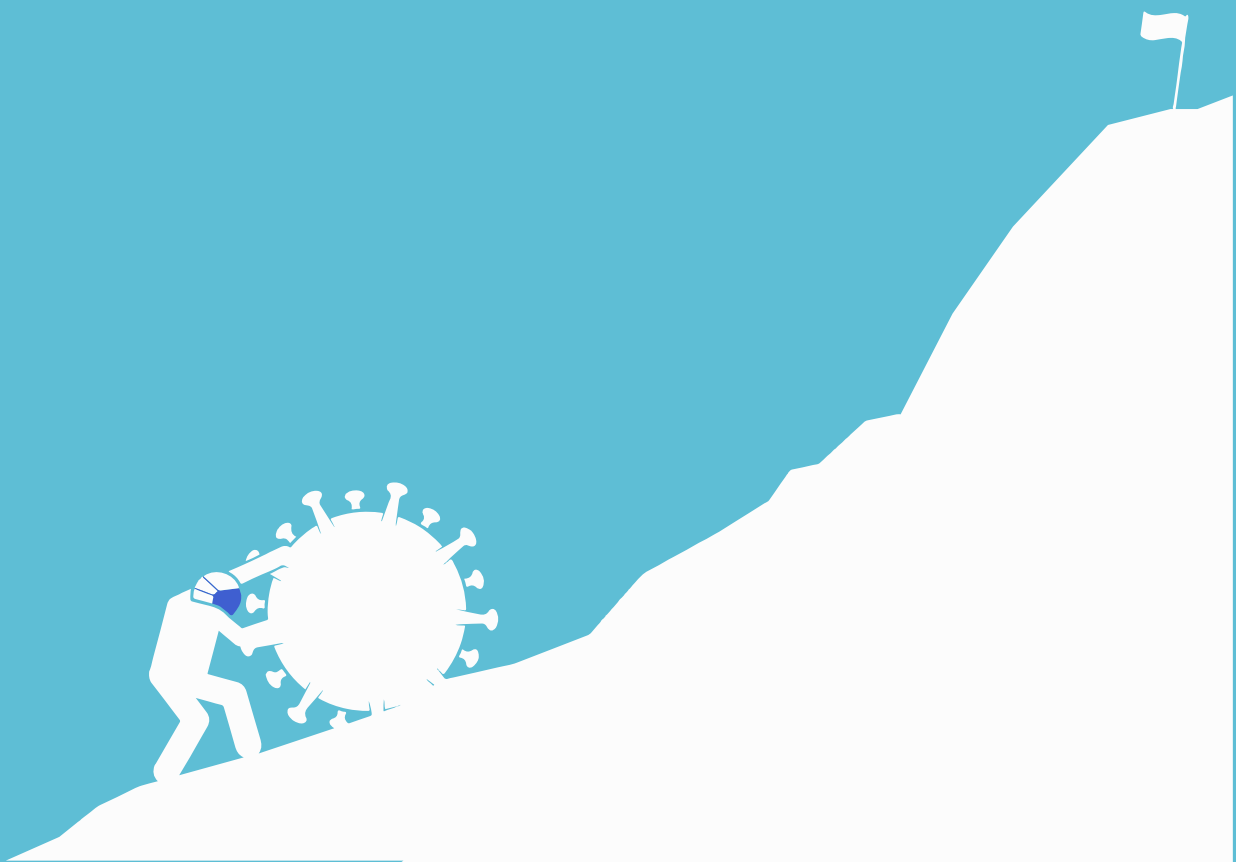


RECESSION TO RESILIENCE

Road to Democracy Renewal in Asia



Collaborators:

Members and Partners of the Asia Democracy Network inclusive of civil society organizations, democracy advocates, human rights advocates, all rights advocates in the Asia Region.

Production Team:

Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay Ph.D, Director, Participatory Research in Asia
Ichal Supriadi, Secretary General, Asia Democracy Network
Karel Jiaan Antonio Galang, Program Officer, Asia Democracy Network
Soo Yon Suh, Program Manager, Asia Democracy Network



Asia Democracy Network

Cheonggyecheon-ro 100, Signature Tower, West Wing, 10F, PO1026
Jung-gu, Seoul, Korea (4542)



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www.adnasia.org | adn@adnasia.org

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to acknowledge all those fighting for democracy and human rights across Asia and the world. Through your sacrifice we continue to advance democracy. We dedicate this report to all those on the ground advocating for democracy. We stand with you and will continue to fight with you! In power and solidarity!



