

ACCELERATING ASIAN DEMOCRACY

Perspectives from
Advocates and Practitioners
on Navigating Pro-democracy
Defense and Promotion

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About the Accelerating Asian Democracy

The Accelerating Asian Democracy discusses contemporary democracy contexts and aims to trigger united and effective responses to democracy challenges. This endeavor aims to serve as a navigational tool for the Asian pro-democracy sectors as they endeavor to promote and protect democratic institutions and processes amid the sociopolitical shifts which transpired at the start of the 21st Century. The document, constructed after months of consultations and national and regional pro-democracy consolidation exercises, compiles recommendations, and identifies priorities from the point of views of on-the-ground democracy practitioners and advocates.

This endeavor identifies key priority issues which stakeholders should prioritize to ensure inclusive and responsive democratic programming and advocacy, identified through prior consultations culminating in the conduct of the Asia Democracy Assembly held in November 2023 in Thailand. It presents a set of recommendations tackling the identified challenges and priority issues. The content also builds on the contexts and discussions of issues explored in prior guidance documents such as the *Recession to Resilience: Road to Democracy Renewal in Asia*¹ and *Shaping a Better Regional Cooperation for a Better Democracy*². It also incorporates key recommendations from processes specific to various areas of democracy promotion, spearheaded by some of the region's pro-democracy networks tackling SDGs, human rights, marginalized sectors³, and elections, among others. This document aims to steer the direction of stakeholder cooperation that assists democracy building in the region.

1 This document is an outcome of the Asia Democracy Assembly 2021, available online at: https://adnasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Final_ADN-Road-to-Democracy-Renewal-in-Asia.pdf

2 This document is an outcome of the Asia Democracy Assembly 2022, held in Bali, Indonesia. Available online at: <https://adnasia.org/shaping-a-better-regional-cooperation-for-better-democracy/>

3 Declaration - Asia Regional People's Assembly 2022, available online at: [https://gcap.global/news/declaration-asia-regional-peoples-assembly-2022/#:~:text=We%20commit%20ourselves%20as%20civil,Poverty%20\(GCAP\)%20\(Coordination\)](https://gcap.global/news/declaration-asia-regional-peoples-assembly-2022/#:~:text=We%20commit%20ourselves%20as%20civil,Poverty%20(GCAP)%20(Coordination))

Reinvigorating Asia's Democracy Movement and Strengthening Consolidation Amid New Realities

The first decades of the 21st Century marked successive waves of “autocratization” in Asia. Amid this situation, states in the region possess various levels of capacity to respond and bounce back from these autocratic attacks. Fortunately, years of struggle to build institutions, embed democratic values, and consolidate endeavors meant that advocates will not be pushing back bare-handed. The challenges are widespread, but the spirit of democracy remains strong, and those that value freedoms and rights in Asia are striving to push the boundaries.

The region, at present, battles regressive forces which seek to uproot years of democracy building and pushback. In Myanmar, the fate of the displaced and marginalized ethnic communities, especially the Rohingyas, hang in balance. After a military coup in 2021 uprooted the democratically elected government, a state of civil war erupted between the Tatmadaw and those who seek to restore a civilian government in Myanmar continues to this day. A similar situation happened in Afghanistan as the Taliban regained control in 2021, which meant the eradication of democratic institutions in the country, and the eradication of any hopes for gender equality, freedom, and representation.

From 2019 to 2020, millions of Hong Kong citizens marched to the streets to protest against the Anti-Extradition Bill, but were only met with arrests of activists, and attacks on free media, civil society, and civil liberties, under the orders of the Chinese Communist Party. Similarly, Cambodians continue to experience repression of liberties and abuses under the Cambodian Peoples’ Party. With anti-democratic influences growing in the world stage, perpetrators of these abuses continue to evade responsibility, as they contravene agreements which sought to protect rights and liberties.

Hopes for genuine democracy in the region have not died down and have only remained resilient. Majority of the region has managed to sustain and protect its democratic institutions and practices. South Korea, Japan and Taiwan continue to thrive as vibrant developed democracies, while still democratizing states such as India, the Philippines and Indonesia continue to hold vibrant elections, as well as reforms to strengthen their institutions amid challenges to their democratic foundations. As much as illiberal forces have continued to rely on each other, it is much more important for actors in these

democracies to forge stronger bonds as they continue to combat borderless issues such as corruption, dis- and misinformation, polarization, and unequal development, among others.

