

# Faces of Freedom in Asia

Friday, 19 February 2016

- Chair: Rainer Heufers, Centre for Indonesian Policy Studies, Indonesia
- Baladevan Rangaraju, India Institute, India
- Dhananath Fernando, Advocata Institute, Sri Lanka
- Noor Amin Ahmad, Institute for Leadership and Development Studies (LEAD), Malaysia
- Basanta Adhikari, Bikalpa, Nepal
- Rishi Kochhar, Amritsar Policy Group, India

The first panel discussion of the Asia Liberty Forum 2016 featured six leaders of think tanks that were recently formed in Asia.

Baladevan Rangaraju kicked things off by speaking about recent initiatives that were taken by India Institute. Mr Baladevan spoke about an online application was recently launched, *k i-Torney* - which explains civil liberties and essential laws to ordinary citizens, and provides them the facility to communicate with one another when their rights are threatened by governing authorities. He also mentioned a project that sought to prevent the relocation of a private school that had educated over 270,000 students for 22 years. In 2015, India Institute also launched a property rights conference, one that Mr Rangaraju hopes to make an annual event.

“Young minds will shape and change our world.”

- Rishi Kochhar

Rishi Kochhar from Amritsar Policy Group in the state of Punjab spoke next. He mentioned that his think tank has reached five universities and 40 colleges. Kochhar explained the reason behind his strategy of targeting students: “Young minds will shape

and change our world. The future is in their hands, and they are shaping and changing the present.”

In Sri Lanka, Dhananath Fernando leads Advocata Institute. Mr Fernando spoke about the institutional problems faced by poor countries. He argued that citizens and governments often focused on sensational topics, instead of solutions for reform. In response to a question on the essentials for starting a think tank, Mr Fernando emphasised the need to consider one’s political, societal and economic context before determining the appropriate course of action. With regard to shifting mind-sets, Fernando said, “academic research work is a must to convert a society to believe in individual freedom.”

Next, Basanta Adhikari from *Bikalpa* in Nepal shared a personal story of turning his life around. He suffered from drug addiction for nine years, but found a new purpose in life and became a leading advocate of free-market policies in a country where socialist sentiments are immensely strong. With 25% of its population under the poverty line, Adhikari sees Bikalpa’s work as critical to establish political stability and economic freedom in Nepal.

“Passion is the key. Have a desire to change the world.”

- Noor Amin Ahmad

In Malaysia, Noor Amin Ahmad from the Institute for Leadership and Development (LEAD) aims to influence public opinion and provide a platform for intellectuals to collaborate with one another to promote libertarian ideals. His institution, LEAD, has initiated various “freedom schools”, climate change camps and training forums at local universities across Malaysia. Furthermore, LEAD has plans to launch an innovative freedom campaign by engaging football fans from state to state. Mr Amin also stressed

the importance of perseverance in leading a think-tank: “Passion is the key to keep going....It is best to open your mind to learn about the principles of freedom and liberty. Have a desire to change the world.”

The chair of the session, Rainer Heufers of the Centre for Indonesian Policy Studies (CIPS) spoke next. CIPS’ primary aim is to improve the living conditions of impoverished Indonesians. CIPS seeks to accomplish this by challenging protectionist policies, which force Indonesians to pay exorbitant prices for essential goods. CIPS also advocates for freer migration of Indonesians workers, to reduce their financial burden and allow for higher wages via employment in more developed countries. Lastly, CIPS is exploring a project to build low-cost private schools to enable the poor to break free from the cycle of poverty.

In conclusion, the first session gave the delegates an insightful glimpse into the hard, yet rewarding work involved in starting and operating a think tank. The sharing session was lively as it highlighted the diverse experiences and challenges faced by various think tank leaders in Asia. These faces of freedom are an inspiration to us all.