INTRODUCTION

The Process of Building the Roadmap

Democracy in Asia is a work in progress. Its health and well-being are everybody's concern. The fragility of democracy in the region is well known and therefore, we Asians, cannot take its well-being for granted. Democracy allows for rights, freedoms, and dignity to thrive that are innate to humankind. That is why we need to continue to enrich and defend democracy every day.

Consolidating the first, second and third waves of democracy, we entered the Millennium with greater hopes for advancement of freedoms of expression, association, and assembly and the right to development. Regrettably, however, the path to democracy has been grim for some time. Gains of democracy in Asia have been continuously eroding with the rise of populist-authoritarian leaders restricting hard-earned freedoms. They have been using legal, as well as extralegal means, and populist actions which are fed by parochial nationalism and identity politics. The freedoms of expression, association, assembly have been eroding significantly and rapidly. The increased suppression on dissenters, activists, journalists, and others seeking justice and truth is the telling testimony.

The year 2019 was hailed as the year of protests, with the rise of spontaneous and organic mobilizations and people's movements demanding greater social justice, human rights, and democracy. The mass protest movements emerged in Hong Kong, Indonesia, India and elsewhere in Asia ushered hopes for renewal of democracy, as these movements empowered ordinary people, many of whom were youth, to take the streets and public squares. The demands from the masses for social justice continue today as we see people risking their lives to defend freedoms in Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and in other places.

As these protests started to gain currency and catch the imagination of masses in the two years that followed, the COVID-19 pandemic heavily inflicted the world. To arrest the spread of the coronavirus, many national governments across Asia imposed differing degrees of lockdowns and curfews, isolating the people further. The authoritarian regimes took this as an opportunity to control and suppress people's movements. However, the resistance continues amidst severe restrictions and suppressions.

While the democratic fabric and human rights conditions continue to degrade across the region, the will of the people to resist multiple democratic recessions continues to grow stronger. To continue with this momentum of will and resistance, the Asia Democracy Network (ADN) has partnered with civil society members in the region with an objective to develop A Roadmap for collective action towards democracy renewal. The aim of the roadmap is to evolve a consensus among multiple stakeholders on a common agenda for Asia and to advocate for greater democracy and human rights.



Over the last one and half years, ADN has convened diverse stakeholders and democracy and human rights advocates in the Asian region and nurtured a series of dialogues and conversations. The process has been inclusive and aimed to collect diverse perspectives and suggestions to develop this Roadmap.

The overarching program that started in 2019 followed a bottom-up process with a series of National Consultations. In partnership with the national partners, ADN has convened these National Consultations which were attended by a diverse set of civil society members to develop strategies for democratic renewal at the country level. Towards this, ADN has facilitated such National Consultations in Indonesia 7 May, 7 July, 30 July, Malaysia 30 October, Sri Lanka 8 April, 21 September, and the Philippines 22 January, 12 August.

Following the National Consultations, ADN has facilitated a series of Sub-Regional Consultations with active participation of the democracy advocates in the Northeast Asia, the South Asia, and the Southeast Asia. Over three days (9-11 August 2021), Sub-Regional Consultations provided spaces for explaining the democracy renewal action plan, consolidating suggestions, and devising strategies, going forward.

On 22 September 2021, ADN organized Asia Regional People's Assembly which mobilized civil society groups from across the region to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on Asian people and how as a region we could foster equity and justice.

The Asia Africa Democracy Forum – AADF (26-28 October 2021), organized jointly with the Community of Democracy (CoD), offered a space for stocktaking and exchanging ideas for democracy renewal amongst the activists, think-tanks, and practitioners from the Asia and Africa. The deliberations at the AADF were bolstered by a series of evidenced-based research studies. These studies, conducted in various sub-regions of Asia and Africa and consolidated at the regional level, analyzed the impact of global pandemic on the state of democracy using Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) as the guiding framework.

