring their own best practices, which she hopes will raise the region's levels of corporate governance particularly in regards to labor laws and conflicts of interest.

In last year's World Press Freedom Report, published by RSF, Taiwan was ranked 45 out of 180 countries, and the highest in Asia.

Cedric Alviani, director of Reporters Sans Frontieres' (RSF) Taipei-based Asia bureau, says the nation's high level of press freedom is a bastion of its democracy and a boon in combating corruption.

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