The Accelerating Asian Democracy: Perspectives from Advocates and Practitioners on Navigating Pro-democracy Defense and Promotion was created after months of consultations, reflections, and consensus building, and is meant to be a rallying cry for democracy stakeholders to unite in priorities and endeavors. It builds on the achievements of prior exercises of democratic unity, such as *Recession to Resilience: Road to Democracy Renewal in Asia and Shaping a Better Regional Cooperation for a Better Democracy*, underscoring the accumulated good practices and learnings on democracy building. It is meant to reinforce the importance of consolidation of pro-democracy actors and advocacies, in recognition of the efficacy of cross-sectoral cooperation in advancing democracy, addressing injustices, and responding to the borderless crises the world faces. It is meant to inspire collaborative approaches among like-minded stakeholders in combating the spread of autocracy.

The document identifies among the most pervasive issues impacting our democracies. We, as pro-democracy advocates, hope that this becomes a catalyst for reforms promoting inclusion, transparency, justice, and the protection of rights and liberties. It is also a call for greater cooperation among pro-democracy actors around the world. We also hope that this document will trigger greater efforts to promote inclusion among the pro-democracy sector, further integrating the role of marginalized sectors such as migrants, youth, gender advocates, and indigenous peoples in democracy building. We hope that it will provide the next generation of democracy advocates a threshold in which to measure the achievements and progress of democracy in Asia.

Through this endeavor, we seek to inspire pro-democracy movements, and provide solidarity in their struggles by identifying needs and possible actions to support them. It is meant to guide pro-democracy actors in the region in identifying priority areas and providing navigation for reforms, united advocacy, and urgent actions. It is meant to symbolize the unwavering commitment of pro-democracy sectors in forging ahead and continuing to work together in combating illiberal and autocratic influences in various Asian spaces. This document marks the renewal of commitment by Asian stakeholders in advancing democracy in Asia.

Areas of Work and Priority Agenda

- 1** *New mechanisms and institutions for democracy promotion, such as a UN Special Rapporteur for Democracy, should be established to make sure pro-democracy stakeholders and their efforts are protected.* Recent events in the past two decades paint a picture of the challenges that should be addressed to effectively promote democracy in the region. Asia achieved significant progress in establishing institutions and movements, in both formal and informal settings, and embedding democratic values as an essential part of the Asian way of life. Ensuring the preservation of democratic values and governance requires continued vigilance from all stakeholders.
- 2** *It is imperative to protect elections, which serve as the foundation of democracy, to ensure that the will of the people is respected.* Reforms to promote inclusion, vibrant and truthful discourse, genuine representation, and transparency still facing headwinds created some distrust in the electoral system, especially among the youth. Populist rhetoric and disinformation, which has now become a common feature of recently held elections in the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, and Taiwan, have created wide polarizations which are hard to repair even after elections. The role and capacity of election monitors and advocates in addressing these issues even after elections must be intensified and supported.
- 3** *The region should intensify efforts to address the widespread impunity and human rights abuses.* Although a lack of access to justice or oversight mechanisms is par for the course in non-democratic regimes, even democracies in the region struggle to maintain rigorous oversight over human rights violations. Years of neglect in strengthening human rights mechanisms and legal reforms have created a dangerous climate for local activists working on rights and workers' rights, and environmental issues.
- 4** *Stakeholders should commit to multisectoral approaches addressing mis- and disinformation plaguing Asia, especially during elections and times of crisis such as the recent Covid 19 Pandemic.* There is a need to address the lack of effective regulation in most

countries, with the often weak media support overlaid with exponential growth and adoption of social media. Disinformation attacks a core principle of democracy: the right of citizens to cast an informed vote and opinion, based on unbiased, impartial, and accessible information. When disinformation intentionally contaminates the available flow of information for citizens, this right is severely curtailed.