Finally, on 23-24 November 2021, ADN in partnership with the leading human rights organizations and networks organized the Asia Democracy Assembly 2021. The findings of national, sub-regional and regional consultations and dialogues were presented in the Assembly with more than 150 activists, researchers and thought leaders which triggered for developing a collective strategy and A Roadmap for democracy renewal in Asia.

As part of the Regional Assembly, ADN organized four side events to focus on topics that required urgent attention in the region. These included discussion on the undemocratic takeover of regimes in Afghanistan and Myanmar and strategies to extend solidarity to the democracy activists in these countries. In addition, discussions on “Democracy Amid the Rise of the Greatest Illiberal Power in Asia” and “Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent in Democracy and Modern Slavery” were organized.

This multi-layered process spanning over a year has contributed to develop this Asian Civil Society Roadmap to Democracy Renewal. We hope that this roadmap will accelerate greater cooperation among the democracy advocates in the region and provide them a direction to defend democracy and human rights.

OBSTACLES TO DEMOCRACY



Democratic Recession Continues in the Region

The path to recovery and consolidation of democracy in Asia is going to be a long and winding one. The challenges that we experience today are indicative of a greater backsliding of democracy in future. With the rise of populist-authoritarianism in Asia, the illiberal actors have connived to seize the opportunity to encroach civic spaces and to cultivate intolerance and divisiveness in our societies. Equipped with an incessant propaganda machinery, the people are made to believe that the misogynistic, patronizing, super-nationalist and inflated “strong men” would provide alternatives to democracy and redress the inequalities and underdevelopment. The incursion of such perceptions among people are becoming pervasive. In this context, the progressive civil society’s tasks have become daunting but indispensable. As a responsible group of civil society in the region, we need to re-strategize our approaches by accelerating democracy education, bringing advocacy closer to the people, and elevating our mobilizing efforts with the citizens to actively participate in redressing the gravest challenges to democracy.

The growing trends of faith-based radicalism and intolerance have become a severe threat to the hard-won democratic values in the Asian countries. Populist illiberal actors continue to use divisiveness and polarization to shift people’s attention from realizing the potential of genuine democratization. Among the most potent weapons that illiberal forces are using liberally is the rhetoric around religiosity and ethnicity. Hatred-fueled politics, policies and popular sentiments are on the rise in India, China, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Myanmar and

elsewhere where the religious and ethnic minorities are often targeted. These regressive practices have created setbacks to the fuller realization of racial and ethnic equalities in the region.

Radicalizing communities and swaying public opinion against human rights and democratic values has become more pervasive. The rampant weaponization of the Internet, especially social media, has created a medium for hate mongering and dangerous populist rhetoric to thrive. The persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar, fearmongering against the Dalits and Muslims in India, Hindus and other minorities in Pakistan and Bangladesh and discriminations based on works and descent in South Asia have had devastating effects on these communities. These intolerant ideologies have caused displacement and deprivation of identities, voices, and the fundamental rights of these minority groups.

With approximately two billion people having access to the Internet in Asia alone, fake news and disinformation spread like wildfire. Pervasive false narratives are being used indiscriminately to divide the communities and to undermine the secular political discourses. With the global social media companies continuing to evade responsibilities regarding such atrocities and the illiberal actors continuing to take over mainstream media, democratic processes that aim to include and empower citizens are being continuously challenged.

Suppression of freedom of expression is a growing concern among the pro-democracy actors. Academics, intellectuals, journalists, civil society activists and human rights advocates are being harassed and intimidated with violent means. Unfortunately, efforts to regulate the media and the Internet are driven by vested political interests and used as instruments to often suppress the political opponents and dissents by the ruling regimes. In places like Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Cambodia, the illiberal actors are using mainstream as well as social media to discredit activists who call for the defense of democratic institutions and government accountability. Instances of suppression of media freedoms, arbitrary arrests, and extrajudicial killings are continuously escalating in the region. Asia has become one of the most dangerous places for journalists, human rights defenders, and civilians.

There is an increased political capture and weakening of democratic institutions like judiciary and election authorities with an attempt to legitimize the authoritarian regimes. In countries like Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Thailand, we have witnessed different degrees of unideal electoral processes and distorted outcomes. Furthermore, with the capture of judicial institutions through undemocratic means, the implementation of rule of law is often obstructed. Lack of sanctions against frequent incidents of human rights violations have often deprived the victims and their families to seek justice. The degradation and lack of respect for democratic values, principles and human rights continue to adversely affect quality of freedoms.

