

SHAPING A BETTER REGIONAL COOPERATION FOR BETTER DEMOCRACY STRATEGIC PLANNING/DISCUSSION SESSION

Special Session at the Asia Democracy Assembly 2022
November 9th, 2022 [09:00 – 12:00]

Summary

At the sidelines of the Asia Democracy Assembly 2022, civil society representatives and pro-democracy allies from all over the region discussed and reflected on the state of democracy in Asia and what has been done so far to combat anti-democratic expansion. Such conversation was the culmination of the Asia Democracy Network's year-long process of consultations and discussions conducted in various parts of the region. Cognizant of the worrying situation in Asia, there is a greater clamor for initiatives that structure and strengthen cooperation among the various pro-democracy stakeholders and other untapped segments of the society which can contribute to pro-democracy endeavors.

The discussions in RISETalk 2022 and prior conversations point to a shrinkage in democratic space due to the expansion of influence by anti-democratic powers such as China and Russia and the threat they bring to world peace and security. These influences also contribute to the continuous arrest of democratization and freedoms in spaces captured by illiberal forces such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Hong Kong. There is an agreement among stakeholders to strengthen capacity in preventing malign elements such as disinformation, corruption, degradation of political processes and institutions, polarization, and securitization from gaining a further foothold in the region. Through these conversations, we were able to capture some highlights and existing endeavors which we hope future pro-democracy efforts can build upon.

The discussions during the Strategic Session covered a plethora of actions and endeavors by the Asian civil society. This document aims to capture the common trends, and highlight priorities, which can be helpful as various stakeholders consolidate and coordinate in resolving the region's grave issues. The discussions made it clear that the region needs to focus on four priority areas. This priority has been expressed by 40 representatives of regional and national civil society organizations during a brief strategic planning session at the Asia Democracy Assembly 2022, and a few priorities highlighted are:

PRIORITIES:

1. Enhancing Protection of Democratic Processes and Institutions on the National and International Stage

Formal processes and the existence of democratic institutions are the keys to a democratic order, where public participation in governance, elections, and other socio-political processes are respected and protected. By protecting these democratic institutions, it ushers in a civic space whereby democratic values and human rights are upheld. However, in reality, people's political participation is becoming increasingly limited, while democratic institutions cannot function properly due to undue influences and interests.

Elections is a political event in which a state selects its own leaders. It is a process that is supposed to bring about a public discussion on the values, policies, and economic direction of a state. Recently, elections have turned into a battle of resources, often featuring violence and social unrest due to increasing polarization and bad populism. In this case, wealthy candidates have absolute advantages, their agents of propaganda from the mainstream media control information flows, and corporations find their way to support candidates to protect corporation interests. Our elections have begun to produce bad leaders and corrupt governance through manipulated electoral machinery, information, and voters' behavior.

Democratic institutions such as functional and oversight bodies, including people's representatives, judiciaries, and media should maintain themselves and be supported as independent entities to ensure the democratic processes run and are able to function as checks and balances. However, the situation in the region paints a picture of democratic institutions being compromised, favoring ruling parties, while legislatures serve elite interests rather than the people, by passing bad laws that harm rights and democratic principles.

Attention: Focus should be given to the work to increase support and enhance methodologies for election observation, especially pertaining to the protection of a fair election environment. With the current plague of disinformation and the distrust of institutions, it is very important that agents of truth-telling are protected, and the environment they operate in is preserved to be free. It is important that transparency in governmental affairs is promoted to ensure that the spread of such distrust is mitigated, thus efforts such as parliamentary and judicial watches, and anti-corruption programs, done in collaboration between government, media, and civil society should be encouraged. Furthermore, intergovernmental, and formal regional arrangements should work on providing more opportunities for dialogue between them and civil society to ensure that accountability and opportunities for justice are provided in different stages.