- 5** *Strengthening regional media and journalist alliances must be supported amid growing attacks on their freedom.* The intertwined nature of media and the internet means any repression on digital platforms and press freedom backsliding go hand in hand. Journalists face physical, legal, and digital attacks, highlighting the need for a comprehensive plan to safeguard media and digital democracy. Currently, there is a lack of a regional solidarity network to support those under attack, and efforts lack involvement from academia, "good" politicians, and state officials to provide a secure space for press and internet freedom. Addressing these issues collectively is crucial for fostering democracy in both media and the digital sphere.
- 6** *Securitization and militarization of government institutions must be addressed and held into account.* Over the past decade, South and Southeast Asia have seen a reassertion of military power in civilian governance. Beyond Myanmar and Thailand, which underwent coups in recent years, the military continues to play a growing role in politics in Cambodia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The military's role over domestic affairs intensified during Covid 19, with the deployment of military forces to enforce health protocols in several of these countries. In some instances, this enabled public authorities to concentrate power in the executive while stripping other branches of government of their responsibilities, thus reducing checks on government power.
- 7** *Stakeholders should unite to enable critical reforms that promote judicial independence.* An increase in lawfare and the abuse of constitutional courts to validate illiberal agendas and stifle dissent, such as SLAPPs, is underway in several countries, most notably in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. In many countries, judicial independence is vulnerable when military-appointed judges and other key positions within public administration entrench a culture of impunity. Indonesia and Thailand are just two examples where judges have been captured by traditional military elites through constitutional means. In 2023, the integrity of these institutions will be something to watch.
- 8** *Stakeholders must create greater space for civil society organizations in helping address corruption and political finance gaps.* In Mongolia and Thailand, civil society and pro-democracy actors anchored their campaigns in anti-corruption discourses, and in Malaysia, defeated entrenched powerful interests. Credible media reportage plays a role in such mobilizations, with the free press contributing to a shedding light into corruption. Journalists and pro-transparency CSOs complement often overburdened anti-criminal and administrative institutions by uncovering corrupt schemes, as well as communicating the details to citizens. This allows the public to demand action and change through democratic processes.

- 9 ***Pro-democracy advocates must consolidate efforts in response to antidemocratic influences in the region and on the world stage.*** For instance, China's CCP has become more assertive in exercising sharp power tactics in recent years, a trend that is likely to continue. CCP has created a web of dependencies among fellow human rights abusers in Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, shielded the perpetrators of abuses from international scrutiny and minimized the impact of international sanctions. Efforts of these antidemocratic agents to co-opt local actors have also played a role in spreading illiberal values such as corruption and lack of transparency, and weakening democratic institutions, checks and balances and processes.
- 10 ***Efforts to support and further connect the pro-democracy exile movement into the greater pro-democracy resistance movement should be intensified.*** The expansion of antidemocratic powers has forced pro-democracy communities to be displaced. CCP's repression of the Uyghur, Tibetan, and Hong Kongers have forced them to be displaced from their homeland, as they continue to experience transnational repression and threats. Myanmar, especially Rohingyas, North Korean, Bangladeshi and Cambodian dissidents also experience a similar fate. Mechanisms to protect their rights, as well as assist them in crucial international pro-democracy initiatives should be intensified. Furthermore, cross-movement dialogue should be strengthened to further embed and include them in mainstream international dialogues pertaining to democracy and freedoms.
- 11 ***Inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized communities in formal and informal processes by government and democracy movements should be enhanced.*** Marginalized and vulnerable sectors such as indigenous, gender, environment, trade union, and other pro-democracy advocates and representatives need to be provided with greater support as they protect and promote the welfare of their respective communities. They should be provided greater roles in governance processes, as well as democracy movements, to ensure an inclusive and vibrant democratic environment.
- 12 ***The youth's role in sustaining democracies and as agents of cross-sectoral cooperation and democratic stewardship should be mainstreamed.*** The youth are at the forefront of democratic movements in Asia, especially as they currently comprise most of the population in the region. They should be capacitated with skills to ensure that they sustain democratization in their spaces, by ensuring that they are encouraged to lead within civil society circles, government and movements, assist in steering the direction of national and regional democracy advocacies, and providing space for them to have critical and crucial dialogue with and among leaders within communities.
- 13 ***Pro-democracy advocates should further utilize the SDGs as a crucial tool to promote democratic and just development.*** It is important to recognize that democracy and sustainable development are interconnected routes towards inclusive and just social progress. It serves as a medium to encourage dialogue between communities and stakeholders such as businesses and industries, bureaucracies, media and civil society. Dialogue among these sectors should be emphasized as a critical feature of inclusive economic development.

