

Statement by
Hon. Mrs. Bilaibhan Sampatisiri
Chairperson, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs
National Legislative Assembly of Thailand
“Promoting Cultural Pluralism and Peace through Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic
Dialogue”
137th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Madame/Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very wise lady from Guatemala once said *“diversity is a fundamental pillar in the eradication of racism, xenophobia and intolerance”*. I could not agree more with Rigoberta Menchú Tum, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, when she said these words.

We are living in a world that is getting smaller and smaller because of technology, because of the ease of travel. But although the world is getting smaller and people are getting closer to each other, ethnicity, culture and religion continue to separate us.

Recent situations in parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia are a stark reminder that a lot more needs to be done before we can truly celebrate diversity.

As a country that has always pride itself on the success of ethnic, social and cultural integration through the centuries, Thailand could never imagine itself without diversity. In fact, as far back as the 17th century in the ancient Siamese Kingdom of Ayutthaya, it was recorded by European missionaries that, in the 1650s, over 40 nationalities from all over the world were present and thriving in Siam.

But, perhaps, things were less complicated back then.

Today, while many countries are trying hard to build a peaceful and harmonious multicultural society, ... racial, cultural and religious confrontations continue to be a major challenge for most of them.

For Thailand, it is a matter of striking the right balance. As a predominantly Buddhist country, we have a longstanding tradition of acceptance, compromise and tolerance. All other cultures and religions are allowed to practice freely in the country. Even the King has been constitutionally appointed as the guardian of all faiths, and not just of Buddhism.

People of all races are not only allowed to live and prosper in the country. In history, many of them were also allowed to serve in high positions in the government. Greek, Italians, Arabs, South Asians, Japanese, Chinese, to name but a few.

This explains why people of various religions and ethnicities have been fully integrated into the Thai society without much difficulty and, throughout the centuries, all of them enjoyed living side by side in harmony and mutual respect.

This has not only endowed the country with a unique blend of multicultural and multi-religious richness and a long history of diversity, but has also tremendously enriched the Thai way of life in a way that is unprecedented in other nations.

This also explains why our late monarch, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej travelled all over the country throughout most of his 70 years reign to embrace the Thai population regardless of their ethnic, culture or religion background. He initiated thousands of royal development projects to help improve their livelihoods and preached to them the principles of Sufficiency Economy Philosophy or “SEP”.

His Majesty the King was also the person who initiated the current government policy to grant Thai nationality to hundreds of thousands stateless persons living along the Thai border. In this year alone, over eighty thousand people will be given this privilege.

This also explains why, even as we speak, Thailand is playing host to over one hundred thousand misplaced persons from neighboring countries in camps along the Thai border. Currently, we also have over four million foreign workers in the country, who are working to help strengthen the Thai economy in so many ways.

Thailand's commitment to social diversity is also embodied in the national Constitution. Section 27 of the current constitution emphasizes that the State shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race, language or religion and prohibits unjust discrimination against a person on the grounds of such differences. The constitution also ensures cultural freedom by stipulating that individual Thais who belong to diverse communities have the rights to preserve their ways of life and express their cultures.

Thailand's Third National Human Rights Plan (2014-2018) also reiterates that the Thai Government shall continue to pursue a consistent multicultural policy aimed to accommodate diversity as part of its overall policy to promote human rights as provided in the Thai Constitution and to ensure effective implementation of the two UN international human rights instruments, namely, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights or ICESCR and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination or CERD.

And this is where we have come full circle.

As a nation, we Thai people have always embraced diversity. Cultural Pluralism has always been the grain of the Thai society. Social and cultural dialogues come natural as part of our everyday lives, without realizing it.

But what we have difficulty with is having dialogues with those who seek to impose extremism, violence and separatism in the Thai society. Where should the dialogue begin when the ultimate goal of these people is to distort history and to carve out an independent state with no means to sustain itself except for religious preaching, and will continue to take innocent lives until the government gives in to what they want?

**Madame/Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We are here to reaffirm that inclusive diversity and pluralism is strength. We are also here to acknowledge that it is a force that can overcome intolerance, radicalism and hate. It is such force that have long served as the foundation of the Thai society. For centuries, it has helped us strike the right balance in our society and it will continue to do so for years to come.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.