Democracy in the region has become even more vulnerable with the occurrence of COVID-19

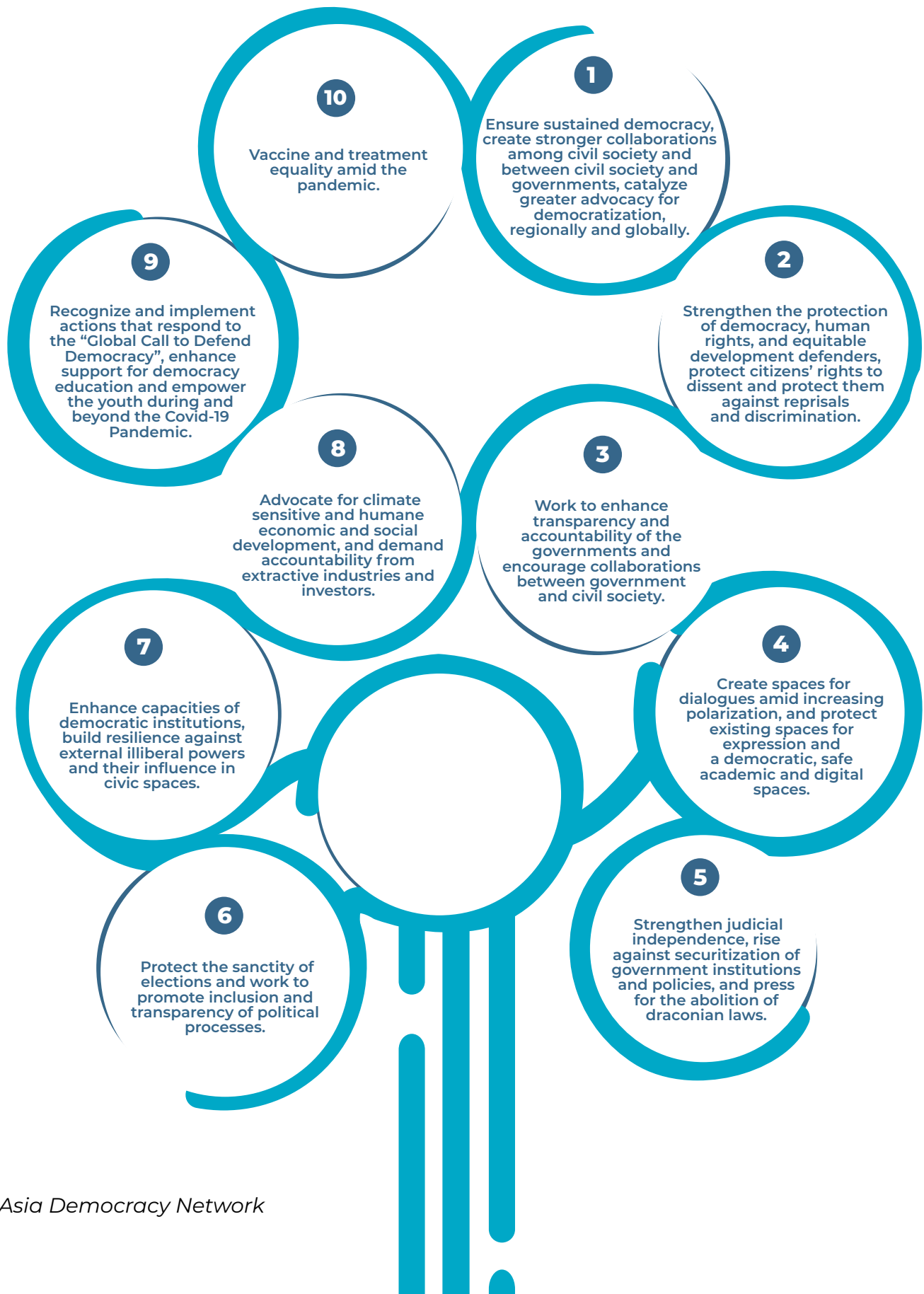
pandemic that provided states an excuse to deliberately weaken the democratic checks and balances. A totalitarian attitude and desire for absolute control by the authoritarian elements within these spaces have been bolstered by frequent imposition of draconian laws, over-centralization of policymaking and other government powers. Most governments in the region have worked overtime to control the flow of information and securitizing government institutions under the guise of pandemic controls. A lackadaisical attitude and inefficiency on part of the State, has not only resulted in avoidable deaths and misery for millions of people but also curtailed the fundamental rights of citizens.