What the CSOs say:

a. It is essential to popularize substantive democracy and democratic processes to prevent the proliferation of elective leaders with autocratic tendencies. There are several elections happening in the region within 2023, (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, etc.,) which require the attention of everyone given the concerning positions by some of the candidates. Similar crucial elections are expected to happen in Thailand, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and even Myanmar. Pro-democracy advocates must observe these processes and conduct necessary advocacies to ensure that the rights of all are recognized and protected. The spread of identity-based populist rhetoric during elections needs to be prevented.

b. Cascade the promotion of democratic values by supporting efforts to enhance human rights in local governments and the bureaucracy. Ensure the wide distribution of pro-democracy narratives by producing yearly assessments and democratic reports. It should be highlighted that at present, there is a proliferation of autocracies in the region, and accountability measures have to be enacted to ensure justice is served for those victimized by these regimes.

c. In Thailand, there needs to be collaboration to resist the tight grip of the military junta against pro-democracy actors. This includes providing legal assistance to those facing cases for exercising their rights to express and associate, and the use of electronic monitoring bracelets and other repressive tools against pro-democracy actors. There should also be advocacies and initiatives to protect the General Elections set to happen within 2023. Positively, there are currently efforts to conduct progressive labor courses and capacitate local leaders on important skills that will help in advancing the pro-democracy agenda in the country.

d. Actions must be done to protect parliamentarians at risk so that they can continue to exercise their mandate. As allies, we need to call for the release of former Senator Leila de Lima, support the members of Myanmar's Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), and halt the judicial harassment of Cambodian and Thai opposition parties. The situation of opposition MPs will be discussed in APhR's upcoming report, Parliamentarians at Risk Report, which will be released in early 2023. We intend to support calls for reforms on fundamental freedoms (association, expression, assembly) in Southeast Asia, among the most concerning of which is the NPO (not-for-profit organizations) Law in Thailand. The region needs a holistic strategy to prevent these kinds of policies from passing. We also seek to empower CSOs by releasing resources on how they can better engage in the legislative process, which will be contained in an upcoming toolkit publication.

e. In Taiwan, groups have been encouraging the Legislative Yuan to pass laws that will enable ease of visa and registration process for pro-democracy individuals and organizations who want to be based in Taiwan given the shrinking spaces observed in other parts of Asia.

f. Pakistan remains to be the largest beneficiary of Chinese grants in South Asia, and civil society organizations continue to express concerns regarding the transparency and accountability of these deals, notwithstanding the grave environmental impact of building and operating numerous coal power plants included in the grants. The fact that the Pakistani government remains overly sensitive regarding matters involving China adds greater complications.

g. Indonesia's chairing of the ASEAN in 2023 will be crucial in asking for accountability for the atrocities against the Rohingyas and the coup in Myanmar. At the same time, the Tatmadaw is also preparing for an election in 2023, which will entail more violence and intimidation against opposition, media, and civil society actors who are still in the country. We call on possible collaborations to monitor the situation and conduct possible advocacy.

h. In Nepal, the government needs encouragement and assistance to ensure legal gaps which prevent the full realization of fundamental freedoms are resolved. For instance, there are existing gaps that regress the state of media and civil society. Furthermore, transparency and accountability measures must be established to ensure that ODA support from World Bank, ADB, USAID, and other agencies is maximized.

i. In 2023, Cambodia will hold General Elections with no viable opposition and virtually absent independent media. In the next few years, PM Hun Sen is expected to transfer power to his son Hun Manet. There is an urgent need for Cambodian journalists to be supported to inform citizens on the ongoing political situations.

2. Multi-Faceted Consolidation and Solidarity

Recognizing that the erosion of democracy is so massive, joint steps are needed among all actors at all levels. The cross-sectoral consolidation process is fundamental in strengthening connections and formulating a collective advocacy agenda. The forum recognizes the urgency to structure the consolidation at the national, and regional levels, and make it workable in many conditions and societies. It is important to reinforce the CSOs' solidarity connection and push more space to engage the government. It is also essential to encourage the establishment of national processes including coalitions, and routine meetings.

At present, there is a crisis of anti-democratic expansion happening in the region. Spaces such as Cambodia, Myanmar, India, and Afghanistan continue to be captured by autocratic forces – with the military Tatmadaw continuing to assert its control over Myanmar’s government while terrorizing pro-democracy and ethnic factions, and the Taliban ousting a democratically elected government to bulldoze democratic foundations in favor of an ultranationalist and fundamentalist government which victimizes women and minorities. Including a continuing ruling party control in Cambodia, as well as increasing religious intolerance in India. This comes at a time when other illiberal forces are exerting their influence in spaces such as Hong Kong and Taiwan.

