



## THAILAND, BRUNEI, THE PHILIPPINES : NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION

### Report on the visit of the France – Southeast Asia inter-parliamentary friendship group in Bangkok, Brunei, Manila and Cebu

1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> January 2017

A delegation of the France-Southeast Asia inter-parliamentary friendship group, led by Chairman Gérard Miquel, and comprised of Deputy Chairman for Thailand Bernard Saugey, Deputy Chairman for Brunei Jean-Claude Lenoir, and Deputy Chairman for the Philippines Simon Sutour, visited Thailand, Brunei and the Philippines from 1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> January 2017.

#### ***I. Thailand: More prospects for cooperation***

The delegation first went to Bangkok to meet members of the Thailand-France friendship group of the National Legislative Assembly and to review the political and economic situation in Thailand, which was affected by the passing of King Rama IX on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2016 after 70 years of rule.

#### **A - Although slowed by the King's death, democratic transition will likely carry on**

Following the coup on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2014, Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha presented a political road map aiming to establish a democratic regime with a new Constitution and a deep-reaching economic reform. The new Constitution was adopted on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2016 and its implementation required royal promulgation by 7<sup>th</sup> February. However, the process was hampered after the King died on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2016.

After Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn acceded to the throne, becoming Rama X on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2016, the situation became clearer, allowing the Constitution to be finally promulgated, as explained by Deputy Foreign Minister Virasakdi Futrakul, whom the delegation met.

After the Constitution was promulgated, Mr Futrakul had assured that the legislative elections would likely be held no later than late in the first quarter of 2018, since 8 months were given to the National Legislative Assembly to adopt organic laws, and 5 months were needed to prepare for the parliamentary election and electoral campaign. To speed up the process, he felt that the Assembly could have given priority to the four laws needed to organise the ballot, originally scheduled for December 2017. But cremation and coronation ceremonies can only take place after the one year of mourning declared throughout the country. As a result, the elections would still likely be delayed by approximately three months.

Since the meeting, **the situation has changed somewhat**. The new sovereign has requested several amendments to the Constitution prior to its promulgation (Articles 5, 17 and 182), allowing him among other things to go abroad for a prolonged period without having to appoint a regent. The new King happens to own a residence in Europe where he often stays. These requests for changes may require a lengthy procedure and come as unprecedented royal interference with Thailand's political life, where the King is traditionally deemed to be "above politics". This will likely delay the parliamentary elections even further.

**Such was the situation** when the Senate delegation met with its counterparts from the National Legislative Assembly at a luncheon hosted by the Thailand-France friendship group.

The meeting was attended by the friendship group's Deputy Chairman Nipat Thongek, its secretary Thamrong Dasananjali, as well as Messrs Danai Meechooet, Pichit

Kuandachakupt and Kitti Intasom. Discussions praised the excellent cooperation between both countries in terms of education, as well as security and defence. Chairman Gérard Miquel also underlined the importance of developing exchanges in the fields of aerospace, and of waste and sewage treatment.



*The delegation with the Thailand-France friendship group of the National Legislative Assembly*

As the meeting came to an end, a delegation of the Thailand-France friendship group was invited to visit France as soon as both countries' electoral calendars allowed it, so that it could familiarise with the French institutions.

### **B – Economic opportunities**

Discussing with the Thai authorities and the French business community, the delegation could appreciate the wide scope of economic opportunities, especially with the development prospects offered by the Modernization Program of the Kingdom's economy (infrastructure, transport, etc.).

Indeed, the delegation could see for itself, especially while visiting the Bangkok canals (the Khlongs), that there are great infrastructural needs in terms of sanitation and wastewater treatment, as well as waste management. In this respect, Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister Virasakdi Futrakul suggested that a delegation of French companies specializing in those fields come to Thailand. He also mentioned renewable energies, as well as the development project of the Bangkok Skytrain lines and the doubling of railway tracks.

He also stressed the importance of the Greater Mekong region's development project, which notably aims to link Burma to Vietnam via Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

The delegation met with Mr Alexandre Dupont, President of the French-Thai Chamber of Commerce. He stressed the benefits of setting up business in Thailand, putting forward the

strength of the country's very low inflation economy, its 2.8 per cent growth rate in 2016, its stable currency (the baht), its dynamic domestic market due to the rising living standards of the middle class, and its industry whose output accounts for 40 per cent of GDP. He emphasised that many French companies have already settled in Bangkok, as well as in Chiang Mai, an industrial city located in the north of the country. Setting up in Thailand most often opens up a production platform for the regional market.

Regarding problems encountered in the Thai market, he said that the low unemployment rate makes it difficult to retain the workforce, which generates high costs for companies seeking qualified employees.

## **II. Brunei: Strengthening good relations all around**

On 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> January, the delegation visited the Sultanate of Brunei, a small state to the northwest of the island of Borneo. A British protectorate from 1906 to 1979, the Sultanate of Brunei gained full independence on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1984.

This first visit of the friendship group, deemed highly timely by French Ambassador Mrs Loan Forgeron, was very much appreciated by the country's authorities, who saw it as a mark of acknowledgement, when few French personalities have been to Brunei in recent years.

Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah's sister Princess Masna, welcomed the delegation to the Palace and emphasised "*the unflinching relationship between France and the Sultanate*". The delegation agreed with the call to **strengthen bilateral—and especially economic—relations**, so that France contribute positively to the Sultanate's strategy of diversifying its economic activities in order to reduce its dependence on hydrocarbons (oil and gas).