Furthermore, the region is witnessing increased scrutiny and enactments of laws, policies, and regulations to control the civil society. This has been detrimental to the freedom of association and to access resources. Examples are abundant where civil society organizations have been subjected to arduous reporting regulations, unjustified taxations, and funding restrictions. In some countries it has become harder for domestic civil society to coordinate with regional counterparts and seek support from the intergovernmental agencies as they are subjected to physical and cyber surveillance. The weakening civil societies' resource base has had adverse effect on the and poor and marginalized whose interests the civil society serves.

People in many countries continue to suffer with the devastating effect of COVID-19. Thanks to the inefficiency and ill-preparedness of the governments in these countries. The existing economic and social inequalities have been completely unmasked and exposed by the pandemic. The gap between rich and poor continue grow and unemployment is on the rise in the absence of pro-poor economic reforms and pro-workers labor reforms. The realization of most critical Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in the region is doubtful. As vaccine nationalism and vaccine apartheidism continue, majority of the people in most Asian countries remain unvaccinated or inadequately vaccinated against the coronavirus.

In this hard time, we also witness a growing influence of the illiberal and anti-democratic actors in international affairs. Developmental cooperation is being weaponized to coopt, cajole, and influence the democratic nations by these anti-democratic actors for undermining the democratic foundations in the region. Young and fledgling democracies have become more susceptible to adopt undemocratic and corrupt practices. These illiberal actors have taken advantage of the vulnerabilities arising out of the pandemic such as access to vaccines and health infrastructures and economic imbalances in the region.

A Call to Deepen Democracy in the “New Normal”





A CALL TO DEEPEN DEMOCRACY IN THE “NEW NORMAL”

10 Urgent Action Points that Democracy Stakeholders Should Consider

1. Ensure sustained consolidations to defend democracy, create stronger collaborations among civil society and between civil society and governments, catalyze greater advocacy for democratization, regionally and globally.

There is a need to intensify efforts towards consolidation of civil society and its allies in unravelling the blockages to democratization that have plagued the region through unified advocacies, mutual initiatives to build capacity, share information and resources. Stakeholders must pledge to work together with democratic governments, especially among the Asian democracies to further institutionalize and localize actions that address regression of human rights and democratic values, and more importantly strengthen support for civil society to promote democratic values in the region. Efficient communication and strengthening networks for advocacy among stakeholders must also be established to ensure efficient dissemination of information regarding issues in the national and regional spheres. Such national and regional consolidation will be utilized to resolve ongoing injustices such as those discriminated against based on work and descent, and demanding resolution for atrocities committed in captured states such as Myanmar and Afghanistan.

2. Strengthen the protection of democracy, human rights, and equitable development defenders, protect citizens' rights to dissent and protect them against reprisals and discrimination.

Commitment to build capacities and to create greater support for defenders and those within vulnerable communities must expand. We must strengthen a support system in the form of legal assistance and protection programs that respond quickly and efficiently to place them in a safe space. We need work to create greater pressure to remedy the rise of actions that suppress dissent, political opposition and greater accountability and transparency of governmental processes.

3. Work to enhance transparency and accountability of the governments and encourage collaborations between government and civil society.

All stakeholders must work to enhance trust in democratic institutions by pressing for reforms to promote transparency and accountability and combat corruption in all tiers of governments. For this, we encourage government and civil society actors to collaborate in building greater transparency and accountability mechanisms which put citizen participation at the core. As such, governments and civil society organizations must strive for greater implementation of freedom of information and creation of whistle-blower protection regulations. More importantly, stakeholders must address the roots and causes of corruption which hinder equitable development.

4. Create spaces for dialogues amid increasing polarization, and protect existing spaces for expression and a democratic, safe academic and digital spaces.