There is a need to further strengthen and augment actions by Asia’s civil society and partners in responding to these crises. Different spaces in the region face different issues, which contribute to the slow resolution of these anti-democratic crises that we face at present. We recognize that with a stronger and more consolidated Asian civil society, response and support, and outcomes can be maximized, thus opening possibilities for those victimized by these illiberal forces.

Attention: We call on parties to adopt democratic consolidation at all levels, to streamline and amplify the promotion and protection of democratic values, more so in spaces and sectors that experience much greater threats. We endeavor for these democratic consolidation exercises to consolidate approaches and serve as a nexus to find synergies and complementarities in action and advocacy among various sectors such as human rights, environment, sustainable development, anti-corruption and transparency, peacebuilding, and transitional justice among others. By adopting a consolidated approach to the promotion of democratic values, we hope to usher in a stronger force towards the achievement of democratic governance in the region and will be beneficial to the protection of such important endeavors, especially at the national level.

What the CSOs say:

a. Ensure advocacy, information, and dissection of national and global attacks on civic space are widely disseminated and easily accessible. With such information available, we hope to expand the discourse on how to effectively defend and protect civic spaces. Existing endeavors such as Civicus’ publications and A4SD’s Scorecard on SDGs among others must be supported given their immense role in democratic development discourses. Vulnerable groups must be specially targeted to ensure that they are further capacitated as they fight for their fundamental rights.

b. In the Philippines, national consolidation processes are ongoing among civil society organizations that recognize that a unified approach to promote democracy is needed. Organizations that are members and partners of ADN's network have been pushing for the formation of an informal "Philippine Democracy Network" to tackle advocacies more effectively in a civic space that has shrunk tremendously over the past 10 years. Similar consolidation exercises in Pakistan are also happening with the call to review the Democracy Charter as a common point of interest among stakeholders. Similar attempts are also started in Indonesia, Timor Leste, and Mongolia.

c. It is important to talk about the impacts of illiberal actors in the region such as China. With Chinese-funded projects ongoing in many parts of the world, it is important to build a grassroots movement against the harmful effects of Chinese investments, especially as they expand their influence on renewable energy tech. Groups such as Innovation for Change East Asia Hub and Business and Human Rights Resource Center have pioneering works in this area. Meanwhile, Doublethink Lab has been working on the China Index, to track the impact of Chinese interventions worldwide. Chinese and Hong Kong human rights lawyers also want to expand their support in Asian countries where Chinese influence is escalating, and one project they want to do is train Chinese, Japanese, and HK diaspora on how to confront this influence peddling and conduct advocacies.

d. Groups such as AMAN have been promoting community resilience through interfaith models. Through interfaith approaches, they have been encouraging and training women as agents of change through a project called "She Builds Change" implemented at the village level which has been instrumental in preventing conflicts and preventing (re)radicalization. They are also strengthening the youth's capacity to conduct dialogues with different stakeholders and exposing them to actual opportunities where they can support them. We need to continue religious exchanges between conservative and progressive leaders to adopt methods introduced by ULAMA to be close to the victims and experiences of women. We encourage Islamic countries to adopt religious moderation work in countries such as Pakistan and Malaysia.

e. There is a call for donors to be more flexible as they support media, human rights, and democracy promotion projects. Groups have called for long-term and sustainable support from the donors. Groups are calling to rework grant guidelines, so constituents are better served.

f. There is a recognition that CSOs in Asia need to reshape their approach in a post-Covid era. We will be commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Human

Rights Declaration and the 13th Bangkok Declaration on Human Rights. We need to recall and re-emphasize the importance of the Vienna Document which recognizes the importance of democracy promotion as part of international relations. We need to remind everyone of the importance of these important milestones.

g. South Asia needs to hold the People's SAARC since it has been 8 years since the last one was held. It is important to hold it given the dire situation in Afghanistan, and the economic issues facing Sri Lanka and Pakistan, which directly affect their way of life and development. We need to have a venue to talk about these important matters.

3. Free Media, Artivism and Free Expression

Attacks on media outlets and persons, including attacks on social media to the users and critical voices are rampant, indicating media practitioners and users are vulnerable. A report from AAG indicates that cyber-attacks globally increased by 125% through 2021 and increasing volumes of cyber-attacks continued to threaten businesses and individuals in 2022. However, media is still a necessary space to deliver information and increase public awareness, which users and critics can address creatively. It is also important to enhance media coalition at the national and regional level, as well as to continuously educate people about the safe use of media. Among the actors exposing facts and further proposed immediate steps to enhance media and use creative art platforms in promoting democracy and human rights, including enhancing their available platforms and collaboration.