*The delegation with Princess Masna and Mrs Loan Forgeron, French Ambassador*

In this perspective, during the delegation's various exchanges with the France-Brunei Business Association (FBBA) and the new public organisation DARE (Darussalam enterprises) founded in February 2016 to promote the Sultanate's economic attractiveness, Deputy Chairman for Brunei Jean-Claude Lenoir highlighted France's expertise in several fields: Insurance, finance, renewable energies, cutting-edge technologies and industries, water treatment, hydrocarbons, construction, transport, etc. He was pleased with the ten-year naval training contract recently signed with *Défense Conseil International* (DCI), calling for further cooperation in the fields of security and defence.

At the meeting with the Minister of Education, he also suggested **developing student exchanges** between the two countries, building on the French section of the University of Brunei Darussalam and the partnerships initiated by Essec Singapore.

Mr Gérard Miquel, Chairman of the friendship group, praised the Sultanate's commitment to the **Climate Agreement** and the efforts generally made to preserve the environment: 80% of the territory is forest, of which nearly two thirds have not been affected by any human activity. During a visit on the mangrove waters, the delegation could observe how well the ecosystem has been preserved: There were fish, birds and flat-nosed monkeys typical of Borneo (orang Belanda).

Discussions with Minister for Tourism Dato Ali Apong and with Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister Pehin Lim emphasised on several occasions how much France and Brunei would benefit from **strengthening tourist and cultural exchanges**. Mr Dato Ali Apong welcomed the proposed cooperation, hoping to benefit from French expertise in developing tourist attractiveness.

### **III. Philippines: Towards stronger ties between the French and Philippine Senates**

Invited by the Philippine Senate, the French Senate delegation then went to Manila and Cebu from 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> January. It was therefore able to open the celebrations—due to last throughout 2017—of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral relations between France and the Philippines. The visit provided an opportunity for key meetings, namely with the President and members of the Philippine Senate, and the Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister.

#### **A – Rapid ratification of the Paris Climate Agreement is promised**

During the meeting with Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Perfecto Yasay, Chairman Gérard Miquel thanked the Philippines for their exceptional commitment to the signing of the Paris Climate Agreement. He recalled the Manila Call to Action, which Senator Loren Legarda, Chairman of the Philippines-France Friendship Group of the Philippine Senate and actress Marion Cotillard took part in when French President François Hollande visited the country.

Replying to Mr Gérard Miquel, who called for rapid implementation of the Treaty, the Minister confirmed his country's commitment as long as the most polluting countries unreservedly honoured their own, since his country was more a victim of rather than contributing to, climate change. He mentioned a possible ratification in July, which was confirmed by the President of the Philippine Senate at the joint press conference with the French delegation.

Since then, on 14<sup>th</sup> March, the Philippine Senate has almost unanimously adopted (by 22 out of 24 votes) a resolution allowing the President of the Republic to definitively approve the Paris Agreement.

#### **B – Promising cooperation projects with the Philippine Senate**

The delegation was received by President of the Philippine Senate Aquino Koko Pimentel, along with five members of the friendship group (Ms Loren Legarda, Chairman of the friendship group, Mr Franklin Drilon, former Speaker of the Philippine Senate, Ms Cynthia Vilar, Mr Juan Miguel Zubiri and Mr Joseph Victor Ejercito), HE Mrs Theresa Lazaro, Philippine Ambassador in Paris, and HE Mr Thierry Mathou, French Ambassador in Manila.



*Inter-parliamentary work meeting chaired by Mr Koko Pimentel, President of the Philippine Senate*

With 24 senators elected for 6 years, the Philippine Senate is the upper house of the Philippine Congress. It was reinstated in 1987, after being abolished in 1972. Half the senators—who must be at least 35 years old—are elected every 3 years in a national first-past-the-post system. In practice, voters must choose 12 senators among all candidates and those with the highest number of votes nationwide are elected.

The Senate is involved in drafting and adopting legislation in the same way as the House of Representatives. In the event of a disagreement between senators and deputies, they meet in a bicameral conference (equivalent to the joint committee).

Meeting the senators, President Pimentel especially wished to discuss the draft constitutional reform put forward by President of the Republic Rodrigo Duterte, who wants to follow the French model of dual executive power. The reform also seeks to establish a form of federalism.

It was agreed that a delegation from the Philippine Senate would travel to France as soon as possible, i.e. after the election period. July was mentioned as a possible timeline.

### **C – Strong expectations of economic cooperation from local authorities**

In Cebu, the delegation was received by Governor Hilario David, and Mayor of Cebu City Tomas Osmena.

Located in the central Visayas region, Cebu Island lies roughly 600 km south of Manila. Densely populated with more than 3.8 million inhabitants over 5,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Cebu is one of the most developed provinces of the archipelago.

Discussions focused on local economic development, the mayor wishing for France to invest in building a home for the elderly offering medical and other services. The aim would be to encourage elderly people to settle in the region as they retire.

\*

During this mission in Southeast Asia, the Senate delegation could see that there are strong cooperation expectations with France, especially in terms of economy. Such expectations are due to France's renewed interest in the area, as shown by the President of the Republic and the Minister of Foreign Affairs' recent visits since 2012.

The region does offer good opportunities, with growing needs generated namely by demographic growth, and a stabilising political context, which is conducive to stronger parliamentary ties.

#### **Members of the delegation**



**Mr Gérard MIQUEL**  
Group Chairman

Senator of Lot  
(Socialist and Republican)



**Mr Bernard SAUGEY**  
Deputy Chairman

for Thailand  
Senator of Isère  
(The Republicans)



**Mr Jean-Claude LENOIR**  
Deputy Chairman

for Brunei  
Senator of Orne  
(The Republicans)



**Mr Simon SUTOUR**  
Deputy Chairman

for the Philippines  
Senator of Gard  
(Socialist and Republican)

**Members of the friendship group:** [http://www.senat.fr/groupe-interparlementaire-amitie/ami\\_609.html](http://www.senat.fr/groupe-interparlementaire-amitie/ami_609.html)