We must create inclusive spaces in which stakeholders can engage in conversations in a frank and honest manner to address existing political and ideological divisions which hinder real democratization and brainstorm solutions for such problems. Furthermore, we must ensure to protect existing mediums for discussion such as the media, academia, and digital space from the spread of misinformation and illiberal influences. Furthermore, we must call for the protection of messengers of truth such as journalists and the academic institutions.

5. Strengthen judicial independence, rise against securitization of government institutions and policies, and press for the abolition of draconian laws.

We call on the stakeholders to work together for demanding judicial independence and addressing the increased use of draconian laws and securitization of government institutions to curb public participation in governance and expressions of dissent. The regional and national stakeholders must expand collaborations with legal experts to strengthen judicial reviews to protect and promote rule of law. Work with the parliamentarians must also be expanded to challenge the draconian laws that adversely impact democracy and human rights.

6. Protect the sanctity of elections and work to promote inclusion and transparency of political processes.

All stakeholders must work together to ensure that elections reflect the will of people, and that the process will not be utilized by authoritarians to legitimize their rule. The pro-democracy actors must work to strengthen civic education to enhance the integrity of the process itself, the leaders it produces, and empower the citizens to make meaningful choices regarding the direction of their government. Work needs to be done to empower and usher greater access for election monitoring groups and protect them from intimidation and reprisals as they perform crucial audits of political processes. We encourage election management bodies and human rights organizations to work with them in these endeavors. We also call on stakeholders to advocate for the creation of legal and political mechanisms to encourage participation of the marginalized people in decision making processes. Furthermore, we advocate for wider citizen education on other means they can utilize in directing national and social policies such as referenda and plebiscites.

7. Enhance capacities of democratic institutions, build resilience against external illiberal powers and their influence in civic spaces.

Formal democratic institutions such as parliaments, provincial and local governments, and bureaucracies must be strengthened to effectively address the needs of people and prevent interference from the external illiberal and anti-democratic forces. Civil society, business, media, academia, and grassroots communities must work together to raise awareness and fight the influence of illiberal actors seeking to undermine the foundations of democracies, meander public perceptions, and take over established democratic processes and institutions. Actors should enhance resilience in these challenging times and must exert pressure on the relevant state agencies to reduce risks created by illiberal interventions in social, economic, and political fronts that might harm the quality of democracy, human-rights, and civic spaces.

8. Advocate for climate sensitive and humane economic and social development, and demand accountability from extractive industries and investors.

It is imperative to demand for accountable investments and stop violating rights of people by the extractive industries to protect the environment from further degradation, the effects of which we are experiencing here and now with the constant rise of sea level, erratic weather events, and increase in global temperatures. International stakeholders must recognize that climate change has a more devastating effect on the Global South. We must commit to raise awareness of the dire climate change crises and exert pressure on our respective governments to adhere to international agreements for reducing greenhouse gas productions and other factors affecting the climate. Encompassing economic development that considers the effect of human activities on our environment and a balance between development and conservation of indigenous and natural treasures. The actors must do everything in their power to save the environment and stop inhumane economic development.

9. Recognize and implement actions that respond to the “Global Call to Defend Democracy”, enhance support for democracy education and empower the youth during and beyond the Covid-19 Pandemic.

All stakeholders must make efforts to increase peoples’ trusts in democratic institutions by following the “Global Call to Defend Democracy”, which emphasizes the importance of building social trust to persevere against crisis and hardship, heal divisions, and respect for the rights of citizens; the empowerment of democratic institutions by empowering the citizens; affirms the importance of free media and free flow of information; in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, reiterating the importance of combating the spread of virus while protecting economic security, and implementing effective responses while ensuring people’s fundamental rights; the need to craft actions which ensure the rule of law and protect individual liberties from undue restraints; ensure public accountability by monitoring the circumscribing emergency government powers and terminate them when not needed; and ensuring believable government data on the scope and impact of the pandemic.

To sustain democracies during and beyond the Pandemic, it is important that investments and easy access to democracy education is facilitated. Stakeholders must enhance training and education of democracy and human rights through the utilization of all available institutions and facilities to enhance the understanding of democracy. Furthermore, the youth should be given the opportunity to benefit from such education and be given the opportunity to participate in crucial decision-making processes that steer the direction of democracies.

