



Opening Remarks

Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr. Kao Kim Hourn

2nd AIPA ConNEXT: Connecting Leaders, Building the Next Path of Leadership - "Navigating Our Future Together: Empowering the Next Generation of ASEAN Leaders"

ASEAN Headquarters/ASEAN Secretariat, 13 May 2026

Your Excellency Dr. Chem Widhya, Secretary-General of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA),

Hon. Jonathan Clement M. Abalos II, Chairperson of Young Parliamentarians of AIPA (YPA) and Member of the House of Representatives of the Republic of the Philippines,

Your Excellency Maria Goru-Mali, President of the National Group of AIPA-Timor-Leste and Member of Parliament of Timor-Leste

Distinguished Mentors and Young Leaders of ASEAN,

Delegates, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning, and a very warm welcome to you all.

1. It is a pleasure to be here at the 2nd AIPA ConNEXT. I want to begin by thanking the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, under the leadership of Secretary General Dr. Chem Widhya, for bringing this programme to life and for recognising that the next chapter of ASEAN must be written by the next generation.

2. This gathering runs alongside the 10th ASEAN Entities Forum, which reflects a deeply held belief within ASEAN: that engaging young leaders is fundamental to how the region moves forward. The future of ASEAN will be shaped by leaders who are adaptive, forward-looking, and grounded in a regional perspective. There is an old saying: it is not the strongest that survive, not the smartest or the biggest that survive, but it is the most adaptable ones who survive and thrive.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. This year's theme arrives as ASEAN begins a new chapter. 2026 marks the start of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 — our shared roadmap toward a more resilient, innovative, dynamic and people-centred region. Ultimately, a roadmap only takes you as far as the people who chart the course.
4. And the terrain ahead is demanding and undoubtedly uncertain. Rapid technological disruption, shifting geopolitical currents, the accelerating climate crisis, and a digital economy that is rewriting the rules of engagement. These are not distant challenges; rather they are the defining realities of your generation's leadership.
5. What ASEAN needs from you is not simply familiarity with policies and institutions, nor is it the principles of regional cooperation. It needs leaders who are agile and adaptive enough to move with change, inclusive enough to bring others along, and grounded enough to hold the region together, especially when the path is unclear. That is the kind of leadership ConNEXT exists to build and I have no doubt that it already exists in ASEAN.
6. ASEAN's founders chose dialogue over confrontation, cooperation over conflict, collective progress over narrow self-interest. That bet held. But they were building for their moment, not yours. The region you are inheriting is faster, more connected, and far more exposed to global forces than they could have foreseen. The task now is to take those founding values and make them work in a world they never imagined. That demands leaders who understand those foundations deeply and are equipped to build upon them boldly. That is the challenge, and the opportunity, that belongs to your generation.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. The speed-mentoring sessions is where things get interesting: seasoned leaders and emerging ones, in real conversation, across the full breadth of ASEAN.

8. To the young leaders: use this well. Come up with your real questions, not your polished ones. Leadership grows through curiosity, challenges, empathy, and the willingness to engage honestly, not just through accumulated knowledge.
9. To the mentors: your being here matters. Mentorship at this level is not a small thing, it shapes how the next generation understands what leadership in ASEAN actually looks like, especially during this period. Thank you very much for that.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

10. ASEAN was never held together by documents and declarations alone. What has sustained it across decades is something less formal and more durable: the relationships built across borders, the trust built through consistent engagement, and a shared sense of purpose that transcends any single nation in ASEAN. What you build here today, the conversations, the connections, the moments of genuine understanding, is part of that same logic.
11. When the five founding Foreign Ministers from this region signed the Bangkok Declaration in 1967, ASEAN had no secretariat, no budget, and no guarantee of survival. And it happened during a very difficult time too. What it had was a room full of people who chose to trust each other across deep divisions and differences. That decision, to engage rather than withdraw and to cooperate rather than compete, is what everything since has been built on. Nearly 60 years on, you are the latest expression of that same choice.
12. This is my message to the young leaders in ASEAN: ASEAN's next chapter does not begin in 2045. It begins with the choices you make today, the relationships you invest in, and the kind of leader you decide to be. Lead with courage, with purpose, with integrity, and with a genuine sense of responsibility to the 700 million people who call this region home. The future is not waiting for you. It is already in your hands.

Thank you.