- 14 *It is important to utilize art as a means to make democracy more understandable and help mainstream pro-democracy messaging.* Stakeholders must explore creative means to ensure that pro-democracy narratives prevail, especially in the context of disinformation. Pro-democracy advocates must work more intensively with artists and other creatives to craft tools and materials that can help promote pro-democratic causes. In this sense, social and traditional media, as well as effective settings to ensure that pro-democracy messaging reaches the general public.

Engagement Model and Commitments

In light of the priority agenda and issues mentioned above, consulted stakeholders have proposed these sets of actions:

1 Enhancing National Consolidation and Democratic Cohesion

- Reinforcing democratic cohesion means supporting strong connectedness and solidarity among pro-democracy stakeholders. Strengthening democratic cohesion can help promote resilience against the encroachment of authoritarian tendencies. A consolidated approach to democracy promotion and defense before and after elections can help facilitate the creation of effective responses to these threats, bridge divides between different societal groups, and promote consensus-building among stakeholders.
- Explore concrete collaborative projects among CSOs and other pro-democracy actors, akin to Pakistan's Charter of Democracy (CoD). Advocate for the establishment of localized Charters of Democracy (COS) addressing governance, political, and economic aspects, contributing to enhanced national consolidation

2 Regional Solidarity for Press and Internet Freedom

- Foster collaboration among press freedom and internet freedom advocates in the region by creating and expanding national and regional platforms for continuous exchange of ideas and situations, and ensuring robust support for journalists and online/social media users to uphold truth and freedom.
- Support the creation of better mechanisms for the protection of journalists and other truth tellers. Reforms on libel laws and media regulations should be reviewed to prevent abuse.

- Provide multi-sectoral space to share experiences and strategies from different regions to counter counter-narratives against democracy.

3 Anti-Corruption Initiatives and Transparency

- Support mainstreaming and incorporating anti-corruption efforts into democracy work, fostering intersectoral collaborations among CSOs addressing various democracy-related issues. This includes strengthening of national and regional coalitions focusing on anti-corruption, transparency, human rights, and democracy, employing a people-to-people approach, emphasizing the utilization of international norms, mechanisms, and policies provided by organizations such as the OECD, UN Human Rights Council, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to enhance the impact of advocacy efforts.
- Encourage research and advocacy related to local perspectives on corruption, and develop a list of corrupt practices observed by different CSO actors, as well as corruption in the blue economy. Utilize open data, formal reports, and tech tools to detect corruption. Develop practical approaches for activists facing challenges in providing evidence of corruption.

4 Engaging Businesses and the Private Sector

- Establish Advocacy Platform: Create a dedicated platform for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to share their advocacy experiences, emphasizing the utilization of diverse norms, mechanisms, and policy tools. This initiative aims to encourage peer learning and foster synergy among CSOs engaged in corporate accountability.
- Develop comprehensive online training programs focused on guiding CSOs in effective advocacy for corporate accountability. Emphasize the utilization of international norms, mechanisms, and policies provided by organizations such as the OECD, UN Human Rights Council, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to enhance the impact of advocacy efforts. Initial targets for advocacy can be social media companies, and mobilize specific groups like journalists and young lawyers to develop investigative capacities and engage in strategic litigation.
- Enhance Collaboration at Global Forums: Foster information sharing among participants during crucial events like the Global Forum on Business and Human Rights (Geneva, 27-29 Nov. 2023) and COP28 of UNFCCC Global Forum on Business and Human Rights, COP28 of UNFCCC and develop strategic plans for active involvement in major global summits (G7, BRICS+, G20, APEC). G7, BRICS+, G20, and APEC. Align efforts with specific events such as the 2024 G7 Summit in Italy, BRICS+ Russia, G20 Brazil, APEC Peru, and the 2025 G7 in Canada, BRICS+ Brazil, G20 South Africa, APEC South Korea.