10. Vaccine and treatment equality amid the pandemic.

It is concerning that while citizens in developed countries have started receiving booster shots, those in troubled developing countries are yet to receive their first vaccine dose. The responsible intergovernmental organizations must ensure that citizens in the Global South are provided with equal access to vaccines. The global pandemic has exposed the existing inequalities in the region. The economic wealth gap widened and the marginalized have become more vulnerable than ever. We must advocate for equitable and equal access to vaccine and healthcare services for all. We must take action to ensure that developing countries are not left behind in receiving adequate healthcare access to combat the raging pandemic. All stakeholders must adopt the recommendations of the Asia-Africa Peoples’ Assembly and [Asia People Assembly](#).

A Call to The International Community

Empower the democracy stakeholders and ensure their representation!

Focus the discussions on actions and just solutions!

Increase support to and consolidation of pro-democracy initiatives!



A CALL TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Strengthen Actions for Democratic Renewal

We call on the international actors and processes to reaffirm the importance of reviving democracy and human rights in the world. The Asian civil society calls for the following actions.

1. Empower the democracy stakeholders and ensure their representation

The global processes often fall short of including the grassroots voices. It is critically important to synchronize the agenda and activities to reflect the diverse needs and aspirations from different regions. This can only be achieved by ensuring that diverse voices are represented in various fora, both formal and informal and that the dialogues highlight the narratives from the grassroots. It is also vital to include all the stakeholders in such processes and empower them to claim ownership of the outcomes. The goals of global democratic action can only be achieved if there is synergy among the state and non-state actors, free flow of information, affirmative and fair opportunities for the regional, sub-regional, national, and sub-national level stakeholders.

2. Focus the discussions on actions and just solutions

The global initiatives are instrumental in navigating the democracy actors globally on how to enhance their efforts towards addressing the current democratic regressions. These global fora should be able to suggest concrete and immediate actions to address the structural issues such as discriminations based on caste, religion, ethnicity, gender as well as works and descent.

In Asia, especially in places like Myanmar, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, undemocratic actions by the foreign and domestic illiberal actors have created a dangerous environment where deaths, disappearances, persecution, and displacement are unabated. The democratic actors need to be sensitized to the fact that silence regarding these atrocities is troubling. The international actors must focus on how these actors can be empowered, supported, and protected. Special attention must be given to support asylum seekers and digital security advancement.

3. Increase support to and consolidation of pro-democracy initiatives.

Amid the pandemic, the pro-democracy actors often have felt inadequately supported. With pro-democracy actors ill-equipped to resist the illiberal attacks, they are left more vulnerable. We call on relevant agencies and States to invest greater resources and capacity

building opportunities for democratic renewal. There is a need to create special funding mechanisms for the regional initiatives that seek to protect civil society actors, human rights defenders, journalists, and academics who have been victimized by the illiberal forces. There is also a need for greater capacity building in the areas of digital security and advocacy. We solicit support from the international community for the implementation of 10 Action Points identified by the Asian stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The misery and suffering unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, can only be alleviated through global collaborative governance among the pro-democratic actors. As illiberal forces continue their efforts to weaken democratic institutions, the crises of democracy can be prolonged, and much worse, might further undermine the hard-earned gains of democracy. It is imperative for pro-democracy actors to strengthen collaborative actions to build advocacies and movements globally. Synergistic actions by the State, Civil Society and Market are important for addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges in the post pandemic world.

We are witnessing a new awakening of the youth taking stand against antidemocratic actions. The emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance across the region has shown that a new generation of pro-democracy advocates are blooming and leading movements in Thailand, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, among others. The repeal of the controversial farm law in India due to a strong protest movement of farmers provides us hopes which can be further strengthened through solidarity. In Indonesia, the civil society has successfully advocated with the Constitutional Court directing the government to revise the controversial clauses of omnibus 'job creation' law within two years or be annulled.

Democracy in the "new normal" can only be protected and sustained if the global stakeholders commit for greater efforts to address the challenges to democracy that magnified during the pandemic. Fortunately, civil society tackling such challenges remain committed and connected, albeit they need greater access to resources and platforms to amplify their voices. Support to the protection of pro democracy actors must be established and sustained. Finally, to realize greater synergy and usher ownership of democratic development in all spaces, actors such as media, environment activists, minorities and business sectors must be included in important discussions and decision-making processes.