While attacks on free expression remain to be prevalent in the region, forms of creative resistance have been instrumental in emphasizing the importance of democracy and empowering stakeholders to continue the fight. We are entering an era where memes, music, movies, poems, and stories have become vehicles for greater citizen awareness of various socio-political issues. In Asia, furthermore, street performances, exhibitions, flash mobs, comedy, and satire have become mediums for social critique and expression of dissent. There is a need to further enhance support for pro-democracy artists aiming to surface critical issues, thus aiding the advocacy of civil society in the region.

Attention: Priority must be given to expanding space for media freedom. In a lot of Asian states, there is a need to review legislation governing media operations. Furthermore, there needs to be further support given to independent media associations and providing legal assistance to journalists harassed as they perform their duty. We are facing a plague of disinformation, and governments must do something to mitigate the damages it brings about in public discourse, during public and political processes, and in times of vulnerability. Furthermore, governments and social media companies must be held accountable as they conduct practices akin to unjust civilian surveillance and unfair data harvesting practices akin to unjust surveillance and unfair data harvesting practices. We should also support artists as they use art to educate the public on democratic

values as a form of creative expression of dissent.

What the CSOs say:

a. There are no regional media coalitions in East, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, it is therefore important to create platforms where journalists can be more consolidated. We believe that web media will play a more important role in shaping public discourse in the future. In Sri Lanka, journalists have been clamoring to build collectives and connect with Southeast and South Asian media formations, and to do this they need facilitation. In Thailand, media also want to connect more with artist-activists, especially since this they have been crucial in creatively expressing issues and have become most visible in social movements. All forms of media alliance-building should be supported.

b. There is a need to enhance the pro-democracy narrative collection and sharing. In terms of concrete steps, ADN has been doing this through its Asia Democracy Chronicles. We connect brave storytellers through dialogue to learn straight from them how we can support each other in doing our job better and doing our causes better. We fill ADC with underreported stories which we want people to know. This is a part of our advocacy to promote collaborative journalism or content production among CSOs and media, without compromising independence.

c. Digital activism initiatives must be intensified through collaborations. Groups such as the Manila-based organization Dakila run human rights film festivals and have materials they can share. They also conduct programs pertaining to freedom of expression online and offline. On the other hand, SEAJunction does events and exhibitions, among which is a project they did with ADN on the plight of the Myanmar people as they struggle under the coup. I4C on the other hand does a program called "Libraries of Resistance " in which they feature stories on how to enable democratic change in small ways. ASEAN SOGIE Caucus does the SEA Queer Culture Festival in which they support 40 artists (film and literature) to showcase their work.

d. There is a need to address invasive tech and digital issues. We need to lobby intergovernmental and national institutions to craft a regional policy to address digital freedom issues and ensure direct communication with tech platforms. There should be constant coordination to ensure that the crafting of these policies is responsive to the concerns of the various stakeholders.

4. Youth and Intergenerational Understanding

According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Asia Pacific region is home to 2 billion people aged under 30 (54% of the world's youth population). These young actors continue to play a significant role and potential in advancing democratic values in the region. The youth have been at the forefront of advancing critical issues such as gender equality, climate change, and economic mobility and equity. Their indelible presence can be felt as they comprise the frontlines of various social movements, especially in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Myanmar. In the digital space, they continue to dominate conversations with their masterful use of social media and various digital platforms.

With their visible presence, however, they have also become targeted by anti-democratic forces. In Hong Kong, for instance, various youth activists and opposition members have been targeted by the Hong Kong and Chinese governments for their roles in the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests. In Thailand, members of the youth who are vocal advocates of institutional reforms have been subjected to SLAPP cases for their support of the pro-democracy movement.

The youth are carving their own space as they learn to fight for their freedoms. As members of civil society, we need to enable them by enabling internal reforms and capacity-building initiatives for the new generation of Asian activists. Furthermore, connections and bridges among generations, sectors, and organizations have to be built to enable the youth to maximize their potential and energy in coordinating movements and advocacies and expanding their role in the region's democratic movement.