5 Defense of Free and Fair Elections

- Engage in electoral issues focusing on gender representation gap in politics and the strengthening of democratic processes. Initiatives include establishing mentorship programs for women candidates, advocating for gender equality policies in political parties, and conducting awareness campaigns.
- Revisit election monitoring methodologies to ensure that they efficiently capture trends on the ground. Form a task force to assess and tackle issues, looking into the use of new technologies like Artificial Intelligence in elections, and conducting public awareness campaigns on the significance of fair and transparent electoral processes. Upholding electoral integrity in defending elections, in cooperation with election monitoring groups
- Democracy stakeholders should ensure that electoral freedoms are protected in crucial elections, specifically in countries like India, Pakistan and Indonesia. Furthermore, efforts must be made to ensure that sham elections in countries like Cambodia and Bangladesh are not legitimized.

6 Inclusive Democracy and Movements

- Prioritize efforts to ensure diverse representation at all levels of democracy advocacy, including gender, ethnicity, age, and marginalized communities. Actively involve and amplify the voices of underrepresented groups, recognizing the importance of their perspectives in shaping inclusive policies and initiatives.
- Implement measures to enhance language accessibility and cultural sensitivity in democracy advocacy. This includes providing translations of key documents, employing interpreters, and using terminology that resonates with a wide range of communities. Recognizing and respecting cultural nuances is essential for fostering inclusivity.
- Look into intersectional approaches that consider the interconnected nature of various forms of discrimination. Recognize and address the unique challenges faced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups, such as LGBTQIA+ individuals, persons with disabilities, environmental activists and ethnic minorities. Tailor advocacy strategies to meet the specific needs of these intersectional identities.
- Invest in capacity-building and educational initiatives aimed at promoting awareness and understanding of democratic principles among diverse communities. Provide resources and training to empower individuals from different backgrounds to actively participate in advocacy efforts. This includes fostering collaboration between civil society organizations and educational institutions to create sustainable programs for democratic education.

7 Engagement with Authorities and Political Governance

- Acknowledge diverse political governance forms. Develop enhanced skills within civil society leaders for effective engagement with authorities. Advocate for consistency in CSO work and collaboration with governments.
- Recognize the evolving dynamics of civil societies, increasingly connected with governments. Explore strategies for expanding civic space, including government outreach. Address challenges of transnational repression and create safe spaces for activists. Bridge the disconnect between civil society organizations and citizens to overcome polarization.
- Advocacy on the establishment of the UN Special Rapporteur for Democracy should be intensified and mainstreamed. Pro-democracy states in Asia should be encouraged to be at the forefront of this endeavor.
- In engaging with political parties, adopt a strategic approach. Frame advocacies to address pressing concerns while demonstrating tangible benefits for their constituencies.

8 Solidarity Beyond Borders

- Foster a broader consensus within civil society to address transnational repression. Develop strategies to support democracy activists in exile, acknowledging the persistent crisis they face globally.
- Pro-democracy advocates should encourage cross-movement collaboration. Furthermore, efforts should be made to amplify diaspora voices in democracy-related conversations, both in the national and regional level platforms.

9 Sustainable Funding for Pro-Democracy Endeavors

- Encourage the diversity of sources in pro-democracy funding. Asian pro-democracy governments should augment funding mechanisms that support CSO-led pro-democracy initiatives. Full democracies in the region such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, with the support of Pacific-based democracies such as Australia and New Zealand, can work on this target.
- Funders should be encouraged to look at their funding mechanisms and ensure that these are responsive to the current needs of pro-democracy sectors. Practices would include longer funding periods which could enable advocates to sustain activities and efforts.
- Funding on critical and crisis-ridden areas should be made more flexible. Support for a pool of funds for support in displaced actors, digital and physical security and other needs should be made more accessible.

Pledges of Support

*A*ccelerating Asian Democracy is a synthesis of the various perspectives gathered during the Asia Democracy Assembly and other consolidation exercises. The actions, priority areas and engagement models included in this document are essential steps for pro-democracy stakeholders to help navigate a coordinated effort to promote, protect and sustain democracies, amid the various challenges we face. We enjoin everyone's support and welcome your solidarity in enabling the points discussed. Please sign in as an individual or organization to signify your support in Accelerating Democracy.