Attention: Create opportunities in the democratic movement where youth can actively direct the trajectory of democratization in their own countries, while also widening opportunities and growth through capacity building and training opportunities for youth activists. There is also a need to intensify intergenerational exchanges and other learning opportunities to sustain youth activism. The democratic movement should capitalize on the youth's power to dominate public discourse, especially in social media. Create wider platforms for destigmatizing activism at home and supporting the mental health of youth activists.

What the CSOs say:

a. Well-being of youth and women activists must be ensured. Programs that promote inclusion, intergenerational dialogue, and intersectional approaches to enhance the participation of the disabled, LGBTs, and indigenous peoples must be prioritized.

b. Hosting interns can be a good practice to expose them to the day-to-day challenges faced by civil society and activists. Some organizations have been incorporating learning opportunities such as online lectures, camps, training, etc.

c. There needs to be a youth fellowship for actors against violence, extremism, and awareness on issues like HK protests and the coup in Myanmar. There are organizations like the ASEAN Youth Forum who are conducting online youth festivals to discuss issues and express solidarity; as well as the School of Human Rights advocacy to teach them the advocacy landscape in the region. They are planning to host the ASEAN Youth Summit and work with Indonesia to strengthen our agenda next year as the country chairs ASEAN.

d. Many organizations are interested in generating intergenerational dialogues within the civil society community in each country and intersectoral. Some organizations such as Plan International are working with AICHR and their country offices to offer education on children's rights and among children who became HR defenders which tackle risks and safeguarding issues to be considered. They also explore conducting children's rights and gender equality workshops. They will also release Girls' Leadership Index, the World Report on Girls' political participation which tackles how we view women in politics. CIVICUS and FA are analyzing how conducive our spaces are for freedom of expression among the youth. Intersectionality, gender rights, and children's rights proliferate.

e. Groups such as I4C have been doing "Support the supporter's program, targeting the families and the immediate environment of activists, to improve their mental health, with the aim of enabling sustainable activism, institutional changes among CSOs on supporting and prioritizing mental health and destigmatize activism in homes.

f. It has been one year since young women in Afghanistan were deprived of access to basic education after the Taliban took over. We need to pressure and advocate so they can regain fundamental rights.

CONCLUSION

The dire situation in the region emphasizes the need to perform much better collaborations, at a time when autocratic forces are also communicating and learning from each other. The Asian civil society must normalize and support frank conversations and trust-building exercises with each other to catalyze synergy in approaches.

Based on the conversations held during the Asia Democracy Assembly 2022 and the closed-door Strategic Planning, civil society and their allies from other sectors must further consolidate and synergize actions to effectively respond to challenges such as extreme polarization, exclusion of youth, women and other vulnerable sectors, the proliferation of disinformation and intrusive technologies, unsustainable development, injustices, and attacks on fundamental freedoms and rights. We hope that by releasing this document, stakeholders are made aware of existing and planned actions which confront the regression of democracy in the region, and hopefully trigger conversations with each other.

Conversations must happen on how to effectively confront how illiberal actors undermine democratic processes and democratic institutions. From the pervasive actions of China, the plight of the Afghans under the Taliban and the people of Myanmar under the Tatmadaw, to the undermining of democratic elections and judicial processes, the corrosive effects of corruption to development, inequality, and the polarization of citizens due to mis- and disinformation, we must adapt our ways of resulting these issues based on evidence-based approaches, that utilize the advancement of technology, and the passion and creativity of the pro-democracy sector. There must be a realization that the root of these maladies can only be resolved through inter-sectoral approaches at different levels – from national to regional and beyond.

We must be cognizant of the power that the youth have in steering the direction of our efforts to democratize. Civil society and other pro-democracy sectors must ensure that the youth are provided avenues to expend their energies to assist in creating positive change in our society by involving them in conversations with older generations, the cross-sectoral representations, and ensuring they are represented in decision-making processes. It is also important that they are supported within their environments, by making sure they have access to adequate physical, mental, and social well-being support.

Finally, we must unite in our advocacies as we tackle this borderless issue of the regression of democracy in Asia. We must strengthen advocacies that capture the middle ground, educate with compassion, and creatively convey democratic values that is easy to appreciate. We have the tools and power in our hands, we call on everyone to join and support each other to bring about genuine democratization for generations beyond us.